

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

Notes for a Political Economy of Unemployment in Africa

Claude Ake

The following are just what the title suggests, notes. Very preliminary and tentative ideas which might be useful for a political economy of unemployment in Africa.

I have treated Africa as an undifferentiated whole by thinking and using those ideas and concepts which seem to me to be applicable to the widest range of African experiences. I am aware of course that unless one thinks concretely and makes the necessary differentiations one does not really say very much. But that refinement is for later. I have made no attempt to be empirical. I am groping for a scientific understanding of the problem of unemployment and it seems to me that the proper way to start is to theorize it however tentatively. Before we can examine particulars, before we can be empirical, we have to begin with the very preliminary task of devising some uniformizing concepts and putting them in some systematic relationship. It is this preliminary task which is being attempted here.

The Meaning and Importance of Unemployment

Perhaps the most telling deficiency of our development strategies in Africa is their failure to register the singular importance of the problem of unemployment. Always, on the formal level, the importance of the problem is acknowledged. At every opportunity, the determination to solve it is proclaimed. But this is never really reflected in actual policies especially at the operational level. I cannot think of a single African development plan which has placed the question of employment at the center of the development effort, nor indeed of any in which it is accorded very high priority.

Yet the problem of unemployment in Africa is so critical that we may legitimately resolve underdevelopment into this problem. Let me clarify. The human being is first and foremost a worker and work is the most critical activity of society. It is by work that the human being fashions the means to stay alive, reproduce his kind and achieve civilization. Essentially, we are as we work.

Now, whether we conceive of development as economic growth or the overcoming of disabilities such as poverty, ignorance and disease, whether we conceive it as the fullest realization of human potentialities, it is ultimately a matter of how we work or how we might work; and associated with that, how we might deploy and use the product of our work. Underdevelopment and development are about work; they are outcomes of determinate characteristics of the work process, its social organization and the distribution and use of its product. So much for work. What about employment?

Employment is a particular variant of work. Work itself is a form of activity conceived in a rather undifferentiated manner. It is purposeful activity involving physical or mental exertion. The vassals tilling the land in the manor are engaged in work. This definition makes no further demands on the quality of the activity except that it entails exertion; it leaves the question of the purpose of the activity completely open, the particular way in which the activity is purposeful does not matter.

Employment is a more restrictive conception of work. Conventionally the concept is used in two related senses, (a) to be occupied in a particular activity and (b) to use somebody or to be used by somebody; this is a special case of being occupied. By extension, the latter usage has come to mean, to use the services of someone or something in return for some compensation now typically monetary or a means of livelihood.

One may work without being employed but that is not to say that work and employment are dichotomous. Employment and work are part of a continuum. We may think of this continuum as gradations of being employed. At the most rudimentary level of being employed the concept of employment meets and merges with that of work. At this level employment is essentially working or doing a job, its quality has little or no content except being a purposeful form of self-exertion. This is arguably the level of employment in which the bulk of the African work-force finds itself. This is certainly true for peasants and subsistence farmers, the lower strata of the urban proletariat, the informal sector and the majority of women. As a rule their employment yields meager material reward; it is often physically and psychologically debilitating and it offers little or no room for self-development.

It is a mute point whether they are employed. For it would seem that one is not really employed if one's productivity or wage or return is so low that one is hardly able to reproduce oneself. Nor is one really employed in a job which offers hardly any scope for self-development.

At a higher level, employment means being engaged in work which is decidedly remunerative in the sense that its material rewards allow for self-

reproduction and even some margin of self-improvement. At yet a higher level, employment offers the prospect of reproduction at a higher qualitative level, the opportunity to be creative and to develop one's potentialities to the fullest.

It is necessary to emphasize that these levels or phases do not constitute different definitions of employment. They are not discrete but continuous, each one necessarily referring to the others. It is especially useful to remember this in the African context where the extremities of underdevelopment usually lead to the conflation of employment with working or having a job and the dismissal of the notion of satisfying and creative jobs as esoteric irrelevancies. It also leads people to overstate, in a most misleading way, the point that having a job, any job at all constitutes a remarkable improvement on prevailing conditions for a lot of people in Africa.

The danger of doing this is that we trivialize the concept of unemployment and with that, its status as a real life problem. If we trivialize the concept of employment in the manner suggested we are readily seduced into modes of thought and action which are dehumanizing. For instance, when we assimilate the concept of employment to the provision of jobs, we may begin to lose sight of the moral and political significance of the differences between the work of the galley slave and that of the architect. Once our sensitivities are blunted in this way we are lost. Also if we are as we work, we cannot reasonably settle for a notion of the work process which offers only beastly existence.

Unemployment and Capitalism

Unfortunately, it is quite difficult to escape these pitfalls. Capitalism tendentially trivializes the problem of unemployment even though it uniquely produces it in its most tragic form. It is the capitalist mode of production which has produced the workless person. This phenomenon is engendered initially by primitive accumulation and subsequently sustained and increased by the mechanics and contradictions of expanded reproduction. The workless person is the outcome of two related aspects of capitalism: the atomization of precapitalist social structures and the emergence of market society, the society of individuals who relate to each other according to the calculus of self-interest.

The other factor is the appropriation of the means of production of the society by the few through the use of force; this is primitive accumulation, the inescapable prehistory of capitalism. It leaves in its wake, masses of people with no chance of realizing their labour power in productive activity, having no means of work. These people offer, if they can, their labour to someone who has means of production. However, there is always a danger of suc-

cumbing to worklessness for labour power like any other commodity is subject to the vagaries of supply and demand.

The Problem of Unemployment in Africa

What is the problem of unemployment in Africa? It can be stated very briefly albeit with oversimplification as follows: Africa is a continent in which the vast majority of the potential workforce, often as much as 70 per cent, is either workless or marginally employed and generally with very low productivity.

In the urban enclaves of Africa, the nature of the problem of unemployment is reflected in the phenomenon of the informal sector. According to surveys carried out by the International Labour Organization especially the Jobs and Skills Programme for Africa (JASPA), the proportion of the labour force involved in some form of informal sector activity is typically over 50 per cent and sometimes goes as high as 70 per cent. The informal sector in Africa has been misrepresented in any number of ways since the ILO Mission of 1972 to Kenya focussed attention on it. Essentially what the informal sector is, is the economy of desperation. As a general rule, labour enters the informal sector when the alternative is worklessness and a real prospect of starvation. It is an expression of the indomitable will to survive in the face of seemingly hopeless odds, namely the lack of a buyer for one's labour power and the lack of means of labour to realize it. The survival is often achieved by stretching ingenuity, endurance and patience to the outer limits: the creation of capital from nothing as in the case of the street trader whose stock of capital is two packets of cigarettes sold singly; the improbable feat of substituting labour power for means of production and hands for tools achieved by the shoemaker of the garbage dump who rescues discarded tires and with hands and scraps of metal turns out shoes-of sorts. The sector is characterized by minimal availability of capital and supporting infrastructures, maximum physical exertion, inhuman hours, and meager returns for effort. The informal sector represents one of the most hostile and brutalizing conditions of realizing labour power.

There is some perversity in the tendency to represent the informal sector as a hopeful development — hopeful in the sense that it reduces social tension, provides employment, encourages creativity and self-reliance, the diffusion of skills and the reduction of waste in human and material resources. No doubt it does all these things to some extent. But we cannot take any comfort in its existence and its daily growth. It arises from misery. And while it may help people to starve off starvation, it subjects them to unacceptable oppression and inhuman conditions of work. The correct attitude to the informal sector must be that we must work for and look forward to its disap-

pearance, and to move people to more humane, more productive and more rewarding avenues for the realization of labour power. This prospect is a long way off. For now it is not disappearing but growing.

To understand the informal sector as a manifestation of the problem of unemployment, it has to be seen in the context of the social formation. It is organically linked to the peculiar historical character of the capitalist mode of production in much of Africa. The informal sector is a manifestation of a capitalism which is prone to stagnation and unable to develop the productive forces. Colonialism entailed the institutionalization of capitalism, but colonial capitalism usually relied heavily on coercive intervention, made minimal productive investment and leaned heavily toward the role of being a conduit for the export of surplus. It attacked the indigenous social formations successfully to get established, atomizing social structures, delinking labour power from the conditions of its realization but it was quite unable to absorb productively the multitudes it was liberating from their social ties and means of work. This, a normal tendency of capitalism, was greatly reinforced by the peculiar logic of colonialism and limited immensely the development of the productive forces. The effect of this is the informal sector.

The concept of the informal sector somewhat mystifies the phenomenon it describes, for what is referred to as the informal sector is really the inescapable caricature of the private sector. It is really by sheer numbers of the people involved in it the bulk of the private sector in Africa, a grotesque deformity just like historical periphery capitalism itself.

Rural Africa

Another perspective from which we may grasp the scale and nature of the problem of unemployment in Africa is to look at rural Africa and the conditions of the peasant producer. Africa's population is predominantly rural. According to the World Bank's *World Development Report* for 1984, only 19.2 per cent of Africa's population was urban dwelling by 1980; this is projected to increase to only 34.9 per cent by the year 2000. (by that time as much as 83.7 per cent of the industrialized countries will be urban dwelling.) This rural population consists overwhelmingly of peasant producers. Peasant producers are independent producers who having access to means of production which they may own or merely use, do not sell their labour power. Nonetheless peasants are dominated economically, culturally and politically by a class which extracts surplus from them through commodity relations, the control of state power or other means.

The rural economy in Africa is not simply a monolith of peasant household producers. It is differentiated and becoming more so. There are capitalist farmers, small commodity producers, wage laborers, whose development is

often linked to the development of capitalist farms; there are peasants producers proper and subsistence farmers.

These two categories constitute the bulk of the rural population in Africa. Though they are often confused, there are important differences between them. Peasant producers exist in a context of social classes as a subordinated class and they are involved in commodity production and exchange. When one is dealing with social formations of contemporary Africa it is somewhat more difficult to sustain this distinction. For rural producers who would normally qualify by virtue of their limited involvement in commodity production and exchange are still subject to class domination though it is difficult to exploit them in the strict sense of the word. For expositional convenience we shall be referring to these two social categories collectively as peasant producers.

The confrontation of the peasantry with capital has homogenized these two types of peasants in some important respects. For one thing, this confrontation has turned the subsistence farmers into simple commodity producers. They continue to produce use values and may well be spending more labour time on use value production. But by virtue of the impingement of capitalism which pulls them into exchange relations however intermittently and which makes the consumption of some commodities such as kerosene a requirement for their reproduction, even subsistence farmers have become simple commodity producers. They continue to produce use values even predominantly but their induction into commodity production though in a highly limited way, fundamentally reconstitutes the conditions for their simple reproduction. We can, with good reason, refer to the two categories of peasants as simple commodity producers.

The plight of simple commodity producers who represent the majority of the rural population of Africa and indeed the entire population of Africa illustrates the character and the scale of the problem of unemployment in Africa.

The particular manifestation of the problem of unemployment in this context is this: under pressure from capital, the state and the world market, simple commodity producers have been suffering simultaneously the devalorization of their labour as well as the reduction of their productive assets. In consonance with other factors which we shall encounter shortly, this trend has forced some simple commodity producers into disguised forms of worklessness. Some have been obliged to drift into the urban areas to swell the ranks of the informal sector, the majority have slumped into subsistence existence. More often than not, simple reproduction is barely achieved. For some, reproduction is achieved on a diminished scale, for instance a smaller

household unit, reduced personal consumption, the replacement of tools and inputs on a lesser scale.

We are not dealing with a generic phenomenon. The confrontation of capital and the peasantry does not necessarily produce this effect. Why then does it lead to these outcomes? That is a question that needs to be answered; to do so will go a long way towards seeing how Africa remains unemployed and by virtue of being unemployed, underdeveloped.

Relations between the rural and the urban

It will be misleading to treat unemployment in the rural and urban areas as discrete phenomena for they are organically related and mutually reinforcing. The factors which produce them are the same. And there are fundamental similarities in their character and manifestations. In both areas unemployment mainly takes the form of low productivity, very small reward for effort, disguised worklessness and tenuous access to the means for the realization of labour power.

There is a great deal of movement between the peasantry and the proletariat. This represents some degree of uniformization though not homogenization. The pressure of capital, the state and the world market is producing some rural proletarianization. However, this process continues to be disguised by the fact that in the countryside, the separation of the producer from the means of production is rarely ever complete. The same pressures which are proletarianizing the peasantry are also peasantizing the proletariat. Just as overexploitation compels some movement from the rural to the urban areas, so it also compels some of the proletariat to seek relief in the rural areas. The pressure of people towards the urban areas would appear to be stronger because the chances of higher incomes in the urban areas are still relatively much higher. Nonetheless the movement to the rural areas by the proletariat is still a significant countervailing force. For a hard-pressed urban proletariat and the members of the informal sector, keeping a foot in the village farm is an important survival strategy. This process of peasantization offers one explanation of how simple reproduction is possible with negligible productivity in the informal sector and the less than living wages in the labour market.

As the roles of peasant and proletariat are intertwined, the miseries of both are increased. One illustration will suffice. The rush of the demands of the urban population on the village land, exacerbates the problems of land scarcity and the exhaustion of the land and this in turn jeopardizes the survival of the peasant already precarious. The peasant already battling with the capitalist farmer, the multinationals and the state has one more competitor

to contend with. That translates to a diminishing possibility of breaking out of his or her oppressive economic circumstances.

It is much the same thing for the urban proletariat. This worker who is already threatened by the workless urban dweller and the nearly workless masses of the informal sector is further imperiled by the steady drift of people from the rural areas eager to take over his or her job. These rural migrants not only help to keep wages low even below the level required for simple reproduction but also makes it extremely difficult for them to struggle effectively against their exploitation.

Unemployment among other social categories

Before ending this discussion of the nature and extent of the problem of unemployment in Africa, it is useful to mention some specific social types whose peculiar plight sheds some light on the problem. Only two groups will be considered, youth and women.

Youth is conventionally defined as people in the age bracket 15 to 24. A large proportion of Africa's population falls in this category. This age group constitutes about 20 per cent of the entire population and this percentage is rising.

According to ILO sources, this age group has an unusually high percentage of the unemployed in Africa, (unemployed in this context meaning the state of worklessness), a percentage which is as high as 80 per cent in some cases. This may be viewed as a temporary bias which gets adjusted as the youth acquire more training, more experience and compete more effectively for job opportunities. Or it could be a structural feature of African economies. This would appear to be the more illuminating perspective. The factors which constitute this structural feature include the demography of Africa particularly the relative youthfulness of the African population as a whole. Another is the objective conditions of rural people which are so hostile that the young, somewhat better educated than their elders in the villages are resisting induction as successors to this arduous life and the high youth unemployment partially reflects this resistance. It is also to some extent a form of resistance to the miserable conditions of the informal sector. A contributory factor is the age bias of African society. Finally, worklessness among youth is the effect of the geometry of power. Because of biases against youth and a capitalist mode of production which values wealth, status and power, (assets which usually come somewhat later in life), youth are not a favored power group and their unemployment reflects their weak power position with the subordinate classes. This suggests that remedying the problem must also be a matter of empowerment.

The plight of women is worse yet. The oppression which women share with the other social types among the subordinate classes is compounded by several factors, especially the patriarchal tendencies of capitalism and of African cultures. The problem of unemployment here is certainly not worklessness, real or disguised. As a general rule, African women toil inhumanely, all the time usually in anonymity without even the benefit of the recognition of the contribution of their work to production and reproduction. The problem is that women are foisted with work rather than employment, and it is work for which there is very meager return of any kind. They are in the vortex of the struggle for survival in its instance of raw immediacy. So much for the nature of the problem of unemployment in Africa. Now why and how does this problem come about in Africa?

The Genesis of Unemployment

To answer this question we need to know how African social formations are constituted and grasp the dynamics of their particular constitution. With minor exceptions the socio-economic formations of contemporary Africa are creations of colonialism. They were forged in the context of near-absolute hegemonization of state power. The state power in question was initially that of the colonizing metropolitan social formation. It was projected and wielded with ruthlessness to subordinate the natural economies on the ground, to fashion economies from disparate territorial entities, to break down and fuse widely different social formations into one and to install the capitalist mode of production while simultaneously incorporating the fledgling economy into the world capitalist system.

Because state power had to do all this, there was inevitably the overdetermination of social structures and social processes by the state. Because of the complexity of the tasks and the inevitable clash between colonizer and colonized at every turn, the process of accomplishing them and the manner in which they were eventually accomplished, the colonial social formations were ridden with contradictions.

Let us examine these contradictions for they define importantly the character of African social formations and their dynamics including the genesis of unemployment.

1. The establishment of capitalism came into conflict with the logic of capitalism. For the efficient operationalization of the law of value and for fulfilling its historical role in the development of the productive forces, capitalism requires freedom and competition. The logic of colonialism was against this. Colonialism was an occupying force, a monumental act of hostility which needed to dispense a great deal of violence and political authoritarianism all the time in order to survive and to achieve its purpose

of exporting surplus from the colonies to the metropole without hindrance from the colonized. Instead of being liberal the colonial state was highly interventionist and obliged to apply force to the labour process. Colonial capitalism was distorted by this contradiction, even when it was quite established it continued to display the characteristic features of primitive accumulation.

2. The penetration of capitalism including the placement of capitalist infrastructures and the generalization of commodity production came into conflict with the exploitative intentions of the colonizers and their concern with repatriation of surplus back home. Since the colony remained essentially a hostile environment, there was rather little investment in infrastructures and capitalist institutions; there was not much interest in transforming the colonial territory into a coherent economy in which the different sectors and regions interlock in complimentary economic relations. More often than not capitalism remained an enclave phenomenon in Africa.

3. While colonial policies were establishing capitalism and arranging to integrate the colonial economy permanently into the world capitalist system, they were simultaneously hostile to the emergence of an indigenous bourgeoisie. The need to nurture an indigenous bourgeoisie was invariably overridden by the immediate concerns with preventing the indigenous people from being in a position to threaten metropolitan interests economically or politically. It was not until the transfer of power seemed inevitable that colonial policies began to be seriously interested in developing an indigenous bourgeoisie.

But then it was too late. The indigenous elites associated with the state apparatus such as teachers, civil servants, leaders of parastatal and government trade unions organized and inherited political power. This accounts for one of the major deformities of the postcolonial state. One of the consequences of this event was the asymmetrical relation between political and economic power. Those who make political decisions and decisions about development strategies are essentially a comprador bourgeoisie who are removed from production. Those who produce, or at any rate oversee production, do not make political decisions.

4. Partly because of the way it was founded and sustained by state power, the colonial state lacked autonomy and was immersed in class struggle and could not mediate it. It could never establish any plausibility as the state for all. Offering very little scope for promoting the interests of the subordinate classes in the class struggle, there was a very strong tendency towards overexploitation.

5. The lack of autonomy of the state constitutes a contradiction for the dominant class as well. Following this lack of autonomy it is not possible to mediate the contradictions between particular capitals and social capital. Among other things this contradiction is highly detrimental to the prospects of extended reproduction.

6. On account of the enclave character of colonial capitalism in Africa, limited commoditization and the survival although in a much decayed or distorted form, of precapitalist social relations of production, there is a problem of the penetration and articulation of state structures at the grassroots. Also, civil society is weak, that is, not much developed. This is the source of a wide variety of problems including the problem of democracy, mass mobilization and development. Arising from the limited penetration of capital the producers from the means of production and the fact that production still remains largely nonsocialized especially for the rural population. This ensures an endless struggle between capital and the peasantry over the conditions of production and exchange, a struggle which has limited the prospects of accumulation and the development of the productive forces.

The Post-colonial Era

Although its significance might have been primarily political, independence was not without significance for economic structures and economic processes in Africa. The general import of these changes has tended in the direction of re-enforcing the many negative features of the colonial economy especially the retarded growth of the productive forces and the associated problem of unemployment. What were these changes and how did they contribute to this effect?

The Intensification of Statism

At independence, African social formations became even more statist than they had been in the colonial period. As we have already seen, it was not the indigenous bourgeoisie that inherited power. At any rate this class was nonexistent or rudimentary at best. It was the petit-bourgeoisie associated with the state apparatuses which succeeded the colonial regime. By virtue of their locus in the state apparatuses they were already predisposed towards statism. Statism was accentuated by two factors which were more important still. One has to do with the embryonic development of the indigenous capitalist class and the associated paucity of private indigenous capital. Statism offered the only way to mobilize the economic resources which would allow the local political class to initiate any kind of development strategy and also begin to challenge foreign capital for the control of the economy.

The second arises from the weak material base of the new rulers. They could not consolidate their power without creating a material base for it.

The one easy and viable option available to them was to use their political leverage for the purposes of creating a material base. Usually this meant appropriating wealth with state power. To some extent this was done directly through corruption particularly selling the prerogatives deriving from their power to make or enforce rules for money. More often than not, it was done by expanding the role of the state in the economy to bring more resources under the control of the rulers so that they could all the more easily appropriate some of these resources. The tendency towards nationalization which is so widespread in Africa is partly a manifest unfortunate effect on the development of the productive forces. Because it is possible for those in control of state power to amass wealth without acting capitalistically, capitalism has not been able to play with any effectiveness its historical role in developing the productive forces in Africa.

Pluralization of Foreign Influence

After independence the foreign influences prevailing on African economies were pluralized. This was part of the process of assuming the symbols of an independent nation-state. Relations could no longer be limited to the former metropolitan masters. They had established links with a broad range of countries, some of which were also anxious to explore new territories which might foster their strategic or economic interests. With the expansion of the political contacts also came the expansion of economic interactions. The class in power was very anxious for this broader contact because it offered some chance of increasing their room for maneuver by pluralizing their dependence on more countries instead of on just the former colonial masters. At the same time, by virtue of being independent, the new states became eligible for membership in the system of international organizations such as the United Nations, the Non-aligned movement, UNESCO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund. Also the more they got into the international arena the more they attracted and contracted relations with the multinationals looking for avenues of power and profit.

To be sure, these developments gave some room for maneuver especially in regard to the domination of the old colonial master. But in some important ways they complicated the problems of escape from dependence and underdevelopment. As was to be expected, these developments pluralized the dependence of African economies but this was only a transitional moment in the process of collectivizing it. Under pressure from African and other Third World social formations asserting themselves, seeking more room for maneuver and a redistribution of the world's resources, the West has closed ranks and constituted themselves into an immensely powerful composite monopoly power.

The African social formations already among the weakest in the world system have been all too easy to subjugate. African social formations in regard to the West are like bearers of labour power in regard to the capitalist: relatively independent of particular capitalists but decidedly a slave to the capitalist class. With the options available to the African political leadership drastically reduced by the debt burden, the domination of the IMF and the World Bank and the cartel tendencies of the European Economic Community, it has been relatively easy for the multinationals to have a free run of African economies.

Populist Developmentalism

During the independence struggle, nationalist politics was the politics of negation, negation of colonial occupation. The new regime could not be defined in terms of being against something. It had to be an affirmation, to stand for something positive. With uncharacteristic unanimity, everyone conceived of the orientational focus of the new regimes as the pursuit of development. It was not just the African ruling class alone that did this. It was also the multinationals, the international organizations and the international community generally. In most of Africa, the idea of development was elevated to the level of ideology. This ideology which we may call populist developmentalism, was consciously though not seriously populist. The populism was a constraint imposed by the nationalist movement. The nationalist movement was populist and even to some extent radical in that it depended on mass mobilization, addressed the issues of oppression and the liberation of oppressed peoples from their bondage. As the nationalist movement grew, so did popular expectation of a just society and improvement in their material well-being. Those who came to power had to come to terms with this reality. Much as they were bent on deradicalizing the nationalist movement they could not ignore the state of popular consciousness so they engaged in defensive radicalism, affecting populist and radical postures which they did not intend to take seriously if they could possibly get away with not doing so.

The new orientation to development was soon to become a source of major contradictions. First and foremost the pursuit of development came into conflict with the reproduction of the hegemony of the political class. Almost as important was the clash between the requirements of capitalist development and the inevitable concessions to the populist postures. These contradictions have been a major impediment to development and even economic growth.

Class Conflict

The class character of the nationalist movement was masked by the domineering figure of the common enemy and the common grievances against it. All the same, it was from the very beginning the movement of a fledgling

bourgeois class, intent on a bourgeois revolution. And that was precisely what occurred. At independence the mask was removed. The African masses confronted an indigenous ruling class, which was content to inherit the colonial economy and disinclined to transform it.

A few notes on the character of the social classes in question and the nature of the class struggle is in order here. The class struggle aptly expressed the specificity of the African postcolonial state. This specificity is the nonautonomization of the institutional mechanisms of domination. In this sense the African state was a contradictions in terms, deriving its specificity from a feature which is really the negation of the differentia specifica of the state. For what distinguishes the state as a modality of domination is that the mechanisms of domination are constituted in a way that they are relatively autonomous of the social classes including the hegemonic social class, that is to say that the state is the concrete expression of the autonomization of domination.

African states have little or no autonomy, a plight arising from the colonial legacy and related objective conditions such as the weak material base of the African successors of the colonial regime and their association with the state apparatus in the nationalist era.

The immediate import of the lack of autonomy of the mechanisms of political domination is that the state is immersed in the class struggle which is accordingly unmediated. This applies not only to the struggle between classes. The state is also by virtue of its nonautonomization unable to mediate, with any effectiveness, the conflicts within the dominant class, including those between particular fractions as well as particular capitals. Finally it is also difficult given the nonautonomization of class domination to mediate the contradictions between social capital and particular capitals.

Where state domination is not autonomized as in most of Africa, political competition becomes Hobbesian, right tends to be coextensive with might and a very high premium is placed on the acquisition and maintenance of political power since it is the only reliable security and the means to everything. These are the underpinnings of the political instability in Africa which have rendered development all the more difficult. Like the Hobbesian state of nature, the intense and 'normless' struggle for power generates diffidence and insecurity and fear of a violent end even among the most powerful. The leadership then become completely absorbed with self-preservation and the reproduction of their hegemony. Anything else including development is given a relatively low priority.

All the factors mentioned above have contributed to the sharpening of the class contradiction and the advancement of the class struggle somewhat out

of proportion to what might reasonably have been expected given the state of the development of the productive forces. The state cannot pretend to be the state of all; it does not and cannot do very much to register the interests of the subordinate classes. What exists is a situation in which the powerful take what they can leaving the weak to suffer what they must. And it is a lot of suffering indeed. Since the state cannot restrain the ruling class and since this class cannot restrain itself the subordinate classes are pressed to extremities and forced to see ever more clearly the irreconcilable differences between them and their leaders and why they must fight to redeem themselves.

The relation between the dominant and the subordinate classes is characterized by overexploitation. This reflects among other things the contradiction between social capitals. In an undisciplined manner particular capitals are preoccupied with the immediate prospects of capital accumulation. To this end they intervene with force in the labour process and degenerate into primitive accumulation from time to time; they subject workers to inhuman toils and inhuman hours and pay wages that do not amount to a living wage. In effect they inadvertently endanger the reproduction of the working class the necessary condition of capitalist accumulation.

Relevance to the Problem of Unemployment

It remains to relate these features of African social formations to the question of unemployment. Factors associated with these features are responsible for the high level of unemployment in Africa. The major way in which they affect unemployment is by retarding the development of the forces of production. To avoid repetition this matter will not be treated in detail here; I will merely summarize a few points that bring these effects into clearer relief.

First the limited penetration of commoditization expresses and constrains the development of the productive forces. Since the division of labour especially in rural Africa is rudimentary and the socialization of production limited, development, capitalist or otherwise is, constrained. The regressive relations of production of natural economies which have survived the process of commoditization exert their own pressures for their reproduction and this, as the story of rural Africa has aptly shown, stalls Africa's progress. Also the persistence of precapitalist social relations of production encourages forms of ideological and political mobilization such as ethnic consciousness which reinforce the political and economic marginalization of the masses and underscores the bottling up of their creative energy. The limited penetration of capitalism and its enclave character express and reinforce the disarticulation of African economies which have facilitated dependence, the export of Africa's wealth and impeded autocentric development.

Second, the integration of African economies into the world capitalist system does not, contrary to expectation, appear to have helped the course

of development in Africa or even economic growth. Not if we go by the evidence of stagnation and retreat in the first 25 years of independence. Perhaps things could have been worse without the Western incursion, but that is a matter of speculation; we will never know. What we know is that after over a century of the civilizing mission and over 30 years of the partnership in progress, Africa is as weak and as marginal as ever and getting more so. The multinationals and multilateral agencies bear a large part of the blame for this. The general thrust of their policies have been inimical to the interests of African economies: in creating conditions favourable for the profiteering of multinationals, in subordinating the interests of African economies structurally disarticulated, in the accentuating of class differences etc.

Finally, the problems posed by the character of the state. Because political domination is not autonomized the state is conspicuously the state of some against the rest, class differences are sharper and class alienation deeper. The people are no longer available for mobilization to development. Under threat of coercion they seemingly cooperate in the leaders' development projects, but indifferently, passively or subversively. In the end the projects get nowhere. Because the state is so powerful and because conflicts cannot be effectively mediated given the state's lack of autonomy, politics metamorphoses into warfare, a hostile environment for development.

Development is also impeded by the intervention of force into the labour process, the persistence of traces of primitive accumulation, the nonmediation of the contradictions between particular capitals and social capital and the overexploitation of the subordinate classes. All these are factors associated with the character of the state in Africa particularly the nonautonomization of the mechanisms of domination.

These are among the major factors which have blocked Africa's escape from underdevelopment, kept the development of productive forces in Africa at an embryonic level. The effect of these factors on underdevelopment have been mediated through unemployment. In other words they have contributed to the persistence of underdevelopment by producing the state of worklessness, by reducing peasants and proletariat to levels of subsistence in which simple reproduction is often problematic, by devaluing the working person's labour etc.

For the rest of this paper we shall try to understand just how these factors engender unemployment.

1. Imbalance between proletarianization and the labour absorptive capacity of the accumulation process. Capitalism pre-supposes the separation of some producers from the means of production. The capitalist penetration of natural

economies proceeds in a manner which does not allow for the regulation of the supply of free labour. In Africa as everywhere else, there has been a tendency to the oversupply of free labour. This is particularly so because once capitalism penetrates a natural economy even partially, even subsistence farmers who still have access to means of production are placed in a position of realizing their reproduction by partial involvement in commodity relations. Some of them become intermittent sellers of labour power in order to ensure their social reproduction. Also subsistence and simple commodity producers find themselves so hard-pressed as to make some of them occasional sellers of labour power. These factors among others tendentially engender a bigger pool of labour power than what is required for extended reproduction.

This imbalance is accentuated by the peculiar nature of African capitalism which is characteristically lacking in dynamism and seemingly unable to develop the productive forces to any significant degree. The reasons why African capitalism suffers from this deficiency are already clear and will not detain us here. The effect of this imbalance is the very high incidence of workless and virtually workless persons and the ever-swelling ranks of the informal sector.

2. The contradiction between social ownership and public ownership of the means of production. This is an important cause of unemployment especially in those African countries which are pursuing, in however distorted a manner, a socialist path of development. The point of this contradiction is that it undermines the capacity of the socialist system to develop the productive forces, a capacity which lies essentially in the realization of the law of the necessary conformity of the social relations of production to the character of the forces of production.

But before going into the content and implications of this contradiction it is necessary to first understand its elements. Under public ownership, the means of production are concentrated in the state more especially in the hands of those who control state power, but the rationale for this concentration is that it is used in the public interest including the elimination of the contradictions inherent in private property and the contradictions of accumulation. However public property is really a form of private property in its essence. Following Włodzimierz Brus (*Socialist Ownership and Political Systems*) we conceptualize social ownership as entailing two elements (1), 'the means of production must be employed in the interest of society', and (2) society must have effective disposition over the means of production it owns.' Włodzimierz argues quite rightly that as a necessary condition for the employment of the means of production in the interest of society, social ownership must entail democratization.

Africa's socialist and statist economies have public ownership of the means of production but no social ownership. It is a form of private property in that it concentrates the control of means of production in a few hands allowing them to appropriate and consume the product of other people's labour, to dominate and exploit them. But it is a form of private property which does not have the dynamism of orthodox capitalism mainly because it is non-competitive and offers very limited incentive to efficiency and innovation. That is why it tends to be associated with economic stagnation and disguised unemployment. But that is only one part of the contradiction.

The other part is that these African socialist systems are in no position to realize the necessary congruence between relations of production and the development of the productive forces. In achieving this congruence, socialism advances the development of the productive forces. This advance arises specifically from the centralization of decision-making and the removal of the anarchy of production, from the harmonization of production with social needs, from the annihilation of social relations of domination and subordination in production and from putting an end to the alienation of the producer.

In Africa no such advance is made. All these changes which socialism should bring are not there, or are there only as contradictions rather akin to those of capitalism. The social formation loses on both ends. By the fact that state capitalism or public ownership as a form of private property is uncompetitive and undynamic and not conducive to the development of the productive forces even in the crude sense of economic growth. And then by the fact that African socialist social formations do not realize the law of the necessary conformity of the social relations of production with the character of the productive forces, which means the absence of those conditions which make socialism conducive to the development of the productive forces. For the most part what is really happening in these social formations is that subordinate classes are over-exploited and demobilized by too much coercion by a grossly inefficient state capitalism which ensures stagnation and unemployment.

3. The contradiction between populism and the pursuit of capitalism. Objective conditions in Africa are conducive to radical consciousness and populist if not radical leadership. These conditions include the gross inequalities of wealth and power and their highly visible and horrifying manifestations, anticipatory socialization to a world of affluence made possible by the communications revolution, the spread and level of poverty. Perhaps because of these realities very few leaders in Africa openly advocate capitalism even when they believe in it and are determined to practise it.

Rather, African leaders have generally preferred ideologies with a populist thrust however spurious the populism or radicalism may be in practice.

This disposition to appear progressive while acting conservative has not been without cost. This cost appears in the conflict between the content and form of policy. Sometimes it leads to serious contradictions which defeat public policies and the intentions of those in power especially when concessions are made to keep the progressive image plausible; such concessions become a constraint to policy and subvert the ends of the capitalist class.

This contradiction is quite evident in the rural development and agricultural policies of many African countries. Here there has been a marked reluctance to let loose the rigours of capitalization of agriculture. Instead, the preference has been to limit capitalization to enclaves. For the rest, the thrust of policy has tended to support the smallholder to survive and to improve performance, a policy very akin to Narodism. Protagonists of this strategy take a great deal of pride in its progressive concern for the independent peasant farmer, for the improved techniques and seedlings and other supports made available to them through extension services and other institutions. However, it should be noted that this policy is also calculated to arrest the drift to the urban areas, to reduce unemployment, to maintain regressive social relations of production and associated forms of consciousness which facilitate the domination of the rural masses.

Whatever the motives for this smallholder strategy, the point of interest here is that it is invariably associated with the retarding of productive forces. It confines capital to a regressive form. For it sets strict limits to technical innovation, scale of operation and productivity. The peasant farmer is expected to act like a capitalist without the means of realizing this. He is coerced and exploited through the very services which the state provides for his or her benefit: the incentives, manoeuvres and sanctions which make the peasant produce what the state and capital require, loans schemes which lure the peasant into servitude, the consumption of inputs which are not cost-effective, extension services which ensure subordination. Paradoxically the independent peasant strategy which is supposed to help the peasant to survive and to prosper often leads to his or her overexploitation. Even if this was not the case, the independent peasant strategy would still be regressive for it sets very strict limits on the expansion of production and accumulation.

Africa's place in the existing international division of labour is another source of unemployment, and here again this effect is mediated by the retardation of the development of the productive forces. Primary production itself is symptomatic of the underdevelopment of the productive forces. As long as it continues, so long does a major cause of unemployment remain. This

is partly because it is limiting to productivity, technological advancement and the growth of industrialization and accumulation. And as the history of Africa has shown very clearly, the primary producer is prone to exploitation, the use of the product of her labour to oppress her and even to put her out of work.

Efforts to change Africa's place in the existing division of labour have been unsuccessful so far. And the prospects for the immediate future do not look very good. The deep economic crisis which Africa has been facing for the last 10 years has brought her increasingly under the domination of Western development agencies particularly the International Monetary Fund who have insisted on capitalist solutions to African problems especially giving free play to market forces. The general effect of their influence is that Africa continues to be tied to primary production where she supposedly has a comparative advantage to the detriment of her development including the productive and creative use of her human resources.

Imbalances

Unemployment is engendered and sustained by imbalances associated with the character of the state and of social classes in Africa. We have already noted that African states tendentially lack autonomy with the result that they are immersed in class struggle and social conflicts including those between fractions of capital and between capital and the subordinate classes. These are not adequately mediated if at all. That is one of the causes of the over-exploitation of the subordinate classes and the difficulties in maintaining the conditions for the operationalization of the law of value. Because the resources follow so rigidly and crudely the geometry of power, the distribution of wealth is very badly skewed in most of Africa; so is the distribution of amenities and opportunities between the urban areas and the rural periphery which is largely the object of power. This is a well-known feature of Africa. What is not so well known is that these imbalances are a major cause of unemployment in Africa. This is so in so far as resources are distributed to the immense disadvantage of the vast majority of the society, so much so that their capacity to survive is hampered if not erased altogether. Some are unemployed or virtually unemployed because they have no means of production such as land. More often than not a few people have such means in such abundance that they merely squander them. Some are unemployed or just marginally employed and marginally productive because of poor health or lack of education or supportive infrastructures. The failure to remedy such imbalances to rationalize the distribution of resources and opportunities is a major element of underdevelopment in Africa.

Another imbalance associated with unemployment deserves mention. This is the dissociation of power from productive activity. In most of Africa state

power is controlled by an indigenous bourgeoisie with strong comprador tendencies and a weak productive base. The real productive base of the social formations is international capital (which supplies the technology and some capital) and the peasants and workers. Of these constituents of the productive base, international capital influences state power but does not control it; the peasants and the workers have hardly any influence over state power except in so far as they are objects of its repression.

This imbalance between political power and productive ability causes irrationalities which produce unemployment. For instance, it means that decisions emanating from the state favour non-producers, the parasitical class in control of state power and discriminates against the real producers especially the peasants and the workers. Sometimes the discrimination results in their loss of means of production, the curtailment of the products of their labour accruing to them to the extent that they lose the incentive to be more productive or even the ability to reproduce themselves.

The imbalance also causes a tendency to accumulate by using state power coercively or corruptly instead of seeking enrichment by capitalist behaviour. Thus exploitation and the accumulation of wealth are separated from the productive use of labour power and from the development of the forces of production. A further consequence of this is that reward, that is, the private appropriation of the socially produced surplus bears little or no relation to productive effort. This is an underlying condition of unemployment and low productivity in Africa.

Conclusion

We are as we work. For it is by their labour that humans create the means of their physical survival and reproduction and even the conditions for their progress to higher civilisation. If that makes work life's primary activity, it also makes unemployment, the state of worklessness of minimal productivity a critical, if not the critical problem of human existence. The problem of underdevelopment is not addressed until we make the problem of unemployment central to our concerns. The escape from underdevelopment is ultimately a matter of putting out more energy, being more productive and more creative, including creating more appropriate property relations and social relations of production and more appropriate modalities for the deployment and utilization of the social product. An essential preliminary is to rethink the question of unemployment in a completely different way from that of the hegemonic ideology and social science practice in contemporary Africa.