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BOOK REVIEWS
The “agrarian crisis” through which Africa is currently passing has tended to encourage highly generalised and unnuanced accounts of agrarian stagnation. And yet the actual situation in Africa is much more complex and encompasses diverse growth trajectories for each major commodity in each country. This suggests the need for more detailed analyses of specific cases and commodities. The study of wheat in Nigeria by Andrea and Beckman is an important contribution to this effort especially since it does not merely confine itself to an empirical account of wheat imports but includes a theorisation of the process through which the Nigerian economy has been drawn into the “wheat trap” through the “entrenchment” of wheat imports over time.

“Entrenchment” is the central concept of the study. It is used to characterise “the process whereby the dependence on imported wheat becomes built into the structure of Nigerian society in a manner which makes disengagement difficult”.

The authors’ main argument is that “the entrenchment” of wheat obstructs Nigeria’s national development by blocking the commercial transformation of Nigerian agriculture. The authors set their argument within the current normative discourse of African problems which posits the right path of development (this may be autocentric, export-oriented, laissez-faire etc) and then goes on to explicate the reason for the divergence between state policy and the obviously correct path. Looked at from the neoclassical perspective, the question raised is: why do the ruling classes adopt policies which create “distortions” in exchange relations (overvalued foreign exchange rates, minimum wages, high tariffs, low interest rates etc) that can only lead to stagnation when evidence from “success stories” clearly shows the inverse correlation between these “distortions” and economic growth? Whereas from the dependence perspective, the question is why does the ruling class accept the “entrenchment” of various forms of dependency (wheat, technology, cultural) when history suggests that “national development” demands autocentric accumulation spearheaded by a national bourgeoisie or “developmental” state?
Andrea and Beckman's formulation of the question is closer to the latter. They argue that the importation of wheat blocks the development of capitalism in Nigeria's agriculture. Imported wheat crowds out locally produced food crops because of its cheapness and the infrastructural and technological support it receives. It is an enormous drain of foreign exchange, leads to technological dependence, hampers the development of a domestic market by blocking the commercialisation of agriculture and reinforces technological dependency.

In light of all this, the authors are led to the formulation of the following "developmentalist" questions: "Why is it that something so inimical to national development is allowed to entrench itself?"; or "The production of wheat in Nigeria makes no sense from either a national or a local perspective. It is a massive waste of resources unlikely to achieve import substitution or foreign exchange savings . . . why is (it) that the policy of import substitution has been allowed to absorb all these resources, despite the blatant national and local diseconomies involved?" or "why (are) food imports entrenched, despite their "disfunctional" role in the development of the national economy?"

Given these effects of wheat imports the authors recommend an outright ban of wheat imports. Since the publication of the book the Nigerian government has decreed that it will do just that. Why has the decree been made and will it stick? Or, in the authors' own words, "what could prevent a conjuncturally motivated policy of self-reliance from being abandoned once oil sales pick up?" Reading this book one cannot answer these questions because the central social categories that would have helped to answer these questions are not fully spelled out. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of Andrea and Beckman's account is that it does not convincingly establish the class configuration required to sustain their recommendations although towards the end one gets a hint at an alliance between the working class and middle peasantry. The authors are aware that without such configuration of social forces, their recommendations would be utopian. Yet despite their frequent remarks about the danger of such an approach, their own set of recommendations is ultimately based either on the needs of "national development" or is basically voluntaristic.

To indicate the kinds of issues that one would have to raise in order to complete Andrea and Beckman's study, it might be worthwhile to recall the debate on "Corn Laws" in England. The Corn Laws, it will be recalled, were a kind of protective tariff allowing for the import of wheat until the domestic price of wheat had reached a certain height. There is a sense in which Andrea and Beckman can be said to be calling for the introduction of "Corn
"Laws" by their explicit and implicit defense of "Corn Law" type legislation which has since been made.

In this regard, Ricardo's political economic analysis of the issues involved both in economic and class terms remains one of the landmarks in classical political economy and I believe is still a valid point of departure today. Ricardo, in a pioneering theoretical study, rigorously established what classes would benefit from the introduction of such laws, the implication on the distribution of income and the impact of such a distribution on the accumulation process as a whole.

Ricardo started his analysis by identifying the four major categories of income — rent, interest, wages and profit — and the social classes to whom these forms of income accrued and he sought to determine how the ban on imports of corn would affect the various incomes. He argued that wage and profit earners would clearly suffer from the introduction of "corn laws", while the rentier class would benefit. Not surprisingly, in England landlords backed corn law and capital and labour favoured imports.

In discussing import substitution, Andrea and Beckman set out the stage for a veritable Ricardian type fractional and intra-class fight between an emergent irrigation lobby consisting of large scale capitalist farmers and a technocracy bent on import substitution on the one side, and an "import coalition" consisting of foreign governments (prone to put extra-economic pressures on policy-makers), transnational "grain merchants" and bakeries using a wide range of imported technologies on the other. The stage is set, the play is cast but somehow it is not fully played out.

The role of labour is ambiguous. The authors argue that it would be in the interest of labour to support the restriction of wheat imports and consumption of wheat. They, however, argue rather persuasively that wheat has become a "wage food" in Nigeria and they bring out all the advantages of wheat as a wage food — it is cheap, easy to store, easy to prepare. It would seem that these arguments are sufficiently convincing enough for workers to support the importation of wheat. Against this the authors evoke the employment creation argument. The domestic production of wage foods would generate employment in agriculture and through linkages with local industry would indirectly create employment in other sectors. However, their account of the transformation of wheat in Nigeria suggests that it is not an enclave process but is fully integrated into the economy and by its application of a rather wide range of techniques of production seems to provide employment.

More seriously the view that labour would support a strategy which bans a cheap wage good so as to support the birth of an agrarian capitalist class
that would produce a wage good locally and in the process generate wage employment in the countryside and in industry servicing the agrarian class (through backward and forward linkages) is demanding too much of labour, given the “proclivity of “comprador” tendencies to play havoc with national production plans”. To expect labour to forego the gains from cheap imports and employment in the bakery industry for uncertain gains of a strategy whose implementation is not certain seems to me highly unrealistic and, as the final chapter indicates, the authors have known this all along!

How about the capitalists? Here one has to distinguish at least three important fractions of capital — the comprador (merchant) capital, the industrial capital and the agrarian capitalists. Andrea and Beckman argue forcefully that comprador elements have frustrated and will continue to frustrate any strategy of import substitution. However, although the authors tend to lean towards the “‘comprador feature of the Nigerian state’ explanation of the importation of wheat, a careful reading of the book and the situation in Nigeria suggests that the continued import of wheat is not merely a “comprador line” and that there are other classes supporting the continuation of wheat imports. For the industrial capitalists, import of wheat cheapens the reproduction of labour and therefore favours profits, given the inverse relationship between wages and profits. This was Ricardo’s point. The new “gentleman farmers” of Nigeria are the most likely beneficiary from the protection of agriculture. However we are told that these are only poorly organised although there are some suggestions here and there that they count.

The authors devote considerable space to the question of import substitution (the entire second part of the book). While the case for “corn laws” seems strong, the one against import substitution production of wheat is not. Why can we not expect an alternative scenario where given the “entrenchment” of wheat in Nigerian dietary habits, the inelasticity of demand for wheat, and reduced import capacity of wheat would tend to push up domestic prices and favour production by domestic and agribusiness? At times Andrea and Beckman argue that there are technical constraints on the efficient production of wheat in Nigeria. At other times one gets the impression that it is the dominance of comprador elements or the “wheat import lobby” that will subvert any import substitution strategy by preferring to import wheat. Their account of why past schemes have failed is quite persuasive but it does not establish why “socially” profitable capitalist production of wheat in Nigeria is impossible.

The authors expose various forms of social cost-benefit exercises used to justify irrigation schemes as either flawed or as downright fraudulent. In the process of doing this they themselves get trapped in the world of neoclassical
calculus of static allocative efficiency of investments. First, why should one use “world prices” to evaluate projects in Nigeria especially when it is clear that there is a lot of “dumping” of wheat by the US and the West European producers? Secondly, what is the appropriate foreign exchange rate to use? It is easy to show, for instance, that using the current exchange rate of the Naira to the dollar and even accepting the authors’ estimates of the import content of wheat production in Nigeria, it is now cheaper to produce wheat in Nigeria than to import it.

This point raises one more problem with the authors’ arguments. There is a recurrent conflation of structural and conjunctural factors in the analysis. Is the “wheat trap” evidence of the structural bind of “dependence” or is it the result of the conjunctural “oil boom” and the resultant “Dutch disease” that has accounted for the nature of state policies and the travails of the non-oil exporting sectors? Virtually every OPEC member state has suffered from this “disease” which is named after Holland’s similar experience with its natural gas boom.

Given the complexity of the process they seek to describe — dependence and underdevelopment — it was probably highly risky to place so much of the burden of substantiation of their argument on one commodity and not the whole agricultural sector. However, the authors demonstrate, like Ricardo, the theoretical potency of such a concentration on one basic commodity. Andrea and Beckman’s book is an important building block in our understanding of the dynamics of agrarian transformation in Africa. If the book does not provide answers to some of the questions we have raised, it clearly does provoke one to think about them and is therefore rewarding reading. The book is also an excellent combination of rigour and lucidity. As such it should be useful reading in university courses on the policies and economics of African agriculture.

Thandika Mkandawire
Codesria,
Dakar.