

The Forces of the African

by
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Revolution (I)

ANY real comprehension of the great revolution which has swept over Africa in recent years is impossible without some appreciation of the forces which participated in this revolution, of their relations with one another in the course of the revolution, of their relative strengths and their roles. It is still more difficult (without such an appreciation) to understand the problems that the independent African states now face, the varying phases of the revolution through which they are now entering, and the perspectives for their further development.

African political leaders and writers are only too aware of the general nature of the problem, of the need to comprehend the nature of the dynamic forces which have helped to bring the African revolution to its present phase and whose role is decisive for the further unfolding of the revolution.

It is obvious, too, that there is a rich variety of conditions, of paths of developments, of social forces, in the thirty-six independent African states, each of which requires separate consideration and emphasis; yet, at the same time, at least as far as most of tropical Africa, or 'Africa south of the Sahara' is concerned, there are certain common features relevant to all the territories under consideration.

In the last few years, and perhaps even more today, there has been considerable discussion in Africa, as well as amongst European Marxists, concerning the structure of African society. Questions have been raised as to the relevancy of a class analysis in Africa. It has been said that "there are no classes at war, but only social groups struggling for influence." Leopold Senghor: *On African Socialism*, 1964. Or, that class differences exist but that they are not important. It has sometimes been argued that classes have been a European introduction into Africa, and that they are not really native to the African situation. Important consideration, too, has been given to the question of the class struggle, and doubts have been expressed as to whether it has any significance for Africa.

INTENSE DEBATE

Finally, there has been intense debate as to the role played by different classes in Africa's historic revolution. The view that the working class has been the leading force in the revolution has found both supporters and challengers. Some have suggested that this role has been played by the peasantry. Others, such as Franz Fanon, that the 'lumpen-proletarians' have been the real 'revolutionaries'. The national bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie, too, have both been depicted as the leading inspiration of the revolution. Another widely held view is that no single class can be claimed as the leader, that the African revolution has been a triumphant achievement of the whole people, of an alliance of all the healthy and patriotic forces of African society striving to overthrow colonialism and its hated tyranny in order to carry out the twin task of restoring to Africa her real identity and historic greatness, and creating in Africa a new society which will carry forward Africa's traditions and provide a new, rich life for its people.

It is therefore evident that an examination of the forces of the African revolution is most relevant to our understanding of that revolution, of its very character, its path and its future. The African revolution is not yet complete. In a sense, it has only begun. Those who wish to assist its rapid completion obviously will need to have a firm grasp of the forces which will be the main driving force in the new phase of Africa's revolutionary development.

The examination made in this article, and the conclusions that I shall try to draw are, by the very nature of

things, only tentative. Much more research is needed, for mere conjecture is of no value. But the research itself is handicapped by the lack of statistical information regarding the people of Africa. Under colonial rule no proper censuses were carried out; populations were often estimated on the basis of poll tax assessments. Now that African states are free to conduct their own censuses it is being strikingly revealed how inaccurate the previous estimates were. Nigeria, for example, which was estimated in 1953 to have a population of 30 million, is now found to have 56 million people. The new state of Zambia, whose 1961 census showed 2,490,000 Africans, apparently has nearer 3½ million Africans.

STRUCTURE OF AFRICAN SOCIETY

When one comes to examine the structure of African society, the difficulties are even greater. Figures for the size of the working class, for example, are difficult to ascertain with any degree of accuracy in most cases. The colonial authorities usually confined their attention to those in government employ or in the employ of major monopolies and plantations. Africans employed in smaller indigenous enterprises usually did not enter statistics. In agriculture there was often a blurring in statistics between peasants and workers, though this was in part, as we shall see, a consequence of the stage of class formation reached in Africa. Sometimes figures refer to those in "gainful activity", which cover a variety of class forces. Women, though admittedly a smaller proportion of the total labour force, are frequently omitted from the figures. As regards African employers of labour, the figures are even more limited. In Ghana today, where a more scientific approach to statistics is being employed, a much fuller analysis is becoming possible. Similarly, the recent decisions of the nine-day seminar on labour statistics, sponsored by the United Nations Economic Committee for Africa (ECA) and the International Labour Office (ILO), to collect relevant information from the different African states should act as a spur for further work in this field. But for the moment, one has to act on the basis of partial information and on statistics which are often largely estimates.

AFRICAN REVOLUTION

Despite these limitations, however, and serious as they may be, it is nevertheless possible, and certainly necessary to analyse the forces of the African revolution on the basis of the facts so far available. Later information may result in modifications to what can be said now, but I believe that there is already sufficient material to enable one to deduce, in broad outline, the position, strength and role of the main forces which have participated in the African revolution.

Before making this assessment however, there is one further observation that I wish to make. Much of the debate regarding the question of class-

es in African society has undoubtedly been, of immense value to Marxists in helping to focus attention on what is specific to African conditions. The ideas of men such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Touré, Ben Bella, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Numaide, Amílcar Cabral and Franz Fanon, who have suffered imprisonment at the hands of the imperialists, participated in mass struggles for the liberation of their countries, including in some cases armed struggles, and, in most cases, carry a heavy responsibility in the leadership of their respective peoples, are essential to an understanding of Africa. Their propositions and views, based as they are on a close experience and observation of African reality, have helped Marxists to avoid the facile and mechanical transference of European experience to their study of African development. Marxists, in Africa and elsewhere, appreciate today more than ever before that to comprehend what is taking place in Africa and to influence its outcome it is necessary to direct our Marxist weapons to the actual circumstances in Africa to what exists in reality and not what is imagined on the basis of some general Marxist propositions. And if today we are nearer this understanding it is in large part, due to the stimulus provided by the work and thought of some of Africa's outstanding thinkers.

"CLASS"

Some of the misunderstanding which has arisen in the discussions on Africa is a consequence of the non-scientific use of the term "class". This is a problem by no means confined to Africa. Marxists in the Western world, too, have found it necessary to combat the ideas of "new thinkers" who proclaim either that we are "all capitalists" now, or that we are "all workers", or that workers are becoming "middle class"—a term which itself has no scientific meaning. Lenin defined a social class in scientific terms which have a relevance to all societies and all regions of the world:

"Classes are large groups of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically definite system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in laws) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions and method of acquiring the share of social wealth that they obtain. Classes are groups of people one of which may appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in the definite system of social economy." (Selected Works: Vol.9, pp.432/3)

It is, as Lenin made clear, how people stand in relation to the means of production which is the key to their class. From this standpoint, Africa is indeed very complex. Even before the era of twentieth century colonialism, tropical African countries did not in general possess such clear-cut class divisions as, for example, most countries did in Asia, where systems of feudalism had existed over long periods. Four hundred years of the European slave trade and of Arab slavery had wrought untold destruction in Africa. It is estimated that over those four centuries Africa, lost

some 60 million people (some estimates put it higher)—killed in the slave hunts, died on the slave ships, landed across the Atlantic for slave labour. These were Africa's most virile and active forces, her direct forces of production. If, in exchange, Africa had received new modern methods of technique not all would have been a loss; but, in exchange for her manpower, Africa received

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gin, beads and rifles, commodities of absolutely no productive value whatever. Tribe was turned against tribe in a mad internecine war to earn rifles by selling slaves—for the possession of rifles was essential for one's own protection from falling into slavery, and the traders demanded slaves in return for the rifles. Thus, at a time when Europe was progressing from feudalism to capitalism and making enormous technological advances, Africa, by this same advancing Europe, was being dragged down and her society thrown into temporary stagnation. On the blood and bones of African slavery European capitalism, and especially that of Britain and France, flourished; new towns arose, inventions were made, factories were built, and Europe laid the basis of her passage to modern industrial development.

But, at the end of the nineteenth century Africa, already in a backward economic state, was to suffer yet a further heavy blow; before she could recover from her four hundred years of darkness, the imperialist whirlwind was upon her. Once more her normal development was frustrated and new distortions were imposed on her economy.

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF DARKNESS

Thus tropical Africa entered the twentieth century with a form of society which has been termed sometimes "elementary feudalism", sometimes "tribal feudalism", and even "feudal tribalism" the latter two definitions both implying a feudal reality behind the outward tribal form. Within this elementary feudalism there were strong survivals of patriarchal society which are still seen today in the firm solidarity of members of the social unit on the level of the patriarchal family, the clan or the village; and especially in the widespread absence of private ownership of the land. In brief, Africa entered the present century with no developed capitalist class of its own, with only the barest beginnings of a working class, with pockets of large-scale feudal landownership. (e.g. Northern Nigeria, Buganda, Ethiopia, Barotseland, Upper Volta and the northern regions of the French Cameroons), but with the majority of her people still carrying on their subsistence agriculture on their communally owned lands, and still practising their local handicrafts and village industries. Only during the past sixty years, and especially in the past two decades, has Africa begun to emerge from this pattern of development.

It is therefore understandable if the growth of new classes in African society—of workers

and capitalists—should not sometimes be given immediate attention or emphasis. In any case, these classes are still in a process of development, and are in no sense mature, clearly defined classes such as we see in the industrialised West. Workers are usually part-time peasants, and peasants are part-time workers. Differentiation amongst the peasants is often not very far advanced; the private ownership of land is beginning to spread but no decisive break-up of communal land ownership has yet taken place, and the main tracts of land are still owned by peasant communities. African capitalists still comprise a relatively small group, mainly in farming, trade and land speculation, and have not yet been able to wrest from the imperialist monopolies any substantial portions of the economy for themselves. When one takes into account, too, the ideological influence of the united front for national independence that has engulfed all African countries without exception, it can more readily be understood why there is often hesitancy by some African leaders to accept the significance of social classes when considering Africa's present phase of development. But the significance cannot be denied.

If I commence with Africa's working class this is because this is the most important of the new classes in Africa, the numerically largest modern class, the most rapidly growing class, the class whose existence, characteristics and growth can be most clearly traced. In most cases it would be incorrect to regard African workers as possessing nothing but their own labour power. Most of them retain a foot in the communal land system, working, in between periods of wage employment, on their own or with their family, on the small plot of land allocated to them by the chief. As long as they use their plots of land, they are entitled to have it but not to own it, and therefore not to sell it. But the piece of land is so small, or the soil so poor, that the African usually cannot earn enough either to pay his cash taxes or to buy the goods he needs. Thus, even though retaining a plot of land in the countryside, the African is compelled by economic necessity to sell his labour power—and that has usually meant employment in a European-owned enterprise. Economic necessity to sell his labour power and take up wage earning employment makes the African a semi-proletarian notwithstanding his continued link with the land; and increasingly, this link is being cut, too.

AFRICAN WORKING CLASS

The origins of the African working class can be traced back to the birth of the imperialist epoch, that is to the turn of the century. To exploit the resources they had stolen from the people, the imperialists were driven to create conditions for the growth of an African working class. The division of Africa, decided on by the Western powers at the 1885 Berlin Conference, had been put into operation by the beginning of the twentieth century, notwithstanding the courageous resistance of the African people, who were heavily handicapped by inferior weapons and, frequently, by tribal division. Having seized Africa, the imperial conquerors were anxious to turn it into a source of profit. That was the main purpose of the conquest.

Crude slavery had been largely abolished, but what was to take its place if Africa was to be compelled to yield its

riches? Diamonds had been discovered in South Africa in 1866 and gold in 1886; gold was found in Southern Rhodesia, in Mashanaland, in the 1860's; and in 1890, agents of the imperialist adventurer, Cecil Rhodes, tricked Lewanika, Paramount Chief of Barotseland, into signing a document giving the British South Africa Company mineral rights in Northern Rhodesia (now the independent state of Zambia), which was to lead to the seizure of the rich copper wealth by the big international monopolies especially of Britain, South Africa and later, of America. The big European trading firms had also moved in; and along with them came the necessity of roads and railways. At the same time, there was an influx of white settlers into such territories as South Africa, the Rhodesias, and Kenya, as well as the setting up of large European-owned plantations in many parts of Africa. Colonial government and the maintenance of troops required labour for building, for laundry and domestic work, for transport, even for certain levels of clerical and administrative labour.

For all of these tasks labour was required, and of special importance was agriculture and mining. Without labour to produce the crops or to go down into the earth to bring up the valuable mineral ores, the possession of African land and resources was virtually worthless.

NECESSITY AND FORCE

To create conditions for the emergence of this working class, the imperialists utilised the twin weapons of economic necessity and force. Notwithstanding the terrible destruction resulting from four hundred years of the European slave traffic the African people, if left to themselves, could still have existed on the basis of their own subsistence agriculture, handicrafts village industry and barter. Describing Bechuanaland, the well-known anthropologist, Dr. I. Schapera has explained:

"Before the coming of the Europeans, all the Native inhabitants of the Territory were economically self-sufficient. In the main, each Bantu household produced its own food by raising crops and breeding livestock; it also built its own huts, and made most of its own clothing and domestic utensils. Certain utensils and other goods were made and bartered by specialist craftsmen, who supplemented in this way their income from farming. Since the coming of the Europeans this old self-sufficiency has broken down."

The "old self-sufficiency" did not break down by accident. For the imperialists, it had to be broken down if they were to obtain the labour for their own purposes. And the economic weapons used for destroying this former self-sufficiency, (which admittedly was not on a very advanced level), were the seizure of land, the crippling of African agriculture, in the elimination of many village crafts and industries, and the imposition of hut and poll tax.

DESTROYED BY COMPETITION

Village crafts and industries were largely destroyed by competition from imperialist manufactured imports, or by the European monopolisation of the economy within Africa itself, as a consequence of the imperialist conquest. A *Special*

Study on Economic Conditions in Non-Self Governing Territories, issued by the United Nations in 1958 points out that in many parts of Africa imported textiles from industrialised countries have resulted in "a complete disappearance of domestic weaving." Other crafts, it says, have "suffered a similar decline". A study on *Mining, Commerce and Finance in Nigeria* (1948) noted that:

"Since the growth of European economic enterprise in Nigeria, native mining has been on the decline because of the *de facto* monopolisation of deposits by Europeans. . . or through the competition of European products with the final products of native mineral industries." The study noted that tin used by the Hausa people for tinning their brassware was formerly mined by Nigerians and smelted by clay furnaces, but "by 1923 this indigenous industry had completely disappeared." Similarly, surface ironstone had been smelted locally and used as a source of iron, but already by the 1930's the local smelting industry had "largely died out". Professor Daryll Forde, describing the human consequences of this decline in Nigeria traditional mining, has written: "Traditional guilds of smiths have decayed, leaving their members impoverished and threatened with social degradation." In many parts of Africa, the local production of salt has been seriously curtailed as a consequence of the import of salt from European sources.

DECLINE IN LOCAL MANUFACTURE

A report from France (*Assemblée de L'Union Française*, No.280, 21 Juillet, 1953) talks of a similar process of decline in local manufacture in the former French colonies in Africa. "Deterioration of African craftsmanship is very rapid. . . certain objects, such as household utensils, produced by African craftsmen have disappeared, calabashes being replaced by basins, wooden bowls by plates." H. Labouret, in his *Paysans d'Afrique Occidentale*, 1941, reported that the collapse of African handicrafts had been so sweeping in some areas that special vocational schools had had to be established in order to preserve these crafts.

By 1958, the *U.N. Special Study on Economic Conditions in Non-Self-Governing Territories* could write:

"The indigenous communities have been brought into contact with world trade centres and their economies have become linked to the sensitive commodity markets of the distant world. In less than half a century the closed system of family economy has broken into pieces under the pressure circumstances."

Decisive in bringing about this catastrophic change has been the decline of traditional agriculture. This was the result of imperialist policy which seized much of the best land, turned whole territories over to the production of single cash crops for export, and introduced various measures to inhibit the emergence of an independent and prosperous African agriculture. In South Africa, the Europeans seized over 90 per cent of the land, and today still hold 88 per cent. In Southern Rhodesia they rapidly acquired over half the land, and almost the same percentage in Swaziland.