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Can Modernity Accommodate African 'Peasants'?

This paper interprets 'modernity' in Africa today as the consequences of historically specific patterns of capitalist development, or 'actually existing capitalism', with special reference to African 'peasants'. Their social conditions of existence are fundamentally, if not exclusively, those of capitalist class relations and dynamics, internalised in the functioning of 'household' farming. Many, perhaps the majority, of Africans with a rural base are better considered as 'classes of labour' than as 'peasants'.

Capitalism, Classes of labour, Peasants.

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'MODERNITY' (AND ITS DISCONTENTS)

This is a short paper which will provoke, I trust. I originally suggested its title in response to the theme of the conference. When I came to write the paper it was no longer clear to me why I chose to ask the question - can modernity accommodate African 'peasants'? – nor indeed what it might mean. This small confession can serve, at least, to point towards the profound ambiguities of big, indeed encompassing, notions of 'modernity' with which we struggle all the time on a range of terrains from the most abstract to the personal/existential. To take some of the most obvious examples, do we mean by 'modernity'

- (i) a socioeconomic condition based in industrialisation and urbanisation, the condition of being 'developed' (Kitching 1982, 2001)?
- (ii) political, cultural, intellectual, moral – and even psychological – traits associated with that condition, typically deploying constructs of 'rationality' and adduced to explain progress, or lack of progress, towards achieving modernity? ¹
- (iii) a particular stance towards a world of continuous change and contradiction, that incorporates 'openness', experiment, creativity, innovation in a range of registers from economic activity to artistic expression (Berman 1983)?
- (iv) aspirations to the condition of modernity, or at least some of its presumed benefits and in however fanciful ways : 'expectations of modernity' (Ferguson 1999)?

All these things, and more? And, of course, permeating such questions, is a further one: are notions of modernity inescapably ethnocentric? Do they function, in effect, as imperialist ideology, as argued famously by Arturo Escobar (1994) *inter alios*? I suggested elsewhere that

...the original source of any meaning of modern 'development' [for which also read 'modernity'] in effect (is) that established by the initial (and long) transitions to capitalism of northwestern Europe, and especially that epochal moment marked by the advent of modern industrialisation in Britain from, say, the mid- or late eighteenth century onwards. After that,

¹ As in Western modernisation theories of the 1950s and 1960s, and their reinventions in today's neoliberal discourses of 'development' and 'good governance' as the guarantors of prosperity with security for all (Duffield 2001; Bernstein 2007).

nothing would be the same again - and, if one adds 'for better or worse', then this is probably as near to commanding a measure of general agreement as any observation of comparable world-historical scope. Of course, agreement does not bestow innocence. Indeed, the association of modernity with world-historical processes initiated in the 'North' (or 'West' or 'First World' in the terminology current not long ago) and thereafter spreading globally, not least by imposition and coercion, remains one of the definitive philosophical and political tensions at the core of debate about development today... (Bernstein 2006: 45-46)

Such tensions, and the ever intensifying contentions concerning modernity and development they manifest, can be further illustrated by two great zones of the world otherwise so dissimilar, sub-Saharan Africa and China. One is positioned in the 'global shadows' with aspirations to modernity that protest exclusion by 'the neoliberal world order' (Ferguson 2006); the other is in the full limelight of contemporary globalization and debates of its possible futures.²

Some of the ambiguities and tensions concerning sub-Saharan Africa are revealed by the motivation for this conference, starting with its formulation of 'challenges to modernity', meaning challenges to the material practices of modernity and their consequences? To discursive constructions of 'modernity' and their (unhappy) consequences, including their characteristic prescriptions for 'development'? The latter is made explicit in the observation of 'the weaknesses of attempts to apply external models of society and state of European and American origin to African countries'. Accepting this position – a standard one among Africanists – only leads to further questions, of course. 'External models of society and state' may be inadequate to exploring and explaining African specificities but what alternative 'models' might do better, let alone help to deliver materially better lives to the great majority of Africa's citizens? (the question that follows from Ferguson, 2006).

The conference motivation points to more interesting ground, I think, when it suggests that 'Various African societies have found innovative responses to the challenges of globalization, either relating to the fields of trade, politics and culture or to the complex scenarios of economic, environmental and energy crises that have been affecting all humanity.' This points, in effect, towards conceptions and practices of modernity alternative to 'external models' inherited from colonialism, refashioned in the period of state-led development, and reinvented in the current period of neoliberalism.

² The two increasingly connected, of course, through China's expanding investment and associated activity in sub-Saharan Africa; Brautigam (2009) is one of the best recent works on this theme.

The conference motivation further suggests that these ‘responses and the accompanying re-readings of the past have been the basis of profound identity shifts’. This is something I look forward to learning more about during the course of the proceedings, not least as it provides points of connection with Chinese debates about conceptions of modernity and China’s path of modernisation, similarly marked by ‘re-readings of the past’ and fears and hopes for the future.

I restrict myself to a few illustrations (and those available from texts from/on China available in English). One is the recent book of essays in English translation by Wang Hui (2009), whose monumental *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (2004) is discussed in an illuminating article by Zhang Yongle (2010). The central theme is that of recurring ‘modernities’ in Chinese history, that is, creative responses, both intellectual and institutional, at key moments of contradiction and stress in the long history of Chinese civilisation. In effect, Wang proposes an alternative to the familiar view of a single moment of modernity, originating in the transformations of European societies and world-historical in its consequences (the position expressed in my quote above). His account incorporates a critique of any binary between multi-ethnic empire and nation-state in China characteristic of much Western scholarship, as well as extensive discussion of questions of method, and of Western notions of science confronted by many Chinese intellectuals from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

The contemporary relevance of Wang’s work is a critique of any Chinese drive to emulate (and overtake) Western modernization, especially as manifested in the form of unrestricted capitalist development since the 1990s. The need to deconstruct ‘modernity’ and modernisation as a critique of China’s extraordinary economic growth based, in his view, on primitive accumulation at the expense of the countryside, is also a central concern of Wen Tiejun (2007, 2008). Wen (2001), which summarises his *Study on Basic Institution of Rural China*, is a surprising revisionist account of land relations and the Chinese peasantry over a similar civilisational *longue durée*, to support his arguments, on both social and ecological grounds, for pro-‘peasant’, pro-rural policies in the current period.³

³ Which means curbing the rate of industrialisation and urbanisation, and redirecting government spending from urban to rural areas (interview with Wen Tiejun, conducted jointly with Yan Hairong, Beijing July 2010). It is also worth noting here the theses of two Western scholars, Kenneth Pomeranz and the late, great, Giovanni Arrighi. Pomeranz (2000) argued that until 1800 or so, the economic development of China and western Europe was very similar; the ‘great divergence’ thereafter was due to highly contingent factors, both ecological and demographic, that favoured Europe, and in which expansion across the Atlantic was key. Arrighi (2006, and more accessibly 2009) argued that until the nineteenth century China had successfully followed a ‘Smithian’ path of economic development which was resumed since liberation in 1949.

Comparisons between sub-Saharan Africa and China are usually fanciful in the light of both their civilisational histories and current dynamics of economic and social change. The brief illustrations given, however, point to some common preoccupations in grappling with meanings, prospects and problems of 'modernity' in a world shaped by western imperialism. Indeed, the title of the article by Zhang (2010) - 'The Future of the Past' - provides an intriguing echo of the motivation of this conference just cited: that 're-readings of the past have been the basis of profound identity shifts' in how Africans deal with the present and imagine their future.

CAPITALISM, AFRICA, 'PEASANTS'

I now shift direction or at least focus to propose some theses about 'modernity' and capitalism, about capitalism in Africa, and about 'peasants' in Africa in terms of the class dynamics of capitalism. The relationship between the emergence and spread of capitalism and the meanings of 'modernity' has always been intimate as well as fractious. Marx himself, of course, often referred to 'the modern mode of production' and 'modern society' as synonyms for capitalism, an index of his insistence on its world-historical nature from the sixteenth century onwards, with its reach and impact intensified by the inception of capital's industrial revolutions from the late eighteenth century.

This is the path followed here, and in contrast with many views of African societies today as 'outside' capitalism in some fundamental sense, as 'incompletely' capitalist, and so on (Bernstein 2004).⁴ For example, two veteran radical scholars of Africa write that 'The predominant social relations are *still not capitalist*, nor is the prevailing logic of production. Africa south of the Sahara exists in a capitalist world, which marks and constrains the lives of its inhabitants at every turn, but is not of it' (Saul and Leys 1999: 13, my emphasis). If sub-Saharan Africa is 'still not capitalist' (an explicitly teleological formulation of the kind that typically features in critiques of 'modernity'), then what is it?

Thesis I

The approach here focuses on 'actually existing capitalism' - generalized commodity production - in Africa (as elsewhere). A key theoretical foundation for this approach was specified, in the context of an analysis of Africa, by Peter Gibbon and Michael Neocosmos (1985: 169, my emphasis):

⁴ Analytical perspectives that can be associated with prescriptions that African 'development' needs, on one hand, more capitalism, on the other hand, some or other alternative to capitalism (for which inspiration is often sought in aspects of African history and/or indigenous culture).

...to suggest that a social formation is capitalist by virtue of being founded on the contradiction between wage-labour and capital is not to assert that all - or even the majority of - enterprises in this social formation will conform to a 'type' in which capitalists and wage-labourers are present...What makes enterprises, and more generally social formations, capitalist or not, is...*the relations which structurally and historically explain their existence*...What has to be shown in order to 'prove' the(ir) capitalist nature...is that the social entities and differences which form the social division of labour in such formations are only explicable in terms of the wage-labour/capital relation.

Capitalist social relations are established through the *commodification of subsistence*, as explained in Bernstein (2010).⁵ However much this process initially required coercive imposition, familiar from the colonial record in all areas of the globe, the commodification of subsistence can be regarded as established once coercion gives way to what Marx called 'the dull compulsion of economic forces' – broadly the situation in sub-Saharan Africa by the end of the colonial period, I argue. Moreover, this results in the *internalisation* of capitalist commodity relations in the circuits and functioning of farming households, with effects for their differential prospects.

Thesis II

The key to the last proposition above is the theorisation of *petty commodity production* in capitalism, which combines the class 'places' or locations of both capital and labour: in farming, capital in the form of land, tools, seeds, fertilizers and other chemicals, and labour in the form of families/households. It is a 'contradictory unity' of class places, for several reasons. First, those class places are not distributed evenly within farming households, especially given gender divisions of property, labour, income and spending, familiar from many studies of African countrysides. Second, there is a contradiction between reproducing the means of production (capital) and the producer (labour), that is, the distribution of income (including from borrowing) between, on one hand, the replacement fund and fund of rent, and, on the other hand, the funds for consumption and generational reproduction - a distribution that is usually also strongly gendered.

Third, the contradictory combination of class places is the source of a tendency of differentiation of petty commodity producers into classes that Lenin (1964) termed rich, middle and poor peasants:

⁵ On which the following draws extensively, as it does on Bernstein (forthcoming). Commodification is the process through which the elements of production and social reproduction are produced for, and obtained from, market exchange and subjected to its disciplines and compulsions.

- those able to accumulate productive assets and reproduce themselves as capital on a larger scale, engaging in *expanded reproduction*, are emergent capitalist farmers, corresponding to Lenin's 'rich peasants';
- those able to reproduce themselves as capital on the same scale of production, and as labour on the same scale of consumption (and generationally) - what Marx termed *simple reproduction* - are medium farmers, corresponding to 'middle' peasants;
- those struggling to reproduce themselves as capital, hence struggling to reproduce themselves as labour from their own farming and subject to what I term a *simple reproduction squeeze*, are poor farmers, corresponding to Lenin's 'poor peasants'.

Emergent capitalist farmers tend to employ (more) wage labour in addition to, or in place of, family labour. Poor farmers experience most acutely the contradiction of reproducing themselves as both labour and capital, and may reduce their consumption to extreme levels in order to retain possession of a small piece of land or a cow, to buy seeds, or to repay debts. As Chayanov (1991: 40) put it: 'in the course of the most ferocious economic struggle for existence, the... [small farmer] who knows how to starve is the one who is best adapted.'

Medium farmers, especially those who are relatively stable petty commodity producers, are of special interest, not least because they are dear to the heart of agrarian populism (as was the 'yeoman farmer' or 'progressive farmer' ideal to late colonial rulers in Africa). This sometimes reflects an assumption that the 'middle peasant' condition was the norm in rural communities before capitalism which are regarded, rather romantically, as intrinsically egalitarian. Consequently the emergence of rich and poor peasants is seen as an unfortunate deviation, a kind of fall from grace, caused by malevolent forces external to peasant communities.

The theoretical schema proposed here recommends a different view: that medium farmers are also produced by class differentiation. That is, processes of commodification

- (i) raise the 'entry' costs and reproduction costs of capital in farming, and the risks associated with those higher costs, and
- (ii) increase competition for land and/or the labour to work it.

Thus even 'medium' family farmers establish and reproduce their commodity enterprises at the expense of their neighbours who are poorer farmers, unable to meet those costs, or bear their risks, and losing out to those who can. They are likely to be forced out of farming, or if they can obtain credit become highly indebted and slide towards marginal farming.

In sum, then, these elements of petty commodity production in capitalism, and its dynamics/tendencies, are fundamental to the theorisation of 'peasants' in Africa as elsewhere. They constitute a necessary starting point for concrete investigations and analyses of farming and reproduction in African countryside but are not sufficient, for the reason Marx (1973: 101) gave in his notes on 'The Method of Political Economy', namely that 'The concrete...is the concentration of many determinations' (and to which I return below).

Subject to the range of specific variations that concrete investigation and analysis always disclose, this second thesis suggests the ubiquity of class dynamics among African 'peasants' as actual or emergent capitalist farmers, petty commodity producers, and 'classes of labour' – the likely majority, in my view.⁶

Thesis III

I use the term 'classes of labour' to refer to 'the growing numbers...who now depend - directly *and indirectly* - on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction' (Panitch and Leys 2001: ix; my emphasis). Classes of labour might not be dispossessed of *all* means of reproducing themselves, but nor do they possess *sufficient* means to reproduce themselves which marks the limits of their viability as petty commodity producers in farming ('peasants') or other branches of activity (an outcome of the commodification of subsistence).

Classes of labour in Africa today, as elsewhere in the 'South', have to pursue their reproduction through insecure and oppressive - and typically increasingly scarce - wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious 'informal sector' ('survival') activity, including farming; in effect, various and complex *combinations* of employment and self-employment. Many do this across different sites of the social division of labour: rural and urban, agricultural and non-agricultural, as well as wage employment and self-employment:

⁶ And in terms of 'agency' we should remember the many instances of specialised commodity production initiated by African farmers, of which Hill (1963) was a pioneering study. Interestingly, a century later (the 1990s) and based on the same crop, cocoa, Tania Murray Li (2002) describes a similar process of 'peasant'-driven initiative in commodity production in the Indonesian island of Sulawesi that soon gave rise to class differentiation in the countryside as earlier in the Gold Coast/Ghana.

'footloose labour' indeed (Breman, 1996).⁷

This defies inherited assumptions of fixed, let alone uniform, notions (and 'identities') of 'worker', 'peasant', 'trader', 'urban', 'rural', 'employed' and 'self-employed'. It also contributes to the fragmentation of classes of labour in various ways. First, social differences of a typically hierarchical, oppressive and exclusionary nature - of which gender is the most ubiquitous and which often also include ethnicity and religion - fragment classes of labour. The 'structural' sources of exploitation and inequality inherent in all capitalist production (petty and grand, informal and formal) combine with other forms of social inequality and oppression to create divisions within classes of labour. Second, relative success or failure in labour markets and salaried employment is typically key to the viability (reproduction) of petty commodity production in farming, and hence class differentiation in the countryside. This, of course, has long been the case in many farming zones in Africa.

In current conditions of (neoliberal) globalization, there are tendencies in sub-Saharan Africa of (i) 'deagrarianization' - 'the growing proportion of rural incomes derived from non-farm sources' (Bryceson, 1999: 172); (ii) diminishing farm size, or area cultivated, and with fewer 'inputs' (other than labour), especially by poorer farmers (Ellis 2006); (iii) shortages of arable land, especially in areas of better soils, wetlands, and/or transport links to urban markets, due to various combinations of intensified pressures on reproduction and demographic concentration, including in-migration to more favoured farming areas (Chimhowu and Woodhouse, 2006); and (iv) increasing conflict over land (Peters, 2004).

There is a kind of scissors effect at work for those in rural Africa (the great majority) whose reproduction is secured from combinations of own farming and off-farm wage and self-employment, alongside the collapse of employment opportunities in the 'formal' economy and of real wages. This accounts for the massively swollen numbers in the 'informal' economy, exerts additional pressure on the reproduction of farming (and through farming), and hence intensifies the pursuit of means of livelihood both on and off the land.

At the same time, of course, the 'crisis of African agriculture' is not distributed equally across those who farm or otherwise have an interest in farming and access to land. Some with recognized claims on land are otherwise too poor to farm: they lack

⁷ On the formation and dynamics of classes of labour in other guises than that of the 'classic' industrial proletariat, see the illuminating studies and arguments of Marcel van der Linden (2008), also relevant here are the extraordinary essays of Jairus Banaji (2010).

capital to secure inputs, command over labour through the social relations of kinship - typically mediated by patriarchal relations of gender and generation - or market, and/or access to credit that is affordable and timely. On the other hand, those able to reproduce relatively robust agricultural petty commodity enterprises, and *a fortiori* to expand the scale of their farming, typically do so with reproduction/investment funds derived from wage employment, and also buy labour power.⁸

SO CAN MODERNITY ACCOMMODATE AFRICAN 'PEASANTS'?

The three theses so schematically stated, and so briefly illustrated, suggest that 'modernity', understood as the dynamics of capitalist social relations of production and reproduction, can, and indeed does, incorporate African 'peasants', and, moreover, in ways that highlight the tendency of their class differentiation.

This is the result of an analytical argument that carries no normative assumptions concerning the virtues or vices of either of its central terms: 'modernity' and 'peasants'. At the same time, it has implications for prescriptions derived from particular understandings, and juxtapositions, of both, whether emanating from, say, the World Bank (on which Carlos Oya's paper for this panel) or from various, typically populist, constructions of 'indigeneity' (underlying the conference motivation?).

It may be argued, of course, that this way of answering the awkwardly framed question of the paper's title involves a kind of conceptual conjuring trick. And/or that it simply leaves out far too much: it is indeed derived from a more general theoretical position on petty commodity production, especially as practiced by 'peasant' farmers, in contemporary capitalism (Bernstein 2001) and with little reference to the specificities of modern African history. And/or that it is excessively 'structuralist' with no space for 'agency'...and so on (but see note 6 above).

In conclusion, then, let me explain a little more the approach of this paper, not in order to 'convert' others but to try to encourage informed disagreement. The indispensable tasks of critique and debate in social science are deprived of value too often by lack of adequate comprehension, or by ideological versus properly intellectual confrontation – especially when a Marxist perspective is applied.⁹

⁸ John Sender and his co-workers have long criticized the systematic neglect of rural labour markets in African 'peasant' farming (e.g., Sender et al 2006). They also emphasize their gendered character, as does Bridget O'Laughlin (1996) in an outstanding analysis of Mozambique.

⁹ There is a structured asymmetry at work here: Marxists typically have a much better grasp of other social science paradigms than proponents of the latter have of Marxism.

First, it may be suggested – and often is – that any Marxist analysis of African social realities represents just another ‘external model...of European origin’, hence can be dismissed *a priori*. Evidently I am unsympathetic to this type of dismissal, too frequently self-serving in its effect and sometimes its intent. If capitalism is a central element of any adequate account of modern African history, then Marxist understandings of capitalism - including what is at stake in intense debates between Marxists (see Banaji 2010) - have to be taken seriously. The same applies to any proposition that capitalism is indeed central but also ‘external’ to Africa in some sense: that sense then has to be specified, investigated and argued rather than simply asserted on some or other nationalist and/or culturalist grounds. It remains the case that any Marxist analysis of modern African history will be enriched by taking into account important work from other, non-Marxist, perspectives, and has to be judged on its merits. On these criteria, one can assess stronger and weaker Marxist contributions.

Second is the much debated question of what forms of capitalism exist in Africa, and why, and how they were established and have mutated historically. A common feature here, as noted earlier, is various notions of ‘incomplete’ development of capitalism in Africa, the reasons for it, and the implications for greater material progress for the majority of Africans. For example, such notions may centre on colonialism and its legacies – whether seen as ‘exploitation’ of Africa or systematic restriction of capitalist development as matter of policy – or on various forms of ‘resistance’ to the compulsions of commodification. Without going into the various strands and complexities of such debates and their relation with interpretations of modern African history, I noted my own view of modern Africa as both incorporated within global capitalism/imperialism *and* as having internalised the social relations, dynamics and contradictions of capitalism.¹⁰ This does not mean that African economies and societies resemble those of, say, western Europe or the USA, or for that matter, Brazil or India – indeed the opposite: they could not given the uneven and combined development of capitalism on a world scale.

Third and following, are different views - of which French Marxist articulation theories were the most serious - of specific combinations of capitalist and pre- or non-capitalist social forms peculiar to modern African experiences. For example, John Saul (1974: 49) suggested that colonialism in Africa ‘left standing, perhaps more firmly than elsewhere, important vestiges of pre-capitalist social networks and cultural

¹⁰ For more historically structured sketches see Bernstein (2004, 2007b, 2008) and Bernstein and Woodhouse (2001).

preoccupations - particularly a range of variations on kinship relationship and upon the theme of ethnic identification'. Whether regarded as 'vestiges' or something more potent, and indeed constitutive, is the object of much analytical debate as well as concrete investigation. All I can do here is note that the social forms and dynamics Saul points to (and to which others can be added) present no intrinsic obstacles to Marxist investigation of the specificities of modern African history.¹¹

Fourth, and finally, I touch on some of the complexities of class analysis, which have always presented some Africanists with apparently insuperable difficulties, especially perhaps in rural settings. I begin with Etienne Balibar's formulation that in a capitalist world, class relations are "*one determining* structure, covering *all* social practices, without being the *only one*" (quoted by Therborn, 2007: 88; emphasis in original). In sum, class relations are *universal but not exclusive* determinants of social practices in capitalism. They intersect and combine with other social differences and divisions of which gender is the most widespread, and which can also include oppressive and exclusionary relations of race and ethnicity, religion and caste. The insistence in this paper on the centrality and ubiquity of capitalist social relations in African countrysides does not translate into any expectations that their dynamics are manifested in clear-cut, observable and evident class categories and agents, for example, the 'stereotypical' (as Lenin used to say) capitalist landed property and agricultural wage labour which Sara Berry (1993) mistakes as the 'Lenin model'.¹²

Complexities of the 'economic sociology' of class include, on different scales, forms of production and labour regimes, social divisions of labour, labour migration, rural-urban divisions and connections, organizational forms of capital and markets, state policies and practices and their effects. It was indicated above that small farmers and classes of labour intersect and are extremely heterogeneous in their composition and characteristics, not least because of the immensely varied ways in which very

¹¹ See, for example, the innovative concept of 'tribal landed property' and its application in a historical analysis of the Bafokeng in South Africa, by Gavin Capps (2010). One can note here Marx's observation (1973: 105; emphasis added) about 'all the vanished social formations out of which it [capitalism] built itself up...[and] whose mere nuances have developed explicit significance within it'; also Lenin (1964: 33): 'infinitely diverse combinations of elements of this or that type type of capitalist evolution are possible' which generates 'peculiar and complex problems' for any concrete investigation.

¹² It is often observed, and rightly so, that more theoretical and otherwise general ideas advanced by authors are commonly, if sometimes unwittingly, influenced by where they know best and have studied most. Such extrapolation can do violence to the crucial specificities of time and place - in terms of my interests, those of the development of capitalism. I initially studied agrarian questions in sub-Saharan Africa, confronting very different conditions than those familiar from Latin American and Asian countrysides marked by class relations between landed property and peasant labour of 'feudal' provenance, which loom so large in the literatures and debates of the agrarian question. As a result, I was driven to understand the class dynamics of agricultural petty commodity production in capitalism in the absence of large-scale landed property (apart from the European settler zones of Africa), and how they are internalized in the circuits of 'peasant' production and reproduction. For valuable methodological discussion of rural class formation in Africa, as well as nuanced analyses of findings on Senegal, see Oya (2004, 2007).

different types of "self-employment" and wage employment can be combined. To paraphrase Lenin (quoted in note 11), 'infinitely diverse combinations of elements of this or that type of labour are possible'.

It follows that any political sociology of class and its themes of class identities, consciousness and collective political practice, involve a series of further determinations that affect political agency. A key issue in the political sociology of (fragmented) classes of labour is indicated by Mamdani's potent observation that the 'translation' of 'social facts' into 'political facts' is always contingent and unpredictable, especially because of 'the many ways in which power fragment[s] the circumstances and experiences of the oppressed' (1996: 219, 272). Existentially, 'circumstances' are not experienced (self-)evidently and exclusively as class exploitation and oppression *in general* but in terms of identities like 'urban/rural dwellers, industrial workers/agricultural labourers, urban craftsmen and women peasants, men/women, mental/manual labour, young/old, black/white, regional, national and ethnic differences, and so on', in the list of examples given by Gibbon and Neocosmos (1985: 190).

An interesting example of a somewhat different kind, and one evoked so often (to the point of meaninglessness?), is 'community'. At different scales from village to 'tribe', 'community' is a corporate status based on lineage and ethnicity that was (re-)defined, and indeed often imposed, by colonial authority. It then serves as a collective claim to specific land on the basis of shared identity and inheritance, usually articulated through chiefs as bearers of the 'community' inheritance, even when the rights of chiefs or other 'traditional authorities' to allocate land within the 'community' are contested. It is evident, first, that the social composition and character of rural communities is now very different from that of their historic and 'imagined' origins. Second, 'community' does not preclude hierarchy and inequality and indeed may justify them as part of the moral order, as Lonsdale (1992) argued for pre-colonial Kikuyu political theory. Third, tensions and conflicts over land at a local level often connect with various levels of the politics of bureaucracy and patronage, from district and provincial government to the central state.

Ideal(ized) constructions of chieftancy and other offices of 'traditional leadership' suggest that they manifest authority prescribed by political hierarchy (rather than class differentiation). Such authority is exercised on behalf of the 'community' (or 'tribe'), and its legitimacy may be conditional on proper performance of this pastoral function, thus central to a given moral economy. It is clear from many instances, however, that the authority of 'traditional leaders' is reshaped, and contested, by long

and complex histories of commodification and how they intersect with similarly complex political histories. Chiefs may be perceived by some subject to their authority as part of the problem of access to land, rather than as part of the solution. This can happen, for example, when in practice and however masked in discursive ambiguity, the authority of chiefs has shifted from claims over (and responsibilities to) 'their' people to jurisdiction over particular areas of land and their allocation.¹³ This includes the sale or leasing of land *and* to a far wider range of 'strangers' than in the past, when the construction of 'stranger' was someone of different place of origin, hence identity, but similar social character and purpose who was looking for land to clear and cultivate and/or to graze their livestock. Now 'strangers' include accumulators/investors of diverse provenance, scale and purpose from commercial farming to logging to eco-tourism.

Colonial constructions of 'tribal' identity, 'customary' land tenure and (patriarchal) political authority, and their connections and legacies, serve as idioms through which class tensions may be played out as 'civil war within the tribe' (Mamdani 1996), as well as in struggles between (cross-class) corporate entities - ethnic group, clan, rural 'community' - over resources of arable and grazing land, water, and forest. Moreover, such struggles are typically articulated by those claiming the political legitimacy of 'tradition' to represent the interests of their clan or 'community', and who themselves may be drawn from, or form alliances with, elements of urban based or displaced classes: retrenched workers; the petty bourgeoisie, whose interest in rural land has been intensified by their own crises of reproduction in recent decades; and, of course, 'big men' located in the apparatuses of the state and its networks of political patronage.

The recent 'comeback' of chiefly politics in conditions of (neo-liberal) globalization, provides an ironic contemporary footnote to longstanding debate of 'tribe', ethnicity, and the like. With all the havoc of the last three decades - the pressures on the reproduction of classes of labour, the implosion of the project of state-led development, the 'second scramble' for the best arable lands (and means of irrigating them), timber, minerals and maritime fisheries of sub-Saharan Africa, and indeed its 'nature' - does the new assertiveness of chiefly politics register a 'persistent', and indeed resurgent, manifestation of 'pre-capitalist' social relations and ideology (as

¹³ In the past century or so in sub-Saharan Africa, class formation (including the emergence of a class of effectively landless labour; Iliffe 1987: 162-3), changes in political structures and processes, and demographic growth (from the 1920s), has led, however unevenly and implicitly, to the commodification of control over land, even in the absence of formal private property rights and pervasive idioms of the 'customary' deployed by all those seeking to control, claim and obtain access to land from positions of relative strength and weakness.

identified by Saul, above)? I think not, but rather that it manifests some of Africa's historically specific forms of commodification and accumulation, of capitalist class dynamics, in new conditions.

In short, as Pauline Peters (2004: 305) concludes in her valuable overview of land conflicts in Africa today, the 'proliferating tensions and struggles between generations and genders, or between groups labelled by region, ethnicity or religion, are intimately tied up with the dynamics of division and exclusion, alliance and inclusion that constitute class formation' (Peters 2004: 305). Understanding this is best approached by the propositions outlined of the 'actually existing capitalism' of African countryside, and of class relations as universal but not exclusive determinants of social practices in capitalism: this is the world of 'modernity' for Africa's 'peasants'.

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