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Book reviews

Book reviews: "Food in Sub-Saharan Africa" and "The politics of food aid - a comparison of American and Canadian policies"

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Reviews:

FOOD IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

edited by Art Hasnsen and Della E. McMillan, Food in Africa Series at the Center for African Studies, University of Florida. Boulder Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 1986, Pp. xvi, 410; 20 figures.

THE POLITICS OF FOOD AID -

A COMPARISON OF AMERICAN AND CANADIAN POLICIES

by Theodore Cohn. McGill Studies in International Development, No. 36. Montreal: Centre for Developing Area Studies, McGill University, 1985. Pp.38.

FOOD IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA provides a useful, if somewhat uneven, introductory overview of the background of the food crisis that engulfed Africa in the 1980s. Based on presentations to a 1983 seminar at the University of Florida's Center for African Studies, each chapter essentially surveys the relevant theories and evidence drawn from various disciplines. Some chapters provide valuable insights. Others consist of little more than descriptive categorizations of information.

Space here restricts this review to comments on the more

interesting chapters, with a few notes on some contradictions and limitations.

First, as to possible explanations of the current food situation, Berry emphasizes "our ignorance of aggregate trends in agricultural output" and whether they have actually declined, far more of the likely causes (p. 66). She points out, "It is necessary to try to understand how national, international and local processes interact to shape conditions and patterns of agricultural production and distribution in Africa." while taking account of "the diversity of African farming systems and rural economies" (p 80). Nicholson's valuable summary of fragmented evidence -- primarily from West Africa -- suggests that, over the centuries, meteorological factors have caused major drought cycles, contributing significantly to periodic famines in Africa. She points out, however, that human behavior can affect "feedbacks" that aggravate the consequences of climatic factors in terms of human suffering.

Lamarchand points out (and Davis reiterates, p. 166), that "the involvement of the colonial state in the expansion of industrial capitalism, first as a labor-recruiting agency, then as a price-setting authority, and ultimately as the ally of European settlers, must be seen as the central factor behind the decline and dislocations suffered by African food systems." (p. 28)

Yet Guthrie, while providing a useful outline of current continental climate and demographic trends, reasserts the widespread myth that population growth is the "primary" cause of the food decline per capita (p. 92). He describes the "economic islands" introduced by colonial activity, but neither he -- nor Davis who focuses the colonial legacy -- adequately explain how colonial control over the national 'commanding heights' fostered penetration into and distorted traditional farming systems in the hinterlands.

Cohen correctly stresses that "Traditional Africa is not an exotic jigsaw puzzle of tribal groupings. Rather, it represents an important range of living options in our common human attempt to solve the universal problems of human existence." (p. 49) But doesn't investigate how colonial/capitalist imposition of migratory labor systems distorted traditional institutions. Davis does show how cash cropping fostered development of migratory labor in West Africa, but he doesn't analyze the associated share-cropping system or the formation of the classes that shaped post-independence government policies.

Spring chapter summarizes the growing evidence that exposes the way the penetration of colonialism and post-colonial "development' policies have interacted with attitudes and institutions of pre-existing sexual divisions of labor to multiply the burdens of rural women. While she emphasizes the

need to give women, who do most of Africa's food farming, access to land appropriate inputs, credit, and markets, she pays little attention to the way gender issues relate to class formation,

Several authors focus on traditional farming systems and the potential role of small farmers, including women, in expanding food production if they receive adequate assistance. McMillan emphasizes the need to understand the "complex patterning of distribution rights within and between households" (p.271). Asante notes the failure of state farms and crash programs to overcome food shortages. But nowhere does anyone examine the problems and possibilities of altering farming systems over time, as capital and skills accumulate, to introduce new technologies to increase productivity while avoiding rural stratification.

Several authors mention post-harvest problems, noting the now-convention wisdom concerning state marketing boards and pricing policies. Berry correctly emphasizes the need for more in-depth research into the the role of the state and the contradictory factors operating in food markets. Bates summarizes information on simple technological possibilities for preserving and storing foodstuffs. Given the prevailing high levels of unemployment in most of Africa, he correctly recommends the use of participatory, labor intensive techniques using local resources. However, neither he, nor anyone else, adequately discusses the need to link these simple processes into an

industrial strategy which, over time, could contribute to transforming the low productivity cultivation, processing and marketing activities to increase food availability.

Browne's and Cumming's culminating chapter, comparing the World Bank/Berg Report to the Lagos Plan of Action, suggests the need to examine the continental food situation in a more dynamic context. They justifiably criticize Berg Report's "erroneous presumptions" centered on continued export dependence and rejection of efforts to attain continental food self-sufficiency (p. 361-2). They gently suggest that the Berg Report "missed an excellent if not unique opportunity to make a major contribution to a vital dialogue about Africa's long term economic prospects." (p. 362) For the most part, this volume, too, neglects research that focuses on the parameters of a longterm strategy for a fundamental transformation in Africa. It does not even note the work of almost two hundred African scholars currently engaged with Samir Amin in exploring "Future Strategies for Africa".

Cohn, in THE POLITICS OF FOOD AID, takes up another important question that FOOD IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA almost entirely neglects, but hardly illuminates the critical issues. His brief monograph focuses primarily on testing a set of hypotheses that apparently intrigued him: 1) That a larger state, like the United States, will be more inclined than a smaller one, like

Canada, to consider withholding food aid as a legitimate foreign policy action; 1-a) The smaller state will be more reluctant than the larger one to publicize decisions to withhold food aid; and 2) Donor states withhold food aid for a variety of reasons only one of which is the attempt to alter recipient-state behavior.

The author examines the two countries' food aid policies in three Asian cases, that of Indonesia, when Sukarno announced his "Crush Malaysia" policy after Malaysia attained independence; of India, when it carried out a "peaceful" nuclear explosion; and human rights violations, especially in relation to Vietnam's treatment of ethnic Chinese and intervention in Cambodia. He deliberately makes no attempt to assess the 'rights' or 'wrongs' of any of these cases, but concludes the evidence substantiates his hypotheses. He calls for extension of this kind of research to Africa and Latin America.

Cohn's hypotheses may interest citizens of a relatively small neighbor of the United States, whose pretensions to world domination might be expected to influence their government's foreign policy decisions. For developing countries like those in Africa, however, concern with their implications rests primarily in the possibility that Canada's potential autonomy in formulating food aid policies may give aid-receiving nations marginal leeway to formulate their own development strategies.

Cohn limits his analysis by implicitly rejecting the argument central to the FOOD IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA book that the issues relating to food involve a whole complex set of interacting factors. He examines evidence solely relating to the two countries' stated food aid policies and the motivations that on the surface appear to influence them. He investigates neither the underlying reasons for the provision of food aid by the U.S., which, he notes, provided by far the largest amount, 45.2 percent of total 1982 Development Assistance Committee food aid; nor by Canada, which provided the third largest amount (next to the Federal Republic of Germany's 9.3 percent), 8.6 percent. He makes no mention of the possible impact of food aid in the recipient countries, an issue of considerable interest, given widespread criticism -- echoed only in passing by Asante and Lamarchand, (FOOD, pp. 17, 40) -- that food aid may contribute to undermining food cultivation by small farmers by: shifting food preferences away from them; flooding local markets and depressing local prices; creating dependencies on foreign aid; and increasing the incomes of local bureaucrats and giving them greater capacity to manipulate the poor.

Especially given the United States' current propensity to use food and other aid (including that of the World Bank and IMF) to impose counter-productive Berg-type strategies on African countries, it seems surprising that neither book explores the mounting evidence which exposes food aid's potential negative

impact. One might expect that a book primarily formulated by American scholars for an American audience on the subject of food in Africa would devote primary attention to depth analyses of the impact of food aid on Africa's long term development perspectives.

Ann Seidman, Jan 1987