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SOME CONVENTIONAL ORTHODOXIES IN THE STUDY OF AGRARIAN CHANGE

By ROBERT H. BATES

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this paper is to present a critical review of two major approaches to the analysis of agrarian societies, and to do so in light of evidence taken from the literature on Africa. The African data provoke considerable skepticism concerning the validity of these contemporary orthodoxies and support the following three major counter-arguments.

1. The very traits that have caused these societies to be classified as “precapitalist”—e.g., the existence of common land rights; the avoidance of market exchanges; the turning to subsistence production, reciprocity, and such social institutions as the family system for economic support—are themselves arguably products of the encounter of agrarian societies with agents of capitalism.¹

2. Agrarian institutions represent compromises and adaptations; equally as often, they represent impositions from above by more powerful external agents. In either case, they cannot represent institutionalized expressions of agrarian values; subjectivist, value-based accounts of these institutions are therefore false.

3. Not only are the current orthodoxies overly culturally determined; they are also overly economic. Many of the distinctive traits of agrarian societies, I argue, result from the efforts of the state to secure domination and control over rural populations. Insofar as the institutions and behaviors exhibited by agrarian societies define a peasantry, in short, it is the state that creates peasants.

THE DOMINANT ORTHODOXIES

Among the most prominent of the current approaches, two stand out: the “natural economy” and “peasant economy” models of rural society.

¹ By capitalism I mean an economic system in which there exists: (1) market exchange of both products and factors of production; (2) in particular, private markets for labor; and (3) economic accumulation, thus securing the reproduction and expansion of the means of production.

THE MYTH OF THE NATURAL ECONOMY

The critical elements of the model of the natural economy are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
SCHEMATIC PRESENTATION OF THE MODEL OF A NATURAL ECONOMY

INITIAL CONDITIONS

1. Agrarian economy
2. Production for use rather than exchange
3. Insignificance of markets

INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. Communal land rights
 - a. Use rights accorded to producers if, and only if, producer is a member of the community
 - b. Rights to land revert to community when use rights are no longer exercised
2. Importance of the primary community and, in particular, the village

SOCIAL VALUES

1. Self-sufficiency
2. Status
3. Equality

PATTERNS OF CHANGE

1. Initial opposition to "commoditization"
2. Social disintegration in the face of markets
3. Radicalization under the impact of capitalism

IMPLICATIONS

The preference of agrarian societies for communal forms of economic organization

Initial conditions. According to the model of the natural economy, "primitive" agrarian societies produce not for exchange but for use; as a consequence, "market exchanges are usually peripheral [and] all important output and factor flows are carried on via reciprocity and redistribution."² In the absence of markets, resources are not allocated in accord with their value in exchange; rather, the patterns of allocation are determined by social relationships. As Dalton states, "There is no separate economic system to be analyzed independently of social organization."³

² George Dalton, "Traditional Production in Primitive African Economies" in Dalton, ed., *Tribal and Peasant Economies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1967), 75.

³ George Dalton, "Subsistence and Peasant Economies in Africa," *ibid.*, 157.

Institutional characteristics. Nowhere is the determining influence of social organization over the allocation of economic resources more clearly seen than in the area of property rights. In precapitalist societies, according to Marx, "an isolated individual could no more own land than he could speak."⁴ The acquisition of property is thus a social act; it requires membership in a community.

Particularly critical is membership in the village. Along with kin-based organizations, the village is viewed as the central social institution of agrarian societies.⁵

The two themes of communal restrictions on landed property and the pervasive significance of villages are often fused. They combine in the discussion of the corporate village. In the words of Eric Wolf, such villages "maintain a measure of communal jurisdiction over land . . . restrict their membership, maintain a religious system, enforce mechanisms which ensure the redistribution or destruction of surplus wealth, and uphold barriers against the . . . outside."⁶ Although the initial writings of Wolf make it clear that the corporate village is but one of many forms of rural settlement, the analysis of these villages dominated much of the subsequent literature on agrarian society.⁷

Social values. The social institutions of rural society, this literature contends, facilitate the attainment of basic cultural values. One such value is a sense of membership. Another is equality. A third is an outgrowth of the first two: the value placed on guarantees of subsistence. All members of society possess an equal right to sufficient income to guarantee their survival. "It is the absence of the threat of *individual* starvation which makes primitive society, in a sense, more human than market economy, and at the same time less economic."⁸

Patterns of change. The initial condition of the natural economy is said to be the absence of markets. But, according to this model, markets inevitably penetrate into even the most isolated communities; and this alteration in the initial conditions generates characteristic patterns of change.

⁴ Karl Marx, "Precapitalist Economic Formations," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations: A Collection* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), 98.

⁵ See, for example, the discussion in James C. Scott, "Protest and Profanation: Agrarian Revolt and the Little Tradition," *Theory and Society* 4 (Summer 1977), 213.

⁶ Wolf, "Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13 (Spring 1957), 6.

⁷ A prime illustration would be Joel S. Migdal, *Peasants, Politics, and Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

⁸ Karl Polanyi, quoted in James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 5.

One response is to resist the market; Robert Redfield maintains that these societies attempt to keep the market "at arm's length."⁹ With the inevitable triumph of the market, however, a second response arises: social disintegration. Eric Wolf states that "capitalism cut through the integument of custom, severing people from their accustomed social matrix in order to transform them into economic actors, independent of prior social commitments to kin and neighbors."¹⁰ A third response is rural radicalism. Agrarian protest is considered radical in the sense that it asserts the entitlement of all people to subsistence, the validity of communal property as a means of securing this entitlement, and the rejection of the private market.

It is precisely the fact that peasants and artisans have one foot in the precapitalist economy that explains why they have provided the mass impetus for so many "forward looking" movements. Their opposition to capitalism, based as it is on a utopian image of an earlier era, is as tenacious, if not more so, as the opposition of a proletariat which has both feet in the new society.¹¹

Policy implications. An important implication of this theory is that rural dwellers will subscribe to collective forms of economic organization that reject private property, and thereby forestall the emergence of economic inequality and exploitation. Goran Hyden notes that the promotion of cooperative societies in Africa derives in part from the conviction of political leaders that African rural society is communitarian by preference.¹²

THE PEASANT ECONOMY

A second model of agrarian society that is frequently applied to rural Africa is the model of the peasant economy. Its distinctive features are summarized in Table 2.

Initial conditions. Peasant economies are held to be precapitalist in the sense that, in peasant societies, labor is not separated from the means of production. Nonetheless, peasant societies represent a more "advanced" form of agrarian society than do natural economies. Peasant economies do not stand isolated and self-sufficient; rather, they reside within state systems and within economies that contain cities, industry, and manufacturing. They are linked to these other sectors through relations of political domination and economic exchange.

⁹ Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 46.

¹⁰ Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 279.

¹¹ Scott (fn. 5), 231.

¹² Hyden, *Efficiency versus Distribution in East African Co-operatives* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1973), 4.

TABLE 2
SCHEMATIC PRESENTATION OF THE MODEL OF A PEASANT ECONOMY

INITIAL CONDITIONS

1. Post-agrarian economy; importance of urban industry and manufacturing
2. Fully elaborated markets both for products and factors of production
3. Production for exchange as well as for use

INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. Private rights in land
2. Prevalence of inequality
 - a. State coercion
 - b. Class formation
3. Limited participation in the markets for products and labor

BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS

1. Subsistence ethic
2. Rejection of pure profit maximization

PATTERNS OF CHANGE

1. Creation of the peasant mode: impact of capitalism on the natural economy
 2. Conflicts between peasant mode and capitalism
-

Institutional characteristics. Nearly all discussions of peasant economies emphasize that peasant societies are “part-societies.” In the cultural sphere, peasants are bearers of the “little” tradition; they define their rituals in response to the “great” tradition of the ritual centers of the larger society.¹³ In the political sphere, they are part, but not governors, of the system. Not only are peasants politically subordinate to the state, but they also are politically dominated by other classes, which are often rural classes: in the context of a market economy and with the help of state power, certain elements of the rural society are able to accumulate large-scale private landholdings. This pattern of inequality is so important that Welch asks: “Without . . . landlords, could there be peasants?”¹⁴

In the economic sphere, peasants are “part” societies in the sense that they participate in markets and are reliant upon them to fulfill their subsistence needs—but only partially. *Limited* market participation exists where there is a tendency to consume large proportions of one’s own

¹³ Redfield (fn. 9), 46.

¹⁴ Claude Welch, “Peasants as a Focus in African Studies,” *African Studies Review* 20 (No. 3, 1977), 2.

production and to rely primarily upon family, as opposed to hired, labor.¹⁵

Behavioral characteristics. Peasants are held to exhibit characteristically “precapitalist” or “non-market” forms of behavior. As production units, peasant households differ from profit-maximizing firms in that they are driven by the need to secure sufficient subsistence to guarantee their survival and their reproduction. As a consequence, they will, if necessary, engage in internal exploitation to cover the requirements of domestic consumption. They will work longer hours, cultivate the lands they hold more intensively, or surrender greater revenues for lands they wish to buy than purely commercial considerations would justify.¹⁶

Patterns of change. The origins of peasant economy, it is held, lie in the impact of market forces upon the natural economy. Under the stimulation of the market, property rights become individualistic; households are no longer self-sufficient, but become dependent on the market; and “self-sufficient communities founded largely upon kinship ties are ‘turned outwards,’ as it were, and made dependent . . . upon external structures and forces.”¹⁷ In the third world, the primary agency for this expansion of the market is imperialism. Post contends that “the colonial powers . . . greatly extended the market principle, to the point where the impersonal forces of the world market dominated the lives of millions. . . . It would appear, then, that many of the conditions for the existence of a peasantry were suddenly created, but from outside.”¹⁸

The subsequent trajectory of change in peasant societies is said to be largely characterized by protracted periods of conflict between capitalism and the peasant mode of production. Some scholars, such as Hyden, find that peasants retard the growth of capitalism by their tendency to avoid markets and by their preference for subsistence production.¹⁹ Others, such as Williams, contend that peasants resist the growth of capitalism but nonetheless fail, for they are inherently a “transitional class, which will inevitably be displaced by the technical superiority of capitalist production.”²⁰

¹⁵ Eric R. Wolf, “Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion,” *American Anthropologist* 57 (June 1955), 454.

¹⁶ A. V. Chayanov, Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay, and R.E.F. Smith, eds., *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin for the American Economic Association, 1966).

¹⁷ Ken Post, “‘Peasantization’ and Rural Political Movements in Western Africa,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 13 (No. 2, 1972), 225-26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 233. See also Wolf (fn. 10).

¹⁹ Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

²⁰ Gavin Williams, “The World Bank and the Peasant Problem,” in Judith Heyer, Pepe

THE MODELS REVIEWED IN LIGHT OF THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

As outlined above, the foregoing represent two of the dominant models of rural society. What is devastating is how poorly these models perform when applied to the African data.

INITIAL CONDITIONS

To an Africanist, one of the most striking deficiencies in these theories is posited in their initial conditions: a world of subsistence production in which there are no markets, no buying, no trading. This assumption, it should be stressed, cannot be dismissed as a mere romantic overtone in the arguments; rather, it provides an essential underpinning. Movements away from these initial conditions precipitate the change from a subsistence-oriented, egalitarian, isolated natural society to a market-dependent, class-riven, peasant society that is inextricably tied to centers of wealth and power. The initial conditions also help to account for the growth and behavior of political forces: outrage at the loss of a "state of virtue" provides a demand for agrarian revolution, and the moral values that are threatened through the spread of capitalism provide the revolutionary ideology.

If the initial conditions of the model of the natural economy were to hold anywhere, one would expect them to hold in Africa. And yet, time and time again, historical research reaffirms that in precolonial Africa there was trade, there was commerce, and there was the widespread use of money in exchange economies. Jack Goody, who best summarizes these findings, is worth quoting at length:

The concept of non-monetary economics is hardly applicable to precolonial Africa, except possibly for certain hunting groups of minimal importance. Africa was involved in a vast network of wide-ranging trade long before the Portuguese came on the scene. For East Africa we have a late first-century sailors' guide, the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, to the trade along the coast. Long before the Europeans arrived there were trade routes from Madagascar up the East African coast, through the Red Sea and into the Mediterranean, along the Persian Gulf to India, South-east Asia, and Indonesia. By the time the Portuguese had reached East Africa, the Chinese had already been active there; before the development of the gun-carrying sailing ship on the Atlantic seaboard, the maritime commerce of the Indian Ocean made western Europe seem an underdeveloped area. Indeed, the trade between Ethiopia, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean had much to do with the developments in the Arabian peninsula, including the rise of Muhammed.

Roberts, and Gavin Williams, eds., *Rural Development in Tropical Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

In West Africa the medieval empires of the Niger bend were built up on the trade which brought salt, cloth, and beads south from the Sahara across to West Africa and took gold and ivory and slaves back to the Barbary coast and from there into medieval Europe.²¹

From the point of view of mercantile economy, parts of Africa were similar to western Europe of the same period. Metal coinage was in use on the East African coast. In the west, currencies consisted of gold, brass, and salt, but more especially cowrie shells which, coming as they did from the Maldiv Islands off the south of Ceylon, filled most of the necessary attributes of money.²²

Isolation, subsistence, and lack of involvement in an exchange economy were not commonly found in the "primitive" economies of Africa. Where they were, these traits characterized so small and insignificant a group of African societies that it would be nonsensical to base a general theory of social change upon them.²³

TRANSITION ARGUMENTS

The reigning orthodoxies in the study of agrarian economies are defined not only in terms of their initial conditions; they are also defined in terms of their dynamics—i.e., assertions are made concerning their characteristic patterns of change. Agrarian societies are portrayed as locked in conflict with a powerful alternative: the capitalist economy, where private property exists, where everything can be bought and sold, and where people are driven to maximize profits by the imperative of market competition. In the face of the encroachment of the capitalist economy, rural dwellers are said to attempt to keep the market at arm's length and to resist commoditization. In light of the expectations generated by these arguments, it is therefore disconcerting to find that in Africa the roles of the supposed antagonists are sometimes the reverse of what these models would lead us to expect.

Buying and selling. Despite myths to the contrary, indigenous peoples throughout much of Africa turned quickly, vigorously, and skillfully to production for colonial markets. The rapid and astonishing growth of the cocoa industry in West Africa has been told by Hill and Berry; within one generation, Ghana became the world's leading producer of cocoa; it did so on the initiative of indigenous agrarian interests.²⁴ Ho-

²¹ Jack Goody, "Economy and Feudalism in Africa," *The Economic History Review* 23 (December 1969), 394-95.

²² *Ibid.*, 395.

²³ There is evidence that extensive trade existed in precolonial Africa for agricultural products as well. See William O. Jones, "Agricultural Trade Within Tropical Africa: Historical Background," in Robert H. Bates and Michael Lofchie, eds., *Agricultural Development in Tropical Africa: Issues of Public Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 10-45.

²⁴ Polly Hill, *Studies in Rural Capitalism in West Africa* (London: Cambridge University

gendorn has shown how in Northern Nigeria indigenous entrepreneurs organized the large-scale production of groundnuts for export to colonial markets.²⁵ Similar histories exist for palm oil production in Nigeria and groundnut production in Senegal.²⁶ Giovanni Arrighi notes that in the Rhodesias change was not limited to the sphere of exchange but was also introduced in the methods of production: “Africans were equally prompt in investing and innovating in response to market opportunities.”²⁷ The peasants acquired wagons, carts, maize mills, pumps, ox-drawn ploughs and other equipment; they radically altered their farming system; and they invested in higher-grade cattle and the fencing and dips required for their survival.²⁸

Property rights. Change went even deeper: it extended to the definition of property rights. In light of the expectations formed by the orthodox treatment of agrarian change, the stunning irony of the matter is that it was often the governments of the colonial powers—the primary agents of capitalism—who advocated “communal” property rights, whereas members of the indigenous agrarian societies championed the cause of private ownership.

In order to avoid confusion on the matter of property rights, let me recall the definition outlined in Table 1. By communal land rights, I mean a system wherein

1. Use rights are accorded a producer if, and only if, that producer is a member of the community. In other words,
 - (a) Community membership is a sufficient condition for rights to land: no member of the community can go without land.
 - (b) Community membership is a necessary condition for rights to land: land cannot be alienated outside of the community.
2. The community holds revisionary rights in land. That is, when individuals no longer use the land, rights to it revert to the community. The land can then be reallocated to other users.

Press, 1970); Sara Berry, *Cocoa, Custom and Socio-Economic Change in Rural Western Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

²⁵ Jan S. Hogendorn, “Economic Initiative and African Cash Farming,” in Peter Duignan and Lewis H. Gann, eds., *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 283-328.

²⁶ Donal Cruise O’Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); G. K. Helleiner, *Peasant Agriculture, Government, and Economic Growth in Nigeria* (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, 1966).

²⁷ Arrighi, “Labor Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia,” in Giovanni Arrighi and John S. Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1973), 185.

²⁸ See also the cases described in Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons, eds., *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977).

Under a system of private property rights, membership in the community is no longer sufficient to guarantee access to land; nor is it a necessary condition. Thus, land can be alienated to persons outside the community. Moreover, land that is not in use does not revert to the community; it can be held for purposes of speculation, transferred to other private individuals, or bequeathed to persons of the owner's choosing. It is a consequence of this system, of course, that even in the presence of abundant land, people may starve for want of access to it; a primary attraction of a communal system of land rights is that under similar circumstances such deaths would not occur.

Conflicts between capitalist governments committed to communal rights and spokesmen for agrarian societies committed to private land rights broke out in both West and East Africa. In 1912, the British colonial government appointed the West African Lands Committee to investigate land laws in British West Africa. The Committee's report called for the reinforcement of "pure native tenure." It stressed that "legislation should have as its aim the checking of the progress of individual tenure and the strengthening of native custom," which, it held, "did not recognize the concept of individual tenure and forbade the . . . sale of . . . community land."²⁹ In these recommendations, the Committee was vigorously opposed by local interests. One expert on local practices, Sir Brandford Griffith, noted that in opposing private ownership and a free market in land, the government was in fact flying in the face of "local custom." Grier comments that

So definite and so common a practice was the sale of land . . . by the end of the nineteenth century that Griffith (whose association with the colony dated back to his father, Sir William Brandford Griffith, Governor 1886-1895) could say that he "never had occasion to consider the question."³⁰

In West Africa, then, the putative agency of capitalist expansion—the government of the colonial power—actively promoted communal rights, while members of the agrarian societies demanded the unrestricted right to purchase and to alienate land. In East Africa, a similar "reversal" obtained. In opposition to the penetration of private market forces into the rural sector, for example, the postwar governor of Kenya, Sir Philip Mitchell, argued that soil degradation, environmental spoilage,

²⁹ Beverly Grier, "Underdevelopment, Modes of Production, and the State in Colonial Ghana," *The African Studies Review* 24 (March 1981), 35. For an excellent discussion of the issue of property rights, see also John Cohen, "Land Tenure and Rural Development in Africa," in Bates and Lofchie (fn. 23).

³⁰ Grier (fn. 29), 33.

and avaricious exploitation of land inevitably followed the creation of private property. What was needed, he maintained, was “the proper control of the community. Each Native Land Unit, or a portion of a unit, was to be regarded as an ‘estate of the community’; each occupier of land was to be a ‘tenant of the tribe’.”³¹

The indigenous people opposed the land policy of the government of Kenya. As long ago as 1912, a Kenya District Officer had investigated local tenurial practices among the Kikuyu and had found that land was held by families who occupied it unconditionally—that is, not at the pleasure of any higher communal authority. He had also found that many of these family estates had been purchased. Land was in fact bought and sold both within and between tribes.³² It is therefore not surprising that the Kikuyu opposed the government’s policy and demanded individual registration of land holdings and the enforcement of private rights to land. The urgency with which they pressed their demands was of course intensified by the insecurity they felt in the face of the uncompensated seizure of lands by the colonialists.

Characteristically, the transition arguments of the orthodox models of agrarian change have made the assumption that rural dwellers are assaulted by capitalism. They counterpoise the communal attributes of these societies against the forces of capitalism that promote private interests. They make allowance for some members of rural society to demand private property rights: rural elites, for example, are expected to seek a regime of private property rights in order to defend their economic privileges. But it could never be the case under these theories that agents of capitalism would seek to establish communal rights while the members of agrarian societies seek private ones. And yet, as we have seen, the literature on Africa documents at least two instances of this “reversal.”

Our attention is thus deflected from the economist orthodoxies. In particular, the discordant set of facts suggests that *governments* may act in ways that differ from what one would expect, given their societies’ “stage of development”; they may confront an independent set of political imperatives.

Ideology. In the case of the British, there existed a genuine conviction that precapitalist societies were communitarian; that Western man, in the personage of the imperialist, was introducing forces that promoted self-interested behavior; and that, because indigenous institutions were

³¹ Quoted in M.P.K. Sorrenson, *Land Reform in Kikuyu Country* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1967), 56.

³² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

scarce and inherently valuable, they should be protected by government. In his discussion of Norman Humphrey, an influential figure in the postwar development of Kenyan land policy, Sorrenson notes:

Humphrey—and indeed a good many other officials—doubted the moral right of Europeans to impose . . . a system [of economic individualism] on Africans, thus destroying the supposed communal spirit of tribal tradition. Humphrey wanted to establish a series of locational, divisional, and district councils to manage land along communal lines . . . and he hoped this would lead to a 'reawakening of [the individual's] sense of duty to his fellows and his land and the instilling of a desire to abandon those false values that have been a major product of his sudden contact with our civilization.'³³

Humphrey was, of course, echoing the sentiments of far more powerful figures in the British colonial regime: Lugard, Cameron, Perham, and Hailey, to mention but a few.³⁴

Empowerment. Tactical calculations made in the course of securing political domination in Africa were also important. The colonial governments sought, and needed, political allies through whom they could secure control over Africa's largely agrarian population. A prime reason for insisting on communal land rights, it would appear, was that a system of communal rights empowered locally based confederates: it gave control over the allocation of the key resource in an agrarian economy to those who would govern the agrarian population on behalf of the colonialist powers—the tribal chiefs.

In the British case, the policy of governing through "traditional rulers" was known as "indirect rule." C. K. Meek clearly articulates the link between indirect rule and the formation of property rights; at the beginning of his semi-official treatise, *Land Law and Custom in the Colonies*, he states:

The authority of chiefs, sub-chiefs and heads of clans and families is bound up with the land. The grant, therefore, to individuals of absolute rights of ownership would tend to disrupt the native policy, and so, too, would the indiscriminate sale of tribal lands by chiefs.³⁵

So compelling is this thesis that Meek returns to it toward the end of his work, contending that "there is a political danger in allowing

³³ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁴ See, for example, Lord Hailey, *An African Survey: Revised, 1956* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957); Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: F. Cass, 1965); and Margery Freda Perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937).

³⁵ Meek, *Land Law and Custom in the Colonies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 10.

individuals to become owners of 'freeholds,' without owing any allegiance to the local Native Authorities." He concludes, "If 'indirect rule' is to continue to be a cardinal principle of British policy, it would appear to be essential that the local Native Authorities should remain the ultimate 'owners' of as much land as possible. . . ."³⁶

The best system, from Meek's point of view, was one in which political loyalty to an agent of the colonial power served as a prerequisite for access to land. Robert L. Tignor, in examining the operation of this system, finds it to operate roughly as one would expect. Friends and relatives of the chief secured land; indeed, the chiefly families became the richest land owners in the districts studied, while political enemies of the chiefs lost rights to land. Tignor also notes that the more valuable the control over land—i.e., the scarcer the land in relation to the population—the greater the power which the British policy of customary land rights conferred to the chiefs. The Ibo and Kikuyu chiefs, for example, who ruled in densely populated agricultural areas, proved far more effective as "modernizing agents" of the British than did the chiefs of the Kamba or Masai, who lived in areas where population was far less dense and land therefore relatively more abundant.³⁷

Counter-factual observations—that rural dwellers favor private property rights while capitalist governments favor communal property—have thus driven us to a departure from orthodox theories of rural change. We have moved instead to an approach in which key rural institutions—in this case, property law—are interpreted as political outcomes. As a corollary to this approach, it might be assumed that the institutions that were adopted in any particular situation would represent the outcome of political bargaining. Viewed in this light, there is no particular reason to expect one or another form of agrarian institution to emerge as a consequence of social change. The outcome would depend on the configuration of power.

This inference is supported by the literature. In some areas of Africa, both the colonial powers and the native chiefs were notably weak. In Zambia, for instance, the occupying forces were small and chiefly powers had been based largely upon warfare and slave raiding, both of which were abandoned following the imperial occupation. It was also true in Kenya; not only were the British forces small in number, but acephalous

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁷ Tignor, "Colonial Chiefs in Chiefless Societies," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 9 (1971), 350. See also Marshall Clough, *Chiefs and Politicians: Local Politics and Social Change in Kiambu, Kenya, 1918-1936*, Ph.D. diss. (Stanford University, 1978).

societies were the rule—the institution of chieftaincy was nonexistent. From the point of view of the colonial administration in both places, the result was a need for power. In the case of Kenya, the response of the British was the virtual creation of chiefs and tribal authorities, and the assignment of the power to regulate the allocation of “native” lands to these native authorities. In the case of Zambia, the British forbade any registering of individual titles of land ownership, and created tribal rights in land; land allocation became the responsibility of the chiefs. As Gluckman states, government policy promoted tribalism.³⁸

Where there was a need to create rural power, then, the colonial state promoted the establishment of communal property rights as part of its effort to elaborate systems of rural political control over an agrarian population. Where the colonial authority possessed decisive power and was not reliant upon the creation of rural elites, the situation was different. In essence, it was no longer purely political; commercial considerations could be decisive. For example, if an industrial labor force was needed, the agrarian society could be “proletarianized,” as it was in some regions of southern Africa. Where food or export crops were desired, the rural population could be left in place as a free peasantry and agrarian society, a collection of smallholders working virtually within a regime of private property.

In other regions, where rural elites did exist, the outcome of the bargaining between the colonial power and the indigenous agrarian society often reflected the composition and preferences of the latter. In Ghana, for instance, indigenous commercial elites profited from the use of land. Exports of rubber, timber, and palm oil had long flourished in the territory, and the local political leaders themselves were deeply involved in commerce and trade. The colonial power, in securing the terms of the political settlement by which to govern the territory, had to concede the rights of these rural elites to exercise unrestricted control over their property. In Uganda, by contrast, the rural elite was not commercialized, and land was not exploited to secure pecuniary profits from agriculture. Rather, the elite was almost purely political and consisted of the chiefs and their administrators. In order to secure allies within the rural sector, then, the imperialists had to accommodate themselves to this structure of power. The result was yet another form of property settlement: the virtual “Junkerization” of landed relations. In return for their collaboration with the British occupying powers, the

³⁸ Max Gluckman, “Foreword” to W. Watson, *Tribal Cohesion in a Money Economy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press for the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1958), x-xi.

chiefs were given freeholders' rights to the best lands in Uganda; the peasants virtually became serfs. When cash crop production began, the chiefs reaped vast economic benefits through the appropriation of labor dues and other "feudal" services.³⁹

The argument that African indigenous societies embodied collective property rights and that it was the influence of capitalism that led to the formation of private rights in land is an overly economist one. Rather, the form of property law was shaped by the desire of the colonial state for political domination of an agrarian population and by the nature of the political accommodations it had to make in order to secure its hegemony.

Finances. States that are driven by the need for domination thus develop land rights in efforts to create rural centers of power. In shaping their policies toward rural property, their behavior is also influenced by financial imperatives. One of the best illustrations of the influence of fiscal considerations comes from Zambia. As is well known, Zambia depends on the production of copper. The copper deposits, first located early in the 20th century, gave birth to one of the world's leading copper industries; by 1930, the mines of what was then Northern Rhodesia employed 30,000 people. As the largest industry in this small territory, and by a vast measure the most profitable, the copper industry constituted the major element in the colonial government's tax base.

When copper prices rose, both the government and the mining companies prospered; when copper prices fell, both suffered. But the costs imposed by lower prices were borne unequally: while both the government and the firms experienced decreasing revenues, the efforts of the firms to lower their costs when income declined imposed increased costs upon the government.

The mines were capitalist enterprises. When prices fell, they maximized their profits (or, equivalently, minimized their losses) by curtailing their use of the variable factor of production: labor. While it was cost-minimizing on the part of companies to release labor at times of lower prices, unemployed labor threatened to add to the costs of government. These costs might take the form of the state's providing food and shelter; or they might take the form of police protection in the face of threats posed by masses of unemployed workers. Even though both the government and the mining companies derived their revenues from mining, then, the government's need for additional funds increased just when revenues became most scarce.

³⁹ Henry W. West, *Land Policy in Buganda* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

This fiscal dilemma was, in a sense, created by capitalism. Since the means of production were in private hands, production decisions were made solely with a view to private, as opposed to social, consequences. In addition, the state's revenues were subject to cyclical shocks originating from the capitalist economies. L. H. Gann quotes the Chief Secretary of Northern Rhodesia at the time of the most cataclysmic of these shocks—the depression of the 1930s:

The wealth of the country is in the minerals which it does not own . . . and direct revenue from this source is at present negligible. . . . The fact . . . that the companies are not earning taxable profits does not diminish the services which the Government is compelled to supply to the mining areas.⁴⁰

To deal with this dilemma, the state advocated an ironical solution: the development of communal forms of rights to landed property. The government created a form of citizenship in which rights were dependent not only on national membership, but also on membership in a sub-nationality, a tribe. Access to land became a function of tribal affiliation. Land could be acquired in a rural community by affiliating with its political officials and by establishing membership in a kin group that belonged to that political community. To retain rural land rights, then, urban dwellers had to be “tribalized.” Rural lands could not be sold; they were retained as “tribal trusts.” The reason for these policies was clear: at times of fiscal stress, the government wanted to be able to avoid the costs of large-scale unemployment. It wanted the disbanded urban labor force to reincorporate itself into the rural economy quickly and peacefully. The costs of guaranteeing subsistence were thus to be borne by the rural community.⁴¹

Thus, the origins of communal land rights lay at least as much in capitalism and in the fiscal problems it created for the state as they did in the inherent cultural traditions of the rural population.⁴²

⁴⁰ Gann, *A History of Northern Rhodesia* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), 253.

⁴¹ Excellent discussions are included in Elena L. Berger, *Labour, Race and Colonial Rule: The Copperbelt from 1924 to Independence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Charles Perrings, *Black Mineworkers in Central Africa* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1979); A. L. Epstein, *Politics in an Urban African Community* (Manchester: Manchester University Press for the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, 1958); and Helmuth Heisler, *Urbanization and the Government of Migration* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974).

⁴² For additional arguments, see Claude Meillassoux, *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Harold Wolpe, “Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa,” *Economy and Society* 1 (No. 4, 1972), 425-56; and Palmer and Parsons (fn. 28). I differ from these approaches in my acknowledgement of the divergence of interests between the state and private enterprises, and in my conviction that the state was set upon solving *its own* fiscal problem by controlling the formation of land laws.

ANOTHER INSTITUTION: THE VILLAGE

Thus far I have employed the African data to criticize several major components of the currently orthodox theories of agrarian change—their statement of initial conditions; their specification of characteristic trajectories of change; and their analysis of a key agrarian institution, property rights. The African experience provokes a skeptical reappraisal of arguments pertaining to a second major rural institution, namely, the village.

In Africa, village dwelling was often not the basic form of rural settlement; many people preferred to live in isolated homesteads. Where villages were formed, it was often at the behest of states. Many of these states were profoundly capitalist.

At the time of the establishment of the Pax Britannica in north-eastern Rhodesia, for example, people generally resided in family homesteads. In the late 19th century, however, the British South African Company (B.S.A.C.)—the creation of that most dedicated proponent of capitalist expansion, Cecil John Rhodes—determined that the region's rural population properly belonged in villages. George Kay notes that “throughout the whole of north-eastern Zambia ruthless regrouping for administrative convenience was systematically carried out.”⁴³ He quotes from the B.S.A.C.'s own records that “many . . . resisted and were sent to prison before the order was finally obeyed.”⁴⁴ In this area, then, it was the administrators who sought to form the villages. That the agents of one of the most dedicated embodiments of capitalism were the proponents of villagization adds an ironic note to our reappraisal of the orthodox position.⁴⁵

Even today it would appear that village dwelling is preferred by the governments rather than by the rural people. Tanzania is a notable case in point. In the name of “development,” the government of Tanzania has sought to group rural dwellers into communities large enough for it to provide dispensaries, clinics, schools, water supplies, agricultural inputs, marketing facilities, and other services; it thereby hopes to strengthen the productive forces of the country's agrarian society.⁴⁶ It is notable that the state legitimated its reconstruction of rural society by propound-

⁴³ Kay, *Social Aspects of Village Regrouping in Zambia* (Lusaka: Institute for Social Research, University of Zambia, 1967), 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁵ In the case of Kenya, Sorrenson notes: “The Kikuyu did not live in villages, but in dispersed households. . . . During the Mau Mau Emergency the Kikuyu, the Embu and some of the Meru population were concentrated in 732 villages. . . .” Sorrenson (fn. 31), 3.

⁴⁶ The best studies are Michaela Von Freyhold, *Ujamaa Villages in Tanzania* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1979); Dean E. McHenry, Jr. *Tanzania's Ujamaa Villages* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1979); and Hyden (fn. 19).

ing a theory of African agrarian history in which "colonialism [had] encouraged individualistic social attitudes,"⁴⁷ whereas prior to colonialism, Africans had lived cooperatively in socially integrated, mutually supportive, "village communities." Tanzanian scholars have not hesitated to question the validity of these claims.⁴⁸

In evaluating the presumption that village-living is the natural form of agrarian settlement in Africa, we should be disposed toward caution. In some areas, villages appear not to have been the preferred mode of habitation. In other cases, where they *were* preferred, it was the states that preferred them. Some of these states were socialist, as in the case of Tanzania; in the case of the late British South Africa Company, however, the authorities were rampantly capitalist.⁴⁹

A BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTIC: THE PREFERENCE FOR SUBSISTENCE

The three elements of initial conditions, institutional traits, and characteristic patterns of change help to define the orthodox models of agrarian society. So, too, does a fourth element: the psychological traits of rural dwellers. Of these traits, the one that is central to the conventional models is the preference for subsistence production.

In contradistinction to the conventional orthodoxies, I argue that the reversion to subsistence can be viewed as a rational response to prevailing conditions in the political and economic environment of the rural producers. The actions of the states that control the markets in efforts to extract resources from rural populations constitute an important source of these conditions.

Many of Africa's export crops are cash crops, pure and simple; they have no direct use in consumption and are grown purely for the market. Recently, the volume of agricultural exports from Africa has declined, creating shortages of foreign exchange; this decline has been taken by Hyden and others as evidence of the disruptive power of a precapitalist peasantry.⁵⁰ But I would argue that it should be viewed in a different light.

In Africa as a whole, over 80 percent of the population is engaged in agriculture, and over 50 percent of the gross domestic product is derived from agricultural production. Most African states therefore rely

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Samuel S. Mushi, "Modernization by Traditionalization: Ujamaa Principles Revisited," *Taamuli* 1 (No. 2, March 1971).

⁴⁹ For further evidence concerning "state origins" of village communities and a brilliant exposition of this argument, see Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

⁵⁰ Hyden (fn. 19).

on agriculture for financial resources. One way in which the industry can be taxed is by regulating the market for export crops. In many cases, the government is the sole legal buyer of these crops. By purchasing them at an administratively set price in the domestic market and selling them at prices prevailing in the world market, the government accumulates revenue generated by the difference between the domestic and world market prices. In this way, the producers of cash crops are heavily taxed.⁵¹

One implication of such governmental fiscal policies is that the rewards for participating in the market place are lowered for many farmers; they are certainly lowered in comparison with the returns attained by producing crops that can be consumed on the farm or sold outside of official marketing channels.⁵²

A government's use of market controls to levy resources from agriculture thus lowers the returns farmers can expect from production for the market, both in absolute and relative terms. *In and of itself, this fact would account for the peasants' turning away from cash crop production.* There is therefore no need to posit the existence of an antimarket peasant mentality. Indeed, such an imputation would be wrong: withdrawal from exchange is the appropriate market response to the economic conditions that at present characterize many agricultural markets.

THE MARKET ORIGINS OF POLITICAL BONDAGE

Governments are interested not only in securing public revenues from export markets; they are also interested in securing foreign exchange. Toward this end, they tend to overvalue their currencies. One consequence is the taxation of export agricultural products for the benefit of those who seek imports: the industrialists (who seek cheap imports of plant and capital equipment) and the elites (who seek to gratify their tastes for imported products more cheaply). Another consequence of overvaluation is the generation of political power by establishing an excess demand for foreign exchange. At the artificially pegged price of the domestic currency, the market cannot allocate foreign exchange; the demand for it exceeds the supply. Those in charge of the foreign exchange "market" therefore become enormously powerful because they control the allocations of a scarce and valuable resource.

In this system, the beneficiaries are those in the Central Bank or those who make appointments to it. They are members of the foreign exchange

⁵¹ See Robert H. Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981).

⁵² See, for example, the data contained in Government of Uganda, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, "Pricing Policy and Agricultural Production," (Entebbe: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, August 1978).

allocation committees and of the committees that allocate import licenses, or persons who designate the appointees to these committees. Those who receive import licenses also stand to benefit.

The losers in this system are those who are not located in positions of access to this scarce resource and who nonetheless must purchase imported goods. Typically, there are no peasant farmers in the Central Bank or on the committee that allocates foreign exchange or import licenses. Yet the farmers rely on imports. Farm implements such as hoes, cutlasses, sprayers, pesticides, ox ploughs and other tools, sacks and bags, milling machines, and so forth often have to be imported. Moreover, many consumer goods, such as shirts, shoes, blankets, soap, and batteries are imported, or are manufactured with imported equipment. But, in this administratively structured market, the farmers must, in effect, bribe their superiors to secure needed imports; they must pay the premium exacted by the excess demand for foreign currencies and imports to satisfy those who have sufficient political power to secure privileged access to foreign exchange or to the imports it can buy.

Overvaluation thus lowers the price of exports, increases the costs of farming, and raises consumer prices for farmers. And it does so while involving the farmers in a system of regulated foreign exchange markets in which they are subject to political and economic domination by persons with influence in the national capital.

An analysis that is based on the political manipulation of markets thus reveals three features of the conventional models of precapitalist societies. One is the withdrawal from markets; another—a virtual corollary—is the preference for subsistence; and the third is the powerlessness of peasants. Rather than posit these characteristics as three separate traits, I regard them as joint consequences of the way in which markets have been manipulated by states to extract resources from agrarian societies. The approach is more powerful than the conventional orthodoxies.⁵³

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have summarized two of the dominant models of agrarian change and reviewed them in light of evidence drawn from rural Africa. The traditional approaches require initial conditions that

⁵³ Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, in writing about precolonial African societies, defined the African mode of production as one in which states did not directly control producers (e.g., through enserfment or slavery), but controlled and manipulated trade in order to accumulate resources from them. Her analysis is at least as applicable, in my view, to contemporary Africa as it was to the precolonial period, and very likely more so. See Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Recherches sur un mode de production Africain," *Le Peñsee* 144 (1969), 61-78.

have rarely existed historically. They are overly subjectivist, attributing the existence of institutions to preferences under circumstances in which these institutions have clearly been imposed. Moreover, they are overly economic, in that they place too strong an emphasis on the impact of the market on agrarian societies and too little on the impact of states. Time and again throughout this essay, an approach has proved fruitful that looks at the effect upon rural society of the demand for power and resources on the part of states under conditions in which people and wealth are concentrated in agriculture.