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A review: Basil Davidson, Let Freedom Come, Africa in Modern History

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"The history of modern Africa is above all a history of the ideas and development of nationalism through the twentieth century." (p. 4)

This is how Basil Davidson introduces his latest book, Let Freedom Come, in which he brings to bear his extensive knowledge of African history to formulate a synthesis focusing on the complex relationships between changing modes of production, emerging class structures and the formation of ideologies which have shaped the last century of the struggle for freedom.

It is difficult, as he says, to select the critical trends and issues from the vast array of events and personalities which have influenced the continent's vital role in the world system of today. It is well worthwhile re-reading this book several times to ferret out, from the wealth of historical detail, the author's insightful analysis of a range of widely-debated issues.

Davidson's conclusions as to the nature of pre-capitalist modes of production are drawn from evidence he has presented in his earlier works: African cultures were embodied in communities of differing sizes and power and at differing points of economic and social organization, bound together by common languages, cultures, and community rules. In Europe, these forms of nationalism preceded the formation of the nation-states that emerged with the advent of capitalism. In Africa, "The centrally unifying concept, resting on the mode of production which has shaped it but also been shaped by it, is that of kinship. (p. 48
By the end of the 19th Century, Davidson asserts, African communities were no longer living — if they ever had been — in a "bliss of primitive communism." By then, the subsistence economy remained almost nowhere. From about 400 BC, or earlier in favored regions like the Nile, less simple modes of production had evolved in which lineage leaders, acknowledged community heads, regulated and accumulated exploitable labor power. "With this lineage mode of production... the ancient inequalities of African society began." He adds,

"They were severe. Women provided the chief source of exploitable labour power: as daughters but even more as wives; and in a large sense these lineage modes of production became systems of tributary labour." (p. 54) He suggests that 'slave' labor, of men as well as women, was an early forerunner of wage-paid labor, rather than the condition of 'rightless chattels.' Social stratification, in the easy going ethos of rural life, was not severe; even women and slaves could find their personal identity and value.

Over time, as the lineage mode of production developed, the state emerged, "the qualitative development from a quantity of lineages to a community equipped with structures of central government or control." (p. 55) Stratification became less easy going, simple states developed into complex states of several or even many communities, spurred in particular by the development of long-distance trade and the need for the security, regulation or monopoly of commercial control.
These economies were far from stagnant. They grew, became more effective, larger, very enterprising. But they did not develop into different, more advanced capitalist structures. While emphasizing the complexities of their systems, Davidson suggests the underlying reason was that "a lineage mode of production, content with wageless labour, crucially inhibited the development of wage-paid labour...new methods of production, and...new relations of production." (p. 58)

The new coastal partnership with European commerce, first in gold and ivory, later in the sale of captives for overseas enslavement, induced the rise of advanced forms of mercantile initiative, and the emergence of a 'new class' of coastal merchants; but these "remained as peripheral elements within their enclosing systems." (p. 60) The merchants were agents of export and import between the great chiefs and kings of the inland country who fostered state controlled trading; and European businessmen who controlled shipping, overseas markets, and sources of import, items like guns and gunpowder. They had little economic incentive to invest in production until the decline of the Atlantic slave trade and the emergence of 'legitimate' trade in expert crops produced by Africans.

And then, before a new, emergent bourgeoisie could break free from the old structural constraints, the colonial 'scramble', backed by technologically superior weapons, imposed imperial state structures which barred them from competing with European monopolies. The resulting crisis 'led onward to the groundwork of nationalism.'

In the remainder of the book, Davidson seeks to explain the consequences of this experience for the nationalist movements that had, by the mid-1970s, created nearly 50 new states on the continent. He begins his narrative with the first pan-African
Congress in 1899, a year when the Gold Coast Aborigines declared, "The feverish rush for plunder and division of Africa is about to be consumated..." and the British were "slogging northwards to the Transvaal." (p. 28) He sees the historian's task as deciding which, in the "confused and often chaotic river of events," constitutes the underlying structural features belonging to its "shaping bed." (p. 23) Dividing the century into periods, he introduces "structural chapters" to suggest "aspects of the river's bed at this or that point of time." (p. 25) Most chapters then track the river's flow, suggesting the interplay between personalities, events, and underlying structural features.

Davidson maintains that neither the Africans nor the Europeans were fully conscious of the underlying factors impelling the colonial invasion. It is possible, nevertheless, to trace "a number of decisive underlying motives:"

The ambition of European traders to secure their own monopolies, breaking opposing African ones; mounting rivalries between the European powers; the conflicts of a variety of special interests; and the larger capitalists' desire for profitable investments in mineral deposits.

Davidson divides colonial activities into three fields: The goading of Africans into migratory labor reserves for the European-owned mines and estates throughout the continent, as well as for African-owned export crop farms in West Africa; the appropriation of African lands in east, central and southern Africa; and the imposition of monopolistic trading companies which, with colonial governmental aid, destroyed African competition to gain control of lucrative overseas trade. It is, perhaps, unfortunate that he did not also analyze the way a handful of giant British and French banks
shaped the colonial money and banking structures, playing a key role in funneling the profits of expanding colonial business back to the metropole.

Davidson identified as the great turning point in the colonial 'enclosure' the 1930s when the imperial powers, seeking to elude the disastrous impact of the Great Slump, expanded and rigidified their colonial systems to the exclusion of others.

Against this brief 'forbiddingly bleak' account, Davidson analyzes the two main trends in the first half century of African responses and initiatives. The vast majority of the population first strove to defend or advance their individual interests and identities by defensive warfare or alliances with the Europeans; and then sought to shape new life patterns by compromises marked by occasional outbursts of resistance. Gradually, their organizational efforts shifted from a religious focus to trade union actions. But nationalism meant practically nothing to them.

The second trend, initially tiny, was composed of western educated men and a few women, caught in a deep-seated contradiction: They typically

rejected the indigenous cultures of the 'illiterate masses', but were themselves rejected and discriminated against by the 'white civilization' they sought to emulate. Some began, tentatively, to espouse nationalist and Pan-Negroist ideas. Save for stray exceptions, only in South Africa did ideas of anti-racism begin to coalesce with those of revolution based on analysis of the class nature of the imposed system.

The Second World War was decisive among many contradictory press-
ures for change. African recruits and conscripts died in remote European and Asian battles. Those who returned brought with them a determination to build a new life. At the same time, the old imperialist monopolies were shaken to their roots. The Americans on one side, the Soviet Union on the other -- though for different reasons -- had no interest in restoring them. Yet the war had gone far to reinforce and complete the structures of colonial extraction as African exports multiplied. The undermining and dislocation of African communities proceeded apace. And ideas of nationalism were spurred by the Atlantic Charter and promises of freedom.

The European powers sought after the war, as Davidson shows, to consolidate their economic expansion through a variety of mostly ill-fated 'development' schemes. The U.S., without seeking territorial expansion, promised development assistance to African elites, seeking to open the doors to American enterprise. Increasingly militant trade unionism was shunted out of politics, its leaders encouraged to affiliate with the 'moderate' ICFTU by U.S. funds and scholarships. Many nationalist leaders, not a little fearful of 'trade unions', preferred to organize their own demonstrations. In settler-dominated regions, anti-trade union violence tended to strengthen trade union-nationalist alliances -- at least until the nationalists, having gained state power, began to oppose the militancy inspired by social struggle.

Davidson sharply exposes the contradictions between the limited nationalism that shaped most of the new African nation-states and the continuing struggle for social change. In his typically vivid prose, he draws a parallel with the 'balkanized' polities that emerged in Eastern Europe in the 1920s:
"Like circumstances tend to produce like results. In Africa as in Eastern Europe, 'strong men' walked in solitary power while corruption spread like a disease, and force took the place of fellowship and violence of persuasion. Once again it was shown that this way of solving the national problem could not solve the social problem; that the colonial state turned nation-state could not be usefully reformed, but must be revolutionised; and that only this kind of revolution, only a clear priority to the solving of the social problem by whatever means the future might reveal, would be able to fulfil the promises of national freedom." (p. 293)

For Davidson holds that, while the gains of independence were real and many, the imported model imposed a high price. The anti-colonial movements had emerged as nationalists, but for the most part they were nationalists without nations. The nations remained to be built in the face of growing skepticism as those in power, urging 'modernization', increasingly appeared to act to advance their own interests as a property-owning class. By 1970, some 19 states were under one or another kind of military regime, with more on the way. The majority of their inhabitants continued to live in deepening rural poverty or urban slums.

Like many others, Davidson finds difficulties in deciding on the appropriate terminology for analyzing the class structures characteristic of the new African states. He underscores their predominantly rural features, and points out that 90 to 95% were united neither in their social consciousness nor in a nationalist ideology. Rather the new nations remained little more than a collection of communities amalgamated by the hazards of colonial frontier delineation. Their mode of production, however, was no longer that within which their separate ancestral lineage systems had been molded.
The imposed colonial moie had forged externally dependent capitalist export enclaves surrounded by large underdeveloped 'support zones' providing cheap labor and, where possible, cheap food. By the 1960s, these regions had become mutually interdependent as growing numbers of under- and unemployed, many maintaining rural ties, crowded into urban slums alongside the lucky few with stable jobs. Yet these new working class elements lacked consciousness of their emerging status.

Distinguished from the 'lowest classes,' Davidson suggests, there began to appear the 'have somethings,' variously, and he argues inadequately, termed 'intermediate strata' or 'petty bourgeoisie': those with regular income from private enterprise or those who managed themselves into the service of the new state, the 'regular troops of the nationalist movements.' The topmost ranks of this group merged with the 'political classes.'

These, he holds, while fitting themselves into the local party-political structure which, after independence, influenced or controlled the local route to benefits, remained tied to foreign capitalist interests which dominated the economy, a distinctive type of 'auxiliary bourgeoisie.'

Unfortunately, Davidson does not explore the way foreign firms, through control of the 'commanding heights' -- basic industries, bank and foreign and internal wholesale trade -- continued to dominate the new nation states' political economies. But does indicate the futility of expecting these new state systems, 'occupied' by small fractions of their inhabitants speaking in the name of national unity, to contribute to better conditions for the great
majority of the people who, "peering into this national idea from the outside" remained "dubious and confused, and not much less alienated from the sources of power than during colonial times." (p. 315)

Davidson holds that the hope for real development lies in the new African model growing out of the politics of mass participation, appearing primarily in regimes with weak economies. Some, like Tanzania, became independent regimes within the 'neo-colonial' situation; others were regimes-in-formation, like Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau.

He sketches the efforts of the Tanzanian party, TANU, to build mass participation as a protection against the increasing power of a bureaucracy enlarged by the nationalization of banks and other foreign enterprises. By the 1970s, he notes, these were the subject of critical debate. He declares as the central theoretical question whether the dominant strata, bureaucratic or otherwise, given their technical ability in running the state, must necessarily come down on the pro-capitalist side of a class contest with peasants and wage workers. His example of an alternative possibility: Somalia, today seems less hopeful, as traditional nationalism and military confrontation seem to foster increased authoritarianism.

Davidson mentions, briefly, other attempts to link old forms of self-defense against colonialism with new forms of a new in the mold of modernizing but revolutionary ideas. The Lumumbists' efforts to organize guerilla warfare in Zaire in the mid-1960s, for example, ended in disaster because the leaders failed to develop modernizing theories to replace unscientific reliance on ancestral beliefs. He contrasts this experience to that of PAIGU in Guinea-Bissau which initially confronted similar conditions. As areas of Guinea-Bissau became liberated, some of the
Fighters began to exploit their new authority for personal reasons, rejecting overall national authority and abusing people, especially women; they also sought advice on old customs and beliefs about witchcraft. The PAIGC had to mobilize against these traditional ideas. In the midst of the fighting in 1963, the PAIGC held a conference in which the leadership confronted the issue head on. As Davidson says, it was a critical moment, decisive for further progress, when the primacy of ancestral belief was made to give way to a fully secular interpretation of reality. He cites Neto who emphasized that in Angola, too, the key task was "to free and modernize our peoples by a dual revolution: against their traditional structures which can no longer serve them, and against colonial rule." (p. 350)

Achievement of success in the liberation struggles, Davidson concludes,

"meant accepting that the solving of the 'national question', the problem of building a national consciousness real enough to absorb each existing 'pre-national' consciousness or individualist divergence, must always depend on solving the 'social question', the problem of meeting the material and cultural needs of everyday life. Out of this necessary acceptance (and those who refused it were lost) there came the practice of their revolutionary theory: the immensely difficult promotion, in liberated zones, of a new socio-cultural system based on the democracy of village committees and the creation of elementary schools, clinics, trading networks, tribunals, and the rest. A new type of state could thus emerge in embryo even while the wars continued." (p. 354)
the social question had to have primacy over the national question. You had to start from the real and immediate needs of the people 'at the base': their need for control over their own communities, their need for understanding how to use this control so as to improve life, their need for means to make this improvement possible. (p. 375)

Additional theoretical and practical problems, Davidson points out, need to be resolved in the continuing struggle to realize the 'new African model.' The revolutionary inner leadership 'core', he suggests, needs to expand and democratize itself into a revolutionary national party within the national movement.

Further, he poses the question of the relationship between the revolutionary party and the new state which it has brought into existence. One might add that this question is rendered vastly more perplexed by the difficulties which participatory state institutions, shaped in liberated village areas, must inevitably confront when they seek to achieve national control of the technologically complex 'commanding heights' in order to transform their inherited externally dependent political economic structures.

And beyond these looms the problem of resolving the potential conflicts between the new African nations, of achieving the "organic unity between national peoples...that would mark the supersession of the frontiers of colonial partition, and the threshold of a new era, and the onset of a new history." (p. 382)

One may not agree with all of Davison's theoretical formulations. One could argue over selection of this or that event or trend as the crucial piece of evidence. But this is surely an important book for those concerned with the use of theory as a guide, not only in Africa, but throughout the Third World. It is not a book simply to be read. It should be studied in depth.