

# REVIEWS

Onesimo SILVEIRA : *Africa South of the Sahara : Party Systems and the Ideologies of Socialism*, Political Science Association, Uppsala 1976.

*Reviewed by*

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Dr. Silveira's book must be ranked as one of the most sympathetic treatments of the African political process to date. His point of departure is to rightly recognize the African political leader as a serious actor with a vision of society, working within the constraints imposed by the colonial legacy, the class nature of his society, and the inherited socio-economic structure to bring about his vision of society as well as, naturally, to stay in power. This approach clearly stands in sharp contrast to the usual approach of the western political scientist (which admittedly Dr. Silveira is not) which departs from the explicit/implicit assumptions that 1) the African political leader is a village tyrant, a cynical unscrupulous manipulator, using traditional symbols, repression etc. ; to keep himself in power as well as to enrich himself. The necessary corollary being — though never made explicit — that 2) the African masses (i.e. everyone but the recognized leader) are ignorant, gullible and perhaps even cowardly. To say that Dr. Silveira's approach is one of the very few that form a basis for a serious discussion of the fundamental aspects of the African political process, is to belabor the obvious.

The book is in two distinct parts. Part I traces the emergence of modern political parties under colonial domination as well as the political parties in the post colonial context. Not so unnaturally, the proliferation of single-party states in the post-colonial context becomes Dr. Silveira's main preoccupation. Unfortunately the equally-striking proliferation of military *coups d'Etats* followed by the no-parties, military regimes receives scant attention. Quoting Arthur Lewis, the author implicitly dismisses *coups d'Etats* as being no more than frustrated responses to the no-legal-opposition feature of single-party systems. But if this were in fact the case, Drs. Arthur Lewis and Onesimo Silveira would at the very least have to explain Benin in 1963, Nigeria in 1966, Upper Volta in 1966, Sierra Leone in 1967, Somalia in 1969, etc. We would, however, have much more to say about Dr. Silveira's analysis of the 'why single-party states in Africa ?' a bit later.

Part II analyses the political philosophy and the political practice of Presidents Sekou Touré, Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere and Jomo Kenyatta, all of whom the author claims are protagonists of 'African Socialism' and which is premised on the absence of class societies

in Africa. This logically leads the author to an analysis (in Chapter 10) of precolonial and colonial social formations in Africa South of the Sahara. His conclusion is most instructive, as far the basic premiss of 'African Socialism' is concerned :

*The horizontalization of the African traditional society, both in the pre— and the post-colonial era, and the corollary concept of the non-existence of class struggle in Africa, cannot face up to the facts either in theory or in practice (P. 157).*

With minor reservations, this chapter on « Social Formations in Africa South of the Sahara » is by far the author's best contribution. Even by itself, it would constitute an imperative reading for all serious students of the African political process. By contrast, however, the last substantive chapter on « Social Classes in Africa South of the Sahara » is distinctly less successful. It consists of no more than three to four paragraph generalizations on the African bourgeoisies, Petit-bourgeoisies, peasantries and the proletariat. In no way, therefore, can this chapter be said to constitute an analysis of the class structure of any African society, much less of all African societies.

Dr. Silveira's main thesis regarding the proliferation of single-party states in Africa South of the Sahara is rather easy to summarize :

*The need to build a nation, to embody the state in appropriate institutions, and to promote the creation of a new economy led the African states, independently of their doctrinal positions, one after the other, to adopt the single party. (P. 42).*

It must be stated, however, that in establishing this thesis, Dr. Silveira relies exclusively on arguments invoked by African leaders in defence of the single party systems. I for one searched the book for arguments beyond these with absolutely no success. The conclusion is clear ; the author is convinced (and would have us believe) that by accepting the rationalizations of the most visible actors (i.e. the single-party advocates and institutionalizers) we are closer to answering the question of 'why the proliferation of single-party states in Africa ? '. It is here that it becomes difficult to resist asking whether Dr. Silveira's single most important virtue (his overwhelming empathy for the African leader) does not in fact become a vice. For clearly, it should have been possible to pose the question of « why single parties ? » independently of the arguments invoked by the African leaders. Taking the concrete case of a particular single party state (for example, CPP under Nkrumah, TANU under Nyerere etc.) one could have asked why the outlawing of opposition parties at the particular historical juncture that the event occurred. What was the nature of the contradictions (social, economic, political) that the single party institution was called upon to resolve ? Posing the question in such a manner is, of course, anything but easy. For one, it requires an in-depth historical, political and socio-economic analysis of a concrete case, a tracing of the evolution of specific social forces, and identifying emergent social contradictions for whose resolution the single party structure was

instituted as a response. While this approach is difficult, it has been done before (see, for example, Mahmood Mamdani's « Politics and Class Formation in Uganda », University of Dar es Salam, 1974). The lessons that may be drawn from such an approach, however, would clearly be more meaningful than the approach adopted by Dr Silveira, namely, to summarize what is common in the arguments invoked by the African leaders for the single-party state and to offer that as the answer to « why the proliferation of single parties in Africa South of the Sahara ? »

From a more cynical approach, one could again have posed the question of why single-party states in a totally different manner. The critical question being whether for the various fractions of the national bourgeoisie (in any single African country) there are any advantages whatsoever in being in political opposition to the party that controls state power. For clearly, the argument that there exist objective conditions (other than the rather lofty reasons put forward by the advocates of single-party states) that lead to *de facto* (as opposed to *de jure*) single-party states or formalistic multiple-party parliamentary system, cannot be that easily be dismissed. The basis for this argument derives from an examination of the nature of peripheral capitalism. Such an examination would reveal (among other things) that indigenous private capital in the typical African country finds a place in the local economy only with great difficulty — faced with transnational domination and the penetration of western capital in the typical peripheral capitalist economy. At best, local capital is relegated to retail, transport and the service industries. Rarely, it might find a place in finance and construction. In any case, however, connections to state power and access to those who have influence on state decision-making process is a *sine qua non* for economic survival. The logical conclusion of such an analysis (i.e there will be a natural tendency for the erosion of the drawing power of parties in opposition and that « politics » quickly becomes struggle for positions within the party that controls state power, as opposed to the contention of various and opposing political ideologies) is one that in fact needs to be tested. Here the experience of Somalia from 1960 to 1969 (i.e. from the evolution of multi-party, or better, multi-clan, politics to a *de facto* single party politics) and that of Liberia currently (to name but a few) would seem to be rather indicative and instructive. Unfortunately, Dr. Silveira's book is silent on this rather interesting argument.

This is a rather serious limitation, for in the light of the foregoing argument, some of Dr. Silveira's comments become rather ambiguous : *The single party is the instrument of integration not only by definition but also, in its aim as such, it is the party of all the people.* (p. 42) But by what definition of « integration » is the single party an instrument ? And in whose aim is the single party to serve as the party of all the people ? Further what is in fact meant by « all the people » ? For clearly a partisan of the cynical thesis might well argue that the single

party derives from an attempt by the various fractions of the national bourgeoisie (i.e. whether ethnically, regionally or sectorally based) to limit their conflicts to the strictly economic arena and to the politics of the « ins » and « outs » of power, as opposed to false ideological struggles amongst themselves. As such, the single-party might well be seen as the instrument of the *ideological integration* of the national bourgeoisies ; a party for all fractions of them and not a party of all the people.

Dr. Silveira states :

*The single party is deeply rooted in the past, specifically in the anti-colonial struggle before independence. At that time, the existence of a common enemy brought about a united front ; this common enemy (colonialism) was then vanquished but the aim of a common front led to the eventual rejection of multi-party systems in order to deal with another common enemy e.g. imperialism or neocolonialism (p. 42).*

This statement can and must in fact be challenged at many levels. For one, it is inconsistent with various assertions that the author makes throughout his book. For example he argues that independence in most African countries was achieved with a low degree of national integration (p. 12). Also, he points out that in both the ex-French and the ex-British territories provisions for a plurality of political parties was a condition for the granting of political independence (p. 30). In fact, what the author establishes is that single parties (whether *de facto* or *de jure*) rather than being an imperative of the anti-colonial struggle carried into the post-colonial era, are a singularly post-colonial phenomenon. Further, even the most casual observation of past and current anti-colonial struggles in Africa reveal that the united front struggle is more the exception than the rule (witness Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola etc. etc.) The most damaging part of the statement, however, is that the author expects us to accept that imperialism and neo-colonialism constitute « a common enemy ». This in spite of the fact that in his chapter on social classes in Africa, he argues that the strength of the class he designates as the « bourgeoisie » derives its strength from its intermediate position between the producing masses and foreign capital. But how can a class that derives its strength (at least in part) from its link to foreign capital and from organizing the access of foreign firms into the local market and which (in Dr. Silveira's own words) has « developed into the role of protector of the interest of the international bourgeoisie » (p. 166), be said, by any stretch of the imagination, to be opposed to imperialism and neo-colonialism ? Does Dr. Silveira mean to exclude this class when he argues that imperialism and neo-colonialism constitute a common enemy which must be combated with the single political party ? Frankly, one cannot escape the conclusion that Dr. Silveira often comes dangerously close to substituting the slogans and rationalizations of the single party advocates for a serious analysis of the phenomenon.

Dr. Silveira's implicit adoption of the thesis that the single party system is a strategy for achieving the complementary process of national integration and political, economic modernization in the face of imperialism, neocolonialism and traditional structures, tribalism and regionalism, leads him to analyse the dual processes of national integration and modernization as well as the institutions of tribalism and regionalism. The author is clear as to what he views as the historical role of national integration ; « consists in the long run, in solving the conflicts of loyalty and the crisis of identity resulting from the double allegiance to a tribe and to a nation. » (p. 49). He is less clear, however, as to what constitutes « modernization » in its political sense, or the « historical role » of political modernization. The impression that I get of the authors position is that he views political modernization as being opposed to traditional political systems or structures. Admittedly, however, this interpretation of the author's position could be wrong.

Clearly, however, one cannot talk about national integration without defining the concept of a nation and here, the author offers us a rather interesting survey of the literature. The contrasting of the thesis of Cheikh Anta Diop, Mamadou Dia's « collective vocation » and « African spirituality » to Samir Amin's thesis which *requires two essential factors for the determination of the fact of nationhood... the political factor which found expression in a class wielding political power and the economic factor expressed as a surplus and having a nationally unifying effect. The life and death of nation is consequently dependent upon the existence or disappearance of this unifying dominant class* (p. 73) makes for a rather imperative reading. This does not mean, however, that we necessarily accept the author's critique of these positions, and especially his critique of Amin's position. For the author's critique of the Amin thesis, which he considers « fragile » is clearly at best fragile. To argue that *In Maoist China, after the centralization of economic and political power, the « minority nationalities » are still officially treated as nationalities even after being cut off from the economic factors which according to Amin are the sine qua non of nationhood* (p. 73)

is simply to beg the question. For to be « officially treated as nationalities » is not the same thing as constituting nations and the author knows the difference. To argue, as does the author, that Soviet Union and China are « pluralistic nations being constituted of 'republics' and 'nationalities, respectively » (p. 73) is to rob the concept of nation of its conciseness. To go even further to argue that « the fact of nationalities is even embodied in the Chinese flag » constitutes further proof of the existence of a multiplicity of nations within China, is to descend to the level of the trivial and the purely formal.

Concerning the role of tribalism, ethnic identification etc. in impeding the process of national integration, the author is at pains to demonstrate that he is neither an adventurist nor an ethnocentric. Thus he neither agrees with Arthur Lewis who argues that social

groups (read tribes) disagree « simply because they are historical enemies » nor does he agree with Cabral who argues that « tribalism comes from Oxford, Cambridge and the Sorbonne where people are educated to become the modern tribal chief. » This latter position, according the author is a simplification of the problem. It is my conviction however, that the author's attempt at establishing a middle position was neither necessary nor particularly successful. It was unnecessary because the author fails to provide convincing evidence to the contrary of the view that tribalism (per se) is of secondary importance as a hindrance to national integration. Nor was he successful at demonstrating that he is not a partisan of either point of view. The author, for example, speaks of « the cultural and economic aspirations of ethnic and tribal groups » (p. 49) as if they could be unambiguously defined and as if they would constitute the same things to the various classes within a particular tribal or ethnic group. The author's unabashed use of such phrases, however, reveals a position closer to that of Arthur Lewis than he would have us believe.

My reading of the history of the most violent tribal conflicts and separatist movements in Africa, leads to the conclusion that almost all separatist movements (e.g. the Ashanti in Ghana, the Ibos in Biafra, the Buganda in Uganda etc.) have been led by powerful but locally based bourgeoisies who resort to separatism (and the manipulation of tribalism) as a second best strategy in the face of their inability to establish a national base. Until a more convincing argument to the contrary, therefore, I would prefer to stay in the camp of Himmels-trand and Cabral.

A study of the political philosophy of African leaders (and especially given the prestige enjoyed by those selected by the author, as the founding fathers of their respective countries) is always instructive. The author's study of the political philosophy of these leaders is limited to three main areas ; their views on man and on history and society, and their practical recommendations with regard to national development. Obviously, the book could hardly have been expected to be the place for an exhaustive study of the full political significance of each and everyone of these political leaders. Further, given the need for a synthesis there are bound to be areas where a readers interpretation of the work of these leaders (or interpretation of specific events — e.g. the army insurrection in Tanzania in 1964 which the author fails to point out that it was not unique to Tanzania but found its echo in Kenya as well as Uganda —) is bound to differ with that of the author. As a source of inspiration to read further into the philosophy of these leaders, however, the four chapters definitely pass the lithmus test.

This then leads us to a discussion of what is by far Dr. Silveira's best chapter — On social formation in Africa South of the Sahara. To begin with, the author rightly started out with a modest objective : *The analysis that follows is not aimed at clarifying problems arising*

*from the application of Marxian schema to Africa South of the Sahara. It aims at juxtaposing several viewpoints and, by so doing, focussing on the necessity to throw light on important aspects of Africa's precolonial social history which still to a great extent remains obscure (p. 148).*

Through a very judicious choice of viewpoints to be analyzed (Samir Amin, Jean Suret-Canale and Majhemout Diop) the debate quickly transcends the question of whether or not class societies existed in precolonial Africa to the more interesting issue of attempting to establish the precise class nature of these societies. This is why the author's conclusion to the chapter must be seen as somewhat of a let-down. For rather than outlining areas for further research, he reverts back to the old debate of whether precapitalist African societies were class societies or not. A debate which he had for the most part surpassed.

It is my view, however, that the following conclusions may be drawn from the chapter 1). That despite quasi-appearance of slavery and feudalism in some African societies, they never constituted dominant modes. This can be stated in spite of Diop's assertion that slave and feudal system existed at least in some parts of Senegal. 2.) The concept of an « Asiatic mode of production » has a place in the study of precapitalist social formations in Africa. The author's qualification, however, is clearly in order :

*Transposed to the case of tropical African societies, this « mode of production » cannot be applied in a reductive manner. It represents a great similarity with precapitalist formations of the continent as far as the « common ownership of land » is concerned. However, it presents an equally important disparity. This can be summed up by the fact that this « common ownership of land » did not generate the type of government based on harsh forms of government as in the case of « oriental despotism » (p. 152).*

One is left wondering, however, whether the author would support Amin's formula « tributary mode of production » as being a better designation of precapitalist social formations in Africa.

The author then traces the effect of the incorporation of Africa into the world capitalist system (the ingrafting of capitalist ingredients, to use his terminology) on the African social systems. This is brief and standard, thus requires no extensive commentary.

In the line of a general overview of Dr. Silveira's book, it is my feeling that if there are any major weaknesses, it derives from the fact that the book is Dr. Silveira's Ph. D. dissertation. As is well known ; it is a rule that in a work that aspires to the Ph. D. seal of approval, a candidate has to demonstrate his « familiarity with the literature ». This leads often to a tendency for such work to survey as broad a spectrum of positions as possible — including positions with obvious lack of scientific (as opposed to ideological) merit, simply because they have been espoused before. Further, as far as possible, a Ph. D.

candidate (at the risk of being branded « dogmatic » or « unscientific » or « ideologically inspired ») has to mask his political ideological learnings. For the unwary candidate, this latter « unwritten rule » often leads to his awkwardly straddling opposing political ideological positions under the guise of « neutrality » or « unimpassioned scientific search for the truth ». This is not without great risks ; for even middle positions or neutral positions have to be justified. Thus a candidate may resort to banal or formal critiques of positions for which he is unable to offer fundamental critiques.

It is my conviction that the author's moments of obvious carelessness can only be explained by his « over-familiarity » with the literature. For consider the following : *This, in turn is largely due to the specific character of the African bourgeoisies which are technologically poor and almost without an entrepreneurial mentality. Due to this fact, these bourgeoisies tend to function more as hoarders than as investors of the surplus values produced by the proletarian masses* (p. 88).

Here, the author begins to parrot the ideologically inspired western « social scientists » who attempt to explain the obvious impossibility for peripheral capitalist countries to achieve authentic and independent capitalist development, by ascribing it to pathological weaknesses in the character, mentality of the dominated peoples. What is more surprising, however, about the above statement is the fact that the author's own analysis (of social formations in Africa South of the Sahara, the resultant effects of the « ingrafting of capitalist ingredients », the subordination/dependency relations between the centre of the capitalist system and its periphery, the fact of the domination of these economies by transnational corporations etc.) clearly offers a much better explanation of why the African bourgeoisies can only be expected to play an accessory role to their European counterparts. Rather than come to this obvious conclusion, the author is content to provide the « psychological school » for why underdevelopment with false data.

As a demonstration of the depth of the author's critique of especially the Marxist School, we can do no better than to reproduce the following statements from the author ;

*The Marxist position referred to above which results from the literal interpretation of the basic principles of Marxist philosophy is « empirically consistent » to a certain extent. Nevertheless it has ceased to be relevant since it has proved incapable of escaping the negative influence of dogmatism* (p. 50). Further, we are told that Majhemout Diop's analysis is defective because « he systematically attempts to force African realities into the mould of Marxian theory » which constitutes, according to the author, the « subordination of African facts to extra-African theory » (p. 150). Need we say anymore ?