
REVIEWS

African Encounters

R. N. Nordau

Africa for Beginners by Melvin Lasky (Weidenfeld & Nicolson)

MELVIN LASKY IS a co-editor of *Encounter*, a monthly magazine whose formula for its great success in recent years has not included any particular interest in Africa or what has happened in Africa. It has concentrated on discussion at a (sometimes self-consciously) high altitude of the intellectual problems—political as well as literary—of Europeans. It is for this reason, I suppose, that Mr. Lasky considers himself a beginner where things African are concerned.

Perhaps he is—though it would be difficult to believe this on the evidence of this book alone. It is a most engaging piece of work, written with consummate ease, and replete with fascinating little anecdotes of meetings with Top People (mostly un-named), conversations with ordinary folk, extracts from newspapers, and interviews on controversial subjects (including an excellent one on 'The African Personality', with Ayo Ogunshaye, described here as "one of the most formidable personalities in new Africa's young intelligentsia"). It is written partly in diary form, partly as a series of letters and partly as reportage of the most sophisticated sort.

It also shows considerable judgment and no small understanding of just what problems face the four countries—Nigeria, Ghana, Sudan and Ethiopia—that Mr. Lasky has chosen to write about.

Yet it is a disappointing little book. Two things in particular worried me. The first is Mr. Lasky's decision to deal only with the four countries he selected, and the rather facile confession that he had avoided describing the settler areas and South Africa—which he had visited—because "I no longer felt myself to be a true beginner." Worse still, I think, was his admission that the real reason was that "new impressions came to be immediately overcast with the dreadful complications of the fiercely entrenched white-black racial antagonisms." A journalist of Mr. Lasky's experience and skill could have avoided the pitfalls of hasty judgment without simply funkng the problems altogether.

OR COULD HE? FOR this is the second aspect of the book that disturbs me. Mr. Lasky tries hard to avoid presenting his own views on the situations he describes in the countries he does deal with. Wherever possible, he presents views through the mouths of others. Yet one is left with the impression that, far from being able to make judgments, he is simply reluctant to state them. He is too eager to imply criticism, without ever saying so. As a result the clever remark (more often

than not given in passing) or the snide one are made to stand in for the more extensive commentary that one is left to imagine Mr. Lasky making elsewhere.

Still, the remarks are clever. His sub-heading "Freud, Marx and other Witch-doctors" is a good example. So is his opening sentence on Ghana:

"On to Ghana from Nigeria, and the first impression, to hasty Western eyes, is that one has moved half a century forward, from, say, 1789 to 1848."

I may be over-sensitive, but I detect here a note of condescension which seemed out of place in one trying so hard to be a beginner. ●

Africa Book Boom

Adrian Leftwich

The Challenge of Africa by Dr. K. A. Busia (Praeger Books)

Handbook of African Economic Development by G. Benveniste and W. E. Moran Jnr. (Praeger Books)

JUST AS BOOKS ABOUT fighter pilots and submarine captains flooded the post-war novel market, so books on Africa have appeared with great rapidity as the Tiers Monde muscles its way into the world of affairs. Surveys and Handbooks to-day, must either be Hailey-like accounts, or carry a simple yet relevant message, if they are not to fall short for the aware reader, and particularly the student of African affairs. Both the *Challenge of Africa* and the *Handbook* are short, and essentially introductory, accounts.

WHEN AFRICAN HEADS OF State are meeting to map out new techniques of inter-African co-operation, regional economic planning, African trade areas, and to solve a host of specialised problems, Dr. Busia's contention that the essential challenge of Africa is a moral one, appears a bit unreal. That the highly politicised tensions of African affairs, in an international context, will draw on a religious cultural background and that this will modify and temper the politics of the continent, is somewhat 19th Century in approach. One cannot help feeling that Dr Busia is escaping from a milieu in which his fortunes fell and all through his rather didactic ("we shall now turn to the problem of . . .") book, one cannot but notice the side swipes which are taken at Nkrumah. Perhaps, as a moralist, he should 'forgive'.

His insistence on "the liberties of the people"—without any attempt at definition of these or the socio-economic context in which they will have relevance, clinches an impression on conventionalism and conservatism. Little or no allowance is made for the exigencies arising out of the emergency of development, nor any attempt made to understand some of the more temporary (one hopes) limitations on freedom, as it is conventionally conceived.

As an introduction to some of the social and cultural problems arising out of the contact of Africa and

Europe, and the psychological effects of domination by the latter of the former, this book will be useful. Conceptually, and in terms of a basic grasp of the problems and their solution, Busia however cannot compare say with Mamadou Dia in his *African Nations and World Solidarity*—which, while also being a survey, at least places the problems of Africa into a context which is real and demands immediate attention.

BENVENISTE AND MORAN HAVE produced a well-rounded survey of African economic problems in their handbook. Apart from a rather thin and cursory reference to problems of agricultural and land reform, which is inadequate, most of the essential issues concerning the economies of Africa are covered, and some usefully extracted tables of figures and facts back up the text.

Some effort has been made to avoid Cold War terms; yet the tendency to look at Africa from a Western point of view—from the point of view of long-term Western interests is nevertheless present. The unashamed “Western” approach to Africa is criticised, and while a refreshing distinction is made between Moscow-dominated political movements (which are they?) and socialist economic principles, the authors still find it

necessary to warn that “If the West refuses to help . . . or is slow or less effective, the East will reap the advantage.”

Showing that aid and investment in Africa to date has not had the desired effect of bringing African economies to a dynamic take-off point, and showing too that, from all sides, aid has been motivated primarily by strategic interests, the authors still hold out some hope for an institutional apparatus which can channel aid to Africa. That aid is needed there can be little doubt, but one cannot help but feel that already African nations are realising that ultimately they are going to have to go it alone. They must develop an attitude which accepts this fact, and they must no longer hope that the West will pay its debt, nor the East pay it for them. Present manifestations of demands for economic agreements between African countries and the plans for closer regional co-operation augur well for the acceptance of this attitude.

The *Handbook of African Economic Development* is a useful guide to those who wish to feel their way into Africa's economic problems, from the point of view of the political economist, and gives a reasonable insight into and moderate criticism of, the thinking of the West on the problems of the ‘neutral’ nations. ●

To The Editor

DEAR SIR,—It is a pity that writers on Africa (such as Mr. Sale and Mr. Leather *New African* II, 4 and II, 5) ignore or neglect factors that *must* be taken into account if any realistic assessment of man's achievements in differing circumstances is to be reached. To discuss the rise, existence and fall of civilisations in lands of varying latitudes without either defining what is meant by “civilisation”, or enumerating the conditions necessary for the rise of any civilisation, cannot fail to be misleading. Thus Mr. Sale attempts to prove that African “civilisation” was at least “equal” to that of Europe, using snippets of information from a variety of largely unverifiable sources, while Mr. Leather, citing the same sources, backwards, tries to prove that Mr. Sale is wrong.

Perhaps these writers should have pointed out that in the course of man's development from savagery to what we hope he will become, the stage known as “civilisation” is reached when he starts to live in cities, and there masters the skills of social economic technical organisation to such a degree that he is able to stop thinking about his belly and devote attention to his soul. When this stage is reached a tract of land will produce its London, Timbuctoo, Cuzco, Angkor, Athens, Rome or Cairo: but this stage can be reached *only* when man is so in control of the production of

food that a continuous surplus can be produced great enough to support a substantial, city dwelling, population. This condition can only be satisfied if the soil in which the food is grown is rich enough to withstand continuous exploitation, and if there is sufficient water available to support growth.

These conditions exist eminently in temperate latitudes, and may be taken to explain the early development of “civilisation” in the Mediterranean basin or in China, as well as the later development of northern Europe as the seat of the most advanced technical civilisation the world has seen. The soil of these regions is rich (in some places in China and England, for example, it has withstood exploitation for *up to a thousand years* without any noticeable decline in condition) and the climate is suitable for agriculture.

The tropical latitudes, within which almost the whole of Black Africa falls, are not blessed with these preconditions for the rise of cities and the progress their rise signifies. On the contrary, these regions are cursed with the presence of factors which strongly militate against man's progress on a scale unimaginable to those whose backgrounds are the product of temperate civilisations:

“We who live in temperate lands find it difficult to realise how baneful Nature can be to man or to understand that water in streams and swamps may swarm with dangerous germs, millions of blood-sucking insects may inject deadly microbes into the human body, and the very soil may be harmful to the touch” (Pierre Gourou *The Tropical World*, 1961

ed, p 6). Not only man, but also his animals, essential to the development of agriculture, are victims of many diseases, of which the most widespread are probably malaria and trypanosomiasis, respectively.

Of the soils, Gourou writes “*Tropical soils are poorer and more fragile than those of temperate regions. Great care is needed in using them if their further impoverishment and destruction are to be avoided. These conditions give tropical agriculture a precarious character which is absent from the temperate belt.*” (op. cit. p. 13). The soils are lacking in humus and in bases, and will support the continuous growth of food crops for *not more than three years*, on the average, after which they must lie fallow for more than ten. In a region of endemic disease, both for himself and his animals, and of poor and easily destructible soil, it is hardly surprising that man generally has not been able to rise above the level of subsistence farming.

What progress has been made in tropical agriculture is often the result of influences from the temperate regions. Thus the rice-growing civilisations of South East Asia owe their development to techniques from temperate China, while India owes much to links it has enjoyed for thousands of years with temperate Asia Minor and Europe. Tropical Africa is separated from the temperate regions by the largest, widest, most intractable desert in the world.

Let us hope that those who today sit in judgment over Africa will bear these factors in mind.

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