Socialist Survey 1

The Reconciliation Needed

*Can high standards of living in an
industrial society only be reached at the expense
of community-mindedness?*

D. H. CRAIGHEAD

AFRICAN SOCIETY, before the impact and the disruption of the slave trade in Africa, and before the enforced re-alignment imposed by a money economy, was relatively stable and complete. Within the family group, there was provision for the aged, the widows, the chronically ill and schooling of the children. Within the wider tribal group there was provision for mutual protection, for simple administration and justice and for the expression of the Community will. If all these things were on a simple, straightforward basis, it was because a subsistence economy did not require elaborate or sophisticated systems. It was a placid, fairly easy life, with security and completion. It led to contentment more readily than can our modern, highly-geared way of living.

If the kind of life led under these conditions did not lead to change and development, except at a very slow pace, it was partly because there was not present a pressure in living which forced change in order to meet new and growing challenges. It was only when the pressure of increasing populations began to demand new methods of growing food, that the system had to change, and in most parts of Africa this came more or less at the same time as colonisation and the impact of a money economy, together with medical advances which further increased the population-density and made change inevitable.

The contact with a machine age has also brought with it a desire for the comforts and pleasures of modern living and of a sophisticated industrial world. This in turn has been disruptive of the type of life that was the basis of African society and of the values that were part of it. A subsistence economy could provide sufficient food, but little comfort in living; the industrial society of Europe means an opening to all the comfort and excitement of a technological world, but it also means malnutrition and dire poverty for the less successful.

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THE CONCEPT OF "AFRICAN SOCIALISM" appears to be less a doctrinaire state nationalism in the European sense than a desire to carry in a developing industrial society the values of communal assistance inherent in the old form of society.

If once the family and tribal group had taken care of those who were not able to fend for themselves, why should not the State do so now in the larger and much more complex society? Previously education had been a function of the family, with the tribe assisting at certain, clearly-defined points: now the State is providing for much more technical educational needs. Why cannot the same apply in other fields?

It must be admitted that the industrial society has brought neither content in living, nor protection to those least able to fend for themselves. Yet it is impossible to go back—population densities demand a highly-fragmented specialised society, while the human desires that have been awakened by a technological society, and are kept fanned by clever advertising and by comparisons with neighbours, cannot be stilled. For better or worse, this is the world we must live in and must learn to tame to our needs.

Is the answer to the individual suffering existing in this modern world to be met through a concept of communal organisation, and if so, how is it to be translated into practice? It seems to be along these lines of thought that "African socialism" is challenging existing modern socio-logical thought. If indeed the concept is capable of a practical realisation in a way that does not damage aspects of value in society, then it will have contributed materially to solving the worst problems that beset our modern world. African society has always had a particularly strong tradition of mutual and communal help, partly, no doubt, because it was at the very root and foundation of that society, yet also strong and vital enough to withstand the fragmentation and individualism of industrialism. How many times does it not happen in township life that a family whose breadwinner is ill or out of work is fed by the neighbours, themselves living at a standard of chronic malnutrition? The amazing generosity and degree of mutual assistance is a feature of African life that is perennially surprising to people of other communities, and should be an object lesson to them. If it can be translated into a definable system of social organisation, then it will indeed add appreciably to the total of human ability.

THE HIGH STANDARDS OF LIVING that have been attained in the wealthier countries stem from an optimum utilisation of all available resources, both material and human. In particular, they depend on all workers in the community being fully trained for their work to the maximum of their individual abilities, being experienced and wise in the problems of their crafts, and working to the full extent of their abilities at all times. Most of all, they require that every worker works willingly and gives of his best—both in regard to skills and in regard to the effort expended.

The average, ordinary person tends to be lazy. He can work at high pressure for sustained periods if there is an incentive, but without that incentive there is always the

tendency to take things easy. It is a well-known fact that if workers who are ill are paid an income during illness equal to their normal wages (and justice would seem to indicate that they should be) the illness lasts unnecessarily long. That is human nature, and very few people are not subject to the temptation to take things easy. Those who are not, are usually activated by some special drive that is quite out of the ordinary run.

There have been times in history when a people, activated by intensely strong motives of a religious or humanitarian nature, have been prepared to make quite extraordinary efforts. We have seen it recently in the establishment and development of the Kibbutzes in Israel, and there is evidence that the same type of drive is behind some of the special efforts at community-development that are occurring sporadically in the new States of Africa, but it is normally transitory, called into existence by a special challenge and fading away when that particular challenge has been met. It is rarely sustained for more than a few years.

Yet the high standards of living that can be attained in the modern world, by a whole people and not just by a privileged few, depend on workers working to their maximum ability at all times. They demand the maximum effort that is consistent with pleasure and satisfaction in work. They require a high standard of ability and effort attained and sustained as a fruit of long experience and training. They are entirely inconsistent with a leisurely and easy life.

Unfortunately, very nearly all experience shows that these high standards can be obtained only in the competitive conditions of the modern world. They stem from the rewards and enticement that are offered to the successful, or in the last resort, from the fear of the consequences of failure.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. In particular, University staff are used to working to the limit of their abilities without any special incentives, and cannot understand why the rest of society cannot be organised successfully on the same basis. But then they have interesting and intellectually stimulating work; work that is its own reward. Workers in a factory, doing very routine repetitive work, cannot be expected to find the same satisfaction in it, and, unless there is some effective spur, will soon start to take things easy. This is the unfortunate choice—there is a high standard of living available, or there is an easy untroubled life—we cannot have both.

THE TERRIBLE HARDSHIPS AND SUFFERING that have been the result of the industrial system have arisen from the harsh, bitter and ruthless competition in it, which forces the shirker and the less able to the wall. Modern governments, that have become more orientated to the interests of the workers as a result of a fully democratic one-man-one-vote system, have eased the resultant hardships by introducing social security benefits which include unemployment insurance, sick benefits, free medical services and old-age pensions. Yet the basic insecurity of the industrial system remains, and it is this insecurity that is the particular burden of the poor and the hall-mark of the system. 'African socialism' seeks to avoid this insecurity and
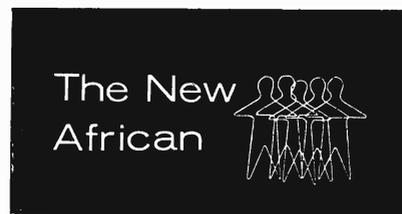
harsh competition by substituting the protection of the State as a super-community. It wishes to retain, both in the legal social system and in the social conscience of the people, the idea of community solidarity and mutual assistance. The problem is how to do this without at the same time destroying those incentives that are essential to a high standard of living.

In fact, it is already very doubtful whether the community concept can withstand the dissolving effects of the modern industrial system. Psychologists who have studied the practical effects of living in an urban area and working in a factory report that after some years the mental outlook has altered considerably from that of the close tribal system, and begins to approximate more and more closely to the outlook of the factory worker in Europe. The concept of mutual assistance begins to lessen and eventually disappear under the harsh realities of factory life.

Nor have the Communist countries been any more successful in handling the same problem. They also have found that incentive differentials are essential if maximum production is to be maintained. Temporarily, the problem can be avoided by a massive appeal to the will of the people in an all-out endeavour to build a new nation, but it cannot be sustained as a permanent basis for work-incentives. It is a harsh commentary on human nature that the only permanently successful work motivation is the reward it brings.

The industrial system has the fault of being too ruthless and individualistic—too cold and unfeeling. African society is so strongly community-minded as to lose much of the incentive towards better work. Is there any way of reconciling the two? ●