

CLASS AND CAPITAL IN AFRICA

Bill Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa*.
Macmillan, 1984, R21,50.

Bill Freund, the American author of this new history of Africa, has had an unusual academic career. He first came to South Africa in the late 1960's to do research for his doctoral thesis for Yale University on the Cape during the Batavian regime. From that thesis came his chapter on the transitional years between Dutch East India Company rule and British rule at the Cape in the well-known textbook edited by Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, *The Shaping of South African Society*. After leaving Yale, he taught in the United States before taking a job at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, northern Nigeria. There he researched the history of labour on the tin-mines on the Jos Plateau, and wrote a much-acclaimed book on that topic. He also taught, more briefly, at the University of Dar es Salaam, which led to an important article in *African Affairs* on recent developments in Tanzania. After this varied African experience, he was appointed to a temporary post in the history department at Harvard, and it was there that he found the time to write this general history of Africa. Invited to the University of Cape Town as a visiting lecturer in 1982, he became excited by the new work being done in South Africa on the country's social and economic history, so when his Harvard appointment came to an end he accepted a research post at the African Studies Institute of the University of the Witwatersrand. In late 1984 he was appointed the first Professor of Economic History at the Durban campus of the University of Natal. That the author of a major new text on African history should have a permanent post at a South African university says something about the state of the academic job market in Britain and America, but also about the relatively healthy state of African studies at our major universities.

Previous histories

There have not been many general histories of Africa by one author, and at most two or three of any distinction. Roland Oliver and John Fage, pioneers in the study of African history, combined to write *A Short History of Africa*, which Penguin Books published in 1962. This was in its day the most-used text of the 1970's, Robin Hallett – whose visit to the University of Cape Town in 1971 stimulated, as with Freund eleven years later, a deep interest and long-term connection with this country – produced the first of his two large volumes on the history of Africa. Vividly written, *Africa to 1875* and then *Africa Since 1875* synthesised the very extensive new work of the 1960s and provided a lot of detail on all parts of the continent. Among the new one-volume general histories to appear in the late 1970s, John Fage's *A History of Africa*, and Philip Curtin et al, *African History* were competent texts, but they summarised the existing scholarship, without providing any new synthesis. All these

'Africanist' texts, Freund claims, tended to celebrate the glories of the pre-colonial African past, which was interpreted mainly in terms of state formation, and to adopt a critical or a dismissive view of colonialism. They ransacked the past for the roots of mid-twentieth century nationalism, and ignored the class dimension of African society. Freund is also as critical of the dependency approach in Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* for its focus on the exploitative relationship Europe imposed on Africa and its tendency to see Africans as passive victims of underdevelopment. Freund boldly set out not merely to write another general one-volume text, but also to offer a new interpretation of modern African history.

His sub-title, 'The Development of African Society since 1800' delimits the scope of his book, though in fact 'The Development of Sub-Saharan African society' would have been more accurate, for North Africa is omitted entirely. There are in fact forty pages or so on Africa before 1800. Robin Hallett mostly adopted a regional approach in his general history. Freund's much briefer 'extended essay', as befits a work of reinterpretation, is more thematic. But while in the first half of his book he attempts to integrate South Africa into his themes – of legitimate commerce, then colonial conquest – for its twentieth century history South Africa gets two separate chapters. The result is that he provides a much more connected account of the recent history of South Africa than of any other region of the continent and that he devotes more space, proportionately, to this country than did previous general histories. The lack of attention to South Africa was certainly a great weakness in Oliver and Fage's Afrocentric *Short History*, though Freund may have gone too far in the other direction. His justification for so great a focus on South Africa is, first, the importance of this country – an importance which seems to be further emphasised by the fact that the second of the two South African chapters is the last in the book. Secondly, he mentions the complexity of the society, the mix of population and the extent of industrialisation.

On the whole his book is very clearly written, and, though it is likely to be most used by undergraduates, it can indeed, as he suggests, be read by any intelligent general reader. There are remarkably few factual inaccuracies in so wide-ranging a work. A number of slips do occur on pages 99 to 102, where the proclamation of British Bechuanaland (1885) is mentioned before the incorporation of Lesotho in the Cape, which took place fourteen years beforehand, and where four dates are incorrectly given (those for the incorporation of Lesotho in the Cape, the British annexation of Zululand, the beginning of the Transvaal revolt, and the Jameson Raid). Other factual

errors – Strijdom misspelt on p. 269, for instance, and P.J. for P.W. Botha – are minor. ‘Homelands’ should surely have been given inverted commas (266 and ff.).

A Materialist Approach.

Oliver and Fage’s general history showed that an Afrocentric history was possible. When they wrote, as Ronald Segal said at the time in his editorial foreword, ‘the study of African history has hardly begun.’ A decade later, Robin Hallett could show that a vast amount had been learned about the African past. Freund is not concerned to show that Africa has a past that can be written about – there is no longer need for that – but rather to explain the course of African development. Such detail as he has space to provide is used in support of the arguments he wishes to make about Africa’s past. He sets out his approach clearly in his Introduction. His purpose, he states, is to survey the making of contemporary Africa from a materialist perspective. Many historians of Africa have investigated particular problems from such a perspective in recent years, but Freund is the first western scholar to attempt a materialist history of Africa. What kind of materialist is he, and how successful is his materialist perspective?

His first page proclaims his belief that ‘the web of social and economic relations that emerges from human satisfaction of material needs forms the core of historical development’ (xi), and that class struggle determines the form of history. So the relationship between capitalism and colonialism, and the evolution of classes, become the central themes of African history. The anti-colonial thrust of African nationalism is, for example, downplayed, its class bases highlighted. Generally, the importance of material forces, of capital penetration, and of class, is asserted.

Class was certainly a major lacuna in the approach of the Africanist and other scholars of the first generation of African history. (Though it was by no means altogether left out of account, and sometimes Freund merely uses ‘ruling class’ where Hallett, for example, used ‘ruler’ or ‘rulers’.) Freund contributes an especially brilliant discussion of the emergence of new classes in the colonial period – peasants, workers, bureaucrats – and in general his account of class formation over time is highly stimulating. But there are problems with his approach, and some discrepancies between what he set out to do and what he has actually accomplished. Despite his proclaimed intention not to follow Rodney’s focus on Europe’s relations with Africa, but rather to stress formation in Africa, the early chapters of his book in fact devote more attention to the former than to the latter. In his chapter on pre-nineteenth century developments, Freund says more about state formation, and much less about economic change, than one would expect. He continues with relatively lengthy sections on the Portuguese in Africa and on the Atlantic slave trade, while important internal developments are ignored, even for the post-1800 period. Thus, the Fulani jihads, or say the impact of the Mfecane west of the Drakensberg, receive barely a mention. Usman dan Fodio appears only within the context of a rising in northern Nigeria which took place a century after the famous jihad leading to the formation of the Sokoto caliphate (155). From his book one will learn very little about the internal dynamics of the caliphate, or of any nineteenth century African society. The importance he attaches to the role of capital, mercantile and industrial, has resulted

in his book appearing much more Eurocentric than the earlier general histories. The whites – whether early European traders in west Africa or politicians in South Africa – receive, relatively, a lot of attention. Freund’s paragraph on the Anglo-Boer war (103), to take just one minor example, makes no mention of African participation, the subject of much recent research.

Freund is a subtle historian, rightly critical of the way abstractions such as modes of production have been used without due regard for the complexities of the past. Nor is he a crude economic reductionist. He is sensitive to the importance of culture and religion, and to the complex interplay of a variety of influences on major historical processes. Yet there remains a difference between the materialist, for whom there is no doubt what is ultimately determinant, and the historian of a more pluralist persuasion, for whom there is no such certainty. It is to be hoped that Freund’s text will help produce a fruitful debate – already in progress for South African history – about the relative importance of race and class in Africa. My own view would be that Freund is too dismissive both of white racism and black anti-colonialism, too ready to attribute everything either to the interests of capital – as in the case of the entire late nineteenth century conquest, for example – or to the class struggle. (And he is too ready to see antagonism – **struggle** is a too frequently used term – in class relationships.) The very concept of class is itself a slippery one, as shown by his own use of the term in different senses (sometimes it is merely a group of office-holders, such as the class of bureaucrats mentioned on p. 150). Freund has to admit that little work has been done on classes in pre-colonial Africa (36), that there are problems about seeing distinct classes among a socially exclusive peasantry (145), and that it is extremely difficult to say what classes have existed in the post-colonial period (239ff). No reader of this book can finish it without accepting the importance of class in African history. But a lot more work obviously needs to be done to elucidate the changing meaning of class, and when it has been the question will remain whether class deserves as decisive and determining an emphasis as Freund gives it in this book.

As is often the case with someone presenting a new perspective, Freund tends to be too critical of his predecessors, especially the Africanists, all of whom sometimes seem to stand accused of what only the most extreme ever suggested (that conquest and foreign rule amounted to systematic plunder, for example, or that there were no classes in colonial Africa). Ecological and environmental factors, one might think, should have been given more attention beyond a couple of pages on the drought of the early 1970s. On the themes he does explore, however – and no one can deny that they are among the most important in African history – Freund undoubtedly presents the best general account in print. Even where he is in fact less novel than he suggests he is, he remains an admirable synthesiser, and he is always interesting. His book concludes with a bibliographic essay almost fifty pages long, in which he comments perceptively on an amazingly wide range of sources. In short, his book is both a challenging and an extremely useful text, which deserves to be widely read. □