



THE NON-POLITICS OF “AFRICAN POLITICS”

by Francis Antonie

If the province of political science is the study of power, and if power is in the last instance ultimately concerned with ‘who gets what when and how’, then it follows that the questions as to who got what from whom when and how are questions of a political nature, the answers to which are to be found within the context of political activity — which is also one way of attempting to rescue “Politics” from either the obscurities of overdetermination or the relegation to “mere superstructure”.

This “re-assertion” of the State as a central category of political analysis is not without its own attendant problems. The State could so very easily become the only object of analysis so that a structural super-determinism emerges which, as Ralph Miliband points out, makes impossible “a truly realistic consideration of the relationship between the State and the “system” — and it is this **relationship** between the State and the “system” (however one eventually defines this term) which poses the greatest problems. It is within the context of these problems and questions that we should attempt to evaluate African politics.

“African Politics”¹ by Pierre Francois Gonidec (Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) is a work which purports to provide “the first comprehensive view of the subject (of politics) for the whole of Africa . . .” by attempting to analyse firstly

the relationship between the (African) State and social formation and secondly the relationship between African States and Western capitalism. But to attempt, in 353 pages, to comprehend, explain and theorize African politics along the lines outlined is clearly an ambitious undertaking; one may also question the wisdom of an undertaking which would, in a general survey, consider the States of North Africa and the sub-Sahara, States which are English-speaking, French-speaking, capitalist, socialist, “true socialist” or merely racist.

The work contains a wealth of information, and there is a great deal of emphasis placed on formal documents (such as constitutions and charters); but the sheer weight of dates, articles, clauses and sub-clauses often detracts from the elucidation and exposition of the central theme of the work, viz. the relationship between capitalism and Africa — and even in this regard, a tortuous structuralism pervades the argument.

Unfortunately Gonidec’s adherence to an Orthodoxy (all the time changing according to the latest fashions of French thought) leads him to invest in appearance a reality all of its own, as causes, phenomena, events are conveniently “overdetermined”. This is not to say that no attempt is made by Gonidec to understand the relationship between

the State and political events or, indeed, between the State and capitalism, but the sheer weight of so much overdetermination does not leave much room for a (theoretical) last lonely instance of economics. When analysis is thus sacrificed to ideology we are still in the night in which all cows are black . . .

"African Politics" is divided into four parts, with an emphasis largely, but not exclusively on the francophone States.

The first two parts deal with "Political Forces" and "Political Ideologies", and it is here that Gonidec fails to come to grips with his material. The problem is one of conceptualization, especially in the case of "social class", and in the conflation of the category "petit-bourgeois" with "bourgeois" (Here, Poulantzas's work would have been of great value, but the latter is never referred to). The problem is not that these fractions do not exist, but that Gonidec's typology of African political forces and classes is inadequate. Moreover his failure to explain and explore the relationship between the national bourgeoisie and the foreign bourgeoisie — Samir Amin's "major absent figure" — is a serious omission. Gonidec rightly points out that the danger exists of enclosing the Third World "in a sort of intellectual ghetto" — but his response is to take sociology to task "for its insufficiently universal and universalizing nature". In the process of stretching the original (marxian) categories they cease to be either analytical or normative in their applicability or content.

Part III deals with "Political Structures". Here, the analysis proceeds not from the point of view of the constitutional lawyer but is more concerned with an attempt to determine to what extent the officially proclaimed ideologies correspond with the political realities of life in contemporary African States. This section is more successful than the preceding two sections in that Gonidec's wealth of information is here used to illustrate and not to stifle his argument — that the gap between political practice and ideology is great.

Part IV which deal with "Political Action" attempts to evaluate African States within the context of their achievements, specifically in terms of the twin but related goals of genuine development and real independence. The section dealing with Africa's international relations is perhaps the most significant in the book, and here Gonidec begins to integrate some of the more important aspects of African Politics which he had alluded to. But, as before, his discussion never substantially departs from the level of ideology to the level of rigorous analysis and is often plagued by vague generalizations.

But there remains in Gonidec's work a major contradiction: his overtly ideological stand fails to uncover anything more than a casual relationship between the State and capitalism. While all the time arguing on behalf of a structural interpretation, he is in the end defeated by straightforward economic determination which relegates Politics to mere superstructure. The State is, for Gonidec, in the end, the captive handmaiden of capitalism.

The irony of it all is that Gonidec quotes, with apparent approval, Engels' letter to Bloch in which Engels argues on behalf of a dialectical understanding of the relationship between base and superstructure — that while the economic situation is the *basis*, the "various elements of the superstructure, the political forms of the class struggle and its consequences, the constitutions established by the victorious class . . . the forms of law . . . also have an effect on the course of historic struggles, and in many cases, predominantly determine their form. There is action and reaction among all these factors."

The error then lies ultimately in a structural interpretation of society which must of necessity be static. Perhaps the final word in this regard should be left to Engels: "What all these gentlemen lack is dialectic."

1 First reviewed for "African Studies" □

THE STRUGGLE FOR ZIMBABWE — THE CHIMURENGA WAR

by David Martin and Phyllis Johnson

Reviewed by André du Pisani
Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1981.

In this eminently readable account of pre-independent Rhodesia, the focus falls principally on the decisive phase of the second Chimurenga* or war of resistance, from December 1972 to April 1980 when victory was finally won at the elections by ZANU. The book is mainly a his-

tory of ZANU and its military wing ZANLA, who did the bulk of the fighting during the final decisive seven years. Through the use of interviews and official party documents, especially documents of ZANU, the reader gets a partisan but graphic portrayal of a dehumanising war.