

Book Review: *Which Way Africa? The Search for a New Society*, by Basil Davidson. Third Edition. London: Penguin African Library, 1971.

Which Way Africa? is the best introduction to the problems and policies of contemporary Africa I know of. One has come to expect deep knowledge, balanced judgment and disciplined prose from Basil Davidson, and even the complexity of this subject does not strain his talents. This is also a very radical book. Its radicalism is not so much in its ideology, although Davidson does advocate a "socialist solution" to Africa's problems. It is radical more in the sense that that word has when one speaks of thousands of young Americans being "radicalized" by a personal confrontation with dehumanized force. Their radicalism is not found essentially in a new ideology either, but in a new consciousness about the world around them and a deeply personal commitment to change the priorities of that world. It is in this latter sense that *Which Way Africa?* is radical: it is intended to "blow one's mind," to alter one's consciousness about Africa, and the book's success lies in the sense of commitment one gains from reading it.

Since Davidson assumes little of his reader except a willingness to learn, the usual Western biases, and reasonable intelligence, he spends the first half of his book carefully reeducating the reader to an Africanist viewpoint about African history and culture. He sketches a useful analysis of the colonial era ("...serious and continuous dismantlement of the pattern and structure of social life.") and the rise of political and cultural nationalism. The second half of the book discusses Africans' attempts to regain control over their own destinies. The "political kingdom" came first, but Davidson argues that nationalist movements were the excuse rather than the reason independence was granted. The "real colonial crisis," he says, was, in general, "acute and worsening poverty" which would "have erupted, if the colonial system had continued, into a manifest breakdown of the whole pattern of rule." Davidson's supporting arguments are not convincing since his evidence is drawn primarily from areas of southern Africa which have not yet decolonized, nor has his interpretation found much acceptance by other scholars. In all fairness, however, it must be stated that little solid research has yet been done on the economic motives for decolonization.

These criticisms do not weaken the thesis of the rest of the book: that the challenge of independent Africa was not only to provide stable, responsive government in African hands, but to transform the social and economic situation

which had evolved under colonial rule, in other words, to build a new society. The political problems of independence are far from solved, but one approach which has had a measure of success has combined a neutralist foreign policy with a more or less democratic one-party state. But for independence to be really meaningful, it soon became apparent that economic and social changes would have to be made to remedy the poverty, both personal and national, in which these new nations found themselves. Davidson argues that two alternatives were open to them: the capitalist (or middle class) solution, which would require a "long period of close economic tutelage to the wealthy countries of the Western world" (neo-colonialism) and the growth of an exploitative middle class elite, very susceptible to corruption and self-seeking ends (neo-colonialism in native dress); or the socialist solution, which, however diverse its formulation in Africa, would seek to build a cooperative (not exploitative) and egalitarian society.

For this third edition Davidson has brought his narrative up to date, though without changing the main lines of his analysis. He has added a new chapter on the growing danger of "neo-imperialism" by South Africa against the rest of the continent.

Socialism, Davidson argues, is the only alternative to Africa's living under economic colonialism. This appears to be overstated. In practice there is often little difference between the policies of "capitalist" and "socialist" countries in Africa, if only because both must, of necessity, seek foreign investment capital and have considerable state direction of the national economy. For example, Davidson quotes with approval a 1962 *Atlantic Monthly* article which described the essential difference between "socialist" Ghana and "capitalist" Nigeria as one of "atmosphere" not policy. Yet this atmospheric difference is not ephemeral, he argues, because the choice of socialism is "an absolute element" in changing African nations:

By making a clear choice in favor or a radical reconstruction of society -- one that could draw the vast majority of people into active and conscious participation -- the 'committed countries' could show a stability and solidarity which their neighbours seldom shared...

"Socialism" as an ideology thus had a clear advantage, in its ability to commit the population to a reconstruction of society, over "capitalism", which was not a counter-ideology but in fact the absence of any ideology. Yet sometimes Davidson's use of "socialism" sounds more like an economic system than an

ideology and this breadth of the definition can lead to confusion and ambiguity. Thus the Nigerian *coups* of 1966 are described as a failure of the "capitalist choice", which is perfectly true if by that is meant a failure to develop a set of national goals and leaders capable of overcoming its great internal divisions and curbing the all too human greed for power and wealth. Yet it was not in any clear way a failure of a "capitalist" economic system, a fact which Davidson seems to recognize in seeing cause for hope in Nigeria's new constitution which may change political structures but does nothing to change economic ones.

The key to the "socialist solution" appears to be distributing the wealth of a nation to all its citizens without giving the lion's share to an elite middle class. Julius Nyerere (the hero of Davidson's book) has been able to do this in continental Tanzania, but he started with a country whose resources were few and whose citizens were relatively equal already. Nigeria, with its tremendous resources and a long history of economic and social inequality, has not so much made a choice for a "middle class solution" as simply followed a long established pattern of development. This has brought great problems, but it is hard to imagine how socialism might have been adopted except after a classic Marxist process of gradual evolution out of a capitalist system.

Is the choice really socialism or neo-colonialism? Even Davidson has his doubts when he comes to consider the case of Guinea, which has concluded a major bauxite mining agreement with American firms without opting for either a privileged middle class or a fully "socialist" solution. Indeed, one of the few disappointments of this new edition is its failure to discuss the reasons for the limited successes of socialism in Africa (outside of Tanzania).

David A. Northrup

* * * * *

DAVID NORTHRUP, *formerly an instructor at Tuskegee Institute, is a doctoral candidate in African History at UCLA. His experience in Africa has included two years as a secondary school teacher in Nigeria. He is the author of an article on "The Growth of Trade among the Igbo before 1800," forthcoming in the Journal of African History.*