

BOOK REVIEW: *The Emergent African Urban Proletariat*, by Peter C. W. Gutkind, Montreal: Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University; Occasional Paper no. 8, 1974. 79 + vii pp. \$2.00 (Developing countries: \$1.25).

For over twenty-five years now, Peter Gutkind has generously contributed to the field of African urban sociology. A pioneer in this field, he has, through his many writings,¹ endeavored to describe the condition of what Fanon called "The Wretched of the Earth".² Indeed, in the editor's words, "his preoccupation has remained the plight of the poor, the oppressed peoples of the world" (p. i). In many respects, this new monograph published under the auspices of McGill University's Centre for Developing-Area Studies pursues this original concern. This work is however, more ambitious in its methodology, scope and purpose than any of his previous works: it belongs to the Marxist tradition of the study of a political economy and it initiates what the author believes to be "a creative and insightful approach to the labour history of Africa" (p. v).

Gutkind centers his analysis of the African labor history during the colonial period around two main questions: how did the African "working class" see itself during the period 1910-1950? And how did the European administrations and employers see the "working class"? Drawing examples essentially from the colonial history of Nigeria and Kenya, the author shows the progressive emergence, among the urban "working class" of a consciousness at two levels: first, at a level that he calls a "political consciousness", when the workers' awareness of their situation of dependency, exploitation, oppression and alienation increases within the colonial society. Such political consciousness can take two forms. It can be either "reactive", in the sense of "short term efforts to deal with particular and especially local, circumstances" (pp. 48-49) or "apocalyptic", namely "the kind of political consciousness which can be transformed into radical and revolutionary ideology and action" (p. 49). The second type of consciousness is the "proletarian" or "working class consciousness", i.e. the emergence of a class consciousness in the Marxist sense of the term, in which the urban workers realize that their condition cannot be explained in terms of fatal destiny linked with supernatural forces, but can rather be understood in terms of the economic and political power of other classes within the colonial society. Such is, in brief, the essence of Gutkind's argument, an argument which I find open to a variety of criticisms, both methodological and substantive.

With respect to the methodology, Gutkind's *Emergent...*

the meaning of such concepts as "workers" and "peasants" as applied to the African situation.⁸

Although such an analytical distinction is made difficult by the complexities of situations arising out of the rural-to-urban migration -- a problem that Gutkind is careful to point out -- it is still necessary to conduct research on African social stratification. In this respect, the four sub-divisions of the working class in Africa offered by V. L. Allen, if not wholly satisfactory, offer a useful starting point for further research. Allen distinguishes between (1) those who sell their labor power, permanently or not; (2) those who use their own and their families' labor power to product their livelihood from the land; (3) the traders; and (4) the "lumpenproletariat".⁹

It is difficult to see a clear analytical distinction between the "proletariat" and the "lumpenproletariat" in Gutkind's work. If one were to believe Fanon, the proletariat constitutes a privileged class in the colonial society:

*... in the colonial territories the proletariat is the nucleus of the colonized population which has been most pampered by the colonial regime. The embryonic proletariat of the towns is in a comparatively privileged position.*¹⁰

Some authors have even gone as far as calling this class a "labor aristocracy", apparently with some justification:

*These workers enjoy incomes three or more times higher than those of unskilled laborers and, together with the elites and sub-elites in bureaucratic employment in the civil service and expatriate concerns, constitute what we call the labor aristocracy of tropical Africa.*¹¹

Thus, to the extent that the urban proletariat can be viewed as being part of the elite, one may not agree with Gutkind that "The struggle which lies ahead might well be between the urban workers and the 'lumpenproletariat' rather than between these two groups and the elite" (p. 58). What would be likely to happen is that the lumpenproletariat would confront the elite as a whole, the latter including the bureaucratic elite, the merchant bourgeoisie and the working class which, "because of the privileged place which (it) holds in the colonial system..."¹²

A further problem arises with the author's distinction between "political consciousness" and "proletarian consciousness". We are told that "Political consciousness is both an individual

Proletariat uncritically accepts the universality of the Marxist approach. Admittedly, the Marxist approach can yield fruitful results when applied in seeking an understanding of the concept of "mode of production" and "social formation"³ as the basis of class analysis; and Gutkind supplements the approach in defining the dominant characteristics of a mode of production which would be specific to traditional African societies, as well as to the colonial situation itself. But the work makes no reference to either an "African"⁴ or "colonial"⁵ mode of production. To say that

The Marxian analysis of the colonial state is based on the model of class struggle in which two classes, the exploited and the exploiters, are in fundamental opposition to each other (p. 31)

is not very explicit, to say the least. Furthermore, Gutkind's class analysis does not take into account pre-colonial social formations in Africa, which are of some relevance to an understanding of social stratification in the colonial society. This he fails to do despite a statement of purpose suggesting that he would: "The emergence... of an African urban proletariat must be set in an historical context taking into account the pre-colonial period" (p. 56).

The monograph should have been much more explicit than it is in the use of the concept of social class. For, as Meillassoux points out,

The concept of social class is a valid instrument of analysis, given, firstly, that the social evolution of dependent countries is considered as part of the broader social system constituted by the economic and political sphere of influence of the dominant foreign power, and, secondly, that a distinction is made between classes proper and other dependent social elements which are the outgrowths of classes.⁶

It is even more difficult to accept the author's generalized concept of "working class" that he uses to characterize both peasants and urban workers. Even though one could agree to some extent that "it is both sensible and logical to use the term "working class" to describe workers and peasants in societies which are satellites to metropolitan capitalist ones",⁷ it is also true that the two concepts refer to clearly distinct social categories. Defining them in terms of common dependence and exploitation, as Gutkind does, is not very useful analytically, and only adds to the existing confusion and controversy over

and a collective manifestation of the exploited; proletarian consciousness is a consciousness of a working class whether they be peasants or urban workers" (p. 1). Except for the author's argument that the proletarian consciousness is a consequence of increased political and economic exploitation by the colonial power, it is difficult to see the rationale for the distinction between the two since

The extent and intensity of political consciousness among African workers during the period of colonialism was nurtured by dependency, exploitation, and oppression in which the workers found themselves (p. 50).

Similarly, while the distinction between "reactive" and "apocalyptic" political consciousness seems to be justified to some extent, it is not clear at which point in time the passage from one to the other is made, and on which class falls the responsibility of transforming the apocalyptic political consciousness "into radical and revolutionary ideology and action" (p. 49).

Probably one of the most serious weaknesses of this monograph is that it attempts to generalize on the basis of very scanty information, both quantitatively and spatially. The "absence of much needed raw data" is acknowledged by the author in his preface (p. vi). Yet this does not prevent him from providing us throughout the essay with a variety of generalizations which either state the obvious

In historical terms, the African labour force... has always been totally divorced from any control... over the use of national resources, the means of production and the distribution of the surplus created (pp. 19-20)

or else sound as pure rethoric

The history of colonialism... is largely a history of controlling and containing the very class consciousness which all too many observers insisted was lacking in the African labour force (p. 37).

The geographical basis for generalizations is also questionable. Clearly, the author's references are essentially with regard to two areas (one is tempted to say: "two cities") the author is most familiar with, namely Nigeria (Lagos) and Kenya (Nairobi). Hardly any consideration is given to other areas in Africa, and the Francophone countries in particular are almost

totally ignored, except for some passing references to Ousemane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* (pp. 28, 48, 51, and 66). Moreover, the author's heavy reliance on secondary material (see pp. 37-53) does not succeed in making up for the lack of primary sources which would be vital to the development of a sounder analysis.

In general, however, the work leaves little doubt that Gutkind is a careful author, aware of the limitations and deficiencies of his approach. As an anthropologist, he confesses that he lacks "the skills of the historian, the political scientist or the economist" (p. v). He is also at pains to explain that his essay should be viewed merely as a first step, as an experiment designed "to act somewhat as a catalyst in the hope that (it) might redirect our thinking about Africa's labour history" (p. vii). There is no doubt that its provocative nature should encourage a useful and serious academic debate which seems necessary before such work is able "to give inspiration to African workers struggling for opportunity and equality in a world unlikely to offer either" (p. vii). If only for this reason, and also because of the fact that it delves into an area still largely ignored by scholarly research, that of colonial African labor history, this essay is worthwhile reading.

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Footnotes

1. See for instance: "The energy of despair: Social organization of the unemployed in two African Cities: Lagos and Nairobi: A preliminary account", *Civilizations*, XVII, 3 (1967), pp. 186-214; XVII, 4 (1967), pp. 380-405; and: "The Poor in Urban Africa: A Prologue to Modernization, Conflict, and the Unfinished Revolution"; in W. Bloomerg, Jr. and H. J. Schmandt (eds.): *Power, Poverty and Urban Policy*, (Beverly Hills, California, 1968), pp. 355-96.
2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York, 1968).
3. On these concepts, see: Samir Amin, "Modes of Production and Social Formations", *Ufahamu*, IV, 3 (Winter 1974), pp. 57-85.

4. On the African mode of production, see for instance: Jean Suret-Canale: "Les Sociétés Traditionnelles en Afrique Tropicale et le Concept de Mode de Production Asiatique", *La Pensée*, 117 (1964), pp. 21-42; Catherine Coquere-Vidrovitch: "Recherches sur un Mode de Production Africain", *La Pensée*, 144 (April 1969), pp. 61-78.
5. On the colonial mode of production, see Pierre P. Rey: *Colonialisme, neo-colonialisme et transition au capitalisme*, (Paris, 1971), pp. 342-83.
6. Claude Meillassoux: "A Class Analysis of the Bureaucratic Process in Mali", *The Journal of Development Studies*, VI, 2 (January 1970), p. 97.
7. V. L. Allen: "The Meaning of the Working Class in Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, X, 2 (July 1972), p. 184.
8. See for instance V. L. Allen, *op. cit.*, and L. A. Fallers: "Are African Cultivators to be called 'Peasants'?", *Current Anthropology*, II, 2 (April 1961), pp. 108-110.
9. V. L. Allen, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-8.
10. Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 108.
11. Giovanni Arrighi & John S. Saul: "Socialism and Economic Development in Tropical Africa"; in G. Arrighi & J. S. Saul: *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*, (New York, 1973), pp. 18-9.
12. Fanon, *op. cit.*, p. 109.