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Liberal Democracy in Africa

ROBERT FATTON, JR.

Richard Sklar in his presidential address to the twenty-sixth meeting of the American African Studies Association has contended that "developmental dictatorships" have failed rather miserably in the economic and political tasks that they had set for themselves. Instead of inducing unity and harmony they generated ethnic favoritism and divisions; instead of ushering in social equality they led to corruption and injustices; instead of promoting economic development they fostered material stagnation and decline; and instead of establishing viable political orders they engendered divisive tendencies, military coups, and civil wars. The dismal performance of developmental dictatorships signals in Sklar's view that the absence of democracy and accountability in African politics can no longer be defended on pragmatic or moral grounds. And indeed, if they were given the choice, African men and women would prefer the vicissitudes, doubts, and imperfections of democracy to the corrupting and paralyzing brutality of dictatorships. The development of democratic mechanisms of accountability and representation is the means with which Africa can begin to arrest its descent into hell and squalor.¹

The democratic project or the process of redemocratizing African politics is thus becoming the hegemonic issue in African studies,² not only because of a the-

¹ Richard L. Sklar, "Democracy in Africa," *African Studies Review* 26 (September/December 1983): 11-24.

² Ibid. See also Patrick Chabal, ed., *Political Domination in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Michael Crowder, "Whose Dream was it Anyway? Twenty-Five Years of African Independence," *African Affairs* 86 (January 1987): 7-24; Zaki Ergas, "In Search of Development: Some Directions for Further Investigation," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 24 (June 1986): 303-333; Robert Fatton Jr., *The Making of a Liberal Democracy: Senegal's Passive Revolution, 1975-1985* (Boulder,

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oretical and moral search for an alternative to the existing authoritarian predicament, but also because there are indications that peasants, workers, and intellectuals of Africa are no longer prepared to put up with being the victims of despotic regimes. These people are exiting the public realm and creating new private spaces in which they hope to construct their own independent and parallel systems of survival. Such exit symbolizes their rejection of existing forms of governance and their desire for a new deal embedded in more democratic structures of accountability.³ The purpose of this article is to decipher how and why such structures can emerge from authoritarianism and what are their material, social, and political limitations.

The emergence of modern authoritarianism in Africa stems from a series of interrelated phenomena rooted in the burdensome and contradictory colonial legacy, the intense and Hobbesian process of class formation, and the severe crisis and dislocation of the structures of production. The weight of culture and history, the struggle for wealth and privilege, and the vicissitudes of scarcity and poverty have all generated despotic forms of personal rule.⁴ These despotic forms, however, are difficult to sustain; they are showing signs of increasing bureaucratic incompetence, material corruption, and political vulnerability. This is not to say that their collapse is inevitable or conducive to more accountable and democratic methods of representation. On the contrary, such a collapse might contribute to a "war of all against all," a battlefield where everyone's individual private interest confronts everyone else's and where chaos, civil strife, and insecurity become a hellish way of life. Paradoxically, this very possibility might facilitate transitions to "uncertain" democracies, democracies "with tears and reservations."⁵ Thus, the manifest failures of authoritarianism and the fears of a further descent into hell might well create opportunities for more egalitarian, popular, and representative systems of governance. How these opportunities come into being, whether they can be seized, and whether they constitute a strong foundation for the full flourishing of democracy are the major questions this article seeks to answer.

Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987); Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Barry Munslow, "Why Has the Westminster Model Failed in Africa?" *Parliamentary Affairs* 36 (Spring 1983): 218-228; Dov Ronen, ed., *Democracy and Pluralism in Africa* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1986); Richard Sandbrook, *The Politics of Africa's Stagnation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

³ Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan, eds., *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988).

⁴ Jean François Bayart, *L'Etat Au Cameroun* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1985); Thomas M. Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Jackson and Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa*.

⁵ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions From Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions About Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Sklar, "Democracy in Africa."

THE LEGACY OF HISTORY AND THE DISINTEGRATION
OF THE COLONIAL-INSPIRED MODEL

Africa inherited liberal democracy in its British, French, or Belgian version from the accelerated and panicky processes of rapid decolonization. It was only in the last decade of colonialism, when independence became a certainty, that the imperialist powers gradually began to institute democratic reforms in what had hitherto been structures of exploitation, despotism, and degradation.⁶ As Michael Crowder has argued:

. . . the colonial state was conceived in violence rather than by negotiation. This violence was often quite out of proportion to the task in hand, with burnings of villages, destruction of crops, killing of women and children, and the execution of leaders. . . . The colonial state was not only conceived in violence, but it was maintained by the free use of it. Any form of resistance was visited by punitive expeditions that were often quite unrestrained by any of the norms of warfare in Europe.⁷

The transition from colonial despotism to liberal democracy was expedited in a few years without any fundamental transformation in the economic, cultural, or bureaucratic domains. The transition was in fact reluctant, repressive, and opportunistic. In addition, African leaders never fully accepted the precepts of the European political model, few were enthusiastic about it, and most tolerated it as means to a different end. The African commitment to liberal democracy was shaky, hesitant, and ultimately short-lived.

Such doubts about the viability of liberal democracy reflected not only a lack of commitment to imported European political systems, they were also grounded in the material matrix of African societies. Africa lacked those objective criteria that have historically been associated with the rise of bourgeois forms of representation elsewhere. Because of its colonial legacy and its peripheral-dependent nature, African capitalism has failed to generate the development of both a hegemonic bourgeoisie and a strong proletariat—the two classes whose conflicts and confrontations are critical in striking the political compromises and bargains necessary to the establishment of liberal democracy.⁸ The absence of these confrontations and conflicts has prevented the growth of liberalism with its ideological and legal emphasis on individual rights, civil liberties, and freedom of association. In other words, the nascent African bourgeoisies have lacked the hegemony that makes possible liberal democracy and the subordinate integration of the dominated classes into the system of bourgeois representation.⁹

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

⁷ Crowder, "Whose Dream Was it Anyway?" 11–12.

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 57–60; Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: Verso Edition, 1978), 87–88.

⁹ Robert Fatton Jr., "Bringing the Ruling Class Back In: Class, State, and Hegemony in Africa," *Comparative Politics* 20 (April 1988): 253–264; Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 206–276.

Not surprisingly, the European model that Africans inherited on independence day disintegrated rapidly and without much popular opposition. The superimposition of alien forms of governmental accountability on an environment that had hitherto been embedded in violence, racism, and repression, and that had produced neither an indigenous bourgeoisie nor a large proletariat, could only lead to political failures and catastrophes. The liberal “gift” of an aging, decadent, and departing imperialism could not erase the more profound and pervasive legacy of decades of colonial domination, coercion, and degradation. During these decades Africans had been “infantilized”; stigmatized by their color; and with no recognizable rights, they had become powerless units of labor who had been deprived of the basic attributes of adult social beings.¹⁰

This infantilization of Africans facilitated the imposition of the colonial dictatorships and contributed to the relative hegemony of a submissive culture of obedience and compliance to authority. There was little room for resistance, challenge, and revolt, and even less for democratic accountability. Africans were treated as children who had yet to acquire the necessary maturity required for considered judgment and political decision making. They were socially dead and removed from history. As Albert Memmi put it:

The colonized . . . feels neither responsible nor guilty nor skeptical, for he is out of the game. He is in no way a subject of history any more. Of course, he carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object. He has forgotten how to participate actively in history and no longer even asks to do so. No matter how briefly colonization may have lasted, all memory of freedom seems distant; he forgets what it costs or else he no longer dares to pay the price for it.¹¹

Frightened, Africans were inclined to accept their situation; the sense of inevitability had conquered their hearts and minds;¹² and they were paralyzed and mesmerized by the might of their oppressors. It was only when this sense of inevitability stopped informing their historical conduct that African men and women began to articulate the idea of decolonization and emancipation. The emancipation of African consciousness, however, was a slow and gradual process that crystallized in the 1950s; it stemmed from the opportunistic convergence of interests between the small petty-bourgeois elite and the masses. The elite knew that its aspirations for winning national power had little chance of materializing without the support of the masses. Colonial authorities would not slacken their will to maintain control and would not concede without an upsurge of popular demands. The masses, on the other hand, knew that their hopes for a better social deal depended on the elite’s capacity to articulate their grievances and organize their struggles.¹³

¹⁰ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.

¹¹ Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 92–93.

¹² Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1978).

¹³ Basil Davidson, *Let Freedom Come* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 227–228.

The historical bloc that resulted from this opportunistic convergence of interests between the petty-bourgeoisie and the masses was built of the common aspiration to end colonialism and alien rule; but it was also fragmented by diverging material goals and conflicting ethnic loyalties. The bridge linking the petty-bourgeoisie and the masses across the wide social and political gap separating them “remained always liable to collapse into mutual distrust or worse.”¹⁴ This, however, was inevitable; how could the petty-bourgeoisie bent on becoming a national bourgeoisie reconcile its own class project with that of the popular sectors? How could one imagine the metamorphosis of the petty-bourgeoisie into a national bourgeoisie without the coercions, corruptions, and despoilments of subordinate classes that have historically characterized the phase of “primitive accumulation”? How could one expect the persistence of foreign forms of bourgeois representation when there was no bourgeoisie, no liberalism, and when there was only a heritage of political authoritarianism and utter social neglect of the popular sectors? Things were indeed bound to fall apart.

Thus the colonial legacy confronted Africa with a fundamental contradiction between the imperatives of democracy and the imperatives of building bourgeoisies. It was a contradiction that Africans failed to resolve. What emerged from the debris of the parliamentary model were varied forms of personal rule that achieved varied degrees of successes with varied degrees of coercion. Where there was success, however, it was precarious, temporary, and crippled by its class and ethnic limitations; where there was failure, it was egregious, massive, and tragic. Where there remained civil liberties, they were fragile, vulnerable, and under constant threat of sudden death; where despotism prevailed, it was cruel, murderous, and incompetent.¹⁵

CLASS, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND PATRIMONIAL RULE

The rapid disintegration of the inherited parliamentary model generated the rise of personal rule shaped by the idiosyncrasies of the ruler and his entourage rather than by effective political institutions and regulations. As Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg have emphasized:

Personal rule is a system of relations linking rulers not with the “public” or even with the ruled (at least not directly), but with patrons, associates, clients, supporters, and rivals, who constitute the “system.” If personal rulers are restrained, it is by the limits of their personal authority and power and by the authority and power of patrons, associates, clients, supporters, and — of course — rivals. The system is “structured,” so to speak, not by institutions, but by the politicians themselves. In general, when rulers are related to the ruled, it is indirectly by patron-client means.¹⁶

The reality of personal rule and patron-client relationships should not, however,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁵ Jackson and Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

obscure the processes of class formation and class closure that envelope such rule and relationships.¹⁷

Patron-client relationships reflect great inequalities of exchange and thoroughly lopsided structures of power, and they entail bonds of coercive dependence rather than ties of genuine reciprocity. Coercive dependence, however, does not entail or necessarily call forth the consciousness of suffering or exploitation or a sense of moral outrage. Patron-client relationships contribute to the routinization and legitimation of coercive dependence by projecting a form of benevolent paternalism; they facilitate the establishment of the moral authority of obedience and stifle the sense of injustice. They tend to freeze the emergence of class conflict and enshrine as natural the existing hierarchy of domination and subordination. Coercive dependence has yet to generate massive popular resistance, but it is an objective reality.

This objective reality reflects the unequal transfer of commercial resources from clients to patrons: a significant portion of the clients' economic surplus is channeled to the patrons.¹⁸ Patron-client relationships are, therefore, processes of resource extraction and capital accumulation. In this sense, their economic structures and paternalistic ethos strengthen and enhance the material and political power of the patrons. They simultaneously disorganize and individualize the resistance and struggles of the clientele against its bonds of coercive dependence. Hence, patron-client relationships contribute to the transformation of patron authority into class authority, and they repress the collective challenge of subaltern classes. As such, they are means of political control and financial aggrandizement.

Patronage and clientelism transform political domination into a type of hierarchic paternalism that masks the coercive bonds of exploitation structuring the relationships between ruling and subordinate classes. It is as if class conflicts were nonexistent. This is so because patron-client relationships prevent the political organization of subordinate classes as classes by maintaining and accentuating their isolation and individualization. On the other hand, they unify the dominant classes by linking them to a framework of cooperation closely associated to the state. In this sense, patron-client relationships integrate the patrons into and exclude the clients from the centers of national power. Clients are personally dependent upon members of the dominant classes for their very survival; they receive petty favors for obedience and in the process are ultimately isolated from their own wider class as atomistic individuals who defer to local displays of wealth and power. Thus, patron-client relationships undermine solidarity among the oppressed by ligating them as individuals to their oppressors; clients are hard put to identify with each other as a class and tend to behave as individuals incapable of cohering their grievances into collective resistance.

¹⁷ Robert Fatton Jr., "Clientelism and Patronage in Senegal," *The African Studies Review* 29 (December 1986): 61–78.

¹⁸ Laura Guasti, "Peru: Clientelism and Internal Control" in Steffen W. Schmidt et al., eds., *Friends, Followers, and Factions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 423.

Patronage contributes, therefore, to maintain afloat the political order and personal rule; but precisely because the whole system rests on persons and the discretion of powerful notables, it lacks the institutionalized coherence required for long-lasting viability. In other words, since the process of class formation is still in the making and since class closure is still gelatinous, the personal ruler and his associated patrons are incapable of imposing their hegemony and of constructing the bureaucratic and legal trenches of rational domination. As a consequence, African political orders constitute patrimonial forms of governance that are incapable of generating the development of a productive capitalism. Being an unpredictable and arbitrary type of political rule, patrimonialism has a strong anticapitalist effect. As Max Weber emphasized:

. . . the patrimonial state lacks the political and procedural *predictability*, indispensable for capitalist development, which is provided by the rational rules of modern bureaucratic administration. Instead we find unpredictability and inconsistency on the part of court and local officials, and variously benevolence and disfavor on the part of the ruler and his servants. It is quite possible that a private individual, by skillfully taking advantage of the given circumstances and of personal relations, obtains a privileged position which offers him nearly unlimited acquisitive opportunities.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, African patrimonialism rests on a vast unproductive network of corruption lorded over by presidential monarchs who dispense favors, resources, and money to gain loyalty, obedience, and submission. Accountability in this environment depends on neither popular legitimacy nor rational bureaucratic norms; it is the child of corruption. In Ryszard Kapuscinski's masterful study of Haile Selassie's despotic rule in Ethiopia, a member of the court emphasized the central function of corruption in the maintenance of imperial patrimonialism:

In a poor country, money is a wonderful, thick hedge, dazzling and always blooming, which separates you from everything else. Through that hedge you do not see creeping poverty, you do not smell the stench of misery, and you do not hear the voices of the human dregs. But at the same time you know that all of that exists, and you feel proud because of your hedge. You have money; that means you have wings. You are the bird of paradise that everyone admires.

. . . [Haile Selassie] liked the people of the court to multiply their belongings, he liked their accounts to grow and their purses to swell. I don't remember His Magnanimous Highness ever demoting someone and pressing his head to the cobblestones because of corruption. Let him enjoy his corruption, as long as he shows his loyalty! Thanks to his unequaled memory and also to the constant reports, our monarch knew exactly who had how much. But as long as his subject behaved loyally, he kept this knowledge to himself and never made use of it. But if he sensed even the slightest shadow of disloyalty, he would immediately confiscate everything and take the bird of paradise away from

¹⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1095; see also Thomas Callaghy, "The State and the Development of Capitalism in Africa: Theoretical, Historical, and Comparative Reflections" in Rothchild and Chazan, eds., *The Precarious Balance*, 67–99.

the embezzler. Thanks to that system of accountability, the King of Kings had everyone in his hand, and everyone knew it.²⁰

The patrimonial ruler's favor and disfavor, gift and confiscation, generate privilege and wealth, and simultaneously ruin and poverty. The ruler's insatiable appetite for ever increasing shares of economic surpluses transforms society into his own personal hunting ground. The vast majority that is kept purposefully unorganized and powerless is compelled to pay the tributes that enrich the ruler and his retinue. This production of wealth that seldom finds its way into productive investments is generally wasted in ostentatious patterns of consumption and in self-aggrandizing projects. The ultimate result is economic stagnation, political malaise, and moral cynicism. Not surprisingly, African patrimonialism is a highly unstable form of governance. Presidential monarchs, however powerful they may be, live in the permanent fear of conspiracies; courtiers continuously agonize over their uncertain present and immediate future; and the people in their general indifference and contempt toward authority withdraw from the public realm to search for alternative forms of survival.

Such patterns of systemic instability created the condition for a Hobbesian quest for power, as well as for its violent and coercive maintenance. In addition, instability is exacerbated further by the high premium that ruling classes place on their monopolistic control of the state. This is so because the state in Africa is the prime instrument with which a class can hope to become a ruling class. To be absent from the state is to be condemned to a subordinate and inferior status. In Africa, class power is state power; the two are fused and inseparable.

The nonhegemonic character of African ruling classes has compelled them to take direct charge of the state itself, to staff it, and consequently to obliterate the political space required for the effective exercise of statecraft. Paradoxically, because state power and class power are one, the state has lacked the relative autonomy necessary to effect those reforms and concessions necessary for the preservation of the rule of the ruling class. With their eyes fixed on immediate and selfish interest and their hands in direct control of the levers of the state apparatus, African ruling classes have been unable to take the long view and organize in an appropriately flexible way the conditions of their own continued dominance. Because those staffing the main agencies of the state form the ruling class and are part of the ruling class by virtue of this very fact, their relative independence in deciding how to serve the long-term interest of their own class is fatally inhibited.

The nonhegemonic status of African ruling classes deprives the state of the relative autonomy that makes reform possible, despotism unnecessary, and liberal democracy viable. The state is almost exclusively an authoritarian structure of dominance; expressing the narrow corporate interests of the ruling class, it has failed to become integral. The integral state is the state of an hegemonic ruling class and as such it is capable of "expansion."²¹ It is capable of integrating and coopting

²⁰ Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 45–46.

²¹ Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 52.

into its own institutions potential allies and even antagonistic elements. The integral state is thus relatively autonomous, since it can extract certain sacrifices from the ruling class and make certain concessions to popular classes. The integral state, however, is not above society; it is integral precisely because the ruling class has achieved hegemony. In other words, the integral state can emerge only when the ruling class has consolidated its rule to the point that its material, intellectual, and moral leadership is unquestioned or at least consensually accepted by the subordinate classes. Thus, hegemony makes possible the integral state.

Although there are exceptions, for most African ruling classes the hegemonic moment is not near.²² These classes are in the process of formation and their rule is thus fragile, contradictory, and yet repressive. In the absence of a hegemonic bourgeoisie, patrimonialism embodies the logical form of political representation. In fact, African patrimonialism has striking similarities with Karl Marx's notion of Bonapartism. The similarities, however, should not be exaggerated; there are important differences as Thomas Callaghy has argued in his study of Sese Seko Mobutu's Zaire. Absolutism fits African conditions more closely than Bonapartism

primarily because socioeconomic and class development is much less advanced and patrimonial forms of politics, leadership, and especially administration are more important than in Bonapartism. The class situation is simply more fluid, more in flux, under absolutism . . . [than under Bonapartism]. In absolutism, there was a rising and consolidating, but not yet dominant, bourgeoisie, which was both protected and closely controlled by the state, and a very small, emerging proletariat. In Bonapartism . . . the bourgeoisie is well-consolidated and the proletariat has developed into the other economically and politically important class.²³

In spite of these limitations Bonapartism—the despotism of an individual resulting from an equilibrium of forces in which no social group is strong enough to impose its own social project on others—can serve as a useful heuristic tool to uncover existing African realities. The static equilibrium between contending classes vying for power that defines Bonapartism is conducive to the rise of a providential and charismatic Caesar who emerges as a temporary savior of the republic. To that extent Bonapartism embodies maximal state autonomy. As Marx explained in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the coup d'état that brought Louis Bonaparte to power represented “the victory of Bonaparte over parliament, of the executive power over the legislative power, of force without phrases over the force of phrases.” France “renounce[d] all will of its own and surrender[ed] itself to the superior orders of something alien, of authority.” It “escaped the despotism of a class only to fall back beneath the despotism of an individual and, what is more, beneath the authority of an individual without authority. The struggle seem[ed] to [have settled] in such a way that all classes, equally impotent and equally mute, [fell] on their knees before the club.”²⁴

²² Fatton, *The Making of a Liberal Democracy*.

²³ Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle*, 21.

²⁴ Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert C. Tucker, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), 513.

Hence, under Bonapartism “the state seem[s] to [make] itself completely independent” from class power; it reaches its maximal autonomy in so far as it seeks to raise itself above and against the interests of the bourgeoisie. But however independent it may be from these interests, the Bonapartist state remained ligatured to class: “state power is not suspended in mid-air. Bonaparte represents a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, the small peasants.”²⁵

Bonapartism, however, is not the exclusive instrument of the small peasants; it serves them only up to a point. Marx explained:

As the executive authority which has made itself an independent power, Bonaparte feels it to be his mission to safeguard “civil order.” But the strength of this civil order lies in the middle class. He looks on himself, therefore, as the representative of the middle class and issues decrees in this sense. Nevertheless, he is somebody solely due to the fact that he has broken the political power of this middle class and daily breaks it anew But by protecting its material power, he generates its political power anew. . . . This contradictory task of the man explains the contradictions of his government, the confused groping hither and thither which seeks now to win, now to humiliate first one class and then another and arrays all of them uniformly against him. . . .²⁶

Because of its contradictory character the Bonapartist state, as well as its maximal autonomy, cannot endure for long. Both are transitory and exceptional, and they soon confront the hard realities of class power. “Bonaparte would like to appear as the patriarchal benefactor of all classes. But he cannot give to one class without taking from another.”²⁷ Bonapartism representing a coup d’état and not a revolution is never able to establish its antagonistic autonomy from the traditional ruling class. Marx wrote in *The Civil War in France*:

In reality, [Bonapartism is] the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie [has] already lost, and the working class [has] not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling the nation. . . . At the same time [it constitutes] the most prostitute and the ultimate form of the State power which nascent middle-class society [has] commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism, and which full-grown bourgeois society [has] finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labour by capital.²⁸

In the contemporary African context the maximal autonomy of the Bonapartist state is thus a function of the crisis of hegemony. African Bonapartes emerge when incipient ruling classes fail to maintain their hold over state power because they lack the material, political, and moral leadership with which they could gain the consent of subaltern groups. African Bonapartism is a political phenomenon marked by the relative absence of hegemony. And yet the Bonapartist state in spite of the despotism of a presidential monarch remains ligatured to society and to classes. It cannot free itself from the weight of class power – however weak, im-

²⁵ Ibid., 515.

²⁶ Ibid., 522–523.

²⁷ Ibid., 523.

²⁸ Ibid., 553–554.

mature, and fragile such class power may be. It seeks to soar high above society, but it has to maintain the social continuity of life and civil order. Thus it has to produce and enhance the economic, political, and cultural dominance of the emerging ruling class.

The maximal autonomy of the Bonapartist state—expressed in a strong presidential monarchism—does not impart to the state the capacity of challenging and threatening the fundamental interests of the emerging ruling class. It displaces temporarily the antagonistic contradiction of society from conflict between ruling and subordinate classes to conflict between society and bureaucracy. As Friedrich Engels explained: “Bonapartism distinguishes itself by preventing [workers and capitalists] from coming to blows. . . . [And yet it] exists only to keep the workers under a tight rein with respect to the bourgeoisie.”²⁹ In Africa, the Bonapartist state’s maximal autonomy saves a temporarily incapacitated ruling class from extinction.

Bonapartism thus defends and guards the material interest of an endangered ruling class, but it is also moved by the self-interest of those in office and in particular that of the presidential monarch, the supreme office-holder. Indeed, Bonapartism is the vehicle through which the despot uses state power to extract from the popular masses those resources required to nourish “an enormous bureaucracy, well dressed and well fed . . . an artificial caste, for which the maintenance of his regime becomes a bread-and-butter question.”³⁰ The maximal autonomy of the Bonapartist state implies neither a fissure from society and class nor a fundamental antagonism to the critical interests of the ruling class; rather it implies that the state momentarily suspends the exhausting confrontation of conflicting social classes. Thus, it is the stalemate of contending classes and of classes in the process of formation that makes possible the maximal autonomy of the Bonapartist state.

Such maximal autonomy favors the development of a unique center of power concentrated in the person of the presidential monarch who cannot tolerate the emergence of pluralistic sources of authority. In this perspective the presidential monarch is at ease only when surrounded by the silent mediocrity of a submissive entourage. As one of Haile Selassie’s subjects revealed to Kapuscinski:

. . . the King of Kings preferred bad ministers. And the King of Kings preferred them because he liked to appear in a favorable light by contrast. How could he show himself favorably if he were surrounded by good ministers? The people would be disoriented. Where would they look for help? On whose wisdom and kindness would they depend? Everyone would have been good and wise. What disorder would have broken out in the Empire then! Instead of one sun, fifty would be shining, and everyone would pay homage to a privately chosen planet. No, my dear friend, you cannot expose the people to such disastrous freedom. There can be only one sun. Such is the order of nature, and anything else is a heresy.³¹

²⁹ Friedrich Engels as quoted in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution I: State and Bureaucracy*, 2 vols, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 404–405.

³⁰ Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 520.

³¹ Kapuscinski, *The Emperor*, 33.

In a certain sense, however, the African sun is caught in his own trap. By sending forth his rays over his courtiers he inevitably grants them some autonomy and power. But since he seeks to remain the only source of light, he must continuously darken the courtier's beaming radiance. At this level the rule of African presidential monarchs can only be capricious, inconsistent, and full of freakish impulses. Courtiers are always confronted with the dangers of sudden demotion, exile, or worse; their loyalty is therefore fragile and opportunistic. And yet, the courtier's loyalty is indispensable to the maintenance of a successful and long-lasting presidential monarchism. At this level the relationship between courtiers and monarch must have a certain degree of institutionalization; it must generate universally accepted rules of political conduct. The presidential monarch and his courtiers are inevitably drawn into a pact based on private agreements and understandings that must be mutually beneficial and respected by both. This pact contains the seeds of constitutional arrangements that may eventually flourish into more accountable and democratic forms of governance.

TOWARD INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION?

The antinomies of presidential monarchism may paradoxically contribute to the development of competing centers of power that are both necessary for and subversive to personal rule. Thus the conditions that define the existence of presidential monarchism undermine its continued functioning. Princely rule legitimizes the struggle for spoils that the presidential monarch regulates and controls. Such regulation and control tend to become an uncoded and invisible constitution that governs political conduct. Rosberg and Jackson point out:

It is this incipient constitutionalism of princely rule — this emphasis on agreements, understandings, and promises — which suggests that it is long-standing princely regimes, more than any of the other forms of personal rule, that have the best chance to become institutionalized, for the private compacts between ruler and oligarchs can become the foundation of an institutional principle of government if the ruling class is prepared to accept them as such, and if these compacts can gain legitimacy from the larger society.³²

The process of institutionalization is also reinforced because the prince and in particular his followers have a vested interest in the routinization and rationalization of princely rule itself. The charismatic attributes of the presidential monarch's statecraft have to be institutionalized if political stability is to be maintained, and if the material privileges and ideological supremacy of his "community of disciples" are to be preserved. Max Weber remarks that

charismatic authority may be said to exist only *in statu nascendi*. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both.

³² Jackson and Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa*, 84; see also Donald Rothchild and Michael W. Foley, "African States and the Politics of Inclusive Coalitions" in Rothchild and Chazan, eds., *The Precarious Balance*, 233–264.

The following are the principal motives underlying this transformation: (a) The ideal and also the material interests of the followers in the continuation and continual reactivation of the community, (b) the still stronger ideal and also stronger material interests of the members of the administrative staff, the disciples, the party workers, or others in continuing their relationship. Not only this, but they have an interest in continuing it in such a way that both from an ideal and a material point of view, their own position is put on a stable everyday basis.³³

Paradoxically, the success of princely rule may ultimately imply the institutionalization of politics and consequently the abolition of princely rule itself. The courtiers' search for more predictable political behavior and expectations can only erode the capricious absolutism characterizing presidential monarchism. Similarly, the severe economic crisis and its entailing drastic reduction of resources contribute inevitably to the shrinkage of the patronage system and thus to the possible emergence of more rational-bureaucratic methods of governance. Finally, if the presidential monarch is to strengthen his authority, he must develop processes and means of accountability that would curb the extent and arbitrariness of his power. Thus, as John Lonsdale has explained, political accountability constitutes

part of the moral calculus of power; it concerns the mutual responsibilities of inequality. Because it raises questions about the control of power and its purposes, accountability must also be concerned with political organisation. For if power is not to some extent shared there can be no effective base from which it may be controlled, nor any protected right to discuss its purposes. So political accountability, or public morality, is the chief end of political freedom. Whether it also guarantees social justice and economic development is an altogether thornier question.³⁴

Paradoxically, the legitimization and consolidation of presidential monarchism calls for the emergence of new forms of accountability grounded in more democratic methods of representation. These new forms, however, do not necessarily give rise to parliamentary liberal democracy; but they may well constitute the first leg in the journey leading to its realization. They constitute what Rothchild and Foley have called the politics of inclusive coalitions and they offer "the prospect of enhanced state influence and even the possibility of strengthened legitimacy. By co-opting leading class and ethnic representatives into the ruling elite, it is possible to reduce the scale and intensity of their demands and to maintain the political system. . . ."³⁵ In this vein, the democratizing transition that the legitimization of presidential monarchism entails characterizes the making of a passive revolution.³⁶

The concept of passive revolution is rooted in Antonio Gramsci's work and it "relates changes in politics, ideology and social relations to changes in the economy.

³³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 246.

³⁴ John Lonsdale, "Political Accountability in African History" in Patrick Chabal, ed., *Political Domination in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 128.

³⁵ Rothchild and Foley, "African States and the Politics of Inclusive Coalitions," 233.

³⁶ See Fatton, *The Making of a Liberal Democracy*.

[It indicates] the constant reorganization of state power and its relationship to society to preserve control by the few over the many, and maintain a traditional lack of real control by the mass of the population over the political and economic realms.³⁷ This process of reorganizing the relationship between state and society is on the one hand passive, because the “traditional split between leaders and led [is] re-articulated in new forms.” On the other hand, it is revolutionary, because simultaneously “substantial changes [are] being instituted in social, economic and political life.”³⁸

In the specific African terrain passive revolutions institutionalize presidential monarchism by diluting its arbitrary and capricious power. They enhance the stability and authority of the ruling class as they integrate subordinate classes into political and economic structures that protect and serve the fundamental interests of the ruling class itself. While passive revolutions are generally initiated as a result of popular resistance against the privileges and powers of the ruling class, it is the ruling class itself that channels them into forms of representation appropriate to its continued domination. This is not to say that the ruling class is always contented with the processes unfolding from the making of passive revolutions, but rather that such processes are necessary for the maintenance of its power. These processes contribute to the cooptation of the popular masses into more or less democratized frameworks of bourgeois governance. The result is the establishment of a new political contract that legitimizes and organizes the great asymmetries of power, status, and wealth between rulers and citizens. This in turn constitutes a form of class compromise that structures and molds political accountability, and delineates what is possible and permissible within the boundaries of a “democracy with tears and many reservations.”

Passive revolutions effect transitions to greater democratic accountability, but they fail to affect in any fundamental way the distribution of wealth, the structure of ownership, and the acquisition of privilege. In fact, it may be that passive revolution as a historical phenomenon can be achieved only if the norms and methods governing the production and the appropriation of the economic surplus remain unaffected by the convulsions of the political realm. As Adam Przeworski contends with considerable force:

A transition to democracy can be made only at the cost of leaving economic relations intact, not only the structure of production but even the distribution of income. Freedom from physical violence is as essential a value as freedom from hunger, but unfortunately authoritarian regimes often produce as a counterreaction the romanticization of a limited model of democracy. Democracy restricted to the political realm has historically coexisted with exploitation and oppression at the workplace, within the schools, within bureaucracies, and within families.³⁹

³⁷ Anne Showstack Sassoon, “Passive Revolution and the Politics of Reform” in Anne Showstack Sassoon, ed., *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Writers and Readers, 1982), 129; see also Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 106–120.

³⁸ Sassoon, “Passive Revolution and the Politics of Reform,” 129.

³⁹ Adam Przeworski, “Some Problems in the Study of the Transition to Democracy” in Guillermo

The oppression and great inequalities that are entailed in the relations of class power are not only compatible with the transition to democracy; their survival is the necessary and ugly precondition of a successful transition. The new wave of laissez-faireism that is sweeping African nations can only contribute to the further exacerbation of such inequalities and thus to social conditions that are not conducive to democratic practice. Both the call for state disengagement from the economy and the inevitable erosion of an already debilitated welfarism that this entails are bound to have devastating consequences for the worst-off segments of the population. Unleashing the forces of the market in African conditions can only invite popular resistance to increased food prices and/or force the vast majority of the population into severe malnutrition.⁴⁰ Moreover, it is highly unlikely that the transition to laissez-faireism can generate the type of political constituency that it necessitates. It is highly unlikely that African ruling classes will choose to adopt the principles of market rationality when they know full well that their power depends on their capacity to use the state as a predatory means to acquire wealth and build political clienteles. John Ravenhill has argued:

To advocate capitalism as a solution to Africa's problems is merely to move the argument one step backwards to the question of how political coalitions can be constructed that will favour giving a greater role to markets. . . . [There] is a probability that state power will be used not to promote market efficiency but to sustain oligopolistic advantages and generate economic rents. Faith in the "market" solution makes the major and questionable assumption that Africa's business elite will not choose the easier path and become rentier capitalists.⁴¹

The introduction of laissez-faireism into Africa will most likely be contradictory, ambivalent, and piecemeal; and instead of generating democratic forces it will promote popular alienation and withdrawal from the public domain. There is, therefore, every reason to expect that the crippling patterns of class domination and the vicissitudes of underdevelopment will continue to besiege African societies whether or not they implant liberal democratic structures of governance. The implantation of such structures, however, would offer better opportunities for developing and improving material as well as cultural and moral conditions. This is why the transformation of presidential monarchisms in Africa into less arbitrary and more accountable political systems cannot be dismissed as mere sham and fraud. The struggle for democratization, however limited may be its gains, is as crucial as ever before. But this struggle should not be confused with the search for a radical revolutionary rupture from existing socioeconomic integuments.

This, Africans of subordinate classes know well. Alternating between resigna-

O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions From Authoritarian Rule* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 63.

⁴⁰ Sayre P. Schatz, "Laissez-Faireism for Africa?" *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 25 (March 1987): 132-133.

⁴¹ John Ravenhill, "Africa's Continuing Crises: The Elusiveness of Development" in John Ravenhill, ed., *Africa in Economic Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 27-28.

tion, despair, withdrawal, and survival, their mood no longer captures the hopes generated by *Uhuru* (independence). Too many times they have seen and suffered the consequences of broken promises; too many times they have experienced a politics of coups and countercoups that alters nothing except the faces of embezzlers; too many times they have been devoured by causes and leaders that they supported and embraced. No longer at ease with their environment, subordinate classes have retreated into their own invented spaces of survival. In their desperate quest to elude their incarceration in the regimented network of state control, subordinate classes are seeking solace in the private spaces that civil society offers them. Far from constituting the victorious revenge of civil society over the state, this withdrawal from the political arena represents a painful escape from the oppressive enclosure of squalor and despair presided over by the wardens of the state.⁴² The exit of the subordinate classes from the public realm represents, therefore, a defensive reaction against state violence and exploitation.⁴³ It is also a return to old methods of producing, consuming, and surviving; in fact, the withdrawal of subordinate classes from state-centered spaces embodies inevitably the resuscitation of past traditions of self-reliance.⁴⁴

This resuscitation alleviates the plight of subordinate classes; it facilitates survival in an environment of death and despair. Hence it may also be the harbinger of a new, more humane, and more egalitarian society that lessens state control and empowers citizens to develop original forms of self-government. Freed from the constraints of immediate material needs, communities would generate a shift to the production of foodstuffs, indigenous technology, and intracommunal trade. While the emergence of such parallel communities offer some hope for grassroots survival and might nurture utopian thoughts of a brave new world of unalienated villagers, it is unlikely that these communities would consolidate and expand to the extent of becoming viable alternative economies and politics to the existing state domain. Sandbrook emphasizes:

The fact is that local self-reliance, though a creative response, is nonetheless a coping or survival strategy. It is not really a long-term substitute for the creation of a healthy national economy with orderly, responsive political institutions at the centre. Further, if the formation of national identities and national classes are prerequisites for national reconstruction, then village self-reliance obstructs such social changes. For the buttressing of local communities is likely to consolidate communal not class or national identities and action.⁴⁵

A return to communal self-reliance will therefore not resolve the acute problems of material underdevelopment and political authoritarianism. In fact, it may

⁴² Rothchild and Chazan. *The Precarious Balance*.

⁴³ Gilberto Mathias and Pierre Salama, *L'Etat Surdéveloppé. Des Métropoles au Tiers Monde* (Paris: Maspéro, 1983), 125–126; see also Jean-François Bayart, “Civil Society in Africa” in Chabal, ed., *Political Domination in Africa*, 109–125; Jean Copans, “Une Crise Conceptuelle Opportune,” *Politique Africaine* 26 (Juin 1987): 2–14.

⁴⁴ Sandbrook, *The Politics of Africa's Economic Stagnation*, 148–151.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

well intensify the salience of ethnicity and consequently promote conflict, nepotism, and traditionalism. The urban and rural masses' powerful attachment to ethnic sentiments would heighten the competition for scarce resources between kinship communities; it would also lend itself to the selfish manipulative appeals of the elites. Enclosed into its own protective shell, the peasantry would be particularly affected by these phenomena. Indeed, politicians would inevitably seek to hijack the organization and leadership of successful self-reliant peasant communities. This in turn would exacerbate social relations, as politicians pursuing their own private interests would seek to mobilize the peasantry along ethnic lines. Having lost its leadership and representation to alien political forces, the peasantry would soon regain its unenviable status as "Africa's silent majority."⁴⁶

In addition, withdrawal from the state is never complete, never total. The peasants' informal economy and countervailing power arising from their parallel spaces of political and material survival are always organically linked to the dominant state system and its capitalist mode of production. Janet MacGaffey has argued:

Simple commodity producers retain control over the means and organization of production and, therefore, are not proletarians. But they are in varying degrees dependent on the exchange of commodities for the reproduction of the producers and the unit of production. The independence of the producers is thus circumscribed not only at the level of exchange through prices, but also at the level of production. Falling prices for commodities produced, relative to those bought, result in reduced levels of consumption or intensified commodity production or both. Capital can thus put a "squeeze" directly on production by forcing the household, or another unit, to intensify its labor to keep up the supply of commodities necessary for its reproduction.⁴⁷

To this extent, popular disengagement from the predatory African state into parallel spaces of survival is inevitably and always circumscribed and incomplete. Furthermore, there are clear indications that such parallel spaces of survival have themselves been penetrated by state agents and personnel. In their quest for ever larger gains, these agents have used their strategic political position to consolidate and expand their involvement in the illegal activities of the parallel economy. Through varied forms of corruption and fraudulent practices, state personnel have accumulated considerable wealth that may contribute to their consolidation and reproduction as a class. Hence, while the processes of the informal economy may fail to enhance significantly the life chances of the worst-off segments of society, they clearly contribute to the further embourgeoisement of the powerful and well-off members of the "statocracy."⁴⁸

The popular classes' withdrawal from the state-dominated spaces amounts to a strategy of survival; it has little to offer in the long term, and it may have unin-

⁴⁶ Roger Tangri, *Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1985), 92.

⁴⁷ Janet MacGaffey, "Economic Disengagement and Class Formation in Zaire" in Rothchild and Chazan, eds., *The Precarious Balance*, 177.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 181-185; see also Kwame A. Ninsin, "Three Levels of State Reordering: The Structural Aspects" in Rothchild and Chazan, eds., *The Precarious Balance*, 278-279; and René Lemarchand, "The State, the Parallel Economy, and the Changing Structure of Patronage Systems," in *ibid.*, 149-170.

tended negative effects for the popular classes themselves. Withdrawal is Janus-faced; it is not only a form of popular resistance to predatory state policies, it is also a response of the state itself to its own incapacity to enhance the well-being of the majority of its citizens and to maintain a viable economic infrastructure. As Kwame Ninsin has argued, withdrawal is a “mechanism by which the state gradually abandons its legal and moral obligations toward the weaker sections of society as a result of its own growing incapacity to discharge them effectively.”⁴⁹ Indeed, withdrawal implies the breakdown of the rules of normalcy and the dissolution of traditional legal structures; it breeds the cruel conditions of severe insecurity that nurture the ghastly emergence of African *macoutes* (bandits) and the potential war of all against all. As René Lemarchand has emphasized, the atrophy of the state in Zaire and Uganda that gives rise to withdrawal and the parallel economy can have profoundly perverse effects on the weakest segments of society:

[It] translates into acute poverty and plundering activities on a major scale. At the root of this situation lies the inability of the state to maintain a viable economic infrastructure. . . . But it also reflects the inability of the state to provide a minimum of security. In fact, it is the state and its local agents—*agents d'exécution* (an appropriate designation), military men, police officers and security officials—who often create the very conditions of insecurity that make for dependency upon their caprice and good graces. The inability of the state to pay its employees means that official tolerance of plunder and extortion is the nearest equivalent of patronage. Exoneration of legal sanctions is the cheapest way to reward local officials.⁵⁰

Hence, instead of offering a heaven in a heartless world, withdrawal may ultimately be nothing but hell.

Withdrawal is no substitute for processes of systemic transformation and democratization. It may, however, enhance the prospects for passive revolutions by propelling the growth of a nascent bourgeoisie that is both rooted in the material structures of the parallel economy and relatively independent from the state.⁵¹ The consolidation of this class as a “true economic bourgeoisie” would contribute to the expansion of a private realm on which could rest the foundations of liberal democratic governance. The establishment of this mode of governance, however, is by no means inevitable, since the potential true economic bourgeoisie is “as yet small and with an undetermined future.”⁵² Whatever may be the future of this class, changes in Africa are more likely to take the form of passive revolutions rather than radical structural ruptures with existing realities. Despite their clear democratic limitations, passive revolutions may offer certain opportunities for greater popular empowerment and representation.⁵³ It is precisely because of this

⁴⁹ Ninsin, “Three Levels of State Reordering: The Structural Aspects,” 273.

⁵⁰ Lemarchand, “The State, the Parallel Economy, and the Changing Structure of Patronage Systems,” 163.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; and MacGaffey, “Economic Disengagement and Class Formation in Zaire.”

⁵² MacGaffey, “Economic Disengagement and Class Formation in Zaire,” 185.

⁵³ Robert Fatton Jr., “The Democratization of Senegal (1976–1983): ‘Passive Revolution’ and the Democratic Limits of Liberal Democracy,” *Review* 10 (Fall 1986): 279–312.

that most African ruling classes fear the consequences of passive revolutions and are reluctant to embark upon them. They fear that such revolutions might open up a Pandora's box and be particularly hazardous to their privileges and interests.

Far from curbing discontent and legitimizing the rule of the dominant class, passive revolutions might well enhance opposition and further raise popular expectations. Because their outcome is full of uncertainties, passive revolutions are unlikely to become the preferred political strategy of African ruling classes. The organic crisis in Africa is therefore more favorable to the accentuation of existing authoritarianisms than to the development of liberal democracies. This is not to say that such democracies cannot take root and flourish in the African terrain, but that their implantation confronts multiple obstacles and that their successful crystallization would not put an end to inequality, poverty, and class domination. Thus, while the struggle for democratizing African regimes is essential, it cannot be equated with radical change, let alone revolutionary socialism. An exaggerated belief in the strength and achievement of liberal democracy and particularly of democracy with tears and reservations belies the democratic limitations and class impairments that cripple such democracies.