How The South Was Done

Underdevelopment — history and present: Kenya and Tanzania

Solidarity Federation

Spring 1999

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Poverty does not lurk in corners — it is running rampage across the so-called 'Third World' — most of Africa, South America, South and Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. This is no secret. But why? — the roots of this poverty is not dinner table conversation. Even less so is the scale and sorts of global bullying still going on in 1999.

The poverty and general lack of 'development' in the 'Third World' is typically thought to be closely related to the fact that it was colonised and controlled by a few countries in Western Europe (and now the US) for so long. But what is this link and how important is it?

All underdeveloped countries have, of course, felt the curse of colonialism, the robbery of the rest of the world for the benefit of European capitalism. But it would be over-simplistic to say that underdevelopment directly follows from colonialism. For sure, colonialism has produced some of the conditions that characterise underdeveloped countries, but these play a more or less indirect role in relation to their present plight. However, it is international capitalism itself which has led directly to lack of development. The basic role that colonialism played was to introduce the capitalist form of production, and all that comes with it, such as the modern nation state and the class system, to new parts of the world.

First of all, it would be useful to look at what "development" means. What it actually refers to is economic development within the international capitalist system, as measured by such bodies as the IMF and OECD. Given that something must have a period of time over which to develop, and that capitalism did not develop in all places at the same time, it would be unreal to expect equal development throughout the world. At the beginning of the colonial period just over a century ago, European capitalism had already been going for two centuries, while it was unknown in Africa. So, to find that Africa hasn't yet caught up should cause no surprise. Moreover, given capitalism's inclinations towards massive inequality within even one state, that such inequalities are reflected on a global level is somewhat inevitable.

That Africa is the least developed region of the world cannot be disputed. Former colonial states in Asia and Latin America have developed economically over the last few decades, in some cases dramatically so — that is, until the troubles of the last couple of years. While the role of capitalism in unequal development is considered elsewhere in this issue, here some effects of colonialism in Kenya and Tanzania are outlined to highlight some of the different forms and methods used in different places at different times.

East Africa

Although the colonial period only lasted around three quarters of a century, contacts between Europe and sub-Saharan Africa are much older. European involvement with Arab slave traders is well known and goes back at least to the 16th Century. The Portuguese, meanwhile, were at the forefront of establishing trading posts around the African coast. Arab influence, on the other hand, goes back as far as the 8th Century and, by the beginning of the colonial period, a wealthy sultanate had long been established on Zanzibar and adjacent parts of the Tanzanian coast.

Arab economic influence was carried along trading routes into the interior of Africa, and Zanzibar was the hub of this network. Influenced by Arabs, the Africans of Zanzibar, nearby islands and coastal areas were also traders, and their language, Swahili, became the language of long-distance trade within east and central Africa. However, the establishment of colonial empires had a profound disruptive effect on these economic relations.

When Belgium seized Zaïre and overthrew Zanzibari commercial domination, trade from eastern Zaïre turned away from the routes to the Indian Ocean towards the mouth of the River Congo, the Atlantic and ultimately Europe. This set in motion a chain of economic events which contributed to the eventual imposition of German rule in Tanzania. The Zanzibaris, facing bankruptcy, called in debts built up in the boom times by African chiefs, who in turn demanded huge tributes from their subjects, driving them in increasing numbers into christian mission stations and out of the reach of tax-gatherers. On the east African coast, meanwhile, Arab and Swahili traders, in increasing competition and conflict with the German East Africa Company, rebelled. This gave an excuse for armed German intervention and, with social and economic order breaking down, Germany took formal control in 1890.

Thus, European intervention in Africa destroyed already established economic relations. This is not to speculate about how African economies might have developed free from such overt interference. Nor is it to say that Arab influence in Africa was somehow benign. It wasn't, as their role in the slave trade makes abundantly clear. However, what took place was that European capitalism, in the form of colonialism, brought in a whole new set of economic relations.

oppressing types

The reasons for European interest often varied from one part of Africa to another. In Tanzania's case, Germany wanted supplies of raw materials — such as rubber, sisal fibre, cotton, gold and mica — that were beyond British and American control. To this end, German settlers were encouraged to establish plantations on the best land which was forcibly confiscated from Africans.

By contrast, the Imperial British East Africa Company's interest in Kenya was as a route into the ivory trade of Uganda. This coincided with Britain's strategic preoccupation with controlling the Nile's headwaters. Only after completion of the railway to Uganda in 1901 was Kenya's potential realised. In fact, it was more a question of how best to make the railway earn back what it had cost to build.

So a policy of European settlement was implemented, with the best land being simply annexed through force, diplomacy, or a mixture of both. To increase the colonial administration's legitimacy among Africans various measures were adopted — seed for marketable crops was issued; collaborators were rewarded with minor administrative jobs; markets in the Empire were opened up for African household goods and Indian traders. Meanwhile, a hut tax on the African population was imposed and chiefs were required to build roads using unpaid labour.

However, the Kenyan economy came to be dominated by estate production of coffee and maize, relying upon cheap African labour. This was the true economic policy of the administration, and African production was only really encouraged insofar as it had a pacifying effect. In fact African agriculture was held back, notably through the forced recruitment of cheap labour for the estates, and through state economic management which protected the settlers' monopolies, by banning Africans from growing coffee, for instance.

Likewise, in Tanzania the German plantations needed cheap labour, but efforts to secure it were less successful than in Kenya. Forced labour, land dispossession, hut taxes, and duties on certain goods, all designed to increase African reliance on money, never persuaded enough Africans to leave the security, stability and degree of control afforded by traditional subsistence society for the harsh, unsanitary, and exploitative world of waged work on the plantations. The plantation system never came to dominate Tanzania's economy as the white estates did in Kenya.

With Germany's defeat in 1918, Tanzania, as a League of Nations mandate, came under the British Empire. However, uncertainty over its future within the Empire meant the new administration never developed a settlement policy such as Kenya's, nor indeed invested in infrastructure in any meaningful way. Although European plantations did remain, the basis of export production, in contrast with Kenya, was peasant smallholding.

Thus, by independence in 1963, Kenya's emphasis on settler estate production had left it in a more developed state in terms of investment and infrastructure than Tanzania. This was reflected in the East African Community, which both countries participated in, along with Uganda, from 1963 until 1977, and which was based on a common colonial history, currency, transport and tax systems. Kenya, especially its industrialising capital, Nairobi, where multinational companies tended to be based, quickly came to dominate the EAC, despite mechanisms to regulate such differences.

It also meant that with much more formerly white-owned land up for grabs in Kenya, there is now a much larger class of large-scale farmers than in Tanzania. While much of this land was given over to the Kenyan peasantry, a large part ended up in the hands of the so-called "telephone farmers", black bourgeoisie working in the state bureaucracy or industrial management in Nairobi and organising their farming requirements by telephone.

land and 'freedom'

The Kikuyu people, Kenya's largest ethnic group (around 20%), had lost by far the most land to white settlers. Beginning in the 1920's and carrying on into the 1940's, land agitation had brought few results. By the end of the 1940's, enough Kikuyu were convinced that violence was the only way, and a campaign of intimidation through crop burning and ham-stringing of cattle got underway. This was the beginnings of the Mau Mau. By the end of 1952, the violence had escalated into killings of settlers. There were reprisals by the settlers; mass evictions of farm labourers from the estates; and half the Kikuyu population of Nairobi was detained in concentration camps. The gruesome nature of many Mau Mau killings quickly lost them support even among the majority of Kikuyu and, confined to a few heavily forested areas, they were rounded up by October 1956, ending 7 years of war in which over 13,500 were killed, less than 100 of them white.

Well after independence, and even today, the Mau Mau period has affected the economic, political and social life. It is complicated by the fact that the Kikuyu were split regarding their support for the Mau Mau. Thus, Mau Mau supporters, rather than "loyalists" within the Kikuyu were favoured when it came to the distribution of land and development projects. And likewise it tended to be Kikuyu areas, and those of their allies, that were favoured overall, leading to regional imbalances and inter-ethnic rivalry.

In Tanzania by contrast, no such dominant ethnic group ever emerged. As early as the Maji Maji rising of 1905–7 against the German authorities, there was a high degree of unity among the Africans throughout the whole territory, which has since remained a feature of Tanzanian political and social life. Thus, the independence movement which grew out of African agricultural co-operatives, first established in the 1920's, was not the exclusive preserve of just one, or a few, ethnic groups.

Africa today is characterised by "modern" states cobbled together through a series of lines drawn on a map in far off Europe. This process has often thrown together mutually hostile peoples, which was certainly the case in Kenya, although the country has been relatively stable since the early years of independence. Nevertheless, it is a stability which is maintained through a one-party state system, with state-run trade unions and no room for independent working class expression. Likewise, Tanzania, despite its enviable record of minimal inter-ethnic rivalry, is dominated by a one-party system and state-controlled unions.

After independence, the conditions for development did exist and some progress was being made. The direct legacy of colonialism lies in the economic and political relations imported from Europe. The result has been new nation states; the capitalist class system, accompanied by corruption and abuse of power; and economies based on the production for export of a handful of cash crops and raw materials. But, in themselves, these have not caused underdevelopment.

For this we don't have to look beyond the crises of international capitalism in the 1970's, which crippled the economies of both Kenya and Tanzania, among many others, a blow from which they have never recovered. Now both countries are characterised by huge foreign debts, massive foreign trade deficits, the export of wealth by multinationals, and IMF restructuring measures which attack the living standards of the poor.

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Retrieved on January 19, 2005 from web.archive.org
Published in *Direct Action* #10 — Spring 1999.

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