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The class consequences of colonialism in Africa

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Efforts continue to calculate the costs and benefits of colonialism in Africa, so that past and present wrongs can be righted by quantities of 'aid' or 'reparations'. The article argues instead for a different approach based on analysis of colonialism's effects on class structures. Class is defined in Marxian terms as a set of economic processes, namely the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus. Taking the cases of Kenya and Britain as examples, the author argues that both colonized and colonizing countries display interdependent mixtures of exploitative and non-exploitative class structures in their pasts and in the present. He calls for more research on the class structures of African societies before, during, and after colonialism and for considering class changes now as a policy priority.

Introduction

A long tradition of analysis supports efforts to itemize and measure the costs and benefits of European colonies in Africa. The colonial officials themselves often initiated those efforts soon after taking a territory for the purpose of shaping colonial policy. For example, the British tried to measure the costs of establishing and maintaining their East Africa Protectorate from its beginning in 1895. They wanted to make the colony 'pay for itself.' The colonial administration should minimize the net drain upon the London treasury by tapping local revenue sources instead to cover the cost of operating the colony. This invariably meant taking portions of the Africans' land or of their produced outputs, or both. The classic mechanisms included outright theft, more or less legal machinations equivalent to theft (unequal exchanges, settling 'open' land, fines and seizures for newly 'illegal' activities, and so on), taxation, and sometimes directly appropriating surplus from African labourers hired by 'public' enterprises functioning within the colonial administration.

The opposition to and eventual destruction of formal colonialism during the twentieth century coincided with new efforts to measure the costs and benefits of colonialism in Africa as elsewhere. Then, however, the motivation was rather different. The concept of reparations entered the debate. Critics of colonialism sought to show that whatever resources had been provided to colonies by the colonizers, a far greater flow of resources had flowed in the opposite direction. The point was not simply to document such costs of colonialism for the colonized people; it was also to make the case for a new post-colonial policy committed to a reverse net flow of resources into former colonies. It was widely believed that bilateral and multilateral reparations or 'aid' from former colonizers to former colonies might be increased if it could be shown that a net reverse flow of resources had occurred during the colonial period and often thereafter as well. Indeed, the continued net flow of resources from former colonies to former colonizers led many to refer to the post-colonial period as neo-colonialism.

Of course, as with all attempts to identify and measure costs and benefits, no final calculus is possible. There are simply many too many economic consequences of colonialism, direct and indirect, present and future, to list them all, let alone to measure them. Nor do those people engaged with such identifications and measurements agree as to (a) which costs and benefits ought to be included and which can be ignored, and (b) how to measure their relative magnitudes. Estimating the costs and benefits of colonialism—like estimating the costs and benefits of any controversial event—always dissolves into contests over which different subsets of the infinite costs and benefits associated with colonialism should be counted.

My point here is not to disparage cost and benefit studies. I recognize their polemical values, their capacities to focus attention on particular social problems in particular ways, to justify policy action or inaction, and so on. However, the logical impossibility of anything like a final, absolute net measure of costs and benefits dissuades me from offering yet another particular calculation based on my particular selection of costs and benefits. Moreover, knowing that colleagues whom I respect are already producing their partisan cost-benefit analyses—and so entering the cost-benefit debates—likewise dissuades me from offering yet another. Instead, I would like to propose a different conceptualization of colonialism's costs for both the colonized and the colonizing economies. This conception is based on a class analysis, rather than a net resource flow analysis based on selected costs and benefits.

There is also another reason to undertake a class analysis rather than a net resource flow analysis. I would argue that colonialism and neo-colonialism had profound effects upon the class structures in colonizing and colonized societies. Class structural changes are different from revenue flows, and, in my view, at least as important. How colonialism and neo-colonialism changed class structures has had much to do with the growing gaps in wealth and power between former colonizers and former colonies—and with the disastrous conditions in so many African societies today. Yet the class changes have received much less attention than the net resource flows. Colonialism violently and traumatically changed Africa's class structures while simultaneously reinforcing challenged class structures inside the colonizing countries. These are the class legacies of colonialism emphasized in this paper.

Certain historical analogies suggest how unwise it is to ignore or marginalize class effects. For example, after World War One, Germany had to make reparation payments to the victors. Germany's pre-war history and then the war had placed unsupportable strains on its class structures: private industrial capitalism, agrarian feudalism in eastern Germany, and a large class of self-employed peasants and craftworkers. Had post-war reparations not been imposed on an already disintegrating set of class structures, the world might have been spared the shift to fascism with all its horrific consequences.

To make the point from a different angle, colonialist resource flows will have different social effects depending on the class changes that colonialism provokes. And it follows logically that any reparations or 'aid' payments made to Africa in the future will have different effects depending on whether and how they interact with class changes. How Africa develops in the future will depend at least as much on how it treats its class structures, bequeathed by colonialism and neo-colonialism, as on any inflows of resources it may secure.

Alternative definitions of class and class analysis

To undertake a class analysis of colonialism requires first that a position be articulated—within a contested terrain—as to which kind of class analysis will be deployed, and which definition of class will be used. There are at least three major and several less frequently utilized definitions of class.

Perhaps the oldest definition of class—utilized, for example, in ancient Greece—uses property as its basis. The society to be scrutinized is divided (classified) into population subgroups according to the quantities and/or qualities of property that each subgroup owns. This is the familiar dualism of the class of propertied rich juxtaposed to the class of the propertyless poor. Subtler variations allow for many gradations: 'middle' classes of the relatively richer, relatively poorer, and so on. With such a property-based definition of class, the analyst can explore how and why rich, poor, and middle classes clash or cooperate and thereby shape the structure and history of the society they together comprise.

Nearly as old as the above is another definition of class in terms of power rather than property. A class analyst working with this definition juxtaposes the powerful against the powerless subgroups of the population. Less dualistic variations explore 'middle' classes who both wield power/authority over some others, while also having some power/authority wielded over them by still others.

No great reflection is needed to ascertain that the property and power definitions of class are not identical, and that class analyses premised upon them also differ. Persons with vast property do not necessarily wield comparable power, and vice versa. The US president, clergy, teachers, and parents, for example, wield powers that have little necessary connection to any wealth they may own. The Sultan of Brunei owns far more wealth than the leaders of most other countries, but he wields far less power than many of them. A class analysis of society based on a property definition yields a very different sense of its structure and dynamic than a class analysis based instead on power.

Many actual class analyses over the centuries have variously combined both definitions into composites: the relatively rich and powerful arrayed against the relatively poor and powerless. Societies are examined in terms of their distributions of wealth and power—defined as their 'class structures'—and policy prescriptions are derived that focus on preserving or changing those distributions. I acknowledge the valuable work of other critics of colonialism and neo-colonialism who have used property, power, and composite conceptions of class.

However, I use an altogether different definition of class to analyze colonialism in Africa and its legacies. I owe this definition of class to Marx, since he introduced and first used it systematically. In this definition, class is a specific set of economic processes that occur in all societies; these are the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus.

A subset of the population engages in productive labour. These people use their brains and muscles to transform nature into useful objects. In all societies, such people—Marx called them 'productive labourers'—always produce a total quantity of useful objects that is larger than the portion they get for their own personal consumption. The labour to produce this portion Marx called 'necessary labour.' The remainder was 'surplus labour' which yielded a corresponding 'surplus product.' Where products of labour were exchanged in markets, and so acquired exchange 'values', the surplus product takes the form of surplus value.

In this definition, a class structure comprises the following classes: (1) those who perform the necessary and the surplus labour, (2) those who appropriate the surplus and then distribute it, and (3) those who receive such distributions of the surplus. Marx concentrated his attention on the capitalist kind of class structure. There, a proletariat performs necessary and surplus labour for the capitalist who has purchased their labour power (with the promise of wages). The capitalist sells the fruit of the proletariat's necessary and surplus labour. Then the capitalist takes one portion of these sales revenues and pays his productive labourers their wages (thus they obtain the fruit of their necessary labour). The remainder of his sales revenues, the fruit of the proletariat's surplus labour, accrues to the capitalist as his immediate property. The capitalist thus appropriates the surplus value.

In Marx's day this capitalist was typically an individual who started, owned, and managed the enterprise. Nowadays it is more typically the board of directors of a multinational, conglomerate enterprise. In either case, the capitalist then distributes the surplus he has appropriated to various social groups to secure their provision of the conditions needed to continue his appropriation of the productive labourers' surplus.

Such surplus-receiving groups in modern corporate capitalism include managers. These are individuals who do not themselves produce the goods and services that the corporation sells (as the productive labourers do). Rather the managers' tasks are to buy the raw material inputs, tools, and equipment; to supervise and discipline productive labour; to arrange for the sales of finished output; to accumulate capital; and so forth. Their salaries and operating budgets are defrayed by distributions to them of a portion of the surplus from the appropriating capitalists, the corporate board of directors. The board of directors likewise distributes portions of the surplus to groups outside the capitalist corporation to secure other conditions of existence for surplus appropriation—to bankers as interest for access to finance and credit, to lawyers as fees for legal counsel, to advertisers to promote sales, to the state as taxes, and so forth. (For a full formulation of an analysis of class—understood as the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus—see Resnick & Wolff 1987).

Marx's focus on class in terms of surplus—exemplified in *Capital*'s three volumes—differs profoundly from social analyses based on definitions of class in terms of property and power. Capitalist appropriators may or may not own wealth; members of most large corporate boards of directors own little or no shares of their own companies. Likewise, corporate wealth often resides with shareholders who wield little effective power within the enterprise. Boards of directors must typically share even the power to distribute their enterprise's surplus with the state which dictates tax rates, with banks that dictate credit terms, with managers who demand high salaries, and so on. In short, the pattern of the distribution of property and power can and usually does differ markedly from the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus—however much they all interact.

Hence, as I will show, analyzing the effects of colonialism on class structures in Africa is quite different from analyzing its effects on wealth and power distributions. While there are many efforts at the latter by social scientists, the former remains to be done.

Marx's analysis of class in terms of surplus also enables a subtle and nuanced attention to the way in which different class structures coexist and interact within any society. Marx and many Marxists since have developed a complex understanding of how class structures vary (e.g. Hindess & Hirst 1975).

Generally speaking, Marxists have identified four other class structures beside the *capitalist* class structure: the *feudal*, the *slave*, the *ancient*, and the *communist*.] Each is distinguished by its unique mode of organizing the production, appropriation, and distribution of the surplus. The capitalist, feudal, and slave share the fact that in each case, the producers of the surplus are different people from those who appropriate and distribute it. In Marx's language these are therefore all exploitative class structures. They differ in many other ways. For example, in the typically feudal class structure, the producers and appropriators do not exchange labour power as a commodity. Instead ties of loyalty, kinship, and/or personal obligation function to persuade or force the performers of necessary and surplus labour to deliver a surplus to the appropriators (Fraad, Resnick & Wolff 1994). Indeed, this feudal kind of class structure takes its name from that prevailing in medieval Europe, although Marxists have long since demonstrated its existence across the globe and in the present as well as the past. The slave class structure entails the producer of the surplus being the property of another. The slave is maintained (or neglected) as a piece of property, while all of his or her product is appropriated by someone other than him/herself.

The ancient and communist class structures are not exploitative in Marx's sense —since in both of them the producers of the surplus are identical to its appropriators. The ancient kind of class structure refers to a condition much like what is now often called 'self-employment.' Marx attached the word 'ancient' because he found its classic embodiment in ancient Rome. The individual peasant produces enough for his or her own consumption, but also produces more than that—a surplus which he or she then distributes to secure the conditions of his/ her existence as an individual producer/ appropriator of surplus. By contrast, the communist class structure, for Marx, entails a collective of workers who produce and then collectively appropriate their own surplus.

Such class structures identified and analyzed in Marxist work have existed, albeit in constantly varying proportions and interrelationships, within both colonizing and colonized territories across recent centuries. Colonialism, as a political institution, had profound effects on these class structures in both African colonies and the colonizing countries of Europe.

The class effects of colonialism in Africa

In most African territories, the arriving colonialists found multiple, different class structures. Because they had no conception of class in terms of surplus labour, they did not recognize those structures. Instead they utilized concepts like 'race' or 'primitive civilization' or 'tribe' or 'agriculture' to formulate their analyses of African societies and their colonial policies. However, this did not prevent their colonial policies from affecting the African class structures that the colonialists could not see.

In general, African societies displayed mixtures of all or most of the five class structures identified by Marxists. To know, for each society at the moment of colonization, what its exact mixture of class structures was, would require a class analytical history that largely remains to be written. What is clear to us is that colonial policy destroyed, established, weakened, or strengthened the different African class structures—depending on the objectives of the colonists, the resistances of the colonized, and the broader social contexts of each colonial situation. The transformation of the African class structures was a by-product of colonial policies aimed to extract wealth from Africa. But that is no reason for presuming that colonialism's wealth transfers had more lasting effects on African societies than those of its class transformations.

No doubt Africa lost vast wealth through its colonial experiences. It likewise lost an enormous part of its population through slavery, military conquest, disease and privation linked to those experiences. African class structures—many deeply intertwined with African traditions, religions, and psychology—were often uprooted and transformed in fast, violent upheavals, with devastating consequences. This is the class aspect of Africa's colonial experience, its class consequences. Here I raise some of the questions that such an approach opens.

How prevalent and how strong were non-exploitative class structures in Africa before the colonists arrived? How did they interact—in competition and/or in mutual support with—exploitative class structures? How did colonial policy shift the balance between exploitative and non-exploitative African class structures? When non-African populations were introduced into African colonies, what class structures were introduced with them? How did the latter interact with the African class structures and so change the total mix of class structures in the colonized territories? How did colonial policies alter the sizes of the surpluses produced within each colony—and hence affect the respective viabilities of their different class structures?

My own work on East Africa suggests a tentative general response to such class analytical questions. Colonialism in Africa sometimes destroyed local class structures outright, especially the non-exploitative class structures which the colonists often equated with 'backwardness' and/or opposition to colonial rule. At other times, the colonists' need for exports and stable tax revenues and/or the prohibitive costs of military conquest prompted a policy of tolerating or even supporting the African class structures, including the non-exploitative ones.

In the East Africa Protectorate (later Kenya), for example, European settlers established plantations with feudal and capitalist class structures and also individual farms with ancient class structures. The African labourers who functioned as *de facto* serfs or wage-labourers on the plantations had to be 'freed' from the class structures in which they had previously worked. This was done by destroying those class structures in the areas of European settlement and moving the African population into crowded 'reserves' where survival for many required labour in the different class structures on the European plantations.

Outside the areas of European settlement, pre-colonial class structures of various kinds often persisted, albeit with various difficulties and adjustments imposed by the colonial authorities' differential taxation, administrative, and other policies. The result was to produce a very different political and cultural history for those tribes and individuals who retained their pre-colonial class structures, as compared to those who lost theirs. Land and other forms of wealth were taken from them all, but their different class structural evolutions under colonial rule yielded very different legacies in terms of their political opposition to colonialism and their post-colonial histories—political, cultural, and economic.

The class effects of colonialism in the colonizing countries

In the colonizing countries, where capitalist class structures prevailed (although non-capitalist class structures were also widespread), colonial policies also had class effects.

Where colonies enabled cheaper imports of food and industrial raw materials, the capitalist enterprises of the colonizing country realized a particular kind of gain in their surpluses. Capitalists could return as wages less of the revenues obtained from selling the goods and services produced by their productive labourers. This was because cheaper food imports offset the reduced wages, leaving workers' standards of living unchanged. With less returned to workers as wages, more remained for capitalists as surpluses. Such greater surpluses amounted to enhanced profits, available for capitalists to distribute to secure the conditions of their existence as surplus appropriators. In short, cheaper food imports from colonies strengthened the capitalist class structures of the colonizer, perhaps at the expense of the other, non-capitalist class structures there.

Similarly, cheaper raw material imports meant that capitalists needed much less capital (used to purchase raw materials, tools and equipment) to undertake production with a given quantity of labourers. The surplus produced by the labourers remained the same; it depended only upon their effort and the physical quantities of raw materials, tools, and equipment. Thus, the reduced cost of raw materials freed a portion of the capitalists' capital to add to an unchanged surplus to strengthen and/or expand their capitalist class structures. Thus the East Africa Protectorate's exports of coffee and cotton (and later those of Kenya as well) enhanced the capitalist class structures of the United Kingdom from 1895 to the present.

Inside the United Kingdom, capitalist class structures seeking to expand repeatedly encountered ancient and feudal class structures—often located in agriculture—that resisted their expansion. Colonialism often facilitated the growth of British capitalist class structures by offering choice colonial sites to the displaced British ancient and feudal class structures to re-establish themselves. The colonial administration would remove those sites from their pre-colonial local usages and thereby destroy their local class structures. Then the colonial administration would subsidize the reorganization of the land and people into ancient and feudal (as well as capitalist) enterprises for the settlers brought in by the administration. Many Britons formerly engaged in the ancient and feudal class structures at home accepted such offers and moved to the colonies.

The problems of British capitalism—its cycles, its workers' oppositions, its foreign competition, and so on—were offset, at least in part, by the supports drawn from the colonies in the form of cheap imports of food and raw materials. Likewise, the opportunity to invest British capital in Kenya—at profit rates boosted by cheap local labour costs consequent upon colonial relocation policies and by various subsidies from the colonial administration—offset declining profit rates in Britain. This too strengthened British capitalism relative to what might otherwise have been the case. Indeed, the most profitable outlets for British private capital investment in the colonies were often precisely those enterprises that produced the cheap exports of food and raw materials being sent back to Britain. Finally, resettling Britain's displaced ancient and feudal class structures in the colonies mollified yet other potential opponents to capitalist expansion at home.

Britain's East African territories provide just such an example of colonialism's multiple class benefits to Britain. When the rest of the British empire is added into the mix, the aggregate consequences may quite reasonably be supposed to have been very significant.

The abilities of British capitalist class structures to (1) prosper, (2) withstand their workers' oppositions and demands, (3) survive their foreign competition, and (4) expand in relation to Britain's non-capitalist class structures, were all aided in significant ways by colonial policies and the class transformations they wrought inside the colonies. Of course, a more complete class analysis would also have to inquire into possibly contradictory effects. For example, when secure colonial markets for British exports slowed technical innovation, the affected British capitalist industries might eventually face more efficient European, American, or Japanese competitors.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the historical evolution of class structures in African societies would have been different in the absence of their colonial experiences. Vast African populations were torn from pre-existing class structures and traumatically thrust into others. Frequently this entailed shifts from non-exploitative to exploitative class structures. The exploiters were often, although not always, Europeans. Thus class exploitation was often associated with ethnic differences and racialized notions of 'advanced' and 'backward' economies. Usually, non-exploitative class structures were either destroyed or else denigrated as inherently backward.

In the colonizing countries of Europe, capitalist class structures were generally strengthened. The mechanism for this strengthening was chiefly the colonies' exports of cheap food and raw materials, and their provision of relatively high-profit outlets for private capital from the colonizing territories. Strengthened capitalist class structures in the colonizing countries confronted dramatically reconfigured class structures in the colonies.

In my view, these differential class effects of colonialism deeply undermined the possibilities for a reduction in the economic, political, and cultural inequalities between colonizers and colonized once colonialism had been defeated. Even when post-colonial reparations or 'aid' was provided to the ex-colonies, it has so far proved insufficient to offset the enduring consequences of colonialism's class effects. Capitalism's strength in the former colonizing countries—gained in part from colonialism itself—enabled it to find and afford new means to continue exploiting its own workers. It also enabled the spread of capitalist class structures in the former colonies, often in the form of collaborations where the old capitalists of the former colonizer encouraged and/or financed new—but dependent—capitalists in the former colonies.

Such complex, multiple class effects of colonialism continue to play a key role in deepening rather than alleviating global inequalities of wealth and power to the advantage of the former colonizers. New flows of reparations or 'aid', unaccompanied by major transformations away from the class legacies of colonialism, will not likely be more effective in promoting global equality in the future than they have been in the past.

Notes

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