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The Persistence of the Family Farm and the Economy of Affection: The Cameroonian Case

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ABSTRACT

This case study attempts to account for the persistence of the economy of affection in Cameroon in light of the persistence of the family farm debate. The study demonstrates, like previous studies, that the economy of affection persists because of subjective values such as the farmers' desire to be independent; the farmers' view of agriculture as a way of life; and farmers' purpose and satisfaction in life derived from bonds and relations formed in the production process. In addition, the study clearly documents the importance of: 1) a sacred component to agriculture; 2) agricultural rituals which provide for social bonding and co-operation; and 3) a process of self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization associated with food production.

Introduction

The development of a global capitalist economy and the emergence of transnational corporations raise questions about the role of the state and internal forces within each nation in the process of social change. Some have argued that the globalization of capitalism has resulted in an alteration of production patterns in the developing nations, transforming them into cash crop exporters controlled by multinational capital, thereby threatening food security (Bonanno *et al.* 1990). Despite the transformatory nature of capitalism, however, non-capitalist forms of production still persist globally. One such form is the family farm which continues to persist, not only in nations with less developed capitalist systems, but also in advanced capitalist societies. This persistence of the family farm or small holdings has been the focus of research and ongoing debate in the sociology of agriculture for the last decade. However, the focus of most of this research has been on advanced capitalist societies, based on a set of assumptions that may not

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necessary apply to less advanced capitalist societies.

This paper examines the persistence of "the economy of affection" in Cameroon in light of reasons given for the persistence of the family farm in western, advanced capitalist economies. Since an attempt to explain farmers' behavior and farm practices is implicit in the persistence of the family farm debate, this paper utilizes a case study based on farmers' responses to a number of agricultural policies designed to promote commercial agriculture. Although the focus of the paper is not on the state and its role in the development of capitalist agriculture, one cannot explain the persistence of the economy of affection in Cameroon, without considering the active role the state plays in promoting the development of capitalist agriculture in Cameroon. The state is known to be active and instrumental in attracting and orienting both foreign and indigenous capital toward the course of rapid and export-oriented industrialization (Grahl 1983, Jenkins 1984). This explains why the case study is based on farmers' responses to agricultural policies designed to promote commercial agriculture.

In Cameroon, a dual mode of production exists: a premature capitalist mode and a more entrenched mode of production referred to by some as "the economy of affection" (Hyden 1980). By "the economy of affection", we are simply referring to an African version of the family farm. Since the economy of affection predominates Cameroonian agriculture and it operates on principles that go against the logic of capitalism, the introduction and promotion of capitalism in agriculture is primarily the task of the state.

How then do we explain the predominance of this economy of affection, despite the transformatory nature of capitalist forces and especially the active role of the state in the transformation process?

A number of explanations have been advanced from research conducted mostly in western societies with advanced capitalist (in some cases post-capitalist) economies and democratic political regimes. We believe it is of great theoretical significance to utilize these explanatory postures in analyzing the logic of the economy of affection in Cameroon, a developing country with a non-democratic political regime and a powerful state as the main catalyst for capitalist development, especially in the agricultural sector. Before turning to the case study, we want to first examine these explanatory postures in order to situate the Cameroonian case in the context of the theoretical debates.

Theoretical Considerations

A Marxist perspective in North American agricultural research has been neglected for decades because of the persistence of the family farm (Buttel *et al.*

1990). In the past decade, however, researchers have come to question this, in their attempt to account for the persistence of the family farm. This phenomenon has been explained by some in terms of the particularities of agriculture and the barriers to rapid capitalist development in all areas of agriculture. The following barriers and particularities have been identified: 1) perishability of some products; 2) non-identity between production and labor time; 3) payment of rents even if land is not put into productive use; 4) labor recruitment problems; 5) insufficient use of constant capital; and, 6) lower rate of profit (Mann & Dickinson 1978).

The persistence of some forms like simple commodity production have been explained in terms of certain advantages they possess such as: 1) the capability of out-competing capitalist farms in the hostile context of competitive markets regarding production and agricultural commodities; 2) the ability to cope with high risk and cyclical demand for labor in most agricultural commodity systems; 3) the absence of profit earning requirements (as for capitalist farms) necessary for reproducing their enterprises; and, 4) the ability to be more flexible than capitalists in reducing their consumption to the subsistence level to survive severe market downturns (Friedmann 1980, 1981). However, both Mann and Dickinson and Friedmann have emphasized the transformatory tendencies in both forms, i.e, the subsequent subordination of independent producers by non-farm capital.

Others account for the slow process of capitalist transformations in agriculture in terms of emerging forms of the capitalist economy, especially political relations, competitive market structures and organization of credit institutions (McMichael 1987). This perspective argues that agriculture tends to experience capitalist development less rapidly than other branches of industry. It is believed that with the forces of proletarianization and state subsidized capital accumulation in agriculture, family farms would gradually be transformed, resulting in division between the social classes (Newby 1978, de Janvry 1980). Some have emphasized the penetration of agriculture by capitalist relations of production, similar in many ways to those in other branches of industry and that the pace and nature of this penetration vary widely, depending on the commodity system in question (Friedland *et al.* 1981).

Some theorists argue that due to the vital services small holdings provide to the industrial sector and the state's strategy of decentralized economic development, such small holdings will continue to persist. In this context, while agricultural production takes place on farms organized along capitalist lines, part-time farming serves as a back-up alternative for the workers in industrial plants located in rural areas. In times of industrial contraction and high unemployment, displaced workers with small farms may turn temporarily to subsistence production until industrial conditions improve, hence forming a reserve labor force (Mottura & Pugliese 1980). The incorporation of agricultural and non-agricultural produc-

tion spheres, in some cases, derives from the state's strategy of mediating the interests of the conflicting social classes in the emerging social orders of advanced societies such as the US and Italy (Bonanno 1987). The state is also viewed as instrumental in maintaining non-profitable small holdings, in order to secure a labor reserve for the industrial sector (Bonanno 1987, Taylor 1979, Wenger & Buck 1988).

Some studies have provided a synthesis, premised on the existence of contradictory class locations in which the family labor farmer, capitalist farmer, and agricultural wage labor all exist. Many detours are taken, such as tenancy, contract farming, part-time farming and debtors, to avoid proletarianization, i.e, either being forced out of agriculture or becoming hired agricultural laborers. The existence of these contradictory classes is explained by formal and neo-Weberian substantive rationality. It is argued that some farmers are motivated by substantive rationality, i.e., the desire to be autonomous in their work, consequently they hold onto their farms and farming lifestyles (Mooney 1986, 1988; Pfeffer 1983).

Sub-culture has also been used to explain the persistence of small holdings. The argument is that families with German backgrounds, for example, tend to view farming as a way of life and therefore keeping the family farm intact is a cherished value (Salamon 1980, 1985; Salamon & Davis Brown 1986). Based on this argument, some have rejected capital penetration as upholding the "totality" of each sector (Hyden 1980). Consequently, a limited state intervention in the agricultural sector has been proposed (Offe 1985; Bonanno & Calasanti 1988).

In sum, the debate can be defined through four categories of explanatory postures. Small holdings persist due to: 1) certain temporary advantages and particularities they possess, emphasizing the transitory tendency of capitalist forms (de Janvry 1980, Friedland *et al.* 1981, Friedmann 1980, 1981; Mann & Dickinson 1978, McMichael 1987, Newby 1978, 1983a, 1983b); 2) some vital services they provide to the industrial sector and the state's strategic function of mediating interests of conflicting social classes (Bonnano 1987, Mottura & Pugliese 1980, Taylor 1979, Wenger & Buck 1988); 3) the farmers' desire to be autonomous (Mooney 1986, 1988; Pfeffer 1983); and 4) the view that farming is a way of life (Hyden 1980, Salamon 1980, 1985; Salamon & Davis Brown 1986). A discussion of the farmers' behavior and farm practices is implicit in the above.

We now turn to the analysis of the economy of affection in Cameroon in light of these theoretical accounts, with the hope of bringing to this debate, significant insights and a different perspective.

State Capitalism and Capitalist Agriculture in Cameroon

Before an analysis of the economy of affection, farmers' behavior and farm practices is presented; there are significant distinctions to be made between capitalism in western societies such as the US and capitalism in developing countries, such as Cameroon. In western societies, the capitalist system is already well-established and it is the key institution which determines the structuring of other institutions. Capitalism exists in free, democratic political systems which facilitate its smooth operation. But in developing countries such as Cameroon, where the economy of affection tends to dominate the capitalist mode of production and the political system is non-democratic; the capitalist system owes its existence and development to a powerful state apparatus. The requirements of foreign exchange relations and the state's needs for foreign currency in its international transactions, have forced the Cameroonian state to promote capitalism aggressively, especially in the agricultural sector through policies favoring export-oriented agriculture.

Before the arrival of Europeans to the territory now known as Cameroon, agriculture consisted in the exclusive production of food crops for local consumption and it was primarily the domain of women. The history of capitalism and especially export-oriented agriculture in Cameroon dates back to the colonial era, during which cash crops such as coffee, cocoa, rubber, and cotton were introduced (Rudin 1938). These crops served the interests of colonial administrators and later those of the indigenous governing elite following independence. The Germans, shortly after their arrival in Cameroon in 1884, found coffee growing wildly in some parts of the territory. After experimentation at the Victoria Botanical Gardens, the crop was distributed to farmers who were coerced into growing it. From then on, export-oriented agriculture was encouraged and promoted by some form of state policy.

To encourage the production of export crops such as coffee, cocoa, cotton, and rubber; the government provides incentives in the form of agricultural credit, fertilizer, building equipment, free training undertaken by agricultural agents, and big prizes for the best farms offered to farmers during agricultural shows. The extent to which the average Cameroonian farmer responds to these incentives, depends on a number of factors, the most important being the farmers' world view, deriving from traditional farming practices.

To what extent then has capitalism penetrated Cameroon's economy, especially the agricultural sector? To the extent that the Cameroonian economy is articulated within the global capitalist system, through the active role of the Cameroonian state, it is capitalist. More realistically, however, it can be argued

that there is a dual mode of production: 1) one mode dominated by subjective rationality, referred to as the economy of affection, in which more than 70% of the population is engaged; and 2) a state capitalist mode driven by the needs and demands of the ruling elite, effected through aggressive development policies. This dualistic mode of production is derived from a modified version of Taylor's (1979) and Hyden's (1980) contributions to the articulation of the modes of production. Rather than talking of the modes of production at the production level, we prefer the notion of "the forms of social organization of production." In this sense, the global capitalist system is seen as penetrating diverse social formations in various ways and within these different social formations themselves, social relations of production need not be transformed to the same degree as in all regions and/or sectors of the economy (Foster-Cater 1978, Cardoso & Faletto 1979). Therefore, our analysis of the economy of affection, farmers' behavior and farm practices, will be guided by the impact of the following two forces originating from this dualism and farmers' responses to them: 1) formal, rational economic forces; and 2) subjective rational forces.

The Case Study

The interest in the economy of affection, farmers' behavior and farm practices in Cameroon was generated by a study conducted in 1990 of Cameroon's agricultural policies and their social and economic outcomes by this author. Through the analysis of policy documents and interviewing farmers, it was discovered that despite attractive economic and monetary incentives provided by the state in order to facilitate the development of capitalism in agriculture, most farmers had expressed little interest. Even those already engaged in the production of export crops were either practicing mixed cropping or had abandoned export agriculture completely and were concentrating their efforts on producing food crops exclusively.

It became very clear from this study that the majority of farmers had abandoned export agriculture and turned to the production of food crops exclusively. In an effort to understand and explain this behavior, a sample of 101 farmers was selected from three villages in three provinces and interviewed in 1991. The choice of this sampling method was due to four main factors: 1) the need to focus on the target group of male coffee and cocoa farmers, concentrated essentially in three provinces; 2) the domination of export agriculture by males; 3) the fact that traditionally, females do not own land; and, 4) the exploratory nature of the study, where the findings were not necessarily intended to be generalized beyond the sample.

Of the 101 farmers, 89% were males and only 11% were females. Of the 11 females that were interviewed, six were widows, three accepted to be interviewed because their husbands asked them to, and two reluctantly accepted to be interviewed because their husbands were away in the city. Although most of the farm work was done by these women, they tended to refer us to their husbands or some male member of the family for questions. Of the 101 respondents, 92% considered agriculture to be their main occupation. The majority of the respondents (81%) reported producing for export, local markets, and family consumption. However, more than 95% said their main preoccupation was with food production, in order to provide food for their families; whereas production for export and local markets was undertaken to make money for non-food items and to provide for other needs.

When asked which crops they considered to be most important, 74% of the respondents chose food crops, 22% chose cash crops, while 4% chose both. The reasons they gave for choosing food crops as the most important were that: 1) food is a principal source of life and its production links them to their ancestors and the "Supreme being," hence 86% said they concentrated most of their time and effort on food production; 2) food crops are a source of income (4%); and, 3) it provides a sense of self (10%). When asked to explain what they meant by saying that food production linked them to their ancestors and the "Supreme being", they alluded to the rituals and two sacred sacrifices offered before the planting season and after harvest. Although 78% of the respondents said the production of cash crops took more time and effort, they found the activity worthwhile as they could make up to 500,000frs CFA (US$3000) at the end of the crop season and with this money, they could realize a major project. This kind of project, such as building a house, would be very difficult to finance from the sale of food crops.

Regarding what influenced their decisions most as to which crops to produce, 52% of the respondents thought the need for money to buy non-food items did; 11% of them thought that cooperatives did; and 23% thought government policy did; while 14% were undecided. But when asked about the crops they thought they had more freedom in making decisions about production, sales, prices, etc., 85% of them said food crops, 11% said cash crops, while 4% said both. The majority of the respondents were dissatisfied with farming, and 85% of them attributed this dissatisfaction to government policy and interference. For example, one of the respondents said:

> *"... Dah thing wonna di collam gobna go kill man... them say me a no get right for cut down da coffee for ma farm... I dong leave the thing for bush, I no go pass foot for day."*

In essence, she was expressing rage at the law which forbids the destruction of coffee plants once planted and said she and her husband had decided to abandon the coffee farm.

Regarding the most common means for selling crops, 60% of the respondents said they sold their crops exclusively through the cooperatives; 33% said they did it only through private individual buyers; while 7% said they sold their crops through the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) exclusively. In terms of what determined the prices of their produce most, 10% said themselves, 81% said the government, 4% said private buyers, and 5% said market forces. The majority of the respondents (90%) said they had more freedom in making various farm decisions about food crops than they did about export crops. However, some concern was expressed about government intervention in setting very low prices for food crops. In most cities, it is the government corporation (MIDEVIV) which sets and enforces the prices of food crops to prevent food shortages and consequently urban unrest. This price policy has resulted in a decline in food supply to urban areas since 1985 as reported by 78% of the respondents.

In sum, the results of the case study demonstrate that the majority of farmers (95%) are engaged in agriculture primarily to provide food for their families. About 81% produce for exports, local markets and family consumption; 95% are engaged in agriculture to provide food for their families; 74% chose food crops as more important to them than export crops, because its production links them to their ancestors and the "Supreme being"; 90% said they had more freedom in making decisions about prices, sales and production of food crops than export crops; 85% expressed dissatisfaction with farming because of government policy and interference; and 81% said the government determined the prices of export crops. According to these findings, export-driven agricultural policies have generally tended to alienate export crop producers, forcing them to re-direct their resources to and concentrate their effort on the food sector. Although the sample taken for this case study is not representative of the Cameroonian agricultural population; the views expressed nonetheless, do reflect the general opinions of the average Cameroonian farmer.

Theoretical Explanations and Implications of Findings

Simple economic models would suggest that the farmers enthusiastically engaged in the production of export crops, especially coffee and cocoa, because they were interested in maximizing profit, i.e., making money from the rising world market prices for these products. In other words, the farmers' behavior is explained in terms of economic rationality. They engaged in the production of export crops in

the 1970s and early 1980s, because the government offered them higher prices for their coffee and cocoa, and when prices started to decline in the 1990s, they decided to switch to the production of food crops as these were more profitable than cash crops. But a closer look at the situation, suggests alternative accounts revolving around the logic of the economy of affection. One of the most intriguing phenomena about Cameroonian agriculture is the farmers' tendency to operate on principles that go against what Weber (1978) referred to as formal rationality, that is: farmers' behavior and farm practices tend to be guided by subjective rationality.

Leis (1964) attempted to explain a similar phenomenon among the Ijaws of Nigeria: the switch from palm oil production, which was more profitable, to the production of illicit gin. Using Weber's theoretical approach in the "Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", Leis argued that this switch could be explained by the desire of the Ijaws for freedom and independence. In other words, the explanation for the change in economic activity was to be found in the value that the Ijaw people attached to their independence. Formal rationality had little to do with the change in economic activity.

Beus and Dunlap (1991) established a high correlation between the attitudes held by Washington State agricultural producers and behavior. They measured behavior in terms of the farm organization to which producers are affiliated. Allen and Bernhandt (1995) also found there to be a relation between production practices and world views, with specific attitudes related to agricultural production practices among farmers in Nebraska. These attitudes and world views are not consistent with formal rationality. They are subjective values which the farmers consider to be very important in determining their behavior and farm practices. In our case study, what factors accounted for the the persistence of the economy of affection, in the context of the kind of behavior and farm practices taking place?

The switch from export to food crop production could be explained partially by non-profitability of coffee and cocoa production in the 1990s. In the 1990s, coffee and cocoa production did not yield as much profit as it did in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the production of these crops was still relatively more profitable than that of food crops. Therefore, non-profitability would be of marginal significance in accounting for the farmers' behavior. As the case study suggests, the majority of Cameroonian farmers operated on the basis of indigenous values; the most important being independence, sacredness associated with agriculture, and agricultural rituals.

For most Cameroonian farmers, being free to do what they wish with their land, to produce the crops they choose, to sell their crops to whoever they want, to decide what to do with their products, and free to work on the farm when they feel like it, with no rigid timetables and requirements; are very important value

orientations. The production of coffee and cocoa, however, came with a number of constraints and requirements (which directly or indirectly infringed upon these value orientations), among which were: 1) once planted the farmer was required by law to never destroy the coffee plants; 2) to sell the coffee crop only through the government controlled cooperatives at prices set by the government; 3) to apply fertilizer supplied by the cooperatives at specified periods; and, 4) to expand and improve the coffee farm yearly, in order to continue to benefit from services offered by the cooperatives and the agricultural extension service. Requirements such as these were considered by the farmers to be an infringement upon their freedom and independence. However, because of the initial high returns from the production of these crops and the government's manipulative strategies, most farmers were attracted to this economic activity.

As the case study demonstrates, agriculture is more than just an economic activity for most farmers. It is symbolic and it provides them with a sense of self, belonging, and identity. Agriculture gives life meaning and provides farmers with a feeling of accomplishment and independence. The meaning of life emerges from participation in the production process (Miller 1982, Veblen 1979). The government's engagement in the production process tends to disrupt this process of self-definition, self-actualization, and self-determination (Collins 1990). The farmers' world revolves around agriculture. Productive activities associated with the production of specific food crops such as corn, beans, yams and coco yams have created what Veblen (1979) referred to as habits of the mind, which in turn have produced certain cultural values, norms, indigenous beliefs, and customs guiding and directing the farmers' daily activities. The farmers can be referred to as "the industrious class" and the government and policy-makers as "the predatory class" (Veblen 1979). In Marx's terminology, the farmers came to the realization that, by producing export crops, they were alienated from the production activity, their product, their fellow farmers, and their human potential. Consequently, they decided to abandon this economic activity.

Another explanation of the farmers' behavior, which emerged from the case study, is the farmers' sacred view of agriculture and land. Cameroonian farmers believe they are guardians and stewards of the land, entrusted to them by the "Supreme being." The land and agricultural activities are some of the ways in which the farmers address their concerns to the "Supreme being." The production of certain food crops is absolutely essential to maintaining a close relationship with one's ancestors and the "Supreme being." There are a number of rituals associated with agriculture and land, and these rituals are tied to the production of corn, beans, yams, and coco yams. Among these rituals, there are two of utmost importance: one performed prior to the planting season and the other performed after the harvest season. The former is performed to request a good crop and

harvest. It is believed that a good harvest depends on whether or not the "Supreme being" and ancestors are satisfied with the village or tribe. The determination of this satisfaction is based on the proper stewardship of the land. The latter ritual deals with the farmers' desire to express their gratitude for the harvest, especially a good one. A bad harvest requires a ritualistic sacrifice of a greater magnitude, because it is believed that this is indicative of the dissatisfaction of the "Supreme being" with some mishandling of the land.

The farmers believe that with the production of crops such as coffee and cocoa, certain principles and rituals associated with land stewardship are violated, since rituals revolve around the production of specific food rather than export crops. In producing these export crops, cooperation and group unity are undermined because the farmers tend to be encouraged to compete and hence the organization of work groups is discouraged. This competition tends to result in the sale of land, including sacred pieces of land that are not supposed to be sold. Therefore, the farmers' behavior must be understood in terms of what Hyden (1980) referred to as the "Economy of Affection," in which peasants tend to resist capital values and incentives. The farmers rely primarily on economic activities which fulfil their subsistence requirements and are less responsive to market signals and indifferent or resistant to state policy.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis of farmers' behavior and farm practices in Cameroon has identified the following key factors to account for the persistence of the economy of affection, certain behavior patterns, and farm practices associated with Cameroonian farmers: 1) economic incentives provided by the state; 2) the state and agricultural policy; and, 3) subjective values associated with agriculture. The analysis suggests that although capitalism is gradually permeating Cameroonian agriculture, Cameroonian farmers attribute more to agriculture than just economic activity. Some of the findings are consistent with those of previous studies which suggest that farmers' behavior and farm practices are to be understood in terms of subjective values such as: 1) independence or what Mooney (1986) referred to as the farmers' desire to be "their own boss;" 2) the farmers' view of farming as a way of life (Pfeffer 1989, Salamon 1980, 1985; Salamon & Davis Brown 1986); and 3) the view that the farmers' purpose and satisfaction in life are derived from the social bonds and relations formed in the production process (Ross *et al.* 1986). However, some findings of the case study provide new insights to our understanding of the persistence of the family, farmers' behaviors, and farm practices. The case study demonstrated that: 1) there is a sacred component to

agriculture; 2) there are rituals which provide for social bonding; and 3) there is a process of self-definition, self-determination, and self-actualization associated with food production. These three forces determine and structure farmers' everyday life and social existence. Food production provides a special medium to and bond with one's ancestors and the "Supreme being." Consequently, agricultural policies driven by economic models which only assume farmers' responsiveness to economic incentives, without considering other subjective values such as those discussed above; tend to alienate farmers and are doomed to failure.

The findings of this study further suggest that the notion of a global capitalist system as an analytical concept should be utilized cautiously, because it tends to mask and underestimate the role of internal social forces, such as the state and indigenous values, in determining the nature and direction of social change within developing nations. In Cameroon, the state plays an active role in introducing, promoting and facilitating the development of capitalism in agriculture. However, this task is a difficult one due to: 1) the farmer's deep-rooted attachment to the land and the rituals that accompany this attachment; 2) the fact that agricultural policies designed to promote capitalist agriculture tend instead to strengthen the farmer's bonds with the land and promote other subjective values associated with agriculture; and, 3) the fact that farmers view the state as a competitor and direct rival.

Due to the exploratory nature of this study and the limitations imposed by the sample, it is not possible to establish with some degree of certainty a causal relationship between farmers' behavior, values and state policy. Therefore, any inferences drawn from the findings must be treated with caution. Further research of an explanatory nature including more variables, such as family size, educational level, ethnic origin, level of urbanization, and available farm land; is certainly needed to be able to determine the exact role of subjective values in the persistence of the economy of affection, farmers' behavior and farm practices. This study also suggests that the farmers' behavior is indicative of considerable social outcomes to state rural development policies that may not have been anticipated. A thorough investigation of these social outcomes is necessary to provide policy-makers with information that will help them make informed policy choices.

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