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Review Articles

Zimbabwe: The Political Economy of Transition, 1980–1986, edited by Ibbo Mandaza, Codesria, Dakar, 1986 (430pp, Z$13,99).

The appearance of **Zimbabwe: the Political Economy of Transition** is welcome. This collection of essays by progressive Zimbabwean scholars, edited by Ibbo Mandaza, a senior official in the Public Service Commission, is a major intervention in the debate on the political economy of independent Zimbabwe. The book seeks to address the main processes and components of that political economy, its directions and contradictions, and the openings it affords for progressive political work.

As the editor signals in his Preface, **The Political Economy of Transition** is addressed mainly to Zimbabweans. Non-Zimbabweans will do well to read it, however, both for what it says about Zimbabwe in the mid-1980's, and for the insight it offers on how Zimbabwean scholars see their society.

The book is timely, for its publication coincides roughly with the 1987 constitutional changes which mark the end of the first transitional phase of the politics of independent Zimbabwe. The essays in the collection bring together a wealth of information and argument about a crucial period in the country's history. Several authors are quite critical of the different aspects of public policy and practice; that such opinions can be published openly speaks well for Zimbabwe. Because it is the first resumé of the political economy of the new nation, and because it comes from a group of Zimbabweans who have nailed their political colours firmly to the mast, the book's appearance will surely provoke responses from other political positions. For this reason it should advance and enhance the national debate on Zimbabwe's political directions and possibilities.

The Political Economy of Transition will also serve as an excellent bibliographic resource on Zimbabwe's political economy. Its twenty-page bibliography contains an extensive listing of published sources (usefully broken down by sectors), unpublished papers, and official documents.

Ultimately, however, this reader found the volume disappointing. It promises more than it finally delivers, insofar as it does not address adequately a number of important theoretical and practical questions about Zimbabwe's professed socialist project. Perhaps the slightly grandiose title raises the reader's expectations too much: "the political economy of transition" begs the question, transition to what? There is an answer on the public agenda, for President Mugabe has made explicit his government's commitment to transforming Zimbabwe into a socialist society. It follows, I think, that an intervention such as this book should address the possibilities

and limits of that project. Yet these essays on 'transition' often do so only in a tangential or oblique fashion, despite their authors' evident sympathy for their government's commitment. Many of the essays tend to *describe* rather than *explain* political-economic processes in the first half-decade of Zimbabwe's independence. And crucially, rarely do they offer much commentary on the implications of such processes for any broader 'transformationist' project. Nor, lastly, do they offer much discussion about the question of political action: what is to be done, by government, by popular organisations, or by progressive intellectuals.

To say this is not to demand that any volume such as this be exhaustive — the editor's proviso (p.x) acknowledges that it is not — but rather to argue that certain critical issues of transition have been neglected or inadequately explored.

We will make selective reference to some of the essays to elaborate this summary critique: space limitations rule out a comment on all of them.

The Political Economy of Transition includes thirteen essays and an editor's introduction. The essays are grouped into five 'sectoral' clusters: two on politics (including one by the editor), three on the economy, three on 'the agrarian question', two on the labour movement and human resources, and three on social development. The book's 430 pages also include a twenty-page bibliography, as noted above, and an index.

The editor's introduction is only twenty pages long, but it requires an extended comment. In any edited collection, the introductory essay plays an important role in defining the tone and substance of the book as a whole. Here, what it doesn't say is probably more important than what it includes.

Ibbo Mandaza's introduction is subtitled "The Political Economy of Transition". Referring to Zimbabwe's protracted (and continuing) struggle for genuine independence, and the imperialist threat to it, he asserts that the book is "an attempt to explain *why things are what they are, rather than what they ought to be*" (p9, emphasis in original). Much of the introduction, however, is devoted not to, for example, outlining a framework of the concepts required for such a task, but rather to a polemic against sundry other scholars and activists who have tried to assess the revolutionary process in Zimbabwe. John Saul is the principal but certainly not the sole culprit. Mandaza's complaint seems to be twofold: first, a critique of the colonisation of knowledge, and a demand that Africans should write their own history; secondly, an assertion that Saul and others have got it wrong in their essentially idealist (in the editor's words, 'romantic') analysis of revolutionary processes and possibilities in Southern Africa. This latter argument is also sometimes tinged with the suggestion that they have no business making the assessment in the first place.

There are two problems with this. First, the editor's attack on other activists is so close to an *ad hominen* barrage that it all too easily deflects the

reader's attention from what is an unassailable argument: namely, that Africans should write their own history. No reasonable person would disagree — and certainly not John Saul, Horace Campbell, et al.

At least as important, however, is that the editor's polemic effectively diverts him from the task of explaining Zimbabwe, such is his eagerness to discredit others' attempts to do so. The book provides a vital opportunity for its authors to establish the conceptual and political terms of debate about Zimbabwe's political economy, precisely because it is the first and — so far — only comprehensive national intervention in that debate. The introduction offers an opportunity, for example, to show the power of a class analysis to explain Zimbabwe's special history and current circumstances, and to link these concepts to classical questions about the transition to socialism. In the event, it is an opportunity foregone. Mandaza does not set out much of a framework for understanding the processes, problems, and possibilities of transition in Zimbabwe, and particularly the transition to socialism. This shortcoming hampers other essays in the book — not because they represent diverse points of view, but because the reader has little sense of an overall problematic into which to set the information they provide. Indeed, many of the essays suffer precisely because they offer the reader intrinsically interesting information which, unrelated to a broader theoretical framework, loses some of its power.

To be specific: there is a fairly extensive literature on the postcolonial state, much of it spawned by the experience of societies in East and Central Africa. There is also a substantial literature on socialist experiments in Africa (however one defines these), as well as an important body of literature on the economics of socialist transformation. This reader would have preferred to see a thorough winnowing of these, but the editor offers only limited comment on several important issues they raise. These include:

— *the social basis and organisation side of the state,* the extent of and prospects for alternative forms of politics, and particularly for popular control of state structures. The central contradiction between popular and imperial interests is properly noted, but there is little else in this vein.

— *the role of the party,* its ideology, organisation, and social base. What options exist for the party, practically and theoretically, in relation to both the state and other popular organisations such as unions? (It must be noted that the cluster of issues related to the role of the party are barely addressed anywhere in the book, and yet these are obviously crucial to any political project, socialist or otherwise.)

— more generally, *the social basis of politics and the conceptual tools for understanding this.* If Zimbabwe is enmeshed in a web of imperialist pressures and interests (as the editor convincingly argues, here and elsewhere) then surely the political project to challenge these rests on the internal configuration of class and political forces. A materialist analysis

must address these: it is not a matter of "appropriate planning skills in the state sector" or even "the correct orientation — and political will — to plan for socialism" (p 18), necessary as these are.

— *dependence and transformation,* the options for developing a planned economy that challenges the inherited logic of the market, both domestically and internationally. Zimbabwe's circumstances are peculiar and problematic, combining a relatively high degree of development of the productive forces with an intimate dependency on regional and global markets dominated by much larger powers. And there is a *political* issue here that cannot be avoided. It is the one raised by Deutscher's critique of the Soviet experience: who pays for accumulation, when the attempt is made to construct socialism in conditions of scarcity?

— *what to do?* How to "identify the possibilities for the development of a progressive development policy?" (p 17). What political space exists for progressive intellectuals? for popular organisations? within and outside the state and party? what limits and possibilities do these imply?

The editor is surely aware of some of these questions, but makes little more than passing reference to them. Some exploration of them, conversely, could have provided a framework within which the different authors could address more sharply the problem of transition in the specific sectors they analyse.

The book's first essay, by the editor, surveys the historical origins and current dynamics of the state in Zimbabwe. It seeks to provide an overview which sets the broad political context of the essays which follow. Like the introduction, its prominence in the book (as well as its fifty-odd pages) lends an importance that calls for close scrutiny.

Mandaza defines the state as a "post-white settler colonial state", a cumbersome phrase, but useful in suggesting specific characteristics. The essay provides a very competent and succinct summary of the evolution of the colonial state, as well as a reflection of the weaknesses and contradictions of the liberation movement. (The latter is described, correctly I think, as a radical nationalist movement with, at best, a socialist idiom.) Mandaza also explains well the net of imperial forces at work in the decolonisation process, emphasising that the outcome at Lancaster House was an expression of the balance of political forces at work. His emphasis on the essential continuity of state structures, and the safeguard thus provided for imperial interests, is also appropriate. He asserts the emergence since 1980, and its subsequent political dominance, of a petty bourgeoisie, a class owing its prominence and power primarily to its control of state and parastatal institutions and, in some instances, its alliance as junior partner with domestic and international capital. It follows too that this class will be little help in any socialist project.

The essay is forcefully argued and, as far as it goes, convincing. The almost exclusive focus on the petty bourgeoisie has serious limitations, however. It

is a theoretical weakness with political consequences. In the Marxist tradition of discourse social classes exist only in relation to one another, and hence must be analysed as such. The state in capitalist society is thus an arena of class struggle — an instrument of class power, a locus of class formation, to be sure, but also object and terrain for contending political forces. Mandaza's analysis, however, in its preoccupation with imperial interests on one hand and petty-bourgeois political consolidation on the other, has little to say about the dominated classes of Zimbabwean society and their relation to the state. Yet unless a writer takes account of the constraints and possibilities of that interaction, a 'class' becomes a free-floating, ahistorical political force. This indeed, is the impression conveyed by Mandaza's account. For this reason, it comes uncomfortably close to élite analysis as practised by orthodox political science.

There is also a certain determinism at work. The account of politics before 1980 is presented with some verve; the reader sees people and organisations at loggerheads over who shall govern. The account of the independence years, unfortunately, loses that sense of human agency. The petty bourgeoisie appears to spring more or less fully grown from the womb of Lancaster House, and the main question to be answered, it seems, is what relationship it will develop with the agents of capital.

The editor's introductory protestations notwithstanding, therefore, there is little here by way of a materialist analysis (in terms of the social base of the nationalist movement, for example) to explain *why* an emergent petty-bourgeois class has secured power. Nor, in the absence of an exploration of the contradictory relations between this grouping and the popular classes — in the Marxist canon, the wellspring of social change — does the reader have a sense of the possible trajectories of social and political change.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this conceptual weakness has political consequences: the account offers little guidance on the practical question of what to do. There is little *explanation* of the incipient divisions within the petty bourgeoisie, or of their implications in terms of political space for popular initiative. (The *fact* of division is noted, but little else.) Nor does the reader gain a sense of what class base (if any) exists for the political project of transformation. Likewise, there is little analysis of popular organisation, particularly of the party and its mobilising potential — no comment at all, for example, about why the politicisation of ethnicity has been so prevalent, with all its divisiveness (problems of inertia and stagnation are mentioned and deplored, but there is little else). There is a very real political problem to be addressed: as a former ZANLA cadre once put it to me, ZANU-PF mobilised the people very effectively politically, for independence, but hardly at all for the economic struggle to follow. These are critical issues if one understands transition as primarily a matter of political struggle, not policy.

In the absence (in this account) of any potential popular motive force, Mandaza is forced to identify the impetus for progressive change as, in effect, individual preoccupations (p 51). He invokes a putative "progressive nationalist" grouping within the petty bourgeoisie as agents of change: not unlike the analysis of Tanzania once offered by Saul! Yet Mandaza offers no compelling explanation of why such a grouping should exist, nor why they should act as he hopes they will.

The essay concludes with a reiteration of the inherent contradiction between the imperial interests embodied in the state and its petty-bourgeois intendants, and the aspirations of the mass of Zimbabwe's people. The writer evokes a vision of the "inexorable and inevitable rising tide of the oppressed". Yet, without any prior analysis of the oppressed, nor explanation why their revolt is both inexorable and inevitable, this sounds very much like the dreaded 'revolutionary romanticism'. 'The people' stride onto the political stage — but almost as an exogenous force. Surely the analysis of the postcolonial state requires a fuller account of popular interests and organisations?

The three essays on the economy include Xavier Kadhani's overview of recent developments, Theresa Chimombe's account of the place of foreign capital, and Dan Ndlela's assessment of prospects for industrialisation. They are complementary, and present a good deal of information on the current state of the economy. While posing some important questions, however, the authors refrain from close investigation of key issues inherent in the notion of 'transition'.

Xavier Kadhani's piece exemplifies the problem. He has written a fluent and comprehensive survey of major economic developments since 1980. He pays comparatively little attention to the politics of economic policy, but still identifies questions which are crucial for any 'transformationist' project, or any political economy of transition. He notes on p 99, for example, that 'transformation' entered the political lexicon in the early '80's, but did not take on any clear operational meaning. The reader immediately asks why. What does this apparent paradox say about the presence of a strategy for transformation? Or were there a range of contending 'operational meanings', with none pre-eminent?

To cite a further example: reviewing the Transitional Development Plan on pp 101-02, Kadhani notes the absence of an effective planning mechanism, and asks, correctly, whether "it is meaningful to 'plan' an economy [in] which ownership and control of the productive assets reside in private hands, and foreign private hands in large measure at that". This gets at the essence of the problem: what options exist for transforming an underdeveloped economy which is, in the main, foreign-owned? Kadhani calls this an 'ideological' problem, and, having noted it, drops it — or, more

accurately, leaves it for the Five-Year Plan to answer. Yet it forces to the surface issues that call for but don't receive examination. These include the structural constraints (both external and domestic) on the development of an autonomous socialist economy; the range of economic options; and the political base for striving for any of these. His excellent summary, finally, of the embrace of orthodox fiscal policy, with the budget gradually taking priority as the main instrument of economic policy, only begs more questions. What political and economic forces led to this? Now that it has happened, what does it imply for any future 'transition'?

It's at this point — to return to an earlier theme — that the limitations of the book's introduction become apparent. Surely a more comprehensive conceptual framework, one which outlined the important theoretical and practical questions, would have placed a deserved priority on the problems Kadhani poses. Without that, the issues once raised are left dangling.

Two of the essays on agriculture I found to be best read as a single unit, with Clever Mubengegwi's "Continuity and Change in Agricultural Policy" preceding Sam Moyo's exploration of "The Land Question". This reverses the order of their appearance in the text. Mubengegwi's piece provides a necessary explanatory framework (namely, the essential continuity of agricultural policy) for Moyo's work. The latter essay provides an extensive and up-to-date summary of the main patterns of land usage in Zimbabwe, and emphasises the limited degree of real change in these since 1980. Moyo also notes the process of rural differentiation which is going on in Zimbabwe's Communal Areas, in the wake of agrarian reforms that have given greater priority to peasant agriculture. But, the essay on "the land question" has an oddly anonymous cast to it offering little explanation of the origins of the processes at work, which are themselves described well enough.

Mubengegwi's account of policy provides the necessary complement. His is one of the stronger essays in the book, and contains, unlike most others, some exploration of the implications for socialist transformation of the policy he analyses. This latter section is suggestive rather than complete, however, and could well have been elaborated. He hints at the critical question of what interests have supported an essential continuity with colonial policy, noting the role of the state as "mediator between the conflicting interests of two agrarian classes" (p 219). His concluding note about the difficulty of developing a strategy for socialising agriculture, for example, indicates the need to extend his own analysis: how much could a 'mediating' state be the instrument of transformation? He does suggest that the true picture might emerge in the next few years, when constitutional constraints have fallen away; equally, however, the logic of his own convincing argument suggests that the very continuity he identifies may well have settled the issue already.

Thomas Shopo's essay on "The Political Economy of Hunger", conversely, I found to be quite impenetrable. He asserts the need to reject a 'market-based approach' to the problem of hunger, and to establish an understanding of widespread hunger and ill health as integral parts of the process of capitalist accumulation — but never does so. On the contrary, the author seems to get so wrapped up in turning phrases (usually derogatory) about others' 'market-based' analyses that he never actually answers the questions he poses. Asking "what are the basic institutional causes of hunger?" for example, he decries the answers of agronomists, legal scientists and historians, lamenting their preoccupation with outmoded paradigms — but doesn't get around to a competing explanation. There is an obvious starting point, of course: any economic system that relies on the exploitation of labour power as a commodity to produce surplus value for those who control production will almost certainly generate hunger within the labouring class, whether it produces food and other agricultural products, or widgets. Thus, the fact of hunger in the midst of food surpluses is hardly to be wondered at. Shopo, however, cannot summon up an explanation even at this level of generality. What can one make of such an essay? It is pretentious in the extreme, and the irony is staggering when the author complains about a "failure to communicate" the real economic laws generating hunger.

Lloyd Sachikonwe and Brian Raftopoulos offer two well-written essays on labour. Sachikonwe's piece is important because it is the only one in the book to look at popular organisation — namely, the labour movement. Addressing the relations among state, capital, and unions, he draws attention to the historical and contemporary weakness of the trade union movement in Zimbabwe, and its vulnerable position vis-a-vis both capital and the state. He describes the struggle of the labour movement since 1980, and the modest advance achieved by the passing of the Labour Relations Act of 1985 — modest because its guarantees of workers' rights are hedged by its provisions for sweeping interventionist powers for the state.

The concluding paragraphs of his essay raise some important issues that warrant further exploration. From the selfevident premise that "a bourgeois state and its apparatus cannot implement socialist labour policies", Sachikonwe asserts that the appearance of a socialist labour movement will hinge on working-class political activism and leadership. The historical experience his own work describes, however, shows little past evidence of this. What would be required to encourage it in the future? What are the practical possibilities of doing so? And, in the absence of a mobilised working class, what prospects exist for any transformative project? Such questions highlight the implications of the history and relationships he presents, which this reader would have liked to see addressed in more detail.

Brian Raftopoulos surveys Zimbabwe's policy and practice in the field of

human resource development: manpower and education planning. He notes the achievements, especially the National Manpower Survey, which showed the extent of the pool of skills within Zimbabwe's black population, and schemes such as the artisanal upgrading programme which followed from this. He recognises (much more than is often the case with articles in this field) the centrality of private capital: so long as production is largely controlled by international capital, the demand for skills is shaped by its accumulative requirements. "Meaningful human resource planning" thus becomes very difficult (p 297); indeed, he might have gone further to say that any coherent strategy beyond Africanising current job hierarchies is probably impossible in the absence of any broader approach to transforming production. His piece does suggest, if only implicitly, that considerable resources exist to support such a strategy, if and as it is developed. Equally, however — and this begs the question not only of what a longer-term socialist human strategy would look like, but who would develop it — the Africanisation of essentially unchanged state structures has created a bureaucratically-based petty bourgeoisie which has little objective interest in a transformative strategy. The short-term achievement in manning the state may have diverted (if not pre-empted) longer-term avenues for change.

The book concludes with three essays related to social development. Rungano Zvobgo and Sam Agere survey the huge strides made in expanding and democratising the education and health care systems. Zvobgo also points to the sizeable social and financial problems that will follow, given the limited growth in the economy as a whole. These include both the problem of financing the enormous recurrent costs of vastly expanded systems, and the suffering which a generation of educated unemployed will sooner or later face. He might usefully have also underscored the difficulty of genuinely transforming education systems. Other nations' experience is instructive here. Fifteen years ago, for example, and facing similar problems, Zambia undertook a far-reaching examination of its own system (essentially the same as Zimbabwe's) and produced a detailed plan for sweeping reform. Its fate bears examining: it foundered on political opposition from a petty-bourgeois class not so very different from that identified by Mandaza and Raftopoulos.

Joyce Kazembe's essay on "The Women Issue", the last in the book, is a tidy little essay written in a confident and often colloquial style. She focuses her attention on the cluster of patriarchal relations historically embedded in *roora,* and on the opportunity for challenging these offered by recent legal changes, notably the Legal Age of Majority Act of 1982 and the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1985. Her essay could be strengthened by extending her final section, "Women and Politics" to include an examination of the problem of political organisation. What kind of movement would be needed for women to seize the opportunities afforded by legal change? What organisational

form might it take, and what are the practical possibilities for its development? Some comment on these issues — difficult ones, admittedly — would have rounded off the essay.

Unfortunately, Kazembe's essay is the only place in the text where gender is addressed. This is a serious shortcoming, no less so because it is so common. Most of the sectoral essays require an analysis of gender in the social relations they seek to portray; none provide it. The pieces on agriculture, for example, are incomplete without an exposition of the place of female labour within agricultural systems past and present. Current processes of rural class formation have an important and inescapable gender dimension, but none of the authors acknowledges it. Any analysis of labour and trade unions in their relation with capital, furthermore, should comment on the role of women as domestic labour (within both migrant labour systems and an urbanised working class) and as major actors in the so-called 'informal sector'. In light of the power of the feminist critique of both orthodox and Marxist paradigms, it is astonishing that a book published in the mid-1980's should bear so little evidence of that critique.

As a final comment, two stylistic points should be made. First, the text abounds with typographical errors. Usually, these are only irritants (column headings are transposed, etc) but sometimes they are more substantive in their implications: class 'factions' and 'fractions' get confused, for example. Secondly, most if not all essays would have been strengthened — their argument more easily grasped — by some editorial insistence on the authors presenting a thesis, or organising theme, at the beginning of each essay. Often, these appear only in concluding sections, thus asking the reader to reconstruct the logic of the piece.

In conclusion, we have an uneven book. The mere appearance of **The Political Economy of Transition** is an important political statement; its authors' commitment is thus to be commended. In addition, it presents a wealth of information on Zimbabwe today. For that reason alone it would be required reading. But this reader found that it largely failed to address many of the most interesting and critical questions related to transition; and this failure was all the more frustrating because most of those are flagged at one point or another in the text. This shortcoming is the more obvious, too, because of the large claims made for the book in its early pages — a more modest proclamation would have been in order.

Reviewed by Nick Orwood, Harare.

References

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