

Commentary

Mahmood Mamdani responds to Jean Copans' Review in *Transformation* 36

Citizen and Subject does not claim to provide a new and different history of Africa. Its domain is that of social science, not history. It is historically informed, but it does not provide a historical narrative. It is, rather, a book of political theory and political analysis. I find it necessary to state this at the very outset, lest readers of Jean Copans' review in *Transformation* 36 are led into thinking that the book under discussion is a work of history.

More specifically, Copans advances four related concerns. First, he is worried by what he thinks is the central concern of the book: a single-minded focus on a fixed idea, the separation of the rural and the urban. Second, he questions a method which he claims backs up 'a global hypothesis' with 'a limited number of examples', without providing a clear or convincing rationale justifying 'the choice of one or the other case study'. Third, he warns of the political dangers of a uni-causal explanation of the South African violence of 1989-94. And finally, he questions the methodological appropriateness of using Africa as a unit of analysis.

Colonial rule spanned centuries. Its final phase unfolded in equatorial Africa, the middle bulge that lay between the Sahara and the Limpopo. This was the part of the continent colonised in the wake of the Berlin conference. It is the post-Berlin phase of colonialism that I refer to as 'late colonialism'. For students of colonialism, the period merits a specific identification because it saw a major shift in the form of colonial rule. Not surprisingly, it was the strongest of the colonial powers, Britain, which summed up the core lesson of colonial rule and implemented it as a reform. That reform in the mode of rule went by the benign name 'indirect rule'.

Jean Copans is not altogether wrong when he states: '*Citizen and Subject* is the book of one and only one idea'. Yet he errs in identifying this idea with the claim that 'African history is explained by the gap between rural

and urban'. The riddle that inspired the book is not the history of contemporary Africa, but its political crisis. The clue I offer is not the gap between the rural and the urban. My focus is broader. By underlining the institutional legacy of colonial rule as reproduced through an ongoing dialectic of struggle and reform, I seek to draw attention to the nature of the state forged through the African colonial experience. It is my misfortune that Copans is unable or unwilling to acknowledge the centrality of this point.

The shift from direct to indirect rule needs to be seen as crystallising the lessons of colonial rule from the standpoint of colonial power. The experiential source of that wisdom was the confrontation between the coloniser and the colonised. Direct rule was brazenly arrogant. It claimed that all 'native tradition' was backward and needed to be eradicated. From this point of view, the cultural slate had to be wiped clean as prelude to a new historical trajectory, one that would hold the promise of modernity and progress. That development had necessarily to lead to the westernisation of colonial society. The shift to indirect rule was a move away from this dogma to a more analytical appreciation of the colonised, of their historicity and culture. It was an appreciation of tradition as a contradictory mix, full of promise as well as danger. It was at the same time an attempt to identify and tap the agency of that section amongst the colonised whose version of custom would most buttress alien authority, while masking it as indigenous.

In seeking to harness authoritarian possibilities in 'native' custom, colonial powers did not so much re-define custom directly as privilege one amongst several customary institutions. In a context in which there were multiple institutions with a customary claim – such as gender institutions, age groups, clan assemblies, hereditary ('customary') alongside bureaucratic (state-appointed) chiefs – colonial powers privileged a single institution, the bureaucratic chief, as the 'customary' authority whose version of custom would henceforth be enforced as law.

I termed the form of state forged through the African colonial experience as 'bifurcated'. The bifurcation was double: between the rural and the urban, and between different ethnicities in the rural.

When Copans protests that I have absolutised the separation of the rural and the urban – 'we can not separate civil and tribal society and ignore the gendered linkages which define African societies and cultures' – my response, once again, is that he has missed the point. My claim was never that the rural was detached from the urban in all spheres: cultural, social, economic, and

political. In fact, it seems to me that the general trend was precisely the opposite: the flow of communication and goods and people and the interdependence between the urban and rural increased through the colonial period. My claim was rather more specific. It was a claim confined to the political sphere: that the rigid separation of the rural and the urban, as of one ethnicity from another, was a state-enforced separation. It was a characteristic of how political power came to be organised in the indirect rule state. This double separation was all the more dramatic since it went against the overall trend. All Copans does is to highlight one aspect of this general trend, the gendered aspect, but without addressing the counter-trend that the bifurcated state attempted to set in motion.

My understanding of the bifurcated state rested on three propositions. One, it created two distinct forms of authority, one civic, the other ethnic. Two, this separation turned on a double distinction, that between the rural and the urban, and that between different ethnicities. Finally, the distinction became a basis for two different legal systems, one civil and the other customary. While civil law spoke the language of rights – and limited their guarantee to racially defined ‘citizens’ – ‘customary’ law spoke the language of tradition, which it claimed was only ethnic, and only defined by the patriarchal authority of senior men.

While colonial political economy set into motion both labour and its products into multiple markets – local, regional and even global – the colonial state tried to pin the ‘natives’ into a series of separate ethnically-defined containers, each under the supervision of its own ethnic Native Authority. This institutional reality gave rise to a series of tensions: between the individual and the community, between rights and culture, as between the polity and the economy. Rather than creating a polity that was a placid super structural reflection of the economy, late colonialism generated an acute tension between the economy and the polity.

I argued that it is not possible to understand the anti-colonial struggle without a focus on this tension. I also argued that the success of militant nationalism lay in building linkages between different kinds of protest, thereby linking not only the urban and rural but also different nationalities, in the process exposing the narrow base on which the institution of the Native Authority was based. Key to militant nationalism was the ability to link the urban and the rural. This was the great achievement of the single party, such as the CPP in Ghana, TANU in Tanganyika or PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau. Not surprisingly, the core cadreship of the single party came from those who

straddled the urban and the rural, such as Nkrumah's 'verandah boys' and Cabral's 'boatmen.' I do not have the space here to summarise the argument as it affects the post-colonial period. Suffice it to point out that I explain the diversity of outcomes on the basis of an inter-action between two different kinds of strategies, of state reform and popular resistance, as each seeks to articulate two key relationships: between the rural and the urban, and between different nationalities.

The second half of *Citizen and Subject* focuses on case studies of resistance. Once again, its point is not to offer a history of resistance. The focus is on two case studies: one of rural protest in Uganda and Tanzania, and the other of urban protest in South Africa. I do not justify the studies as representative, why I make no attempt to cite parallels elsewhere on the continent. My justification is that these studies have a paradigmatic importance. Precisely because they represent not the norm but the most advanced struggles for reform, they allow us to see in bold the tensions introduced by the structure of power in the anatomy of resistance. As most advanced cases of rural and urban protest in contemporary Africa, they allow us to problematise both kinds of struggles.

Finally, I wish to face the question of method raised by Copans. 'To view Africa as a significant social arena of comparison', claims Copans, 'is an ideological choice and a methodological blunder.' Why? Because, he says, 'the historical unity of Black Africa is a colonial chimera' and because 'social history in the last fifteen years has tried to draw another picture'.

Citizen and Subject neither claims nor disavows a unity of equatorial Africa in the pre-colonial period. Its focus is the colonial and the post-colonial period. At no point does the book claim Africa to be the most appropriate unit of analysis for every scholarly endeavour, whatever its disciplinary domain. In fact, I imply the reverse when I state that notions of South African exceptionalism are most convincing when they seek to explain economic trends, and the least convincing when offering a political analysis of apartheid as a form of the state. When I offer Africa as a fruitful unit of analysis, it is with specific reference to understanding the post-colonial state. From this point of view, the discovery that the historical unity of Black Africa was a colonial chimera should not be reason to dismiss it but, rather, to take it all the more seriously – presuming, of course, that one is not ideologically predisposed against it. For the relevant point here is not one of fact or prejudice, truth or lie. The point is that, when held as a conviction by power, prejudice gets embedded in institutions, and is reproduced as institutional ideology. The concern of my book is with one such institutional legacy from the colonial period, the legacy of indirect rule, of decentralised despotism as a form of the state.

I claim that this form of the state was not specific to British colonialism, but that it came to inspire reforms in the mode of colonial rule in the domain of other European powers, including apartheid South Africa. As a self-confessed 'basically French-Africanist-oriented' scholar, I had hoped Jean Copans would have addressed the relevant argument from my book: that the shift in French colonial policy in equatorial Africa from 'assimilation' to 'association' made for a version of indirect rule. Also, as one interested in social history, I had hoped he would take seriously my claim that the structure of power framed the parameters within which resistance unfolded.

As Copans indicates, the question of the form of the state is of more than scholarly importance. This is because institutions of rule undergird and reproduce specific political identities. The bifurcated state reproduced two distinct political identities: race and ethnicity. 'Race' tended to unify beneficiaries of power whereas ethnicity tended to fragment its victims. It is in doing so that power framed the starting points of resistance. I argued that race and ethnicity function both as ideologies of domination and as ideologies of resistance. At the same time, I thought it a mistake to make a distinction between ideologies of domination and ideologies of resistance only to dismiss the former and make the latter available for an embrace. Race and ethnicity can neither be dismissed nor be embraced—uncritically. As ideologies of resistance, each needs to be problematised. If the politics of civil society and Native Authority reform on the African continent teaches us one lesson, it is about the dilemma of a resistance that uncritically accepts an uni-dimensional identity from power. Where the population on the ground is multi-racial and multi-ethnic, uni-racial or uni-ethnic definitions, of power as of resistance, are bound to trigger racial and ethnic conflict.

My critique of how ANC-allied forces addressed the violence of 1987-94 should be seen in this context. Rather than a claim that this violence has a single explanation, it was an endeavour to underscore a single political lesson against the admittedly complex backdrop of the violence on the Reef. That lesson is the importance of recognizing the legitimacy of differences in the camp of resistance, and of finding democratic ways of addressing these. It is in the absence of such a democratic practice that differences turn into antagonisms and nurture the ground for Third Force-type activities. Without a grasp of this lesson, it is going to be difficult to forge a democratic link between the urban and rural, a starting point necessary to any viable strategy of reform of the indirect rule state. This remains true of South Africa, as it does of equatorial Africa.