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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1f93p9g9>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 8(2)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Bolnick, Joel

Publication Date

1978

DOI

10.5070/F782017386

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AN EXAMINATION OF CLASS AND CLASS CONFLICT IN NEO-COLONIAL STATES

by

Joel Bolnick

Neo-Marxists who have tackled the problem of underdevelopment have generally agreed that the division of the world into nation states with unequal power is not a purely superstructural problem, but that it is something strongly influenced by and strongly influencing class interests. Much neo-Marxist analysis, however, has been crude ideological, and inadequate. It is with this in mind that I want to turn to an explanation of class location and class relations in the neo-colonial state. In order to avoid crude Marxist determinism and in order to get beyond the level of mere critique, I will constantly attempt to explain that the location of groups, and their relations to one another, is at the levels of the relations of production, and within a specific social formation, in terms of the mode of intervention of these relations within the three articulated instances (economic, political, ideological) comprising formation.

Now neo-Marxists such as Paul Baran, have followed Marx with little deviation, by emphasizing the destruction of traditional socio-economic systems by the emergence of the capitalist process of production. Baran explains, however, that when capitalism began to apply itself to the presently underdeveloped world, the developed countries did not in fact show to the less developed ones 'the image of their own future'; as Marx had predicted. Indeed a powerful impetus to the development of capitalism was provided, but this development 'was forcibly shunted off its normal course, distorted and crippled to suit the purposes of Western capitalism.'¹

And the question with which most neo-Marxist theorists have preoccupied themselves stems directly from this falsified piece of Marxist prophecy. For what reasons have 'third world' countries failed to develop as the developed countries did after the capitalist process of production began to emerge from the traditional social formation?

Most neo-Marxists suggest that the answer can be found in the fact that bourgeois classes of the periphery countries, which are fostered in the colonial era, form an almost unbreakable alliance with foreign capital, thereby assuming a continued exploitation, a continued transfer abroad of extracted surpluses

after colonial rule has ended.

Underdeveloped neo colonial societies, then, are those societies that are no longer colonies of the capitalist powers, but are controlled for them by a local bourgeois class, the comprador class. Neo-colonialism, therefore, is a system whereby the mass population of a country is dominated by foreign capital, which is mediated and in some cases administered by certain domestic class interests which, themselves, have been cultivated and sustained by foreign capital. In turn, this vigorously promoted, small, privileged, domestic class ensures the steady growth of foreign capital in the domestic economy, and the intensification of an unequal distribution of wealth.

Imperialism, in the form of merchant capital, functioning on the basis of unequal exchange was responsible for the initial extraction of surpluses from the periphery countries. With the historical development of capital, however, new relations of production, based of course on capital, which facilitated more successful extraction of surplus, has to be created. For imperialism one of the most important aspects of these new arrangements was the establishment of a new social class which had a personal interest in organising and facilitating economic activities which favoured foreign capital. So it was that the economies of the underdeveloped states, with the important exceptions of China, Vietnam, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau, became externally oriented, with sharp contradictions between different domestic groups, and very strong liaison between the comprador classes and the overseas suppliers.

One of the consequences of the comprador-imperialist alignment is that the greater part of the non-agricultural capital lives outside the country. The fact that foreign interests in post-agricultural capital lives outside the country. The fact that foreign interests in post-colonial states have to be represented on behalf of, imperialist concerns has significant implications for the neo-colonial social structures. This process of representation is facilitated by the foreign capitalists, by means of employing a substantial bureaucracy, which is itself originally foreign, but later becomes increasingly domestic, so that by the time the colonial forces withdraw, a section of the comprador elite is set up as a higher bureaucracy. This does not apply only to economic sector of the neo-colonial state, but also to the administration.

For neo-Marxists all social formations 'are concrete structures organised and characterised by a dominant mode of production which forms the apex of a complex set of subordinate modes.'² Accordingly, any attempt at class location and class analysis must begin with the mode of production within a social

formation. But within the various neo-colonial social formations, there exist, not just one mode of production, but various residual modes under the dominance of capitalism. This means that the existence of pure classes, as located at the abstract level of the pure mode of production, will not exist and therefore:

*Class analysis for a (neo-colonial) society must ... proceed from the identification and analysis of the co-existing modes of production, and from an investigation of the process of interaction between the modes.*³

It can be asserted as a working proposition that capitalism in its 'peripheral' or 'underdeveloped' aspect tends, far less than its developed manifestation to destroy or absorb pre-capitalist modes. Suffice to say that this partially due to the nature of the forms of capital historically dominant in neo-colonial states (particularly in Africa), that is merchant capital, and the nature of its articulation with the pre-existing pre-capitalist mode of production.

The nature of class location is accordingly, in this situation of relatively undistorted, although dominated modes, much more complex than in a situation of increased distortion or domination or absorption. What I am attempting to do, therefore is to try to assess the nature of groups in dominated modes, and their relation to the social formation, and also to assess precisely which groups exist as potentially revolutionary social forces.

Following Geoffrey Kay, however, it can be held that the dominant mode of production in neo-colonial society is no longer an essentially primitive or peasant one, but has become partially but nevertheless considerably industrialised. In other words the periphery regions of the capitalist network have become firm regional centres for international capital. Furthermore, the characteristic of industrial capital as it functions in the peripheral or regional centres, is that it is capital-intensive. And it is capital-intensive because by being capital-intensive, it is less dependent on wage labour, and therefore guarantees the largest surpluses for international capital. In order that this process is facilitated, there is an urgent need for the establishment of a higher bureaucracy within the comprador controlled state apparatus.

This bureaucratic elite, then, controls and expands the modern industrial mode of production in close partnership with western capital. Of course, with foreign capital intent on

accumulation and the bureaucracy, as a social apparatus linked to the comprador class fraction, eager for its fringe benefits, the peasant and working classes are completely overlooked. It follows, that the bureaucratic arm of the comprador regime must become the mediator between the enormous foreign interest and the great mass of the domestic, exploited population. The image is parasitical, elitist, and chauvanistic, and inevitably leads to conflict between the higher bureaucracy of the comprador regime, and the masses of the population.

It is obvious that an analysis of the chrySTALLISATION of the comprador class in neo-colonial states is as relatively unambiguous as its actual chrySTALLISATION. What about the class structure of the masses? Is it equally homogeneous and unambiguous, or is it far more complex than the structure of the foreign created and controlled comprador stratum?

Often, when attempts are made to locate groups of wage and salary earners in Post Colonial States, there is a tendency to introduce the Marxism notion of the 'labour aristocracy' in order to understand fragmentations within the proletarian class formation. By introducing the concept of a 'labour aristocracy', neo-Marxists believe that they can explain the way in which class alliances and class differentiations become manifest within a social formation that is dominated by multi-national investment.

The basis of the problematic becomes the revolutionary or conservative potential of fully proletarianised workers, semi proletarianised workers, peasant producers, etc., within the framework of possible alliances.

I would like to draw some distinctions, at this juncture, between three differentiated groups within a neo-colonial social formation, and then to attempt to identify certain criteria for locating the groups with regard to other groups, as well as the social formation. In the process I intend to refute the claim for the existence of 'labour aristocracies' in all but a handful of neo-colonial states, and thereby show the real revolutionary potential of the working classes of the underdeveloped world.

Following Poulantzas, I want to distinguish the following three groups as useful categories for the location of classes within the social formation.

a) *Social Categories* are groups which, by virtue of their relation to the relation to the relations of production, and the reflection of the relation at other levels of the social formation are capable of becoming social forces. Examples:

of these categories are:

- i) the bureaucracy, in terms of its relation to the state apparatus.
 - ii) intellectuals, in terms of their relation to the ideological instance of the social formation.
- b) *Class Fractions* are sections of an actual class, which by virtue of their particular relationship to the levels of the social formations are capable of acting as social forces.
- c) *Social Strata* are groups which indicate the effects of a combination of modes of production, or are themselves residual classes from a dominated mode of production. They are not potential social forces, in that their relationship to the non-economic (the political legal, ideological) levels of the social formation, is weak and insufficient.

I would make the tentative suggestion that a class fraction must have its relationship to the relations of production reflected at all levels of the social formation, whereas a social category need only be reflected at the level of one instance.

How then are we to know what particular groups of the neo-colonial proletariat exist, in regard to the Poulantzian categories outlined above?

I would suggest that a group may exist as a social category, class or class fraction, and thereby a social force, if and only if the relationship to the superstructural levels (or a superstructural level in the case of a social category) of the social formation are overdetermined.

If a group relationship to these levels is underdetermined, that is, not reflected, or asserted, then that group is a social stratum, and cannot become social force. And since a specific social formation consisting of the three instances is predicated upon a dominated mode of production, it can be concluded that groups which are the effect of, or a residual class from, dominated modes of production, have this underdetermined existence.

At this juncture, I would like to explain precisely how this process of classes becoming underdetermined has occurred within neo-colonial states, which is after all what I am talking about when I refer to a social formation predicated upon a dominated mode of production.

Now as I have mentioned, in the neo-colonial world, two (sometimes more) modes of production operate concurrently;

namely the capitalist and peasant modes of production. The two modes of production are intimately linked. Firstly the peasant modes of production depend on the capitalist mode of production for markets and for wage labour incomes which supplement peasant production itself. On the other hand the capitalist mode of production depends on peasant production for two main reasons. Firstly 'competition for work permits the capitalist to deduct from the price of labour power that which the family earns from its own little garden or field.'⁴ Secondly the peasant sector of the productive process provides agricultural non-manufactured commodities at very low prices. Furthermore the peasant mode of production tends to absorb the expanding population, thereby continuing to make cheap labour easily available.

What is obvious is that the concurrent existence of a dominant mode of production and other pre-capitalist modes of production within a social formation must lead to a considerable fragmentation of the working class. That is the major reason why working classes in neo-colonial states invariably comprise of various strata (proletariats, migrants, peasants) all having different levels of revolutionary potential. Since the influence of foreign capital is largely responsible for the partiality of the capitalist mode of production, the general lack of revolutionary action in the history of most Post-colonial states is not the result of the lack of a class consciousness on the part of the working class, but is the result of structural differentiations, artificially and inadequately created by the global capitalist process of production, and sustained by the ruling comprador classes.

Furthermore, because of the fact that the comprador classes enter into joint venture with foreign capital, and because of the fact that industrial capital is primarily capital-intensive so that population growth is accompanied by a rise in unemployment, the bargaining position of the wage labour force is incredibly weak. Even where trade unions and other worker organisations are effective in politicising their followers, it is common to find their power being drastically curbed by actions of the comprador government. Inevitably the share of wages in national income declines, and profits which are mostly extracted by foreign capital tend to rise.

The problem of organising and politicising labour is made even more difficult by many other factors, all of them dependent on the existing modes of production in the different neo-colonial states. What is more, when all other attempts and methods to fragment and divide the working class fail, the comprador regimes are never reluctant to turn to institutional repression and violence. The reproduction of underdevelopment by

neo-colonialism gives rise to noticeable forms of class struggle which are uncontrollable by indirect and covert forms of domination, so that cruder and more direct forms have to be used.

Hence underdevelopment under neo-colonialism implies, not only limits to growth but also a growing polarisation of classes as the exploitation of the masses necessarily becomes more intense.

In order to avert class conflict, foreign capital can attempt an internal redistribution of income in order to expand production and wage employment, thus accommodating the working classes, and neutralising some of their basic grievances. Any substantial redistribution, however, is at the expense of domestic capital, and hence of the comprador regime. Neo-colonial underdevelopment, therefore, seems bound to disturb the close relationship between comprador and imperialist interests, as a result of the prospect of conflict between the domestic masses and the domestic ruling classes. In order to avert a disturbance of the relationship between metropole and satellite ruling classes, political polarisation must be prevented. In many cases the masses have elevated the struggle to such a revolutionary level that the comprador regime must make full use of all the repressive apparatuses at its disposal.

Thus the stability of so many neo-colonial regimes depend upon the brutal functioning of repressive apparatuses which are manipulated by a cornered comprador class. It is mystifying to conclude from the supposed harmony of these states that the working classes are hopelessly fragmented and therefore lack revolutionary potential. The working class in neo-colonial states are significant social forces, having vast revolutionary potential. The history of revolutions in the neo-colonial world has reached a stage of inhibition, not because of the reactionism or lack of solidarity of the working class but because of the effectiveness of the repressiveness of the imperialist-backed comprador regime.

Footnotes:

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For Marx.
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Joel Bolnick has a B.A. Honours degree from the University of Witwaterland, Johannesburg, South Africa. He was politically active in his country, and was detained and held in solitary confinement in June of 1977. In September 1977, he was forced to go into exile. In the U.S.A., he has given support and solidarity to the Black Consciousnes Movement by working with the International University Exchange Fund.