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**Considering Africa’s Agrarian Questions**

Of all the world’s regions today, sub-Saharan Africa is seen as most emblematic of ‘crisis’, ‘disaster’, and ‘tragedy’.¹ All that can go wrong in the human condition seems to be concentrated with particular bleakness in this region: the mutually reinforcing dynamics of poverty and insecurity, of endemic and vicious (‘tribal’) warfare with its displacements and other brutalisations of whole populations, of extreme climatic uncertainty and environmental destruction, of the ravages of HIV/AIDS. These appear to combine the effects of the worst of nature and the worst of society; the only beneficiaries of comprehensive economic, social and political ‘breakdown’ are politicians and warlords predatory on an anonymous mass of victims.

Such perceptions build on a long history of narratives of Africa with their more or less explicit racism, and give international bureaucrats, academics and journalists carte blanche² to promote their

¹ ‘Africa’ in the scope of this article refers only to sub-Saharan Africa. Here, I partly draw on, and seek to connect and develop, ideas presented in Bernstein, 1996 and 2000, and Bernstein and Woodhouse, 2001. This article was submitted to *Historical Materialism* and accepted for publication in 2002. I have not updated it for its eventual publication in this special issue, but in several subsequent papers have addressed issues of the politics of land in Africa, both more generally and with special reference to events in Zimbabwe. Bernstein 2003a, 2004, forthcoming.

² The pun is intended.
diagnoses of, and prescriptions for, this ‘darkest’ of continents. If, historically, imperialism ‘acted on Africa with an overt contempt even more marked than its record in other regions of the “non-white” world’, Africa today represents a kind of ideological free-fire zone in which discursive insult is piled upon, and helps to reproduce, the injuries of material existence. Africa is also the region of the South most vulnerable – as laboratory or playground – to the latest fashions in neoliberal experiment with structural adjustment and state reform. If the agendas of the World Bank and others to ‘develop’ and ‘democratise’ Africa on liberal-capitalist lines manifest an ideological fantasy, the responses to them of nationalism and populism – with their own fantasies in defence of African states and peasantries respectively – are hardly adequate.

What sort of alternative analysis can historical materialism provide? This article considers elements of an answer to this question, which requires alertness to assumptions and procedures that idealise – or ‘stereotype’, in Lenin’s term – the mechanisms and forms of capitalist development. This is a common charge by Marxists against bourgeois theories of capitalism and its development, but a charge from which Marxism has no guarantee of immunity. It is all the more salient because different notions of capitalism are ubiquitously deployed, explicitly or implicitly, to explain Africa’s failures of development, and specifically of agrarian development, as the effects of a lack of ‘enough’, ‘full’ or ‘proper’ capitalism. In this paper, this is illustrated first through other approaches to Africa’s agrarian questions before proceeding to some contributions of materialist analysis. The discussion assumes a schematic periodisation of four phases of modern African history: colonial conquest and consolidation, 1880s–1930s; late colonialism (and its

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3 Bernstein 1990, p. 28.
4 And resistant as well as vulnerable to the interventions of those who would transform it in the image of liberal peace, development, ‘good governance’ and so forth, which its social realities persist in offending.
5 Albeit fantasy with material, and often deadly, consequences. Cooper observed of the Vichy government’s ten year ‘metropolitan-directed and financed development plan’ for its African colonies that ‘What was visionary about Vichy was pure fantasy, and what wasn’t fantasy was brutal’ (Cooper 1997, p. 68).
6 Moreover, such notions of capitalism (at its ‘fullest’, hence best) point to that terrain shared by certain Marxist (for example, Second-International) and bourgeois conceptions of development, modernisation, and the like. Inter alia, this is a particular problem in understanding more generally the place(s) of ‘peasants’ (agricultural petty commodity producers) in modern capitalism. Bernstein 2000.