Review Essay

THE AFRICAN STATE AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS


Development efforts and the crisis of the African state have drawn the attention of policy makers and scholars alike. One such area of Africa’s political economy that has drawn intense attention is the food crisis. The literature and debate has been very diverse with scholars arguing, expectedly, from different ideological and theoretical perspectives. While there is a general agreement on the existence of the crisis, scholars differ on the causes and solutions. For example, some view it from the modernization perspective while some think the Marxian approach offers the best explanations. The two books under review fall into this categorization. The editors and most of the contributors of _Coping with Africa’s Food Crisis_ argue from the Western liberal perspective. William Graf’s _The Nigerian State_, on the other hand, is a radical, albeit, Marxian, analysis of the Nigerian state. While both books differ on the prescriptions for the African crisis, the existence and enormity of the crisis is acknowledged by both.

The purpose of _Coping with Africa’s Food Crisis_ is to document Africa’s food problem (why and how it has reached a crisis stage) and the responses to the crisis by different African states. The book provides the reader with case studies from some selected countries in Africa. The editors start off with a general survey and analysis of the food problem common to most African countries. In the introduction, the editors give the general explanations for what they call the “food politics,” particularly the decline of food production on the continent since the 1970s before reaching the current crisis stage in the 1980s. These include the politics of food prices, the politics of food supplies, the politics of food scarcities and the cycle of food response and reaction.

For example, Chazan and Shaw show that a major problem of the African
food crisis is that of "the inability of large segments of the population to pay the inflated price of a square meal" (p. 4). With the aid of some tables, they argue forcefully that "Whereas abundant food was frequently available at reasonable prices two decades ago, the reduction in food production and the growing dependence on imports (sic) has put many items beyond the reach of the average citizen" (p. 4). The prohibitive high price is complicated further by lopsided food distribution patterns. As "dependence on imports grew and food prices rose, access to supplies became noticeably circumscribed. Governments tightened their control over the movement of food, increased their monopolies over essential commodities and attempted to centralize distribution processes." In general, women and the youths are the most affected. Another group that is neglected in the distribution network are the rural dwellers and the urban poor. This is especially common with imported food items. When the imports come, they are shared mainly among the upper and urban middle class who work for government. While there is abundance among the few elites and sometimes the working middle class, the urban poor and rural dwellers only see the movement of vehicles conveying the items without having the opportunity to touch, let alone buy them. Even foods produced by the rural farmers are usually purchased in bulk by government for distribution/sale (sometimes at subsidized prices) to the elite group in the urban centers.

The variation in this food crisis is the subject of the comparative cases. Many of the cases focus on African state responses. Of particular relevance are the chapters by Lewis on Cameroon, Good on Zambia and MacGaffey on Zaire because of their focus on the local responses. In these states, government put undue pressure on the local communities to produce, only to be drained for the urban elite. The overconcentration on cash crop, for example, cocoa in Cameroon, Ghana and the Ivory Coast have greatly reduced food production. This is despite the great fluctuations in world prices of these commodities. A major theme in most of the essays is the assumption that the African food crisis is principally caused by (bad) government policies. This is an elaboration of the Robert Bates thesis on agricultural policies in Africa which he had consistently advocated and defended. This is particularly seen in the general overview by Jon Kraus on Ghana and Micheal Lofchie on Tanzania. Kenneth Good's analysis of Zambia has a similar bent. What is not clear from the case studies is whether good policies alone will always produce success stories. Recent criticisms of Robert Bates show this is not always the case.

Even the conclusion by Michael Ford and Frank Holmquist in the Chazan and Shaw edited volume tends to show this exception to Bates's assumptions. In a well-reasoned and argued essay on the crisis of the African state, Ford and Holmquist contend that the major problem of the crisis is access to food, which in their view means access to political power, especially by the rural majority who have been depoliticized. Citing the U.S. example (where there is hunger and poverty amidst abundant, and sometimes surplus food production), Ford and