3 Ivory Coast: Libertarian Growth without Equality

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Ivorian miracle did not begin in the 1950s by waving a magic wand. Rather it was created by men acting within the sweep of 20th century Ivorian history. In our detailed analysis in this chapter we will examine how the miracle was nurtured, how it matured and, finally, how it deformed Ivorian development. First of all, however, we shall be concerned with its birth. More specifically, in order to account for the miracle, we will identify certain events and conditions in Ivorian history prior to 1960, the year of independence from France. Exceptional growth implies the presence of exceptional circumstances, that is, conditions especially present in the Ivory Coast but conspicuously absent elsewhere in francophone West Africa. Two such exceptional conditions which we will describe were (a) the Ivorian uniqueness as a French colony and (b) the origins of the planter bourgeoisie, a stabilising force from the 1950s to the present.

A search for uniqueness in exceptional conditions is a speculative exercise in retrodiction. We are seeking to identify historical circumstances responsible for the birth of the Ivorian miracle. Implicitly we are supposing that had these circumstances been absent, all else being equal, the miracle would not have been born. Let us be reminded that such retrodiction lies on the speculative outer fringe of the science of political economy.

Among the French colonies of West Africa, the Ivory Coast was unique in a number of ways. First and foremost, it was unique in being a neglected colony. Colonial rule came late, in 1893, in comparison with neighboring colonies. The development of Ivorian underdevelopment through colonialism (to borrow a term from André Gunder Frank) was short and superficial, historically speaking. This sparsely populated colony provided neither an interesting market for French exports nor a large labor force for colonial agriculture, in comparison with other colonies. The population reached only 2.7 million by 1955. Lacking a natural deep-water harbor, the shipment of colonial goods to France was cumbersome.
Lacking navigable rivers to the hinterland, colonial economic activities were limited to the coastal and tropical zones to the south.

On the face of it, Gunter Frank’s thesis on underdevelopment seems applicable to Ivorian exceptionalism. He contends that the development of a satellite or colony is greatest when the exploitative links with the metropolis are weakest. The French metropolis appears to have had especially weak exploitative ties with the colonial Ivory Coast, at least in comparison with neighboring colonies.

The one significant change occurring during colonial rule was the introduction of cash crops. Even this remained limited in scope until after the Second World War.

European organization of the timber industry started early in this century in the Ivory Coast; European cocoa started about 1920; coffee planting after 1930; banana planting about 1933. As for the relative importance of each of these cash crops, until 1925 the main contributions to the French economy were timber and palm oil; cocoa became increasingly important after 1920 but was bypassed by coffee after the Second World War. By this time, cocoa and coffee constituted an average of 90% of the value of exports from the Ivory Coast.

Though late and limited, the colonial bondage in the form of cash crops was to have a profound influence on Ivorian socio-political structure.

The other exceptional characteristic of the present-day Ivory Coast, with its roots in colonial soil, is the socio-political stability. Just as continuity describes the transition to independence, evolution describes the change since then. In contrast to the turbulent Argentine history between 1950 and 1976, punctuated by coups d'état and shifting class alliances, the Ivory Coast experienced relative tranquility and continuity. Let us look briefly at the colonial origins of the Ivorian planter bourgeoisie, the social class largely responsible for this second exceptionalism.

Though never numerically very great, the European planters predominated in export agriculture when cash crops were first introduced. European plantations were large and required African labor while the African plantations at first were very small and relied upon family labor. The number of African coffee and cocoa farmers grew from 40,000 in 1944 to 200,000 in 1959. Over the same period the European share in coffee production fell from 55 per cent to 6 per