The Worm in the Bud: The Divided African State

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Review Article

Citizen and Subject:
Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism
by Mahmood Mamdani
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The discourse of the African renaissance, diplomatic initiatives in Southern Africa and beyond, and money-making strategies by South African companies making explorations of the interior have brought the relationship between the peoples at the southern tip of the continent and those of the land mass to the north into the matter of politics and business. The Clinton visit, and his curious punting of opportunities in Africa as a new profitable investment opportunity, brings to life the key issues of SA relationships with the rest of the continent as South Africa appears the centrepiece of international diplomatic initiatives, curiously elevated by American support and intervention. Behind the public blandishments of manifest destiny and economic opportunity lie the root motives of power and money and the accompanying manifestations of familiarity, arrogance and xenophobia.

Apart from the students of foreign policy and specialists of various types, there are few real authorities on Africa in South Africa. Compared to the experiences of those from Europe and the United States, few South African exiles living in the continent have returned with a fluent intellectual interest in the African continent as a whole. The movement of ideas and intellectual exchange over the divide between South Africa and equatorial Africa is perilously confined as the political and economic landscape shifts. The disciplines and focus of studies in South African universities in previous years—with courses such as African Studies and Comparative African Government and Administration—that previously attracted those with a radical interest in continental transformation, with all their evident limitations, have somehow withered on the vine. In many ways African Studies has to be created anew in South Africa, and this is reflected in the current academic controversies over the content and textual basis of African Studies at UCT. Mamdani has conducted path-breaking work in the development of an African Studies which integrates our country and the continent, and simultaneously locates Africa within the global context. His work has been both

theoretical and practical; he has written on population control and the politics of Uganda where he served with distinction on the Local Government Commission.

The intellectual claims of *Citizen and Subject* are broad and all-embracing, and his work quite explicitly carves out a new work from the material of the various histories and destinies of African countries. Mamdani highlights many of the convolutions of the post-apartheid period; its timid advances, the broad mood of acquiescence in a fait accompli among many weary of its potential internal wars, and its ambiguity and crass confusion in relation to the rule of people in the rural areas which is undoubtedly the least reformed aspect of the new period. Mamdani is helpful in going beyond the racial dilemma to point to the real nature of the contest for democracy, the actual obstacles, and provides a thorough examination of the various cul-de-sacs along which advances have been attempted. But his approach does have limitations, principally his identification of South African exceptionalism with political economy; this identification allows Mamdani to jettison the methodological perspective of political economy, a perspective that I believe provides a valuable resource for combating South African exceptionalism.

the things that bind

Citizen and Subject clearly marks out the intellectual antecedents of the current controversies as Mamdani straddles many divides; those between the disciplines of law, politics, cultural studies and sociology; between divisions of African Studies and what he demarcates as South African Studies; and between colonial and post-colonial forms of rule and resistance. Mamdani is a writer who refuses to be trapped in the conservative logic of 'race relations' and the false paradigms of comparative colonial practice, but cuts through the thickets of colonial discourse to reveal the dynamics of divide and rule in a way that illuminates that which previously appeared hazy and obscure. He argues that the majority of Africa's peoples are locked into a peculiar subjection to traditional authorities refurbished and reinforced by colonial practice of decades. This authority remains unreformed by post-independence governments.

In an unusual introduction to the book Mamdani presents his approach in terms of a specifically political methodology that emphasises his preoccupation with the nature of the African state and its practices, particularly in the rural areas. Indeed he rejects the approach of South African Studies which he sees as based fundamentally on political economy. His foundational approach is not theorised at length, it is simply asserted and then defended through an exhaustive examination of various case studies from the continent, effortlessly moving between the literature and experience of Uganda, South Africa, and other countries. Mamdani argues that South African Studies is based on the prejudice of South African exceptionalism, and that it is largely 'economistic' with an overdrawn preoccupation with exploitation that minimises analysis of the form of rule of the African majority.

> With its eye on an irreversible process of proletarianization, it sees rural areas as rapidly shrinking in the face of a unilinear trend. Because it treats

> rural areas as largely residual, it is unable fully to explain apartheid as a form of the state. It is only from an economistic perspective—one that highlights levels of industrialization and proletarianization one-sidedly—that South African exceptionalism makes sense. Conversely, the same exceptionalism masks the colonial nature of the South African experience (27)[1].

South Africa, he continues, is characterised from what he terms a 'labour perspective' by 'semi-industrialization, semi-proletarianization, semi-urbanization, capped by a strong civil society'. For all his spurning of the 'labour' perspective he walks sure-footedly through the writing on trade unionism. But rather than engaging with this tradition critically on its own terms, Mamdani chooses to highlight the 'native question', the conditions of rule over the African people, as the point of departure. The commonality between South Africa and the rest of Africa, he argues cogently, lies in the bifurcated state which characterises both. This monstrosity did not arise as a pure idea out of the mind of the colonial oppressor but evolved from the encounter between authority and resistance not only in Africa but from the wealth of experience, particularly of the British imperial state in India. The key feature of the African colonial state was that it was Janus-faced, showing two faces of the same bifurcated state organised differently in the rural areas and the urban areas. There is a duality of two forms of power under a single hegemonic authority:

> Urban power spoke the language of civil society and civil rights, rural power of community and culture. Civil power claimed to protect rights, customary power pledged to enforce tradition. The former was organized on the principle of differentiation to check the concentration of power, the latter around the principle of fusion to ensure a unitary authority (18).

This experience of stateform is the material of the common despotism which characterises the lives of rural people, deforms civil society, and distorts the claims of genuine democracy and freedom.

Mamdani's argument is surprisingly simple and direct; initially the colonial rulers had a single-minded obsession to annihilate the traditional political system, but after vanquishing the tribes through this initial centralised despotism, the colonial rulers soon reversed this policy and ended up stabilising colonial rule on the social base of traditional rulers. Here lies the worm in the bud. African traditional culture and pre-colonial social structures became intimately interwoven with the apparatus of foreign domination. The idea did not arise specifically from the African experience, although it flowered in the continent, but rather it had its roots in earlier experience. He argues that Britain, the imperialist country par excellence, had the perverse genius of being the first to systematically exploit the authoritarian possibilities in native culture. In reaction to

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[1] To avoid repetition, page references to the book are simply enclosed in brackets. References to other texts will be fully indicated.

the rise of resistance employing traditional beliefs, British actions to prevent the dissolution of society are described by Mamdani as being essentially curative in India and preventative in Africa. The British rulers, operating under the overarching aegis of Manchester free trade principles, functioned differently in the colonies as land was defined as customary communal holding. For all the exultation of the individual under free-enterprise capitalism, the African was defined not as native but as tribesperson. He quotes a commentator on colonial administration as follows: 'The genius of British rule in Africa ... was in seeking to civilize Africans as communities, not as individuals'.

A one-sided opposition between the individual and the group, civil society and community, rights and traditions emerged which allowed a cheap and (for a fairly long period) largely effortless method of rule by a small number of bureaucrats over the colonial masses. This form of rule is supremely political, aiming at a frictionless domination over the African people. The respected colonial archivist and strategist, Lord Hailey, is quoted as stating frankly how African life was warped under colonialism:

> The objective of African customary law is primarily designed to maintain the social equilibrium (51).

The success of this schema was, in the view of colonial authorities, that it did not freeze social relations in a pre-conquest stage, but, in a familiar phrase, was a 'transitional stage' towards the integration of Africans as communities, and not individuals, into the modern world. Indeed, indirect rule which has led to the long-term forms of bondage of the rural masses was presented as an important colonial *reform*. What was actually achieved, in Mamdani's memorable phrase was 'decentralised despotism', the rule by foreigners over the masses indirectly through traditional authorities. Although the African masses were powerless, their immediate rulers were given considerable powers over their subjects which eliminated traditional checks and balances. These powers they used to the full. The model of decentralised despotism was monarchical, patriarchal, and authoritarian:

> It presumed a king at the center of every polity, a chief on every piece of administrative ground, and a patriarch in every homestead or kraal. Whether in the homestead, the village, or the kingdom, authority was considered an attribute of a personal despotism (39).

Such were the fruits of colonial reform: foreign rule and colonialism was not openly maintained by the force of arms, it was effectively camouflaged for the vast majority of Africans by local rule through chiefs. On the one side was the unchecked despotism of African over African under the overarching colonial power, on the other was the limited civil society of the towns which largely existed in a racial form, available only to the white colonists and deliberately excluding the African urban people.

Mamdani follows this essentialist reading of colonial history with a free-ranging exploration of the variety of experiences in Africa of British, French and Belgian colonial forms of rule, displaying an unsurpassed skill in analysis and an

uninhibited range of retrieval of the literature of colonialism. The argument in the view of the reviewer is convincing, but it has been made before in less expansive histories[2], albeit without the detailed knowledge, keen logic and self-confidence of the author. What is strikingly original and provocative are the next steps of the argument.

the cheap labour thesis

Mamdani argues that his locus of analysis is the *mode of domination* rather than the *mode of accumulation*. Working within this method he comes to the somewhat startling conclusion that apartheid is uniquely African rather than the political product of the working out of the operation of the cheap labour system. In his words:

> usually understood as institutionalized racial domination, apartheid was actually an attempt to soften racial antagonism by mediating and thereby refracting the impact of racial domination through a range of Native Authorities (27).

Apartheid fractured the ranks of the ruled along a double divide, ethnic on the one hand, rural-urban on the other:

> More than a response to the question of securing cheap labor power in a semi-industrial setting, I have argued that apartheid needs to be understood as the outcome of an *unending quest for order* in a setting both semi-industrial and colonial. Without denying the importance of the semi-industrial context, I have illuminated the significance of the colonial context in understanding apartheid as a form of the state (295; e.a.).

This is a substantial claim and Mamdani has considerable intellectual power to back it. At one level here is a startling new idea, at another we have to ask ourselves whether it is not a one-sided re-interpretation of what has already been established. An exclusively political interpretation of apartheid seeing only its state form while denying any economic logic has a certain advantage in pruning away the inessential. But searching the superstructure for an explanation of the real living processes of apartheid appears to me to be an inversion of the necessary methodological approach.

It is undeniable that one of the routes to apartheid came from British colonial practice. In earlier writing I uncovered the unfolding of what later became the essential features of segregation and apartheid—including the idea of the colonial city being the property of whites, of blacks needing to be ruled by chiefs and needing chiefly control in urban areas, etc.—expanding from the contradictions over labour market forces in the 1870s in colonial Natal (Hemson 1980). The apparatus of control was ready made, and what powered the development of pre-apartheid institutions further along these lines was an economic impulse, a mode of accumulation that interlocked with a mode of domination. The point which needs to be made here is that while the bifurcated state

[2] Such as David Welsh (1971) in his study of native affairs in Natal; and David Kaplan (1979).

provided an overarching framework of rule, the precise form of rule arose from the contradictions of colonial life and were not prescribed in advance. I would argue that the contradictory sides of the state (partially recognising civil society while also increased national oppression) were shaped and reshaped by socio-economic pressures bearing on the political processes[3]. There were indeed contradictions. During apartheid, for instance, for the first time in Africa the African majority were granted entitlement to pensions, albeit on a highly discriminatory basis. Although the primordial features of the apartheid state were present at Union, subsequent changes were not determined from birth but were accelerated by the contradictions of the break-up of older forms of rule. The astonishing material differences between a white bourgeoisie and a black proletariat, the permanence of labour migration, the absurdities of reserve politics, and the dynamics of class organisation among the black majority were to have a decisive effect in the cities which became the main arena of political battle.

Since the cheap labour explanation of segregation is under attack or revision from a number of sources other than Mamdani (see Hindson 1987; Posel 1983; 1997), a considered defence is in order. The spectacular theoretical advances of the 1970s have passed, and the complex reinterpretations of its essential tenets which have followed can be seen as attempts to theorise an essential difference between capitalism and apartheid. The remarkable simplicity of the cheap labour-power thesis—that the reserves sustained the subsidy to the cheap labour-power of African workers—has a powerful explanatory power. The enforced state of impermanence through migrant labour which was sustained for more than a century provided, as Wolpe (1972; 1988) argued, a subsidy to the migrant labourer's wage. The argument, of course, went further than this elemental logic. The reserve and right to access to communal land in the rural areas distorted African urbanisation for an extended period, provided a political pole for the African migrant, and secured African women under direct patriarchal control. For a whole period the argument is incontestable, its strongest confirmation appearing in the arguments advanced by the mining industry to Commissions. The results of the cheap labour system are available in the data of mining as real wages were held constant between 1911 to 1969 on the gold mines (Wilson 1970:66). It also helps provide an understanding of why conquest in South Africa was in a way 'incomplete', why it remained in this state, and why the imperial and Boer war machines stopped short of breaking tribes completely, and, in a remarkably short period of time, turned around 180 degrees to shore up the very system which had provided the primary phase of resistance. We need to remember just how far we have come from the simple-minded idea of the

[3] Kane-Berman (1990) presents the dynamics of civil society as apart of an inexorable change and implicity argues that liberation politics were not necessary; this is stretching the point too far, but undoubtedly social pressures were crucial in breaking up the granite monolith. This makes a nonsense of Kane-Berman's affinity for Inkatha as a defender of civil society and democratic freedom as it has had nothing to do with the mass mobilisation of the oppressed in trade unions and civics which so effectively challenged apartheid strictures. On the contrary it saw these democratic currents as a grave threat to the dominant role it had been accorded in KwaZulu-Natal.

annihilation of the tribal polity which was the first impulse in the colonial administrator's mind. Fear of the complete proletarianisation of African labourers was crucial to the change in policy.

This approach provided a clear link between economy and society but was not innocent of political elaboration, particularly in Legassick's (1974; 1997) work. The support for attempts to reconstruct the reserves, the encouragement of a traditional petty bourgeoisie, the coercive nature of migrant labour whereby African migrants were forced to return and renew links with the rural area, all show a logical connection between the cheap labour strategy and the political superstructure. Later, of course, the cheap labour theory has been contested for relying on a functional and undynamic view of the relations between the political and the economic. It is well known that in the 1960s and beyond, the dysfunctional side of political oppression became clearly apparent and apartheid became in living reality a regime of crisis. The separation between politics and economics became a gulf, and intensified with the economic crisis endemic to late apartheid. But none of this amounts to grounds for rejecting the essential truths of the cheap labour argument in the foundations of segregation and apartheid.

In a sense capitalism appeared in South Africa in a weak form, able only to provide for the capitalist class itself, a white middle class and a privileged working class, while imparting misery and degradation to the majority. Its modernising mission was somehow blunted, its destructive edge against traditionalism held back. Indeed, the very opposite direction is undertaken in policy even though the extension of market relations worked inexorably, if incompletely, to dissolve prior modes of production. More than any other issue, the land question shaped the character of colonial society. The market in land was incomplete and would remain incomplete, and the sustaining of patriarchal relations on communal land became the watchword of the great and wealthy. Capitalism came late and, unlike the situation in post-war South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, the conquerors turned their swords toward the entrenchment of the old order. In these countries the essential hold of old authority on the land was decisively broken. But in Africa the process appears essentially different as the old order is allowed to retain the allocation of land, by and large, and there is no general market in land. In South Africa the most productive and extensive tracts of land were appropriated by the whites, but the chiefs were reinforced in their power over the scraps which remained. Some of these were just sufficient to sustain, not a tribal mode of production, but a modicum of a base for traditional family life and custom. This was enough to disguise the insidious absurdity of the Bantustans from the rural poor. As could be anticipated, the African migrant held desperately on to these plots as a relatively cheap family home. The economic and the political intertwine, separate out, and recombine in different strands to reveal the essential relations of one of the most perverse and destructive societies of our time. The weakness of *Citizen and Subject* is that the mode of political domination is foregrounded at the expense of these other factors. This said, one of the merits of Mamdani's book is its perception of post-colonial political development and the complexity of the broad processes of democratisation.

the post-colonial experience

The development of democracy in Africa in the aftermath of almost universal single-party states is highly problematic, full of the graves of initiatives by radical regimes to bring about real change and of conservative regimes to maintain stability. Mamdani develops a thorough-going analysis of the impasse of African social and political life and a critique of the attempts by urban political elites to bring about change. He locates the limitation for democracy as coming essentially from the failure to expand civil society and to carry the ambit of democratic struggle into the rural areas. Nationalist movements have historically been preoccupied with exclusion from civil society and resistance to alien rule. But, he argues, rural power has not been detribalised and neither has it been joined to the question of democratisation with the result that anti-democratic remnants of 'the rural contaminated the urban'. He argues that the Achilles' heel of the 'second independence movement' aiming to expand civil society and democracy lies in a political failure to grasp what *mode of rule* needs to be democratised. There is an infatuation with the notion of civil society in the towns, 'a preoccupation that conceals the actual form of power through which rural populations are ruled' (288f).

The neglect of the reform of the local state means 'democratization will remain not only superficial but also explosive' (288f). He points to the limited range of democratic rule in countries where the mass of the population may participate in elections which have no effect over the form of rule they experience:

> An electoral reform that does not affect the appointment of the Native Authority and its chiefs—which leaves rural areas out of consideration as so many protectorates—is precisely about the reemergence of a decentralized despotism! (289).

The victor in electoral politics feels entitled to the right to rule over subjects through Native Authorities, to appoint chiefs, etc.: 'the issue in a civil society-centred contest comes to be who will be master of all tribes' (289). The ethnicity of the president is critical as the rural is governed through patrimonial relationships, and rural constituencies are harnessed through patron-client relations, a situation which leads to the depressing conclusion that 'clientism is the only noncoercive way of linking the rural with the urban' (289). Yet this method of rule has explosive results because tribalism in the urban context is corrosive as it has no democratic impetus and carries within itself the promise of civil war. A form of 'urban tribalism' (290) results with civil society itself becoming tribalised. On these foundations the hope for democracy is delusional.

Such are the results of continuing indirect rule by conservative post-colonial regimes. But Mamdani argues that radical nationalist movements, which have sought through militant anticolonial nationalism to detribalise Native Authority and institute single party, face a similar impasse. Militant nationalism is the glue which cements a 'successful linkup between urban militants and rural insurrectionary movements against Native Authorities' (290), and offers a potential for rural transformation. The single party attempted to contain the social and political fragmentation lying at the heart

of Native Authorities but democracy was deeply distrusted as it was 'understood as a civil society-centered electoral reform'. The radical nationalists attempted to depoliticise a civil society whose politics appeared as civil society-based clientelism marked by 'deepening fragmentation along ethnic lines' (290). These regimes became increasingly authoritarian as the centre of gravity in the party-state shifted from the voluntary to the coercive. Development strategies were enforced from above on a reluctant peasantry, and the final result of the 'forced developmental march' (290) was to exacerbate tensions between the rural and the urban. In a chilling phrase from Fanon, the 'militants of yesterday turned into informers of today' as the transcendental goals of liberation were displaced by the sordid defence of power. Yet the exercise of centralised arrogant power does not necessarily abolish chieftainship as there is continuity in administrative power and technique—a 'reinforced fused power, administrative justice and extra-economic coercion—all in the name of development' (291). The radical attempts at change come up against both the obstacles of the existing political culture and those thrown up by their own actions.

Mamdani's analysis is persuasive and it provides a powerful critique of the many attempts to restructure African society from above or to arrive at an accommodation with existing structures. In this dynamic model of political radicalism civil society appears a feeble creature. The weight of a traditional society shored up and reinforced by colonial practice, the intolerance of military dictatorships, and a tendency to become aligned with political opposition movements which simply lay claim to the spoils of power for another excluded middle class group, gives little room for growth. In delineating the locus of power, rural society stands as a disenfranchised but weighty incubus, unable to participate in the broader movement for democracy as it is held in the grasp of a traditional authority revived and reinforced under colonialism. This analysis shows a keen insight into the 'seesaw' (291) nature of African politics and the present impasse of development around the shared axis of despotism. Africans appear trapped on the treadmill of history.

Mamdani's turning away from political economy and stress on the distinctively structural can become particularly rigid, even as it acknowledges the possibility of variance between two dead-end roads. Mamdani rejects an Afro-pessimistic syndrome—which he describes as the rejection of the idea that the continent can rejuvenate itself from within—for critically ignoring the *mode of colonial penetration* into Africa. The idea of recolonisation occasionally played with by this current fails to come to grips with the very legacy of colonialism which has led to barbaric forms of structural violence. But he is very far from an airy optimism (which often shows a callous disregard for the desperate conditions of the African majority), seeing in both the conservative regimes resting on rural despotism and the centralised despotism of the radical one-party states dead-ends for democratic advance. In a sense the book is healthily sceptical about the prospects for a revived and renewed civil society and democratic culture, insisting that the problem be clearly defined before solutions are indulged in. The argument marks a recognition of the structural deformation of the African state warped by colonialism, and trapped between attempts to overcome rural despotism of the chiefs and the alternative strategies of

compromising with the same despotism. All attempts at change come full circle against the inertia of traditionalism which has an extraordinary weight.

Citizen and Subject presents a starkly realistic recognition of the vitiation of civil society in Africa, a landscape with no high ground above various despotic forms of rule. But for all the dazzling display of analystic synthesis and counterpoint, Mamdani appears to stumble in confronting the very monster he reveals; the geological faultline of Africa's substructure is exposed but then our author recoils from bold proposals for change. If there are no proposals for change, then the reader is left with the fatalistic conclusion of an inexorable African reality. Division is ineluctable, between town and countryside, between civil society and rural despotism, between the striving for emancipation and the dead hand of tradition; all appear too weighty to move, too resistant to change for change to succeed. The analysis is sharply structural and bipolar as the two sides of the African divide are identified and mapped, and any shifts in the specific gravity of each are eventually drawn back to their original position of baleful inadequacy.

This argument presupposes an implicit comparison with the accomplishment of democracy in advanced capitalist countries where alternative traditions of democratic practice and civil society have flourished for an entire period. Implicit in the view of established democracy is the idea that these societies have reached their 'end of history', that there is nothing more to be said. While in the post-1990 period any hope in socialist forms of democracy stand vulnerable of being lampooned, I believe that the argument for workers' democracy and socialism as the full flowering of the human potential for genuine social democracy is undiminished. Certainly the expansion and safeguarding of democracy, even in its limited electoral form, is vulnerable in societies where there is sharply growing inequality and social opportunity. In addition the contradictory experience of colonial history and democracy demands explanation: Britain which is the 'cradle of democracy' is also the most astute exploiter of the divisions, both ethnic and social, among the colonial oppressed. There is no simple line of comparative logic between the growth of democratic practice in the West and the present battles for democracy in the economically devastated regions of the world.

the post-apartheid experience

Recent developments show that we in South Africa are far from having escaped from these contradictions. A curious contradiction is evident as traditional leaders insist on their powers while claiming to espouse democracy, and debates about traditionalism end up in the most extraordinary verbal gymnastics with kings, chiefs, etc. all claiming to be democrats. The impasse in local government in South Africa's rural areas is witness to Mamdani's accurate theoretical focus, and it would not be an exaggeration to state that local democracy in the former reserves does not exist at all. Chiefs state they will not tolerate the 'government's councillors' (i.e. those who were elected in the local government elections of 1996), and nobody seems certain who these people are or whether elections took place in their area. The political background to all this uncertainty is clearly that no party wishes to confront the problem of decentralised

despotism. Rather they attempt to accommodate the chiefs, encouraging them in the belief they are somehow part of democracy in South Africa and, indeed, that their rule should be reinforced and privileges extended.

The revival of political life in the run-up to the 1999 election provides lucid examples of the Realpolitik of South Africa which are also those of Africa, illustrating that national political leadership depends on traditional authority for power. The support of the rural people is solicited not directly by campaigning but through the chiefs. This is illustrated by the tendency for Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe to rediscover the cultural and religious significance of the African chiefs, to promise anew a strengthening of their position, and affirm their role in communicating with the ancestors before elections. Similarly there are displays of President Mandela moving familiarly among the chiefs of the Transkei, and our Minister of Constitutional Development promising an *expanded role* for chiefs in local government and their continued control over the allocation of land (SATV 5 March 1998)[4]. Traditional leaders are alive to this courtship and play the game. The leader of CONTRALESA, Phathekile Holomisa, has expressed the fear that politicians want to take power from the chiefs who, he claims, represent the people in the rural areas. He argues that attempts at modernising local government have been made before in Africa and have failed, and they will fail in South Africa because elected councillors don't deliver and Africans are not properly represented in local councils in rural areas (SAfm 1 May 1998). Speaking on behalf of CONTRALESA, he objects to the Ministers deciding on the rank of traditional leaders, who is a king or paramount chief, etc. and demands the same pensions and salaries for traditional and elected leaders (SAfm 2 May 1998). Money is central to the debate about traditional culture. In rural areas where there are development projects, case studies have revealed that decisions about such projects are often taken autocratically by the chief and his councillors. Youth and women are denied participation. The first priority often seems to be to build a road to the chief's house. When food relief is provided it has been reported that the first person to benefit is the chief, who requires food for himself before the children can be fed. Communities complain to the Hearings on Poverty that the chiefs are the main obstacles to development. These are impressions of the actual power relationships in rural areas, and policy statements aim at accommodating these realities.

The recently released White Paper on Local Government (March 1988:4.4,4.3) avoids confronting the issue of power and authority, light-mindedly arguing that there is no conflict between African customs and traditions and democracy, and promising 'additional functions' to be added to those of traditional leaders. The distortion of tradition under apartheid is not mentioned and neither are the obviously enormous problems such as the representation and rights of women, to mention only one crucial question. This policy statement from a democratic government promotes

[4] For some reason these displays of courtship are only registered in the electronic media and not in the press. Speeches are not lodged on the ANC's website of speeches, making a recording of the actual promises and entreaties dependent on note-taking at transmission times!

the idea that the chiefs—who are regarded as 'being the spokespersons generally of their communities'—are crucial to 'maintaining law and order' (4.1). The only impediment to the problem of development is relegated to the minor question of the overlapping between traditional authorities and municipalities. There is paralysis on the key questions. On the crucial issue of whether traditional leaders should have voting rights the White Paper comes to no conclusion at all. The blurring of these issues attempts to conceal the accommodation with the anti-democratic traditional authorities. This is the Realpolitik which Mamdani is sharply alive to and which confirms the main thrust of his argument. These examples of the articulation of modernising elites with traditional leaders illustrate a general tendency in African politics and society: that of modern political change to reach its limits and to seek accommodation and joint rule over the rural people with the chiefs. Customary law unreformed by the embrace of colonialism, the chiefly system, and forms of despotic rule remain the afterbirth of Africa's emergence into independence.

in defence of political economy

Of greatest interest to South African intellectuals is Mamdani's analysis of the inner connections between this colonial tradition, the scalpel of imperialism in the dextrous divisions of African society, and the malevolent flowering of apartheid. The argument that apartheid is the end product of colonialism in Africa, however, which appears so effective and simple, unfortunately also reveals the limits of his hypothesis. While there were intimate connections, colonial practice did not prescribe the outcome of apartheid. We have to draw on the insights provided by the cheap labour theorists to explain its trajectory. Theoretically Mamdani appears to lose the essential link between the political economy of South Africa and the nature of internal divisions; the lines of internal division among the population were most brutally enforced, but they were also fatally flawed. The solution to these manifest divisions, both in South Africa and beyond, lies not in the political or administrative, though both are vital in the reassembly of the notion of African unity and progress, but in the economic and the expansion of the modern sector and the eventual smoothing over of the rasping lines of division by the resuscitation of civil society. This is a function of rural as well as urban society. The early tradition of the Ujamma villages of Tanzania, which were originally the product of rural Africa's imagination before becoming the bureaucratic nightmare of a semi-modernised and authoritarian state, shows the latent possibilities of African initiative and African solutions.

Mamdani expresses severe reservations about the emergence of a vital civil society in Africa. The outlines of the landscape of African realities are presented in broad and effective strokes but the colours are sharply monochromal, purely black and white. The grey shades of change, the slow evolution of society from the customary accession to authority and to the multivarious challenges posed by the individual and disparate interests revealed in civil society, the bending of custom and tradition to the dictates of urban and industrial life (most evident in South African anthropology, but also in the work of the Zambian school of social change), the initiatives of individuals

and communities organising themselves along democratic lines[5], are elusive in this work. He gives priority to the political and administrative, brilliantly portraying the distortion of custom under colonialism and explaining its self-perpetuation, rather than looking towards the contrary tendencies of evolutionary social change and the bending of tradition to the demands of the city. The argument of *Citizen and Subject* is compelling at one level but inadequate at another because Mamdani fails to grapple with the essential sociological fact that the process of the dissolution of traditional authority is inexorable and continues apace.

Compared to the ebb and flux of politics—the ability to manoeuvre and perform policy gymnastics—this trend seems slow and unuseful. But without this perspective we can be insensitive to the contrary trends to traditionalism latent in urbanisation, a growing youthful population, and the painful but progressive emancipation of women from rural patriarchy. There are also the contradictory tendencies in public consciousness signalled by the crossing over to more 'modern' attitudes towards sexual identity, sexual abuse, land ownership by women, religious freedom, and inter-racial marriage, etc. These trends indicate the tendencies sapping away the raw patriarchal power of militant traditionalism such as that of Inkatha. Once its war mobilisation subsides—as eventually it has to since it is committed to the stabilisation of social relations on a capitalist basis—then the rational core of Inkatha's deformation of tradition will be found to be absent and in its place a savage antipathy of leader against leader could result. The main problem Inkatha faces is the growing divorce between itself and its business supporters now that the ANC leadership has wholeheartedly embraced the task of financial stability and monetary restraint, and prioritised the building of a black capitalist class rather than redressing of social needs. Yet such is the extent of the accommodation to the forces of tradition that even a radical commentator within the ANC defends a merger of the party of modernising nationalism with that of its most destructive traditionalist opponent (Cronin 1998). While this indicates the abiding power of decentralised despotism, it can also be read as indicating the possibility that decentralised despotism is not an immovable monolith but is rather in process, fluctuating violently between dissolution and a willed consolidation. Such are the contradictions of contemporary South Africa.

In terms of the broader perspective required by a rejuvenated African studies *Citizen and Subject* is limited by a weak conception of the political economy of Africa; a lack of recognition that Africa is the Third World's Third World, a stagnant backwater of the international economy, a continent marginalised and brutally exploited in which

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[5] In my work on the growth of social movements in Inanda (Hemson 1996) I argue that the potential for democratic civic structures depends on the quality and commitment to change of leadership. Such a leadership cannot be guaranteed, but neither should the possibility of democracy through community participation be entirely excluded. The role of conciousness and organisation in the contest of power, locally and nationally, is a vital factor. The vigorous contest for power in this community appears to have left an important legacy of civic democracy while the national movement appears in disarray.

people have been forced to endure more than 30 wars since 1970. All this adds up to the portrayal of a continental society in dreadful stagnation because of the lack of an economic dynamic, a society in which pride of place is taken by the military, and where ordinary people have to turn to the rural areas and traditional authority for some shelter from the ravages of modern society. But beyond this negative picture it is also important to register the effective challenges of civil society, the increasing participation of women in economic activities, the battle for survival and for property under these conditions, the growth of a landless proletariat with weaker sentimental attachment to the land. Quantity can change fairly rapidly into quality as has been witnessed in Zimbabwe where recently there has been the most extraordinary flowering of civil society around the fulcrum of the trade unions. These initiatives by Africans in Africa escape Mamdani's eclectic purview.

Finally, it is worth stressing that structures, states, and civil society have to rest on a certain economic base, and this truth is not the exclusive property of a Marxist perspective. The relation between state and economy is central to the question of the state, and cannot be demoted as a regional obsession[6]. Lines of analysis which pursue the relationship between state and economy as the basis for an understanding of the character of the state are suggestive of its future development. The African state has to be located within the processes of continental disintegration and reconstruction, and within world markets. The most recent beginnings of an upturn in growth may presage better prospects for civil society. If Africa had the economic basis, then the real boundaries marking off civil society from rural despotism, the opportunities for the genuine revival of civil society in war-torn regions, could shift apace. We need to remember that at the beginning of the various development decades in the 1950s, the per capita income of many African countries was similar to those of South East Asia, many of whom have doubled per capita incomes in a decade. What has been the critical factor in Africa's political and economic stagnation? The bifurcated state is a key element in the mode of domination, but is it the essential factor in explaining the impasse, or do we have to seek out the data of Africa's marginalisation in world markets, and combinations of state explanations and the economy?

conclusion

I would suggest that, despite Mamdani's powerful methodological synthesis, we need to return to the elements of political economy for a comprehensive analytic apparatus.

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[6] Peter Evans has used concepts such as 'embedded autonomy' to analyse the bureaucratic insulation, combined with intense connection to the surrounding social structure (particularly industrial capital), as a formative element of the state's ability to develop a modern economy. 'Predatory' states are located along with 'developmental' states within a continuum of the achievement of development. Some African states are specifically characterisable as being controlled by those who 'plunder without any more regard for the welfare of the citizenry than a predator has for the welfare of its prey' (Evans 1995:44).

This does not require that we lose focus on the specificity of regional studies, or the necessity of situating South African exceptionalism within the continental context. As Hall and Tarrow (1998) stress, there is a need for area studies to counterbalance the preoccupation with globalisation which has a 'natural allure' and carries with it 'new mysteries'. The integration of South African and African studies in a perspective for cross-regional studies involves working within the tension between the regional and the global, and this entails acknowledging the continuing importance of political economy.

There is much in *Citizen and Subject* which relates directly to our present experience and, despite his insistence on blending the South African into a refurbished African Studies, Mamdani is not blind to the singularity and marked differences between South African and continental experiences. He sees the specificity of the country in the 'strength of its civil society, both white and black' (28), but he also carries a disturbing warning:

> independent Africa shows apartheid South Africa one possible outcome of a reformed state structure, deracialised but not democratized—whether achieved through armed struggle or through negotiations, through independence from a foreign colonial power or through strategic engagement with an erstwhile colonizing resident minority: a deracialized but decentralized despotism (61).

In the mind of this reviewer the warning is timely and to the point. Current tendencies towards accommodation with the decentralised despotism which will entrap the rural population in neo-colonial power relations are strongly evident and unopposed across party lines.

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