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### Editorial

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## Editorial

Drought, desertification, deforestation — these are the technical terms conservationists use to describe Africa's environmental crisis. They frame the problems in terms of population growth surpassing national resources and herds outstripping the land's carrying capacity; it follows that their solutions are human and animal population control. Much of their technical talk assumes the logic of capitalist development — 'economic man,' investments, profits, growth — as well as the liberal values of the Reverend Thomas Malthus, which blame the crisis on its victims. The recurrence of Malthusian explanations of agricultural decline is unfortunate as they ignore the fact that labour constraints are often critical given conditions in the 'subsistence' sector (especially the plight of women, children, and the elderly in labour reserves) and divert attention from the social and economic forces that create poverty and paucity. More importantly, neo-malthusianism but also the preoccupation with exposing it have retarded analysis of the environmental crisis in Africa.

The imperative of this issue of *ROAPE* is the need to move beyond simple critiques of simplistic arguments; it is the need for a deeper understanding of the relation between environment and modes of production. Marxist analysts of the industrial revolution focus on urban industrial environments but, apart from descriptions of technological disasters, few critics have paid attention to the environmental aspects of capitalism's impact on rural livelihoods in the Third World. Yet African environments are changing dramatically with the restructuring of old modes of production and the introduction of new. Kjekshus, in his book *Ecology Control & Economic Development in East African History* (Heinemann, London, 1977), opened the debate with his controversial analysis of the impact of colonialism and early capitalism on the environment in East Africa, but he was not explicit about the ways in which environments are produced. Since independence, new forms of capitalist relations to the environment have emerged throughout Africa. This issue of *ROAPE* tries to reshape the environmental debate by seeking to place it in a new analytical context.

The papers in this issue all deal with aspects of underdevelopment that have led to a worsening of the environment for those people who live and actually produce in it. These papers do not represent the total spectrum of environmental problems in Africa. Questions of industrial location, for example, appear but rarely in the African literature, although the world has seen recent catastrophes in India, Mexico, and Brazil and it would seem to be only a matter of time before some African country experiences a major industrial accident. Similarly, one reads

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occasionally about the dumping of toxic wastes — wastes such as nuclear material likely to retain its radioactivity for hundreds of years — often not realising the extent to which they pose a growing environmental threat to Africa and not just industrialised countries. In addition, there are important perspectives in relation to the central role of women in production, described by Cliffe in his report on Zimbabwe. But women's role in relation to the environment is not yet adequately examined in the African context, as Lawrence points out in his review of the Green Revolution literature. Constraints produced by environmental change and degradation have a particularly acute effect on the lives of women, in their multiple roles as food producers, food processors, and *de facto* head of household where men work away from home.

In this issue of *ROAPE* we confine our attention to a few aspects of degradation particular to the African environment — deterioration in urban housing and sanitation and in rural pastoral and agricultural production. Importantly, these articles are illustrative of the central questions about the political economy of the environment. Environmental problems are not, as modernization theorists would have it, to do with the unwanted side effects of development. They are integral parts of the ongoing process of development.

Two of the papers are studies of pastoralism. Touré and Molutsi call the deleterious effects of commercial ranching in Senegal and Botswana the proximate results of overcrowding. Cliffe shows the complex interaction of herding and farming practices, and thus the transposition of the orthodox question of too many people or cattle into its opposite — too little land. Lawrence notes that land shortage results from the shift to cash crops. Stock in his study of sanitation in Nigeria and Campbell in his analysis of housing in Tanzania also invoke overcrowding as a cause. Before looking at the underlying factors, which are rooted in the capitalist mode of production introduced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is worth considering the state response to overcrowding.

### Eviction

A striking similarity is the theme of eviction, which runs through all of the articles. Molutsi describes the eviction of pastoralists from the Kalahari; Touré the eviction of the Peul from the Ferlo; Stock the eviction of beggars and lepers from Nigerian towns; and Campbell the eviction of squatters from Dar es Salaam. Cliffe reminds us of the eviction of Africans from the half of Rhodesia reserved for white settlers and the danger of bureaucrats resorting to threats of eviction from 'nationalised' land as a means of enforced conservation. Lawrence mentions tenant farmers displaced by the Green Revolution. Many conservationists represent such departures as the 'flight of environmental refugees', shifting the blame from the workings of a socio-economic system to humans who are unfortunate but predictable victims of their own misuse of a 'natural' system. Such an analysis does nothing to explain which people are 'evicted' and also trivialises both the plight of the refugees and the deteriorating environment. Clearly, eviction is the state response to overcrowding and one must ask why this is the response.

One answer is that poor people in the countryside appear to be invisible to the (urban-based) state, unless they are in open revolt, and the poor in cities are a nuisance to be removed from sight. Molutsi shows that the British colonial authorities thought Bechuanaland was empty; Toure' says the French thought the

Ferlo underutilised. In the towns, Stock and Campbell describe the British undertaking slum clearance in order to make empty spaces.

The ability of colonial regimes to carry out draconian measures derives from political power based on the economic power of capitalism, but the will to impose upon nature, to move people aside, is rooted in perceptions of reality that are distorted by capitalist ideology. Socialists also want to dominate nature, but is it self-evident that, for example, a sedentary lifestyle is necessarily superior to the nomadic or that people should live in western-style urban housing of separated little boxes laid out on straight streets instead of shared African homesteads? The self-evident superiority of all things capitalist is born of arrogance and bred by power.

Environmental deterioration is not a clear case of bad guys doing evil to good guys, however. The post-colonial state does serve some of its people well, if only in the short term. Thus Lawrence notes the dynamic process of rural differentiation whereby some rich farmers get richer and the poor lose their land. Molutsi notes that some Botswanans get rich quick in the commercial ranching schemes; Toure finds that some Peul have more money than before borehole development; Campbell reveals subtle changes in definitions of eligibility that permit some Tanzanians to obtain better housing; and Stock points out that the Nigerian urban bourgeoisie benefitted from a healthier, more beautiful environment. These observations in turn invoke the debates about 'the tragedy of the commons', referred to in the Zimbabwe piece in which Cliffe describes the contradictions between individual gain and common concerns.

In the long term, however, people all too often lose control of their environment, which is an important means of production in both rural and urban settings. Irrigation schemes result in increased soil salinity, the destruction of fishing grounds, and the spread of diseases like river blindness and bilharzia. The Ferlo self-destructs, transhumance collapses, the productivity of the communal lands of Zimbabwe declines, sites and services deteriorate, and the proliferation of consumer waste overtakes cities — and not only in Nigeria!

#### **Self-determination**

One of the fundamental beliefs of capitalism is that technology can fix any problem. Lawrence shows that technology becomes another commodity to be sold, and eventually technicians search for problems to which technology can be applied. The external interventions described in these articles — from boreholes in the Ferlo to sites and services in Dar — are based on the promise of the 'technological fix'. But even the best designed interventions, whether managed by colonial, post-colonial or aid agencies, ignore relations of power that determine access to resources and, ultimately, control of the environment.

All of the articles stress the continuity in colonial, post-colonial, and donor programmes. Underlying these programmes are negative preconceptions of pastoral and agricultural practices, which Molutsi and Toure underscore. For example, in Botswana the regimes blame drought and desertification on such production methods as shifting cultivation and bush fires. The decision to change what was thought to be backward 'tribal' policies actually only legitimated the expansion of big farmers. These negative preconceptions provide a false basis for

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intervention and, even more discouraging, they represent obstacles to self-determination, even when they are not internalised by the victims they blame.

In pre-capitalist modes of production, planning and technology were carried out in the context of universal (if not always equal) access to collective resources (the forces and means of production). Under capitalism, access to land and means of production, which are privately held, is controlled by capital and mediated by the colonial and neo-colonial state. In this context of powerlessness, the poor are mystified by capitalist technology and planning; self-determination, promised in such populist slogans as self-reliance (Botswana, Tanzania, Nigeria) is illusory. As Molutsi and Cliffe make clear, access to resources is the key to environmental management, which is not a technical issue. Toure shows poignantly how the Peul were entrapped by a technology they did not control into forfeiting their own planning processes.

The role of the state obscures the true nature of production and its integral relation to environment. Stock shows that the Nigerian government ignored the role of industry as polluters of the environment, preferring to blame individuals for lack of discipline. Campbell mentions that the design of site-and-services projects frustrated production by failing to provide simple but necessary amenities.

##### **Production**

The state perceives the urban poor not as producers but as consumers of services. In Nigeria, street traders were banished in the name of public health, while the state failed to devise adequate drainage and sewage disposal systems. And in Dar es Salaam, when funding went wrong, the state eliminated small-scale industries, markets, and community facilities from the housing projects. In Senegal, nomads are seen as hoarders and are not acknowledged to be producers until they are settled and brought into the cash nexus.

These misperceptions are contrary to the view the poor have of themselves as producers who manage their environment as a means of production, an insight that turns the standard capitalist argument on its head. In the people's view, environmental degradation results when they lose control of resources. Capitalism, then, does not 'create slums' — urban or rural — so much as it destroys environments that Africans built and managed. In the end, it would seem that the logic of capitalism, which is private profit, and the long-term conservation of the environment, which can only be managed collectively, are mutually exclusive.

*Meredeth Turshen, Carol Barker, Phil O'Keefe*