

The Baobab and the Mango Tree: Lessons About Development - African and Asian Contrasts. By Nicholas Thompson and Scott Thompson. London: Zed Books (2000), xii+212 pp.

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On the eve of decolonization half a century ago, attention in academic circles was focused on the new leaders of the “developing nations.” Progress would depend very largely on the quality of the “inheritance elite,” western-educated leaders with the intelligence and integrity to build on the material endowment of the colonial regimes. The dream was shattered by the apparent incapacity of developing societies to produce “good” leaders by recognizably democratic processes. Too soon, power was growing from the barrels of guns, and leadership in “The Third World” was characterized by ugly words like “kleptocracy.” As a new wave of scholars sought to apportion blame for the most conspicuous political failures of the twentieth century, i.e. the expansion of poverty and environmental damage, attention shifted to social forces beyond the range of individual personality, initiative and qualification. Externally, the new states were seen as the hapless products of imperial rule and the global expansion of capital. Internally, they were seen as enmeshed in “clientism” or “prebendalism,” dysfunctional blends of “traditional” and “modern” politics.

Good leadership was the hope of the 1950s, bad leadership the despair of the rest of the century. This view resonates with popular judgments in the rich countries about the personal incompetence of people in poor countries to govern themselves. Ascribing these ills to personal failings like greed, stupidity or ignorance is a way of evading the broader and more profound causes that lie beyond the compass of individual motivation and agency. The policy implication that we can progress by replacing bad leaders with good is incredibly trite. If we have learned anything from fifty years of development studies, it’s that life is much more complicated than that.

Blaming leaders rather than society or history for the ills of humanity is not so much a theory as a political presumption. According to Edward Luttwak, in one of several flyleaf puffs, “This book is propelled by a brilliant intuition: by comparing two non-Western countries (Ghana and Thailand) with each other, instead of the usual and futile comparisons with Western models, the authors have uncovered some true secrets of the ‘wealth of nations’ or lack of it.” If this is indeed the intention of Nicholas and Scott Thompson (son and father) it is surely disingenuous. The book and its comparisons are predicated not on something authentically Ghanaian or Thai, but on a very familiar set of Western ideological premises: “the evidence, in totality, is that there is indeed a relationship between political freedom and economic growth” (p. 14); “development really boils down to freedom” (p. 93).

The Thompsons’ criteria for progress are “openness” to international markets, unconstrained freedom of choice, the conservation of “good” traditions as “cultural capital” (pp. 20-23), change by gradual reform - “perseverance” (p. 15), investment in formal education, and above all, smart leadership. These very mid-twentieth-century virtues are augmented by a fashionable concern for courtesy to women and reasonable care of the environment. Other tell-tale preferences pop up from time to time: an enthusiasm for Francis Fukuyama, Harry Lee of Singapore, and Botswana (“the most astonishing economic miracle of Africa” (p. 45)) on the one hand, and a distaste for trade unions, “political correctness,” Libya, Iraq, and Cuba, on the other.

If you are seeking reinforcement for your liberal convictions, you will enjoy this book. If you are looking for new explanations of urgent issues such as the abuse of natural resources, or ethnic and sectarian violence, or corporate greed, or child armies in Africa and Asia, or generation warfare anywhere in the world, you will be disappointed. Nor can the Thompsons make much headway with such curiosities as the greater equality of income - and wealth - in the benighted Ghana than in enlightened Thailand, or why the latter could do little to resist the “meltdown” of its economy (pp. 53,112) in 1997.

The authors argue by parable: “Kwame Nkrumah thought,” so they say, that “dump trucks full of money arrive in the middle of the night, spill their loot around the countryside and, in the morning, people wake up, look out of their windows and see that, oh neat, development has arrived” (p. 81). They lean heavily on innuendo - “it was widely believed,” “it was everywhere said” (p. 49) “by all accounts” (p. 121). Metaphors of all sorts abound (leprosy, smallpox, hyenas, geese, chickens, albatrosses), the baobab and the mango of the title being the most prominent and the most abstruse. The role of the beastly baobab, alias the state in West Africa, has been “to

swallow, to consume, to obstruct, to stick its branches aggressively in the air and thrust its roots through the ground, sucking up every available resource" (p. 11). The way of the baobab (the image is from Saint-Exupéry and his Little Prince) "leads to certain destruction" (p. 15). Thus, after independence, Africa's "pioneer republic" Ghana began its "long blunder into poverty," degenerating into a "tragic Kleptocracy" with a "bursting population" (p. 1,3).

Although the baobab seems to raise its roots to the sky, I do not grasp the Thompson's image of "top-down development." Naively, I always thought the baobab a marvelous tree that survived where no other could, and offered succor to the traveler. But then I never did find Saint-Exupéry appealing. Neither, it seems, would West Africans, for whom the baobab is a vital, popular symbol. "You see," said the leader of Senegal's famous Orchestra Baobab recently, "we are just like the tree we are named after. The baobab lives for years and years. Storms and cyclones can rustle it, but it always stands firm" [Guardian Weekly May 10-16, 2001].

The mango, alias Thailand, develops modestly and fruitfully from its bourgeois middle, which "leads to qualified success, if you do everything else right too" (p. 15). "Thailand is not paradise - it has been turning "forests into asphalt" and is "the whorehouse of the world" (p. 4). It has had a procession of military rulers, and concluded the century with a massive economic "meltdown," but in the authors' eyes it is redeemed by its open-door liberalism. "Thailand may have been corrupt or even careless at times, but at no point was the government consciously and intentionally acting against the interests of the people or of development" (p. 11). The underlying reason for the pernicious comparison is clear: "East Asian leaders have gripped Adam Smith's invisible hand, while for forty years African leaders tried to cut it off" (p. 103).

For the Thompsons, underdevelopment is a product of historical and environmental disadvantage - how the dice are loaded. But what matters now is the how the game is played, the decisions "made at identifiable times by real people with names which need to be remembered, for better and for worse" (p. 184). Structural explanations (e.g., class conflict, the international expansion of capital) and solutions (e.g., national planning) are dismissed or ridiculed. Britain prospered historically because of its well-regulated commerce. That old leftist bogey imperialism is largely absolved of blame for the political and economic predicament of post-colonial states like Ghana (pp. 29-34). The causes of inequality are basically "just human nature" (p. 86) which good leaders should try to alleviate - "without crippling the rest of economic and political society" (p. 81). Smart leaders play the economic game on the board, but wicked leaders try to mess about with the rules. Luck, that great theoretical standby of the neoclassical economic tradition, is evoked to explain market failures, but failures in socialist planning are just bad leadership. "Idiot leaders have led to idiot economics" (p. 118). There is very little sympathy for leaders who, for all their faults, tried very hard to lead in a world that was so plainly concerned to lead them.

Political agency is a notoriously slithery notion in an analytical genre that can reach little further into causation than individual interest and action. Various entities like "Thailand," "the government," "the state" and "the people" appear often as univocal actors, rather than as political composites. The Thompsons' understanding of agency extends to what used to be called "the demonstration effect" in rural economics: smaller polities learn invidiously from strong regional exemplars (pp. 66-68), like peasants from kulaks. But they must know their place in the wider scheme of things: "A country must have a strategy proportional to the size and competence of the society" (p. 60). What this actually means, who should kowtow to whom, and what distinguishes benign and malign hegemony, glossed over. African Unity of the sort visualized by Nkrumah is unequivocally bad - but for whom? The Thompsons condemn Ghana for its monstrous "international hubris," whereas the Thais' "sense of gratitude" for assistance, especially from the US, is their "finest cultural trait" (p. 73).

The behavior of leaders is understood as a very transactional sort of morality, rather than one shaped by social forces rooted in history. Economics and politics are held distinct, the one a pure science, the other a corruptible art. Politics threaten markets, they don't define markets. Unfettered markets have the curative power to "root out" corruption (p. 135). For the Thompsons, the ideal politics are consensual, embodied in their own vision of "civil society" as the social context of liberal democracy. It is a comprehensive "we group," a critical public moved by national sentiment and with the capacity to moderate state power and "mercantile greed" (p. 153). The endemic "tribalism" of Africa is inimical to civil society, but primordial loyalties function positively if there is a "strong enough central ethnic group to pull the rest into their magnetic field" (p. 26) like the Han Chinese majority in Asia. Ethnic conflict in Africa is apparently the work of silly leaders: "Ibo officers killed the prime ministers of the non-Ibo regions and knocked off the Hausa Federal Prime Minister and his mentor for good measure, then wondered why everyone turned on them in a ruinous civil war" (p. 28).

In characterizing their version of Civil Society, the Thompsons make much play on "Essential Structures," a cluster of conservative values defined as conducive to expansion, security, and legitimacy of "the state and nation" (p. 89). They include religion, "culture" (p. 88) and "environmental protection" (pp. 90-91). Monarchy, as in Thailand, or Buganda, or Ashanti, can be an essential structure, but a class working for itself can not. Thailand's

“authoritarian but gentle regime” is praised for the way it “kept unions down in the 1960s” (p. 13), and Busia likewise gets grudging praise for his assault on Ghanaian unions in the 1970s (p. 166). There is a loosely populist assumption that a healthy civil society, whose life force is exchange (markets, transactions), will spontaneously generate groups (“NGOs”) which will express corrective interests (e.g. “bodies devoted to protecting obscure animals, distant human rights, and small farmers growing odd crops” (p. 141).) “Switzerland and England” are the paradigms of the “voluntarist participatory order,” which constitutes “civil society” (pp. 151-2). Disagreement is healthy, and utilitarian democracy is the gentlemanly way of resolving it. But consensus is the optimal political ecology of progress, and civil societies that become too querulous stagnate.

“When men and women at the top are open and dedicated to the country, it is likely that millions of countrymen will be too” (p. 184). Why? The authors’ account of “civil society” might be more convincing if it conveyed a clearer understanding of the massively rural populations of Ghana and Thailand. Focusing as they do on elite networks rather than the grass roots produces very odd images, like “the strangely contented Ghanaian villagers” (p. 95). Errors about people and places in Ghana (“villages like Mamprusi,” “Bolatanga” (p. 94) don’t inspire confidence, but more worrying is the Thompsons’ apparently tenuous grip on the history, ecology and political economy of cocoa production - and consequentially, their failure to understand the market forces to which anyone attempting to manage the economy at any level fell victim.

Practicing “openness” in this political prospectus involves entertaining debate while keeping a tight and tacit clamp on its resolution (a bourgeois trick that the Marxists were so concerned to expose). This book is interspersed with little boxes containing the bickerings of a mysterious couple, “Tara and Taylor,” who toss out opinions which the authors themselves seem too squeamish to voice: “Africa is poor because of Africans” (p. 32), “Wal-Mart is something that comes along with development and with freedom” (p. 80) etc. Other assertions are offered boldly as fact: “at the end of the millennium, every society that had tried to direct its economy had failed” (p. 8). (That must include all the national planners of the twentieth century such as Japan, France, and West Germany - along with such bold American ventures as the Marshall Plan and the Tennessee Valley project.) Again: “The global information economy is all-consuming and it depends on transparency” (p. 13). (It feeds very selectively, and it thrives on opacity.) And: “Short of Antarctica, Africa is the hardest continent for human beings to survive on” (p. 23). (That’s a poisoned chestnut - as with every other continent, it depends where you live and who you are.) And one more, to take the breath away: “Africa has been isolationist, hostile to immigrants and international business, reluctant to accept foreign advice” (p. 31).

The Thompsons’ version of bourgeois internationalism is fashionably cagey about “homogenizing globalism,” cautiously valuing “diversity” so long as it doesn’t interfere with free markets. The “open society” idealizes diverse peoples with diverse cultures freely trading diverse commodities. But the Thompsons bravely insist that there are good and bad “cultures.” A “good” cultural trait is “openness,” which implies “open economies, open attitudes towards foreign affairs and, most importantly, a view of the world that is not reducible to a zero sum” (p. 8). And if this is the best of all possible worlds, then we can probably tip the wink at a bit of corruption - especially of the “mango” variety (p. 12, 125) - so long as it is efficient and bears a few social benefits. But where do we draw the line between this sleight of the invisible hand, and “[t]he whole baroque monstrosity of theft” (p. 128) in West Africa? The answer, for the Thompsons, is disarmingly simple: markets - good, leaders - bad.

True to the liberal doctrines of individual initiative, rationality and morality, leadership is what links “history” and “tradition” in the making of a healthy “open society” (p. 7-8). “Bad leadership transcends ideology” (p. 39). The book homes in on the fetish of corrupt leadership, widely regarded by people in the rich countries as the cardinal failing of those in the poor. That leaders go bad is a complaint as old as politics, but these authors are at a loss to explain why they do so. Redemption, some prospect of a second chance, will depend on whether “the right people make the right decisions” (p. 174). The first piece of advice the authors have for the brave new leader is that “you have to consolidate political power so that what you accomplish doesn’t fall back on itself” (p. 165). This is exactly how Jerry Rawlings inaugurated his regime: the Thompsons’ make no less than seven scandalized references to his swift and prudent execution of his “three living predecessors” (pp. 44, 46, 64, 133, 148, 163, 181). If, as a Flight Lieutenant you have just seized power, the last thing you want is predecessors breathing down your neck. This he had apparently learned from their mistakes (the Thompsons’ second item of advice). He also (the remaining items) made snappy decisions and authoritative changes. The authors credit him very grudgingly with “a strand of cranky idealism” (p. 148) for capitulating to the IMF and its “Structural Adjustment” policies. His cardinal sin, it seems, was his distaste for professional economic advice (p. 168).

The Thompsons’ praise for King Bhumibol of Thailand, a “mild, ascetic and gentle man” (p. 58), is unstinting. In his “great and long reign,” this “beloved ruler” (p. 12) “has arguably been the most successful monarch of the century anywhere” (p. 5). Numerous other Thai officials, politicians and generals are also praised unreservedly for their complaisance. By contrast, the Thompsons are unstinting in their condemnation of those

Reviews

“plain brutes” (p. 50) the leaders of Africa. After independence they were “absolutely awful but their successors have been even worse” (p. 7). Nkrumah, with his “crazed dream” of socialism and unity for Africa, is their *bête noire*, slammed for “his vanity, ideological duplicity and disingenuousness” (p. 42). Jerry Rawlings does not fare much better: he was “a typical African despot,” the “great whale” (p. 163), though apart from bumping-off his predecessors, the authors are unable to nail him for a truly convincing vice. Busia was “bumbling” (p. 43). Acheampong was “an incompetent tyrant” (p. 10) and “Ghana’s chief kleptocrat” (p. 11). The disapprobation sweeps out to the other African leaders: Sekou Touré was “the destructive President of Guinea” (p. 66) and Eyadema of Togo “one of the worst blights ever to be cast on Africa” (p. 58).

The jacket blurb presumably has these excoriations in mind in commending the book as “courageous.” One way or another, it has all been said before, and so many of the culprits are on the litigiously safe side of the grave. The thought-provoking contrast, however, is not with the Thompsons’ approbation of the Thai leaders, but with their panegyrics for the bourgeois intellectuals with whom they ally themselves: “that great economist Partha Dasgupta” (p. 158); “the great development economist Robert West” (p. 14); “the learned Carl Rosberg” (p. 44); and a stream of others, many of whom rate the over-exercised label “brilliant.”

At Independence, African leaders had a passionate respect for academics, and insisted on the qualifications they had acquired, one way or another: Doctor Nkrumah, Doctor Obote, Doctor Banda. Now, everywhere, and with justification, the mood is skeptical. “It’s all academic now,” we say, when one football team is being incontrovertibly thrashed by another. Publics, even in Africa, are getting thoroughly inured to the vacuities that stream from the ivory tower. As for liberal panaceas and moral harangues about leadership, they have certainly heard all that before. As Jerry Rawlings famously remarked, when he was being lectured by the Structural Adjustment pundits: “blah blah blah” (p. 46).

Teetering on the Rim: Global Restructuring, Daily Life, and the Armed Retreat of the Bolivian State. By Lesley Gill. New York: Columbia University Press (2000), 222 pp.

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In her relatively compact urban ethnography of El Alto, Bolivia (a peripheral migrant city in Bolivia of at least half a million people) Lesley Gill asks a question we should all be asking: “what is wrong with the global economic order” (p. 181)? She asks this question in provocative ways, as well, encouraging us to think hard about the costs and benefits (if any) for people living in the onetime 3rd and 4th worlds. Cutting to the quick, for El Alto, at least, she detects virtually “no” benefit whatsoever for *alteños*, forced to come to terms with a draconian legacy of fifteen years of neoliberal structural adjustment. Therefore, her ethnographic goal is a study of “the complexity of local experience and the ways in which pain, loss, and desperation shape daily life” (p. 185) in El Alto, a marginal place of increasingly bleak prospects, forced to absorb the blows of neoliberalism as best it can, which is to say, often not very easily and with dire costs for those left to muddle through.

Given the increasing ubiquity and seeming inevitability of so-called “neoliberal democratization” in Latin America, detailed studies of what we might tactfully call its “fault lines” are surprisingly few and should be welcome. Gill’s analysis and critique “from below” of the fallout of Bolivia’s neoliberal regime for daily life in El Alto takes aim both at lacunae in the ethnographic attention to the aftermath of structural adjustment, and in the urban anthropology of the Andes. One reason why there has not been the sheer quantity of ethnography one should justifiably expect with regard to this, the most pressing global issue shaping turn-of-the-century Latin America, is the often bedeviling challenge of just exactly how to go about it. Given the intimate stock in trade of ethnography (that is, prolonged participant-observation by a single researcher in a “place”), it is a daunting task to confront such a scale and complexity of wholesale macro-level social transformation. Where to begin and how to describe the systemic effects of reform are not questions with singular or simple solutions.