

DROUGHTS, FAMINES AND THE EVOLUTION OF SENEGAL (1966–1978)

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1966, the Senegalese economy has experienced a cycle of fluctuations initiated ostensibly by droughts undermining agricultural outputs and affecting the demographic balance of several important regions. I would like to show, however, that recent socio-economic disruptions commonly attributed to climatic failure in Senegal have in fact resulted from the combination of drought and, less visibly, neocolonial economic policy. These forces have fused so as to enlarge pauperization and with it the decline of village level self-sufficiency. I want to examine how, in the Senegal case, political and economic institutions mediate climatic inputs and in so doing reduce the prosperity of those who work the land. What will be indicated in particular is how the logic operating in Senegalese capitalism has allowed the government and outside interest groups to profit from this situation.

CURRENT VIEWS AND SOCIO-HISTORICAL ANALYSES

The Sahelian droughts have become a fashionable topic for discussion among scholars and journalists. Fundamental questions bearing on the roots of the disaster have been brought forward and technical solutions have sprung up from everywhere (Giri, 1976), but serious historical and empirical studies have been very

few (cf. Lallemand, 1975; Salifou, 1974; Santoir, 1976). On the whole, research has concentrated on single, isolated problems such as the evolution of pastoralism, the cash-crop economy, relief operations and water supply policies. In fact, global analyses that present the political and social constraints transforming drought into famine are so few that one suspects researchers and policy makers, experts and journalists of conspiring in a kind of cover-up plot.

It will be helpful to begin by summarizing principal theories about disaster causality that prevail in the enormous literature on African droughts. Three different lines of analysis can be discerned.

(a) **An advance of the Sahara syndrome** is postulated to derive from irrational human behavior promoting deforestation and subsequent soil erosion. Unfortunately, this argument fails to address the process bringing land-use practices into conflict with nature. I have in mind particularly the modern doctrines about politico-economy which may be antithetical to traditional management practices (Reboul, 1977).

(b) **Production crisis theorists** reason that because intense droughts create famines, they reveal weaknesses inherent in the local food

production apparatus. Indigenous ingenuity is called into question. The basic weakness in this premise is that it disregards the fact that indigenous economies have evolved to meet the needs of subsistence cultivators, but traditional agriculturalists must now produce cash crops for export as well, leaving them in want during drought years. The fact that food must be imported during crop failure creates the false impression that the economic institutions of these farmers are inherently incapable of supporting them during crises. (Comité Information Sahel, 1974; FAO, 1976).

(c) **According to social crisis theories**, food shortage is a concomitant of population pressure. Famines occur because there are too many people to be fed, not because of any food shortage. Once again, social factors are forgotten, particularly those depriving persons of existing surpluses. I would include here exorbitant food prices or lack of agrarian employment options. Added to this would be the insufficiency of infrastructure by which food from surplus areas is channeled to deficit districts.

The arguments I have just sketched have been employed as a rationale legitimating national and international meddling in economically backward portions of least developed countries. For the deleterious consequences of droughts/famines to be understood, the activity of these supra-local forces must be taken into consideration. I will now try to describe the role that drought has played in the origin of social alienation and exploitation, using as my example, the Senegal.

THE SENEGAL

French colonialism in Senegal has a long history associated with the production and export of peanuts (Amin, 1973). Indeed, the peanut industry has given rise to many national institutions. These include peanut production

cooperatives, a state managed marketing board, rural councils, and a host of agricultural agencies and related industries (cf. Schumacher, 1975). Tied into these developments have been the rise of muslim brotherhoods and economic stimulation of central Senegal, the Peanut Basin. Prodigious growth of the Peanut Basin has led to underdevelopment in other regions, for instance the Senegal River Valley, which was until the beginning of the 19th Century, the most active and developed part of the Senegambian international economy (Curtin, 1975). I will elaborate on this important point further on in the paper.

Senegal is unique among francophone countries in Africa in having a highly developed system of markets and cooperatives and a free, multiparty election system. These factors are related to the international strategies revealed by the post-drought situation. I proceed by examining the evolution of the agricultural system and the changes in the framework of economic and political institutions. I then attempt to assess the relations among various institutional levels brought into focus by the droughts.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE RURAL ECONOMY

In 1964 Senegal asked the Société d'Aide Technique et de Cooperation (SATEC), a French rural development agency, for assistance in promoting the modernization of Senegalese peanut production. This plan was intended to compensate, by a 25% increase in production, the losses caused by suppression of French price supports. SATEC was eventually replaced by the Senegalese run Société de Développement et de Vulgarisation Agricole (SODEVA). SODEVA's operations, though limited to the Peanut Basin, applied to a spectrum of programs ranging from rural literacy to credit facilities for the purchase of cattle. The SODEVA structure was soon considered the most reliable agricultural institution established in the Peanut Basin, and for that matter anywhere in the Senegal.

SODEVA has become a major factor in agrarian policy change. Large, specialized regional agencies have replaced the former complex, inefficient pyramid of institutional subdivisions concerned with rural problems. Each agency operates in one region and concentrates on a range of production activities and carries out a number of programs, including large investment projects on the Senegal River or the employment of village level technical advisors in the Peanut Basin. This new approach to rural development came into full operation during and after the droughts of 1972–73.

Though SODEVA was unable to attain its economic objectives pertaining to levels of food production, it did change the role of state intervention. The National Peanut Marketing Board was reformed. Within the first dozen years following independence, SODEVA completely modified the structure of development institutions. Peanut producers were still at the center of rural development strategies, but they were no longer the only peasants to benefit by an institutional network. Farmers in other regions of the country were being advised and organized within special programs for production in rice, cotton, fruit and other produce. But in practice, many programs fell short of targets envisaged by the five year plans. Crop diversification had been called for but with little progress. In some cases little could be done to alter plant ecology without the introduction of irrigation. And in other cases, peasant resistance to change and bureaucratic insensitivity coincided. The only significant achievements here were in millet production. In contrast, peanut production declined in the post-drought years. Crop specialization followed a regional pattern without attendant integration through an internal market structure. This facilitated black marketing in periods of crisis and so for some converted drought into famine.

Second, this new institutional framework entailed an uneven pattern of regional development: large, internationally financed irrigation

projects on the Senegal River geared to food production; State controlled commercialization of small peasant producers and an elite of important farmers and traders (cf. Dubois, 1971; Copans, 1978); and multinational enclaves for foodstuffs (BUD) or cotton (Compagnie Francaise des Textiles). This situation has produced a patchwork economy made up of various competing economic structures (Copans, 1978; Atlas National, 1977). Fragmentary economic growth threatens to stimulate further regional specialization pitting agricultural workers against peasants and state or multinational operators against individual cash-crop producers.

THE MEANING OF REGIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

Three kinds of regional settings corresponding to forms of capitalist organized production can be distinguished. These consist of: regions where production for the external market is secondary and where social changes are minimal; regions almost exclusively devoted to cash crops and organized on a peasant basis; regions where agro-business is becoming or is going to become efficient and based on “free” agricultural laborers.

The first case, where food production levels are adequate, applies to the eastern and southern parts of Senegal, where drought has had the least effect. The populations in these regions have not been overtaken by drought, at least not so far, because they have experienced little intense economic change and because correspondently, they have been able to buffer themselves from environmental perturbations by maintaining grain surpluses and by preserving traditional land management practices.

The central regions are devoted largely to the cultivation of peanuts and millet. The agricultural system has been subject to technical and administrative inputs for a long time. After attempting to induce broadscale changes in the countryside, SODEVA has begun to focus on the most important producers, urging the devel-

opment of subsistence crops and the protection of the environment. But this strategy, based on large land ownerships, financial backing from outside and more or less unpaid labor has provided little relief for the mass of peasants whose means are very limited.

It is noteworthy that the ranching solution to livestock production follows the same principles of intensification, concentration and salaried work as in the agricultural sector. Ranching schemes have been advocated for some time by international experts but to date they are still modest, taking up only 25% of the breeding budget. So far, as recent droughts have demonstrated, only the State or important entrepreneurs, not the average pastoralist, have gotten the opportunity to engage in such programs (cf. Marches Tropicaux, 1978: 416–417; 464–67). The only coping strategy really practicable by the ordinary mixed farmer has been to revert to millet and this has proven inadequate in dealing with food shortage. The other solutions are migration to cities and to “new” lands.

The drought has accelerated a process imposed by colonial and post-colonial capitalist domination. This trend has resulted in the dispossession of the producers’ means of production on the one hand, and the emergence of pronounced socio-economic differentiation on the other. What seems to be evolving is the appearance of an unorganized and heterogeneous *kulak* kind of group clearing the way for itself through a discouraged and alienated peasantry.

The third kind of region is represented by the Senegal River basin. It was associated with a highly developed trade system until the beginning of the 19th century. With the peanut boom it has become pretty much an underdeveloped region, evidenced in part by large-scale labor migrations to Dakar and to Europe. The existence of this “free” labor force, the potentialities offered by a large, modern multi-dam irrigation project, and the absence of specialized production have favored the agro-business industry. What will probably occur is

that the River Valley will produce foodstuffs on an industrial scale for the internal market but probably also if not more for the external market. Thus, ironically, the areas stricken by drought will be exporting foodstuffs, consequently impoverishing the peasant and converting him into a hired worker on his own land.

These structural changes within the agricultural system suggest that the only response to the drought has been more technical input, more money, and more social differentiation. Even in the case of foodstuff production, Senegal’s dependency is increasing. It seems likely that self sufficiency will be obtained at the expense of autonomous economic development. Moreover, the social disruption introduced by agro-business implies a disappearance of the peasant’s knowhow. The farming sector will be submitted to the agro-business way of dealing with drought or risk a drop in world market prices and corresponding unemployment.

POLITICAL CHANGE

The fact that droughts contribute to economic underdevelopment does not imply that they produce a significant social and political change automatically. The important crisis Senegal had to deal with in 1968 and 1969 was not solely attributable to drought. The 1970–71 peasant disturbances were related to the state policy on debts and the price of peanuts. And the almost yearly student uprisings since 1966 have had little to do with a revolt against the deterioration of the conditions of living. Whereas in other Sahelian countries political factors have been tentatively related to the famines, it is difficult in the case of Senegal to single out a direct causal relationship (see Ormieres, 1975).

The political setting of Senegal is the proper framework within which to interpret the effects of drought. In this regard, the State has been able to control the distribution of aid. Coming after the 1968–71 period, the govern-

ment was careful not to cut its ties with the peasantry. The international aid was of course more beneficial to the state budget and to the various sorts of private traders and intermediaries than to the small farmers. Here again it is necessary to focus on political and administrative changes which have not been a result of the droughts, but which are nevertheless understandable as a means of deterring any kind of social crisis that could be triggered by, among other factors, future droughts.

Administrative reform began in 1972. Today, most of the peasant populations of the Peanut Basin have been integrated into this new system which introduces representativeness at the village level. The rural councils of the different levels – arrondissement, department, region – promote a kind of generalized cooptation of the real ‘elites’. The State is not only delegating its authority, it is seeking consensus and political backing at the grass-roots level. These councils are mandated to develop village and community projects of general interest, and they are supposed to administer their own budget. By adding a local-level structure based on election to the state control apparatus that ends with the village headman, the dominant groups can ensure a more institutionalized but apparently self-managed control of the peasants. This reform functions within the new multiparty representation.

Senegal has again embraced multipartism. This so-called democratic overture arose out of the need to prepare for a successor to Senghor, the democratic justification for the Socialist Party to become a member of the Second Socialist International, and a dispersion of centripetal forces (rule and divide). This political current is also a new vehicle for expressing ideological discontent. It might turn out to be a dangerous experiment and that is why Senghor today advocates a strong western military intervention in Africa (cf. *Newsweek*, June 1978). The French army has a military basis in Senegal. It is for the moment in full operation because of the French intervention

in Mauritania and Chad. This has had an indirect effect on national politics. And one must remember that the modernization of the Senegal Valley is a joint project (OMVS) with Mauritania and Mali, and perhaps French Guinea, as well.

Rural reform, multipartism, and French military presence are the decisive elements of the new political frame operating in post-drought Senegal. The years 1977 and 1978 were bad ones in terms of agricultural production and of prices for phosphates on the world market. The State has thus far managed to divert the populace’s attention from these problems or has discouraged them from expressing their profound personal discontent.

LESSONS AND PROSPECTS

General conclusions can be drawn concerning the social evolution of Senegal over the last ten years, of which the drought/famine is one element (FAO, 1976; Labonne, 1976; Berg, 1975). Social, regional and national differences and inequalities have increased. The urban-rural distribution of income is becoming more skewed. The transfer of resources from agricultural production to the State budget is accelerating. This situation will continue and thereby guarantee a stepped up rate of ecological crises in the future. That yields of the most important cash crops are steadily declining is officially conceded. Agricultural imports account for a third of the total value of imported goods. Peasants, migrants and urban unemployed, the parties who have undergone the greatest deterioration in living conditions, have not mustered any concerted political grievances. There have been various forms of resistance to the economic exploitation accompanying drought, such as non-payment of taxes or cooperative debts, abandonment of cash-crops and disinterest in public events. But events can be measured the other way around, that is by assessing the consequences of the new economic and political decisions.

The impact of the drought, by provoking a fall in cash crop production has also endangered the present level of resources of the state and of the dominant groups that operate it or benefit from it. It is for this reason that changes have been proposed and implemented. In fact, since 1973 the drought has benefited those sectors of Senegalese society that had the means to react to its effects, particularly traders and bureaucrats. By implementing administrative reforms, by channelling political discontent into a limited electoralist strategy, by proposing to expand the cash crop system to subsistence production and therefore renewing and enlarging the socio-economic basis of surplus extraction, the Senegalese State has laid the basis for an alternate development strategy within the same imperial system (Feder, 1976).

I would like to stress that this renovated strategy was defined in its general orientation before the 1972–1973 droughts and that it is far from being completely operational. The international situation is the fundamental reason why the older orientation remains unchanged and why the new one is only in the early stage of implementation. French capitalism is incapable by itself of promoting a modernized Senegalese economy. The level of investments implies an international financial backing and inter-imperialist contradictions and conflicts have developed very sharply. The fuel crisis and inflation have considerably enlarged the costs of the Senegal Valley projects, the ranching and the agro-industrial operations.

Imperialist interests were not keen to invest in a country which lacked the administrative and economic sophistication necessary to absorb and make profitable large productive investments. In making these investments absolutely necessary for nutritional and social equilibrium, the droughts have justified imperialistic tenets and put the Senegalese dominant group in a position for activating reform and change. But the ultimate decisions have not been made yet and these political considerations may not work out.

I would like to suggest the following conclusions. First, technical solutions to the drought such as integrated rural development schemes, the increase of food production, and an internal market network were proposed before the droughts made them necessary. Second, international economic forces have been more decisive than climatic vicissitudes in initiating this new strategy. And third, the inter-imperialist contradictions are such that this strategy has not yet really taken off.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND ECOLOGY

In focusing on the structural impact of international economy and the laws of underdevelopment economy and dependency, I may have given the impression of having ignored the environmental processes behind drought and famine. But I cannot distinguish in the abstract or even statistically the effects of imperial domination and those of changes in the natural environment. They thoroughly dovetail. I have remarked elsewhere (Copans, 1978):

We can no longer separate the natural phenomena and the necessary political translation of its effects . . . Social exploitation works out partially through the mechanisms of natural evolution: our object is located at the very place where the relations between man and nature mask the more subtle forms of exploitation of man by man.

We must view the recent period as a specific historical situation, that of the setting up of neocolonial institutions. The droughts have drawn attention to the fact that if they are to stay in power, the dominant groups must be able to reproduce the material foundations of their power and authority. Therefore productive forces have to be controlled or adapted to the needs of the relations of production and to the stabilization of their reproductive processes. This control must not be disrupted by natural perturbations. In fact, the international economy is more endangered by the political and economic incapability of the dominant classes to react to such hazards than by the

social movements provoked by those who have been totally dispossessed.

Droughts may be seen as a useful warning that the form and level of Senegalese productive forces have been changed too little, for instance in not meeting urban food needs, or too much, *viz.* the erosion created by monocropping. To maintain the actual level of State and imperial revenues and profits, exploitation must increase. The process of dispossessing the direct producers will continue on a larger scale. Though the drought has not created this historical development it has accelerated it.

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