

Review

Reviewed Work(s): False Start in Africa by Rene Dumont and Phyllis Nauts Ott

Review by: John R. Harris

Source: *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Jul., 1968, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Jul., 1968), pp. 615-622

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1152239>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic Development and Cultural Change*

JSTOR

Rene Dumont, **False Start in Africa**. Translated by Phyllis Nauts Ott. Introduction by Thomas Balogh, with an additional chapter by John Hatch. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966. 320 pp., \$7.00.

John R. Harris
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

African leaders expected independence to usher in a period of rapid economic development. With the shackles of imperialism loosed, the sleeping giant of tropical Africa was expected to realize the potential which had been suppressed by years of colonial rule. It is now clear that these hopes have not been realized; the wave of military takeovers in the past year can be interpreted in part as a reaction to the slow rate of economic advance.

False Start in Africa is a recent translation of Professor Dumont's *L'Afrique Noire est Mal Partie*, published in France in 1962. An additional note on English-speaking Africa by John Hatch and an introduction by Thomas Balogh have been added. As the title indicates, Dumont feels that African nations have started out on the wrong foot. This book is an attempt to analyze the causes of failure and prescribe policies to get Africa moving. No newcomer to problems of tropical development, Professor Dumont brings impressive credentials to this task, having advised governments and undertaken research in Indochina, throughout Francophone Africa, Cuba, China, and Latin America. His recent *African Agricultural Development*¹ is based heavily upon the book under review.

One is forced to write a review of this work with mixed feelings. Brilliant insights into the workings of economic processes are interspersed with ideological polemics; contradictions are not infrequent. The style is unfortunately pedantic, although it may be attributable in part to the problems of translation.

Part I, entitled "Tropical Africa is Marking Time," is a recital of the failures of the African states. Starting with the colonial heritage, the author discusses aspects of economic exploitation—primarily by policies of the expatriate trading firms. A particularly good analysis is made of the misdirection of capital investment by the metropolitan powers in Africa. According to Dumont, funds were devoted primarily to infrastructure, while directly productive investments were slighted; large-scale, capital-intensive agricultural schemes, such as the *Office du Niger*, were economic failures because settler motivation and prevailing factor proportions were ignored; and the structure of artificially supported prices for colonial produce has led to excessive coffee production. Concluding a section, lacking in balance and perspective, Dumont states, "The growth of African resources through FIDES was in large measure sterilized by alcohol" (p. 51).

Independence has meant the accession to power of a new African elite. The difference, however, has been more apparent than real. The new elite

Economic Development and Cultural Change

has retained metropolitan attitudes and life style; the emoluments of politicians and civil servants are based on expatriate scales; splendid houses and large limousines are commonplace among them; and the jacket and tie are symbols of status. Concentration of the new elite in the capital cities coupled with nepotism and corruption has, if anything, widened the gulf between governors and governed.

The educational system comes under indictment by Dumont for much of this. Based on European culture and needs, the curriculum is seen to be worse than irrelevant—it is obstructionistic, according to Dumont. Oriented towards colonial values, the worth of manual labor is downgraded, and far too much emphasis is placed on “qualifications.” The result is that individuals who have received formal education are unfitted for productive work in industry or agriculture.

John Hatch's note on English-speaking Africa is essentially an affirmation that the same problems exist in the areas that were under British tutelage. He states: “One of the worst contributions made by Britain to Africa in the post-war period has been the universities.... The consequences of this imitation British aristocratic educational system have been that the very type of work most needed in Africa—agricultural work—is now despised by the educated; unemployment among the educated classes is growing; and the gulf between the *elites* and the peasants—manual workers—party activists is rapidly widening” (p. 296).

Although this paints a dismal picture of African performance to date, Dumont argues in Part II that it need not be so. This, in my opinion, is by far the strongest and most useful part of the book. Arguing that parallel development in industry and agriculture is needed to propel African economies into continuing growth, he outlines a progression of industrial undertakings, starting with production of simple agricultural implements and moving on to food processing, fertilizer, textiles, and wood products. Cogent arguments for relatively small-scale, labor-intensive units are presented, and an interesting scheme for village-level sugar refining mills integrated with sugar cane production is suggested.

The author's expertise is most evident in his discussions of possible agricultural improvements. After considering the obstacles to agricultural change, which include systems of land tenure, traditional elements such as priests and chiefs, ignorance, and heavy demands of dowries and interest payments, he deals in turn with each of the major ecological areas. Specialization in tree crops such as oil palms, cocoa, and cashews, using improved strains under closely supervised cultivation, is recommended for the forest zone. Careful management of forest resources for producing lumber and pulp is also urged.

The schemes outlined for increasing productivity in the savannah zone are worthy of particular attention. Introduction of simple implements and draft animals can improve the cultivation of peanuts and grains; more careful attention to the timing of planting cotton can greatly increase its

yield; and the introduction of new sorghums and the use of fertilizers is urged. A practical scheme of small-scale irrigation projects using either wind or animal power is outlined, and larger-scale irrigation projects for the production of rice and sugar cane are suggested for a second stage.

Proposals for improved livestock raising are discussed at length. The importance of cheaper transport of animals and carcasses for the development of meat production is stressed. An interesting proposal for integrated sugar and dairy farming is presented. The potential importance of goats for both milk and meat production is also pointed out.

The strength of this section is the careful attention paid to the *economic viability* of the proposed schemes. He successfully avoids the usual agronomists' bias towards the most elaborate and "modern" techniques. Instead, a sequential process of improvement is outlined.

The decisive progress will consist of replacing men and picks with donkeys and oxen, pulling harrows, ploughs and wagons. Intelligent livestock-raising will "capitalize" on dung by putting it back in the soil; the more productive soil will then enable them to pay for chemical fertilizers, which should be manufactured as soon as possible. African agriculture can then start using machines and, progressing gradually to the more complex models, will feed its livestock well and regularly, and graduate to the concept of capital exploitation . . . Many will wish to skip steps, and acquire the most up-to-date tools immediately, particularly tractors . . . Plantations of shrubs and forests and modern fisheries would be less ambitious but more effective (p. 194).

Although it is easy to agree with Dumont that human problems of attitude and organization are of primary importance in Africa, it is less obvious that his optimism regarding the technical possibilities for agricultural transformation is fully justified. It is my impression that many technical problems remain to be solved before progress of the sort envisaged here can be a realistic possibility in most of tropical Africa. For instance, a summary of the forthcoming World Bank Study of African Agricultural Productivity indicates:

In most places it has not been possible, so far, to devise a satisfactory solution for maintaining soil fertility as a permanent substitute for bush fallow. It has not usually been possible to deal with the unexplained failure of legumes to produce nodules and fix nitrogen under tropical African conditions. Nor is it yet determined whether chemical fertilizers can raise yields on a sustained basis over the long run without devising a system of replenishing the soils organic matter.²

Furthermore, it is not as clear as Dumont would have us believe that the forest zone should increase its specialization in tree crops. Demand for these products, as well as considerations of the real costs of transporting food from the savannah zone, require further analysis of desirable patterns of specialization—they cannot merely be taken as articles of faith.³

Economic Development and Cultural Change

If African countries have failed to make much progress even though the prospects for success are not unfavorable, a program of action is obviously in order. Part III is entitled "In order to develop, Africa must reorganize the whole of its educational system . . . and set to work." A reorientation of education towards specific vocational training is called for. The emergence of a rural cadre which would organize people at the local level and introduce new techniques is envisaged as a consequence of the reorganized educational system. Suggestions are made for credit institutions based on a "help-those-who-help-themselves" philosophy and for a network of cooperatives. Forced savings schemes, trade bureaus (marketing boards), and large-scale labor investments are also urged. These proposals are, for the most part, imaginative and radical.

Prospects for implementation are discussed in the concluding Part IV, which is entitled "Africa as a Client of Europe—or Developed for Itself?" The challenges posed by socialist forms of organization are outlined and the twin pitfalls of South-Americanism and rash socialism discussed. After rejecting *laissez faire*, Israeli, and Soviet models, the author concludes:

The Chinese model seems much more valuable for the African economy, because levels of production were lower there, and the structure was semi-colonial. The period from 1952–57, during which the Han peasants were mobilized for a "reasonable" level of achievement, is full of lessons for Africa. Certain modifications will be necessary to avoid the excesses of the subsequent "great leap forward" and the communes. The lesson of manual labour for organizers and leaders (which Dieng calls the romantic conception of revolution) seems to be particularly relevant for Africa right now (p. 256).

Just how these changes are to be effected is less clear. Dumont finds that radical African students are unwilling to work and make the necessary sacrifices, European socialists have betrayed the underdeveloped world (pp. 247–48), and that parliamentary models are inapplicable for Africa (p. 240).

However, some specific recommendations are made: cut salaries in the "modern" sector, develop plans that tap both private and state initiative, stamp out traditional practices, eliminate the import of luxuries, and protect domestic industry. Furthermore, pan-African union, beginning with regional common markets, is urged both for rationalization of industry and to present a united front in dealings with the rest of the world. Finally, it is asserted that underdevelopment can be conquered in twenty years if disarmament and a world federal government leading to a program of massive international transfer of incomes to the developing countries were to come about. A world-wide "civilian military service" (along Peace Corps lines, but without propaganda) would be a concomitant measure. Dumont agrees that this is a Utopian scheme, but justifies it by stating: "A Utopia, certainly, but it is Utopias, or visions of a better world,

that have furthered progress, in Greek and Renaissance times as well as our own. Utopia could be defined nowadays as ‘long-term forecast’” (p. 279).

If African development is dependent on these schemes, which, however laudable, nevertheless, can remain little more than pious hopes, then the outlook for Africa is indeed bleak. Dumont concludes:

In all this, what will Africa become? Its fate in the future is also in the hands of the Africans themselves; but it is often now in those of leaders set up by the West, which exercises control. Yet its peasants, students and workers will also play an essential role in its future. Let us hope that they do not falter in the huge efforts needed to bring on the great destiny surely promised to Africa (p. 283).

His own analysis indicates that the present political, educational, and social structures militate against peasants, students, and workers playing such a role. Is there no basis for hope?

With regard to the rationality or responsiveness of peasants to economic incentives, he seems to be of two minds. There are several references to instances in which peasants responded positively:

When a crop brings a good profit without involving too much work . . . peasants are quick to plant it (pp. 230–31). In order to attract peasant labour to the project, they offered 100 CFA francs a day . . . They got as many workers as they could desire (p. 55). . . . the workers were made to understand that since they were working for themselves they should be less demanding and more hard-working. As a result they levelled five cubic metres a day for 100 francs. Each cubic metre levelled was therefore five times cheaper . . . (p. 168).

Yet in other places he is contemptuous of the efforts of peasants. In discussing irrigation schemes, he states: “Projects as expensive as these should not be turned over to ignorant and lazy African peasants . . .” (p. 166).

Closely related to this last point is his evident contempt for traditional society and values. “As long as peasants remain uneducated, they often present the most frightening inertia to all forms of Progress” (p. 59). “Cutting must be done according to a schedule set in advance each day of the season, which cannot allow time off for traditional festivals and taboos” (p. 169). “Next, the tradition of parasitic relatives must be stamped out, as it stifles both motivation to work for personal and family success, and the idea of saving” (p. 259).

One of the probable reasons for this ambivalence is his attempt to generalize for all Africa from scattered examples. One of the most striking things about Africa is its diversity. Traditional cultures vary extraordinarily from one area to another—the type of contact with Europeans, exposure to Western education, value systems, and motivations are anything but

Economic Development and Cultural Change

homogeneous. What is true for one country (or part of a country) is not necessarily true for other countries. Hence, his evidence is frequently conflicting.

The case against traditional social arrangements is anything but conclusive. It may turn out to be true that in balance they are unfavorable to economic development, but their role in providing security for the ill and aged, of mobilizing resources for education and investment, and of transmitting "modern" values must also be taken into account.⁴

Although some peasants may not respond to economic incentives and might even deserve the accolade "ignorant and lazy peasants," the evidence against this as a general proposition is quite convincing. For the most part, African peasants respond strongly and rapidly to opportunities for economic gain.⁵

Dumont has obvious ideological antipathy towards capitalism. He sees private ownership of land as an evil and inveighs against expatriate private capital throughout the book. For instance, he cautions that "Governments must also act to prevent a capitalist evolution similar to Japan's, where a small *elite* has become very rich and the backward peasant mass is supporting the entire weight of development. The dangers of this are already very apparent in the Ivory Coast" (p. 261). Elsewhere he feels that private enterprise is merely useless in promoting development: "Unless the economy is seriously planned and controlled, peasant efforts become simply a number of local peasant initiatives without real economic effect" (p. 209). Yet, his is not a blindly dogmatic position. At another point he states: "In spite of all its faults, capitalism does penalize failure. No doubt, pure profit seeking does not rate investments according to social and national utility, and does not accord priority to the most urgent needs of all the people; it can, nevertheless, stop errors of orientation in time" (p. 247). And again he points out that "Development of native capitalism is, of course, preferable from the African point of view to ex-colonial foreign capitalism . . ." (p. 102).

The main argument of this book is that only massive revolutionary efforts can transform African economies in a reasonably short period of time, yet Dumont admits that "The greatest obstacle to progress remains the lack of elementary morality—work, honesty, and dedication to the country—of a good percentage of political leaders, even more than the lack of revolutionary drive" (p. 242). If neither revolutionary fervor nor dedicated political leaders can be found, is there any hope at all?

Pragmatism has won the battle over ideology where Dumont proposes as a first step a fiscal system that will encourage native capitalists. "Such a framework would provide the largely parasitic white-collar bourgeoisie of today with the incentive to become enterprising and useful to his country." This is followed by some constructive proposals for the negotiation of foreign aid and for some first steps towards regional economic groupings.

I think that these are sensible and workable proposals. A fair reservoir of private initiative can be tapped in many African countries. Governments will necessarily play a dominant part, but care must be taken not to overburden the available administrative apparatus. Almost anyone who has worked in West Africa agrees that the level of political morality has been distressingly low and that this has had deleterious effects on the various economies. Whether or not the military regimes which have taken over during the past year will provide the drive and leadership necessary to carry out needed reforms and galvanize the bureaucracies into constructive action remains to be seen. Tanzania's imaginative experiments bear close watching.

The situation is far from hopeless. According to the United Nations, Africa as a whole increased its gross domestic product at an annual rate of 4.1 percent during the 1950's.⁶ Since 1960 the rate may have slowed up a bit over-all, although several countries have been showing rates of growth considerably in excess of this. Of course, one would like to see growth accelerating even faster, and at this rate the "gap" between African economic levels and those of Europe will close very slowly—if at all. Yet, it should by now be obvious that no amount of wishful thinking will cause this gap to be closed in 20 years. I think that at least part of Dumont's indictment of African performance stems from the disillusionment that inevitably arises when exaggerated expectations are not fulfilled. A genuine desire to see Africa develop more rapidly must not be allowed to blind one to the progress that has been made.

The publishers have done a service in making this volume available to an English-speaking audience. It is simultaneously annoying and thought-provoking, and considerable information on Francophone Africa is presented which would not otherwise be accessible.

- 1 New York: Food and Agricultural Organization, 1966.
- 2 Peter F. M. McLoughlin, "Some Conclusions from the World Bank Study of African Agricultural Productivity," delivered to the African Studies Association, October 1966, p. 4. Similar conclusions are voiced in David Hapgood, ed., *Policies for Promoting Agricultural Development* (Cambridge: Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1965), pp. 165–68.
- 3 Hapgood, *op. cit.*, pp. 162–64, takes as an unquestioned premise the converse proposition, that the forest zone must increase its food production.
- 4 See Polly Hill, *The Migrant Cocoa Farmers of Southern Ghana* (1963), for an excellent discussion of the positive role of the traditional society in facilitating the expansion of cocoa farming in Ghana. P. C. Lloyd's *The New Elites of Tropical Africa* (1966), pp. 28–37, contains a balanced discussion of the

Economic Development and Cultural Change

relationships between elites and traditional units. The importance of the contact in transmitting modern values and the selective basis for providing education for family members who are particularly able is worth further consideration.

5 Polly Hill, *op. cit.*; E. R. Dean, *The Supply Responses of African Farmers* (1966); T. W. Schultz, *Transforming Traditional Agriculture* (1964); J. R. Harris and M. P. Rowe, "Entrepreneurial Patterns in the Nigerian Sawmilling Industry," *NJESS* (March 1966)—these are but a few of the recent studies providing some measure of quantitative evidence that Africans are responsive to economic incentives. Hill and Harris and Rowe also have evidence that Africans will save and invest in long-term projects when the prospects are favorable.

In a very interesting article, R. Green and S. Hymer, "Cocoa and the Gold Coast: A Study in the Relations between African Farmers and Agricultural Experts," *Journal of Economic History* (September 1966), it is shown that the profitable expansion of cocoa production in Ghana came about entirely through peasant initiative—government efforts were obstructive, for the most part.

R. Levine, *Dreams and Deeds* (1966), discusses the adaptability of many traditional African societies.

6 *World Economic Survey* (1963), p. 19.

H. A. Oluwasanmi, **Agriculture and Nigerian Economic Development**. London: Oxford University Press, 1966. 240 pp.

Bruce F. Johnston
Stanford University

This small book by Dr. Oluwasanmi is a competent, well organized, and comprehensive account of Nigerian agriculture and its place in the national economy. Particularly informative are the concise and lucid chapters dealing with the role of agricultural export expansion in the country's modern economic history, the characteristics of the land tenure systems that prevail in the different regions, and the typical patterns of land use. An outstanding feature of the book is the historical perspective that the author brings to bear throughout—for example, in his discussion of the efforts to introduce animal draft power in northern Nigeria that trace back to 1912 (pp. 88 ff.), and in tracing the origins of the marketing boards that have handled the bulk of Nigeria's agricultural exports during the postwar years (pp. 150 ff.). Although major attention is given to the boards set up to handle export crops, the chapter on marketing also carries a useful, though condensed, account of domestic trade in farm products (pp. 147–50).