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## Book Reviews

### **Development and Dependency: The Political Economy of Papua New Guinea.**

A. Amarshi, K. Good and R. Mortimer. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979. PB \$8.95, HB, \$17.50.

This book, by three academics formerly resident in PNG, seeks to analyse the country's economic history and present socio-economic pattern in Marxist terms. Underlying their analysis is the concept of the ongoing "under-development" to which countries linked to the international capitalist system are subject. This underdevelopment involves, for example, dualism between the domestic economy and the export enclaves, an overwhelming export orientation and extreme inequalities. A second theme is that of "periphery". PNG has been and remains on the outskirts of Australia, itself a sub-metropolitan capitalist power; the nature and speed of PNG's development has therefore been determined by Australian capitalist interests.

The book is divided into four fairly discrete parts. Part 1 consists of an interpretation of the economic history of PNG; Part 2 (which seems to fit rather awkwardly into the book) deals with international aspects of under-development; Part 3 considers class formation; and Part 4 examines the evolution of political institutions in the post-colonial state.

There will be some readers who will dismiss the book out of hand (and others who will not read it at all) because of its unashamedly Marxist approach. This would be unfortunate. There is, in my mind, no doubt that a number of Marxist concepts are very helpful in understanding the nature of the development process both in developing countries and in Australia. Nevertheless, the book has some important weaknesses, and here my remarks are concentrated on the economic history in Part 1. First, as the authors freely admit (pp. xiv, xviii) their use of facts is selective; facts are chosen if they support the authors' theoretical position. Now it should be emphasized that no author is free from this selective use of evidence, but in this case, there are a number of omissions which to me seem vital. To continually line up the administration with capitalist interests in Australia ignores, for example, the vitally important fact that land ownership remained vested in native hands. This resulted, in Papua, from a steadfast refusal by Hubert Murray, with the backing of missionaries, to submit to intense pressure from commercial interests for widespread land alienation. Again, to quote the suggestion that increased production of export crops is the fundamental cause of malnutrition (p. 59) ignores the wide range of other reasons which operate, many of which are demonstrably more important than export crops. A final blatant example: copper is (correctly) stated as accounting for more than half the total value of exports in 1975; however, the author does not go on to report that this proportion fell substantially (to less than a quarter of the value of total exports on average) between 1976 and 1979.

Second, some interpretations of facts are questionable. This is particularly so in the case of the *motives* for various policies. The high level of Australian aid to PNG is seen as motivated by the need to fuel and transform peripheral capitalism so that it might be more useful in serving Australian capital interests (p. 59). Now, it may well be true that Australian aid has had this effect; whether it was motivated by such an objective is open to question. Again, it is asserted that the post war expansion of welfare, education and indigenous participation were subject to "the central aims of consolidating

colonial power and extracting greater profit from it" (p. 177). One wonders what light the policy-makers responsible could shed on their aims and motivations.

Finally, there is a tendency to generalize from other developing countries to PNG. Clearly this is valid in some respects; capitalism does impinge in similar ways in all developing countries. But in other respects, which to me appear crucial, PNG is not a typical developing country: it does not have a landless labouring class; it does not have landlords; it does not have absolute hunger and poverty in comparison to countries of South and South East Asia; and high levels of productivity in subsistence agriculture have been maintained. In consequence, the continual generalization from other countries to PNG (*e.g.*, plantations have caused a reduction in the productivity of subsistence agriculture by taking over the best land; small scale producers cannot compete with plantations, *etc.*) need much closer scrutiny than they have been given. A related issue is the tendency to generalize from one area of PNG to another, which is at times unwarranted.

Despite the above, the book deserves to be read reflectively and unemotionally by policy makers and those interested in PNG's development. Its predictions, (concerning class development, for example) need to be monitored. More importantly, the many negative elements of capitalist intrusion (*e.g.*, attempts to gain individual freehold to land) which the book identifies need to be attacked with much greater vigour than has been evident so far. Or is this expecting the impossible from a parliament dominated by businessmen?

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### **Information Systems for Agriculture.**

M. J. Blackie and J. B. Dent (eds). London: Applied Science Publishers Ltd, 1979, pp. xii, 178. \$28.40.

This book is a collection of eight papers dealing with the general area of information systems in agriculture. The editors take as their departure point the words of Bonnen that "... the problems of agriculture and of rural society, indeed societal problems generally, are best understood as fundamentally problems of information processing". Thus decision-making in agriculture, as elsewhere, depends crucially on information availability and usage. For example, it is becoming more apparent that appropriate information systems at the farm level are critical for enterprise and farm viability. Similarly, state and federal policy makers must have information at the right time and in the right form to permit efficient direction or control. Deficiencies in these information systems have obvious implications for the efficiency of production, marketing and policy decisions.

The editors claim that a contemporary review of the subject is warranted because of this important role of information in agricultural decision-making, the increasing complexity of agriculture (and hence the increasing complexity of decisions), and the apparent demand for such a review by information users. When the role of information in economic theory is being rapidly developed, it should also be an appropriate time to examine the practicability of some of these theoretical advances.

The book contains four major sections. Part 1 is titled "Technology of Information Systems" and contains a discussion of the basic concepts and some of the technology of information systems. Barnard (Concepts and Structures) argues the benefits of, and need for, comprehensive information systems for agriculture, and some of the necessary conditions for the successful implementation of such systems. Sprowls (Data Base Management) discusses the problems of data definition, and techniques for data base organization and storage.

The topic of the second section of the book is "Farm Information Systems". The authors of the two papers in this section attempt to translate the concepts of Part 1 into an on-farm management information setting. Harrington and Schapper (Management Information Systems for the Commercial Family Farm) outline the purposes of farm management information and list the necessary elements of such a system for assessment, control and planning on the individual farm. Emphasis is placed on the role of computer based information systems. Blackie and Dent (Structure and Operation of Existing Farm Information Systems) review the state of the art with respect to farm information systems. They discuss developments from simple farm record systems (such as ACCRA), through planning and control systems (such as DECIDE, COMPLAN), to full-scale management information systems (such as CANFARM).

A more aggregate view of farm information systems is taken in Part 3 "Organization of Farm Information Systems". In the main paper, Thompson (Central Computing Facilities for Information Systems) talks about the problems of a centralized management information system, such as CANFARM. Topics covered include the compatibility of data flows and computer loading; data security; farmer motivation; how to introduce improvements; the merits of postal or direct contact; and the role of extension services. Pugh (Microcomputer Facilities for Information Systems) looks at the hardware aspect of this framework in more detail.

The final section of the book deals with "Industry Applications". Hawkins (Information Systems for Commodity Marketing) repeats previous papers outlining his view of the basic concepts of marketing, and uses the Alberta Hog Producers Marketing Board as an example of an industry information system. In the last and probably best paper, Riemenschneider and Bonnen (National Agricultural Information Systems: Design and Assessment) discuss the nature of an information system, the characteristics of information as a commodity, and the procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of an information system.

Each chapter makes liberal use of diagrams to illustrate the concepts discussed and concludes with a list of references. A fairly comprehensive index is also provided.

A major problem with the book, as with many such collections involving different authors, is the diversity in the quality and subject matter coverage of the papers. Many of the papers are available, in only slightly different forms, in journals or conference proceedings. There is considerable repetition, with at least three contributions discussing the nature of information systems and the necessary conditions for their success. Finally, there seems to be an over-emphasis on *farm* information systems at the expense of *market* information systems, but this may merely reflect the state of development of the subject.

The more fundamental issue however is that there are no real guidelines for assessing the benefits of an existing information system, or of modifications to it. Many of the papers in the book are largely irrelevant to such a study,

since their focus on concepts and procedures for implementing an information system can be taken as predetermined. The interesting questions of how to value publicly produced information? *etc.* are not addressed, although this is where the theoretical developments are heading.

The book should be useful in a teaching environment as a statement of progress in the field of information systems in agriculture, but will be less popular among practitioners as it does not provide solutions to the problems which concern them.

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