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Economic & Political Reform in Africa: Anthropological Perspectives by Peter Little

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Little, Peter D. *Economic and Political Reform in Africa: Anthropological Perspectives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014. 240 pages. Paperback, \$20.75.

The broad question that *Economic and Political Reform in Africa* addresses is how pro-market and pro-democracy reforms have impacted local economics and communities. Peter D. Little, an anthropologist and director of the program in Development Studies at Emory University, using grounded empirical work and ethnographic insights, examines the complicated processes of economic and political reforms based on seven case studies in six African countries (The Gambia, Ghana, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the borderlands of Somalia and Kenya). The case studies are intended to show how neoliberal reforms have actually worked in local communities, as well as how those targeted as beneficiaries of foreign aid programs and economic reforms perceive themselves, the programs, and the outcomes. The book comprises seven chapters (with notably catchy titles such as “‘We Now Milk Elephants:’ The Community Conservation Business in Rural Kenya”) and conclusions.

The first case study compares contract farming in non-traditional commodities—fresh fruits and vegetables for export—near Banjul (The Gambia) and Accra (Ghana). In its reform objective, contract farming and non-traditional commodities diversification were presented as solutions for Africa’s agrarian deficiencies. However, the author reveals that, rather than empowering smallholder farmers, the programs in Ghana and The Gambia encouraged large-scale production of fresh fruits and vegetables under a small number of export-oriented farms. The latter offloaded produce unfit for export into local markets at low cost, thereby undermining small local producers. Due to World Bank and Ghanaian government support for cooperatives, smallholders in Ghana fared a bit better than those in The Gambia. Other competitors in the fruit and vegetable export business, notably countries with lower transport costs to Europe such as Egypt and Morocco, emerged to take a larger market share.

The second case study in Mozambique examines peri-urban trade in Maputo after the end of a protracted civil war. The study demonstrates how economic reforms in Mozambique reduced public-sector employment, devalued currency, decreased access to land, and increased food costs in Maputo. This dire situation channeled many people into petty trade as a survival mechanism. Using ethnography and local economic data collected from street vendors (*dumba nengue*), the author shows that the outcomes were uneven as education and gender played a role in deciding winners and losers. For example, those with some level of education fared better than those with no formal education, while men fared better than women. Furthermore, given the prevalence of extreme poverty, even informal revolving loan schemes were ineffective in generating business growth, as funds were deployed to more pressing necessities instead of business expansion.

The third case study examines how global concerns for biodiversity increasingly shaped practices aimed at rural development in Kenya. The much-touted community-based conservation (CBC) programs, which supported and funded by a combination of public and private actors, largely failed to usher in the economic gains that they promised. As the author argues, the CBC model has been “hijacked by private investors, overly zealous conservation groups, and, in some cases, local elite who channel the bulk of the benefits to themselves or, in the case of conservation NGOs, to the preservation of wildlife often at the expense of local pastoralists and their lands” (p. 90). In effect, the author challenges the environmentalist mindset that places priority on wildlife conservation over offering viable economic livelihoods to the local population. The focus on Kenya continues in the fourth case study, where the author shows how

multiparty elections influenced local politics and identities in rural districts. The author observes, among other things, a shifting emphasis from “indigenous rights” (contestation for space and traditional homelands) to “minority rights” (political representation). Neoliberal economic and political reforms created new possibilities for trans-ethnic and trans-national alliances, especially among minority groups. Seizing the opportunity offered by political dialogue, the Camus people pursued political representation, as well as “an identity that distinguishes their political cause from other Maa-speaking groups in Kenya” (p. 115).

The fifth case study, “Narratives of Food Aid Dependence in Rural Ethiopia,” exposes the inherent contradictions in the neoliberal reform agenda: the need to promote economic growth while alleviating poverty and protecting the poor through public welfare programs. Based on the politics of famine and food insecurity, the Ethiopian government mandated participation in development projects as a prerequisite for food aid to control the rural populations in South Wollo, northern Ethiopia. In most cases, food aid did not reach those in most need due to the nepotism of local officials involved in distribution. More importantly, the government’s notion that food aid rewards laziness and encourages a dependency syndrome was not borne out by the empirical evidence. Similarly, the sixth case study, “The Politics of Pastoralist Poverty Assessment in Kenya,” exposes the contradictions between policy reform initiatives and reform outcomes.

The last case study, “Hyper-liberalization and Somali Transnationalism,” examines the operation of Somali politics and power relations even in the absence of a functioning state. The author highlights an increasingly globalized Somali transnational community that is able to adjust to open trade policies and carve out a business niche in consumer goods, electronics, and livestock trade. With a growing diaspora and a remittance, trade-based economy, the Somali business community was able to enter new international markets that galvanized around three critical centers of the international Somali economy: Dubai, Eastleigh in Nairobi, and the border town of Garissa.

Finally, in his conclusions, the author highlights the contradictions between market liberalization and state interventions in the context of economic reform. Moreover, he maintains that the extension of global markets into various local communities has often disempowered smallholders and the poor. In effect, there appears to be a gap between intended policy reforms and what actually happens in local communities. At the same time, democratic politics and community empowerment initiatives have, in some cases, aggravated communal/ethnic tensions, as exemplified in the Rift Valley of Kenya. While the book is not antidevelopment, it does suggest, “Africa and Africans do not need externally prescribed solutions and discourses or imposed models to address their own problems of poverty, food insecurity, and conflict” (p. 193). Lastly, as the book has shown, development initiatives designed to reduce poverty serve as a rationale for some governments to pursue political agendas targeting certain segments of their population. This book is well written and the narratives are enlightening. It should be recommended reading for students of African development.

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