Political Theory and National Involvement in East Africa
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A recent controversy of academic significance in East Africa centered on an article in *Time* magazine. The article assumed importance not because of any stature enjoyed by the magazine, but because of the status of the issue it raised. The article criticised Makerere for alleged insensitivity to the real needs of East Africa. The needs were on the whole conceived in practical terms. Makerere was accused of producing more philosophers than engineers—an assertion which achieved the distinction of being both literally correct and a distortion of the facts. It is only just barely correct that Makerere has produced one philosopher but no engineer. But a department which has produced only one specialist in its subject, and which is, in any case, one of the smallest units in the College, is hardly the right basis for a generalisation. As for the engineers, the reason why Makerere has not produced any is because, by a special East African agreement, engineering for East Africa as a whole was supposed to be a prerogative of the University College in Nairobi—and Uganda students were being sent there.¹ *Time* then went on


¹ The article appeared in *Time*, July 26, 1968. The single philosopher produced by Makerere so far is, in fact, a postgraduate product of the Sub-Department of Philosophy of the College. And the correct rejoinder to the *Time* article is that given by Mr. Karl W. Bigelow, Director of the African-American Program in Teacher Education, who said in a reply letter to *Time* magazine: "It is not true that Makerere is ‘turning out more philosophers than engineers’. No graduates in either field have as yet been produced. A degree course in philosophy has recently been begun. But Uganda students wishing to become engineers have for long studied that subject at Kenya’s University College, Nairobi, where work in engineering is concentrated so far as the University of East Africa [.] is concerned."
to give its blessing to “a proposal [...] that African countries should temporarily forsake universities, instead concentrate on building trade or vocational schools.”

_Time_ magazine might have carried the argument to an extreme, and certainly distorted facts in the process. But the general issue which the magazine was raising was an important one, and one which, in a more moderate form, commands wide acceptability itself. It is in part this factor which might account for the seriousness with which an article in a magazine like _Time_ was treated. The newspaper of the ruling Uganda Peoples Congress, _The People_, reprinted extracts from the article. The Principal of Makerere University College felt compelled to issue a public rebuttal of some of the claims made by _Time_. The Director of the African-American Program in Teacher Education, Dr. Karl W. Bigelow, wrote an extremely well-informed reply to the magazine. A professor of agriculture and Acting Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture at Makerere also responded and wrote to _Time_. The Student Guild newspaper, _The Makererean_, reprinted these letters and had comments on the general theme. And, perhaps most significant of all, the President of Uganda, Dr. Milton Obote, regarded the issue important enough for him to raise it at a speech he gave at Makerere as part of the Africa Day celebrations of the College. Dr. Obote regarded _Time’s_ presumption as a case of Westerners once again denouncing African institutions and African governments in a patronising and condescending way, and making prescriptions of how African societies were to conduct their affairs.¹

Science vs. Practicality.

What has this whole issue got to do with political theory? One level of relevance concerns the allegation by _Time_ that the University College, Dar es-Salaam, had eliminated “courses in classical political thought” in favour of “management administration”. The assertion was basically incorrect, but it was not devoid of significance.

Another level of the relevance of the article in _Time_ magazine for political theory in East Africa concerns the article’s attitude to philosophy. There seemed to be little doubt that _Time_ regarded the study of philosophy as a luxury which African societies could not afford. Did this include the study of political and social philosophy? This was not made explicit, but it did raise the issue of the place of general intellectual speculation in African educational systems.

The third point of relevance lies in a broader doctrine underlying that whole piece in _Time_ magazine. This is where we link up with

¹. For Obote’s speech, cf. _Uganda Argus_, August 5, 1968.
As I have argued elsewhere, the balanced growth of a university in Africa is sometimes threatened by two mystiques. The first one is what I have called the mystique of practicality, and the second the mystique of science and scientism. The article in the *Time* magazine lies solidly within the tradition of the mystique of practicality. This is the tradition which would argue that an African university should concentrate or even limit itself to subjects which have a direct discernible *practical* application.

The mystique of scientism, on the other hand, tends to regard the scientific disciplines in a university as being more deserving of emphasis than the promotion of the arts and humanities. One major assumption underlying the mystique of scientism has direct links with nineteenth-century faith in the idea of progress. Modernity itself is conceived of as the realisation of the scientific spirit. And modernity is the ultimate destination of social evolution and national progress.

It is not, in fact, always remembered that the mystique of science and the mystique of practicality do not always pull in the same direction. The pure sciences are sometimes, in their very abstract universalism, less related to practical needs of East Africa than, say, a parochial course in African history or African literature. Pure mathematics, by the very fact of being very scientific, is more distant from the realities of East Africa than a course which studies the novels of James Ngugi, or Kiganda oral literature, or the rise, decline and fall of Bunyoro-Kitara. In their own imperceptible ways, the arts and humanities and their pre-occupation with *national* histories, *national* literatures, *national* political systems, might be regarded to contribute more than the natural sciences to the cumulative transformation of values without which no new forms of identity can ever coalesce into meaningful realities.

But just as these two mystiques of scientism and practicality provoke debate in educational doctrines at their broadest level, the two mystiques also affect considerations of what the study of politics should devote itself to in a university in Africa. The very term ‘political science’ springs in its origins from a mystique of scientism within the whole area of social studies. There has been a desire for social studies to become more and more value-free, and committed only to the pursuit of a neutral scientific understanding of social phenomena. In this paper we shall indeed freely use the term ‘political science’, but mainly because it is now a widely accepted label for the study of politics and not necessarily because its capacity for scientific reliability as a mode of investigation has as yet been fully established.
While political science as a whole continues to be affected by the ambition of scientism and the desire to achieve full rigorous reliability, political science in African universities is feeling the pull of the mystique of practicality.

Part of the problem arises from political pressures outside the university. The President of Uganda, in a television interview, intimated that Makerere University College was not adequately involved in nation-building. He was voicing a judgment that is perhaps widely shared among men of affairs within Uganda and beyond.

But it is not simply a case of academics feeling the breath of close scrutiny by external spectators. Sometimes within the university itself academics are by conviction eager to tear themselves away from a conceptual ivory tower. They feel that the university is a little too distant from the society it serves. And one way of bridging the gulf between itself and that society is to make the subjects taught within the university of greater applicability to policy issues within the nation.

There is then widespread feeling in different departments that there is need for self-validation. The existence of a department in an African university must seek national validation or social vindication from at least a simple commitment to applied research and, to some extent, applied teaching. Not all disciplines lend themselves easily to this form of self-vindication, but each discipline within the University of East Africa seems to be groping for at least a partial area where it can claim to be making a contribution to nation-building.

In the teaching of political science, one approach is to be increasingly interested in public and development administration as an area of emphasis. The head of a department of political science of a West African university once congratulated Makerere for having had the foresight to call its own department, ‘Department of Political Science and Public Administration’. The visiting head regarded this as an insurance against becoming, or against being mistaken to be an exotic discipline unrelated to practical matters.

The Department of Political Science and Public Administration at Makerere has tried to live up to its name as an organism interested both in general political analysis and in the phenomenon of public and development administration. In the early days our participation in the latter was mainly through short in-service training courses for civil servants within Uganda, and through periodic institutes in diplomacy for foreign service officers from English-speaking African countries. Since then the in-service training for Uganda civil servants has been taken over by the Uganda Institute of Public Administration. The
department at Makerere retains active involvement in institutes in diplomacy. In addition, the department has now started a Bachelor of Arts degree specialising in Public Administration. In other words, a student enrolled within the department at the moment can either take a single-subject honours degree in Political Science (general), or a single-subject honours degree in Political Science (specialising in Public Administration), or an honours degree combining political science with another discipline. The degree in Public Administration includes among its requirements an internship during at least one long vacation either in the public service or in a comparable administrative position.

Social Reflection as Participation.

It is relatively easy to see the pertinence of courses in development administration for an ethos which puts a premium on practicality. If one were to devise a gradation for political science courses in terms of their practical relevance to society, one might indeed be tempted to put at the top of the scale courses which promote greater understanding of the workings of administrative institutions and of the behaviour of administrators. What can so easily be overlooked is that the second most practically oriented course in a department of Political Science within an African university—some might even say the first—might well be a course in normative political theory. By the latter we do indeed mean what is sometimes called political philosophy.

However, this constitutes a parting of the way between the mystique of practicality and the mystique of scientism within the ethos of political studies. The behaviouralist, or the scientific theorist of Eastonian detachment, by his very insistence on scientificity, is in fact insisting on withdrawal from the polity he is studying. To be ultra-objective in this sphere is to assert absolute neutrality. And to assert absolute neutrality is to take a step backwards away from the object one is studying, and then look at it as something decidedly apart.

But the role of the normative theorist is different. As Thomas Landon Thorson so aptly put it:

“The political philosopher is so often less an observer of the political process than a special kind of participant in it. All men who are engaged in politics, whether as leaders or as followers, have as their prime problems matters of choice, matters of value. The political philosopher is a member of society who allocates his resources and his energies toward the articulation of answers to these questions of choice and value [ ]. The political scientist, who by his own definition is the dispassionate observer of the political process, speaks
primarily to other political scientists. The political philosopher, on the other hand, speaks only incidentally to political scientists and, for the matter, only incidentally to other political philosophers; he speaks primarily to human beings."

Normative political theory is an attempt to combine political socialisation with the promotion of intellectual independence. This is because normative political theory lies in an intermediate position between detached scientific social theory on the one hand and fully committed political ideology on the other. The detached scientific social theory is primarily a game between specialists in the field, in a constant dialogue to give greater precision, rigour, and sometimes less intelligibility to the concepts of their scholarly discourse. Ideology, on the other hand, implies a fuller commitment to a specific set of values. To impart ideology is a process of indoctrination which corrodes part of the area of intellectual initiative for the individual. Normative political theory, on the other hand, tries to bridge the two areas of ideas which separate ideological partisans from scientific theorists. Normative political theory, by trying to encompass within each course given at a university a variety of thinkers and of approaches to social problems, should hopefully promote within the class in which the course is given a wider spectrum of value-analysis. A class in scientific theory aspires to be non-ideological. An indoctrination class in an ideological institute aspires to be uni-ideological. A class in normative theory aspires to be multi-ideological.

Sometimes rather unlikely pairs, divided between each other by great intellectual or ideological gulfs, become nevertheless associated in the mind of a student of normative theory. The mention of Plato might lead on to the thought of Aristotle, two very different protagonists of political approaches. The mention of Hobbes might spark off the thought of Locke, divided though they are by the gulf which separates political absolutism on one side from anarchic liberalism on the other. The mention of Hegel might spark off the thought of Marx, in spite of the divide between a right-wing idealism and a left-wing materialism.

When the University College, Dar es-Salaam, first started advocating and implementing a common course for all students at the College, this appeared to be a case of political education. The underlying ethos of the course seemed designed to be the ethos of a socialist Tanzania. And although the course was, in fact, conducted by a multiplicity of lecturers, recruited from outside, as well as by supervisory tutors within the University College itself, the general ambition

seemed to be Tanzacentric. To that extent it appeared uni-ideological, encouraging discussion and disagreement but within narrowly defined ideological frontiers. In practice, the course does not appear to have worked that way, and many at the University College, Dar es-Salaam, would assert that it was not intended to do so. But it acquired that reputation both among outsiders and among some of the students themselves within the University College.

However, when early in 1968, the University College, Dar es-Salaam, put forward before Senate a new idea of development studies, the emphasis seemed to lie more in the tradition of normative theory than in the tradition of indoctrination. The ‘development studies’ concept as put before Senate was, in some ways, a little too broad, and tried to encompass too many disciplines within it. But the very notion that all students at the University College ought to be exposed to a common course centering on the theme of development was itself fundamentally normative. And the diversity of approaches envisaged within that course implied a multi-ideological diversity rather than a uni-ideological purity. The former idea might seem to be less of a commitment to the Tanzanian society under a socialist regime. But even the approach of normative theory is itself a contribution to the practicalities of political awareness in that society.

One might even argue that it is a greater service to Tanzania in the long run to promote the study of normative diversity rather than simply that of socialist purity. It is sometimes too glibly suggested that African universities should devote themselves to the promotion of national values. In reality, there are no fully stable national values as yet in most African countries. Tanzania might claim to have a national ethic, but it would be hazardous to conclude that this has yet been sufficiently internalised into the modes of behaviour of the people to make it a reliable basis for predicting Tanzania’s behaviour in the years ahead. And in any case Tanzania is further ahead in the process of cultural homogenisation than most of her neighbours. It would be even more hazardous to make universities elsewhere in Africa simply respond to the latest policy declarations from the capital on this or that value preference.

_Political Theory and Popular Consciousness._

As we have argued elsewhere, a university in an African country—perhaps more so than a university elsewhere—has one overpowering duty in addition to that of producing skills for the society it serves. The additional duty to skills is the duty not to promote this or that
ideology, but to promote a general intellectual sophistication in the society as a whole.\footnote{Cf Ali A. Mazrui and Yash Tandon, “The University of East Africa as a Political Institution”, Minerva, V. 3, 1967 (especially pp. 384-386).}

But how is this intellectual sophistication to be promoted? One method lies simply in the production of educated people who later themselves play a part in thinking out problems and finding out solutions. From the point of view of just producing educated manpower, it is almost irrelevant which discipline they have specialised in. Engineers, doctors, physicists, historians and accountants are all individuals who by virtue of the education to which they have been exposed, should help to raise the level of thought in at least their own specialised areas.

But it is not simply by producing educated manpower that a university helps to raise the intellectual sophistication of a particular society; it is also by helping to disseminate important ideas in the populace as a whole. In this particular area of promoting social consciousness, the social sciences have by definition a distinctive role to play. Their preoccupation with problems of more immediate concern to the majority of people in a given society give them the potential of a more immediate impact in the dissemination of ideas.

Keynes was right on the whole when he observed that the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they were right and when they were wrong, were more powerful than was commonly understood:

“Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Mad men in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzies from some academic scribbler of few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval; for in the field of economic and political philosophy there are not many who are influenced by new theories until after they are twenty-five or thirty years of age, so that the ideas which civil servants and politicians and even agitators apply to current events are not likely to be the newest. But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil.”\footnote{John Maynard Keynes, The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, London, 1936.}

Keynes himself believed in the inter-relevance between economic theory and political philosophy. And he regarded both, at least when popularised, as great influences on policy and social behaviour in societies which give them a chance to flourish.

It is these considerations which give courses and successful publications in normative political theory at an African university a definite role in the evolution of the political culture of the society served by
that university. What emerges from those courses and papers need not be a commitment to that or this set of ideological preferences, nor indeed need it be a highly sophisticated comprehension of socio-political phenomena at large. All that the courses and discussions can hope to achieve immediately among students is a modest improvement in the sophistication of analysis. The student who successfully completes a course in normative political theory from, say, Plato to Marx, ought to have acquired in the process a little extra depth as he gropes for the meaning of social priorities and political values.

And yet would not such a course in an African university be by definition a little removed from African preoccupations? After all, neither Plato nor Marx could conceivably be regarded as having had any knowledge of key problems in the Africa of their day, let alone in today's Africa.

An answer which continues to be pertinent is that these were thinkers who attempted to make generalisations not about man in their own geographical area, or about social forces in their own time only, but about man and society at the broadest level of generality. Many of their interpretations have stood the test of time, or at any rate provoked lines of thinking which have yielded more fruitful conclusions. It cannot be repeated too often that for those who are called upon to teach European political theory to students outside Europe, there may often be a case for playing down the 'Europeanism' of the theories concerned. This is not in order to make the theories more popular, but in order to see if they can be made more relevant. The process might involve tearing the theory out of its historical context altogether, and bringing the logic of all or some of its ideas to bear on a specific situation in perhaps one's own time or one's own area in Africa,

"the object of the exercise being to determine whether the ideas scattered within the theory help in the understanding of the situation, on the one hand, and on the other, whether the situation can lend a new depth to the theory or perhaps expose an old shallowness within it. [...] What can be taken for granted is that ideas can express further ideas if they are systematically referred to one situation after another. To change the metaphor, if an idea is fertile, it may well conceive a different kind of child if it is mated to a different kind of situation."

The first year course in political theory at Makerere is from Thomas Hobbes to Julius K. Nyerere. But throughout the course there is

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an attempt to test the ideas of each thinker against experience outside
the thinker's own geographical or temporal context. More often
than not the test is against African realities. Thomas Hobbes' 
attitude to foreign missionaries, or the question of whether tribal 
loyalties are the equivalent of 'particular wills' in Rousseau's terms,
are the sort of issues which provide occasion in Makerere classrooms 
for vigorous discussion of European political thinkers in relation to 
African problems.

Soon after the difficult events of 1966, a lecture in normative 
political theory at the College was seeking to apply the Lockean idea 
of a social contract to the events which had torn up Uganda briefly 
earlier that year. The 1962 Constitution of the country had been 
the legal expression of the independence agreement. The class 
discussed whether the 1962 Constitution resembled a social contract 
creating a new society, with the parties to the contract surrendering
some of their 'natural rights' for the sake of the compact. Among 
the 'natural' (or pre-existent) rights of the Baganda was deemed to
be the right to the soil of Buganda. Yet, on the basis of the national 
compact of 1962, Buganda had surrendered her pre-existent right to 
the area of Kampala to the central government of Uganda.

When a social contract of this kind was broken, all rights were
supposed to be reverting to their original holders. When Obote
abrogated the 1962 Constitution of Uganda, he was in effect dissolving 
the compact on the basis of which the new nation had come into 
being. If all rights reverted to their original holders, to whom was
the city of Kampala now to go? The Lukiiko, or Legislature of 
Buganda, interpreted the situation in Lockean terms. The Lukiiko
proceeded to issue an ultimatum to the central government of Uganda 
demanding that it should leave 'Buganda soil' by the end of May 1966.
But Dr. Milton Obote was not playing Lockean game. He responded
by declaring this an act of high treason, and proceeded to deal with 
Buganda militarily accordingly.¹

At that moment in time there was indeed a risk that a discussion
of the issues of 1966 in those terms could have been too sensitive in
a class of several dozen Uganda students. But although the students
were evidently and understandably in disagreement with each other
over this or that issue within the situation as a whole, there was no
doubt that the use of Lockean ideas to understand recent events in
their own country opened up whole new intellectual vistas into the
world of their own politics.

¹ Cf. G. F. Engholm and Ali A. Mazrui, "Violent Constitutionalism in
Towards a Universal Idiom of Politics.

But the importance of European normative theory for an African university lies not only in the fact that, at least in many of its parts, it can be consulted as a tool for the analysis of African problems. It also lies in the fact that the language of politics in Africa and many of its institutions today have been intellectually influenced by European political philosophy. As John Plamenatz has argued, Europeans have been pioneers not only of the natural sciences, but also of the social sciences as well:

“No one, I think, will contest that the Europeans have devoted more time than other peoples to the systematic study of social institutions, past and present. They have long been accustomed to the idea that societies differ greatly from one another and are all in process of continual change. They have also, more than other peoples, been deliberate reformers; they have often tried to change institutions in order to improve them. This reforming zeal has itself been largely an effect of a closer study of society and social change.”

Plamenatz goes on to argue persuasively that Europeans have come nearer than other peoples to creating a vocabulary adequate to the description of social institutions and social change. Both the academic and the practical language of modern politics, he asserts, is European. Wherever political and social institutions are systematically discussed or analysed, they are more often than not discussed in terms of concepts invented in Europe, and the actual business of government is ‘everywhere’ carried on largely in idioms of European origin:

“To understand the modern world, to explain what is happening to it, and to know how to act effectively in it, a man must be able to think and speak about it in European ways, even when he speaks of Asia and Africa. It may be a pity it should be so, but the fact remains.”

Plamenatz probably exaggerates his case. But there is little doubt that the idiom of modern politics in Africa, even when translated into non-European languages, owes a lot to the original European vocabulary. Terms like sovereignty, parliament, the vote, constitution, class conflict, inflation, democracy, common market, nationalisation, the State, individualism, socialism, and dozens of others have all become central elements of political discourse at the national level almost everywhere.

We may therefore say that the very language of political priorities

now in use in the national politics of most African countries owes a lot to European normative political theory. When a university attempts to raise the level of sophistication in the handling of these ideas, that university is crucially participating in the process of refining and deepening the political culture of the country it serves. Even the constitution itself is basically a piece of normative political theory. The duty of political science to itself may indeed lie in following the mystique of science. But the duty of political science to society may lie in raising the level of evaluation as between priorities and deepening the language of political discourse. This is to follow the mystique of practicality. And for that mystique normative political theory has a critical significance.¹

¹ For the practical relevance of applied research in political science, consult James S. Coleman and Emory Bundy, "Applied Political Science Research and Development", presented at the University Social Science Conference, University of East Africa, January 1966.