Résumé

P. C. W. Gutkind — La vue d'en bas : la prise de conscience politique chez les citadins pauvres d'Ibadan. Une analyse d'attitudes parmi les couches les plus pauvres de la population urbaine d'Ibadan fait apparaître la prise de conscience d'appartenir à un groupe distinct, et antagoniste, par rapport à l'élite politico-économique et à la petite bourgeoisie nationale. Cette conscience de classe naissante s'accompagne d'une prise de conscience politique, aboutissant actuellement à des positions plutôt réformistes que révolutionnaires, qui s'expliquent par des raisons diverses, entre autres le manque de solidarité entre la couche la plus pauvre (talaka) et la couche immédiatement supérieure (mekunnu) de ce prolétariat. Discussion, dans une approche marxiste, de cette formation de classe et des perspectives qu'elle offre. See infra critical comments of J. Copans and M. Vernière, PP- 37-55.

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The View from below: Political Consciousness of the Urban Poor in Ibadan

'It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment considers as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is irrevocably and clearly foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as the whole organization of bourgeois society today.'

The Holy Family.

Introduction

Within Africa today, two groups, with irreconciliable differences, confront each other: the rich and the poor (Lenin 1929: 32). Some observers, as those who follow Fanon, are likely to restate this conflicts as one between poor peasants and the urban élite; others might see the conflict as one between the rural and urban poor faced by an alliance of better-off peasants and a commercial bourgeoisie. Some would simplify the model, on the basis of experience in Latin America and Asia, and suggest, as Barrington Moore (1967) has done, that the conflict is one between landlord and peasant. While this latter approach is not applicable to the greater part of Africa south of the Sahara and north of the Limpopo, the model could be re-cast by defining as landlords all those who control all or most of the resources and the means to exploit them. Others would suggest that the nature of the confrontation is determined by (a) the operation of the class system existing at the time of rapid technological and political change (as this has applied to Africa since about 1890); (b) whether the rich (who control the State) perform services for the peasants and hold membership in peasant communities; (c) whether the peasant communities have achieved solidarity, and how they are tied into the larger community or are independent from it. Thus, it is argued, varieties of class structures lead to different political systems (under

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conditions of rapid change) such as fascism, communism and democracy. Furthermore, the nature of the classe struggle, in pre-industrial (or incipient industrial) societies leads either to a strong or weak bourgeoisie prepared to or opposed to commercial agriculture or rapid industrialization. Peasants are either left on the land or forced to leave depending on (a) internal class forces and alliances; (b) externally imposed constraints which tie pre-industrial economies directly to the fortunes and objectives of the metropoles.

However, whatever model of class conflict is used, what is revealed in African society today is a structure of a polity and an economy based on significant differences in wealth and, hence, very unequal access to power. The roots of this condition, which are taken as given, do not concern us in this paper. It was in the nature of colonialism in Africa to restrict mobility of the vast majority of the ‘native’ population, to create enormous disparities of wealth between the conquerors and the conquered, to control political change firmly, and to prevent competition between Africans and non-Africans. At the same time, the colonial powers drew into their otherwise closed circle a small group of Africans whom they educated and trained for various tasks, thus conferring higher status on them, and who eventually emerged as an élite community and who today make up the core of those who hold power firmly in their hands.

Although this development was set in motion some years before independence was achieved, the post-independence period has witnessed a clear crystallization of class feelings. If, at this stage of Africa’s political evolution, we separate consciousness of class sentiment from political activism implied in the class struggle, our model will be less deterministic and allow for greater variability of behaviour and a greater range of processes. This is not to suggest that manifestations of the class struggle are rare (successive military coups d’État in Africa do fit this model); rather it is to assert that class consciousness is the foundation of political action and may precede it. In the immediate pre-independence and the immediate post-independence days, that multi-party systems existed clearly reflected class alignments. Thus the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA) in West Africa once had clear ties with the French Communist Party, while the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) was clearly the instrument of the oligarchic rulers of Northern Nigeria. Today, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) appears to stand for a socialist policy while the Kenya African National Union (KANU) has drifted considerably to the right. While their political following neither was, nor is, as class conscious as the leaders, the point made is simply to illustrate the connection between structural characteristics and ideologies. The political evolution of Africa since 1890 has been progressively in the direction of an increasingly complex internal differentiation of society and, at the macro-level of the international system, a wholly subordinate status vis-à-vis the technologically advanced nations.
It is the contention of this paper that those Africans, who since 1960 have controlled the economic and political life of Southern Nigeria, but whose roots of political and economic power go back considerably further, and who we might collectively refer to as the ‘native bourgeoisie’, in contrast to the international bourgeoisie on whom the former depend, have preempted for the moment any possibility for the poor, be they resident in the rural or the urban areas, to alter their inferior status in any significant manner (Jackson 1973). It is further suggested that attempts by the poor to create greater opportunities for themselves will be prevented by an alliance of various segments of this native bourgeoisie who will resist any active liberal reformism, or ‘heroic’ radical or revolutionary change to which the poor might subscribe. Finally, it is suggested that the poor have placed their faith in slow evolutionary change—at least for the time being—which they hope to achieve by a series of manipulative personal and, at times, collectives manoeuvres using networks of kin, friends, occupations, neighbourhood contacts, past political friendships, sub-class relationships and what might be called ethnic brotherhood. The Ibadan poor have great faith that they can eventually find a true ‘helper’ who is both willing and able to create for them opportunities productive of upward mobility.

The poor in Africa, and in particular the urban poor, stand in the front-line of confrontation. It is in the towns of Africa that disparities of opportunities, wealth and status are often most brilliantly illuminated, although it has been suggested, by Fanon (1966) in particular, that the urban areas (and perhaps in other Third World nations in Asia and Latin America) are a composite of bourgeoisie, a labour aristocracy, a proto-proletariat, opportunists and a Lumpen made up of thugs, and lay-abouts, thus implying that urbanites are better off, and hence politically are conservative. Abject poverty, Fanon would suggest, is a rural rather than urban phenomenon. Hence circumstances of rural life lead the peasant to radical political action and an advanced political consciousness. Be that as it may, in this paper we shall be concerned with the perceptions held by some of the urban poor in Ibadan, Western Nigeria, how they see their future, and what ‘strategies’, both personal and political, they consider, at present, most viable in obtaining jobs, personal security in daily life, and in a general upgrading of their present lowly status.

It is clearly important to emphasize that these strategies are now, and perhaps always, highly flexible and that a person or group can support one strategy today which could be found wanting tomorrow. Life situations and perceptions of aspirations change often inexplicably from one extreme to another. Although the poor are generally firm in their conviction that from year to year they are worse off, it is extremely difficult to match objective factors, such as decreasing purchasing power, with a consistent evolution of political consciousness and political action. While the poor can and do express a consciousness of class, unlike the ‘middle classes’ who express their aspirations in terms of a clearly defined
ideology and perception of the 'good life', few of the poor map out the pathways before them. However, lack of this kind of aggressive precision must be balanced against an often strong sense of corporateness—a feeling of 'we the poor'. Nor should one mistakenly interpret a lack of aggressiveness or fight for greater equality and justice as indicative of fatalism, an 'Image of the Limited Good' (Foster 1965), a resignation to superior political forces, or a determination to chip away at the fabric of an oppressive society in the hope that the hurdles of inequality will eventually fall and open the gates to greater promise. A revolutionary zeal has yet to be established among the poor in Ibadan. But the acceptance of this fact, for fact it is, has nothing to do with the force of the argument which springs from the objective conditions in which the poor are trapped. It is a procrustean mold fashioned by the forces of international capitalism and the legacy of colonialism. Thus, while a large number of scholars, tainted with Western racism, have constructed models which essentially blame the victims for their fate, historical analysis offers an objective framework for an understanding of a society, its composition and likely future direction.

**Political and Class Consciousness**

Are the poor politically conscious, and what is the nature of this consciousness? All but the smallest and most homogeneous societies are internally stratified to a degree. The exact nature of this stratification will of course differ according to a wide variety of ecological, historical, cultural and contemporary circumstances. Whatever the nature of this differentiation, not all adult members, men or women, will have equal access to resources and authority. Few societies fail to recognize this and have evolved terminologies reflecting differences in status and power. Under colonialism, the polity and economy evolved in such a manner as to intensify whatever political and economic differentiation existed not only between the indigenous people and the invaders, but within the former in particular. Indeed, under colonialism, the relationships between the former and the latter were converted into 'commodity relationships', this being the most distinct aspect of the operation of colonial capitalism and its more recent brand, neocolonialism, while traditional hierarchies were intensified as among the Baganda, the Ashanti and in Northern Nigeria. These general observations are relevant when we consider the nature, content and force of political consciousness (Wolpe 1970) both in historical and contemporary times.

It is all too frequently assumed that pre-industrial people lack political consciousness, which might be defined as a knowledge of the internal hierarchy of political offices (and the authority attached to them) in relation to the individual and/or group. Seen in these terms, political consciousness is a common feature of the social order, and the perceptions
of individuals within that order, whether they are poor or rich or part of a pre-industrial or industrial economic and political order. This consciousness is likely to be unevenly distributed, and manifests itself with uneven intensity, depending on the events which take place and how these are interpreted.

In a colonial system the nature and content of political consciousness springs primarily from oppression, control, paternalism, exploitation and racism which are the pillars of colonial domination. Rejection of these conditions by the colonial people was and is one of the great historic struggles of the twentieth century. To have accepted these conditions, i.e. to lack political consciousness, would have been tantamount to accepting slavery. In the colonial world political consciousness was and is directed foremost to the achievement of political and national sovereignty—if not immediate economic independence. The evidence that the colonial people, most of whom are still embedded in a pre-industrial matrix, possessed this political consciousness was therefore written clearly in the historical record. It would, likewise, be hard to escape the observation that in pre-colonial times competition for political authority was not as clearly manifest as it is today. In our analysis what we must treat separately are the manifestations of class consciousness, those of political consciousness, and those of political activism—although these are far from mutually exclusive.

How politically conscious the urban poor are, reduces the question to a particular group of people facing particular circumstances. While the base-line of our argument remains the same, the universality of such consciousness, Marxist-Leninist and Fanonist assumptions have an important bearing on the questions posed. While the Marxist view is basically that political consciousness of the urban worker is high, if the right leadership is provided, the Fanonist perspective holds that the urbanite, while no doubt politically conscious, has retreated from the premise that only radical political action can usher in a more just and equitable social order—a duty which Fanon lays on the shoulders of the peasants who, he insist, have maintained a purity of conception of what a just and fair social order might be.

The view taken in this paper is that the urban poor exhibit as varied a political consciousness as the peasant, as varied a feeling about justice as the ruralite, and as varied a conviction about political action as the farmer, although the urban poor might at times have a clearer perception of their lower class status than the cultivators. The assumption that the poor hold politically radical ideas by virtue of their position is not supported by the evidence despite the fact that they exhibit a consciousness of their low class position. That the Algerian peasantry was a revolutionary peasantry has recently been questioned by Perinbam (1973) and others. Joan Nelson (1969) using mostly data taken from voting patterns in Latin America (but also using some African data), points out that the newly arrived migrant, frequently the poorest urbanite, tends to
be politically conservative in contrast to the more established urban worker.

It might be useful to make a distinction between political and class consciousness at this stage of transformation of African societies. Political consciousness, it is assumed, is a pre-requisite for political action, that one is invariably an outcome of the other. Class consciousness, at least in non-Marxist terms, is expressed in distinct life styles and a recognition that societies are composed of two basic political and economic categories, the rich and the poor. Only in Marxist terms does class consciousness also imply the political aspects of the class struggle. Class consciousness, of either the rich or the poor, is often expressed as a set of ambiguous attitudes to those above or below one's own status. The poor admire the rich for their achievements, although the means used to get to the top are often criticized, while the rich may fear the poor and hence support reformist measures. Furthermore, the class consciousness of the poor is often expressed in goals which, to the rich, seem to legitimize their status and power. In this regard it might be premature to speak of political consciousness among the urban populations of Africa, although certain urban-based occupational groups are, as it appears, showing signs of such a consciousness, and those political actions associated with it. On the whole, however, the Ibadan poor still show strong signs of faith in the status quo perhaps because the roots of class solidarity are still very shallow—a point recently stressed by Peter Lloyd (1973)—and aspirations of individual mobility are not realistically assessed in terms of the structure of society. There is, in other words, a conviction that the poor are being exploited, while simultaneously the belief prevails that local conditions allow for upward mobility. As the contradictions contained in this ambiguity become more obvious, class consciousness becomes a key element in political activism. Likewise, a shift is likely to take place from a sense of personal inadequacy and failure to emphasize political and economic forces which restrict individual and group opportunity. When this shift takes place the urban rural poor will reveal a far more analytical frame of mind exposing the mechanisms used by those vested with authority who control such vital areas as educational planning, the availability of credit, agricultural policy and industrial development. This level of political consciousness also will reveal that the fight against social inequality will have begun; it likewise will herald an intensification of competition and an increase of sub-class formation at the level of the totally unemployed, the underemployed, the casual labourer and the skilled worker. Political and (sub-)class consciousness among the Ibadan poor is further revealed in the occupational and income differences among them. From the interviews I conducted it was clear that minor status differences can assume considerable significance. The urban poor, like others in Ibadan, attach considerable importance to material possessions—be they absolute necessities or not. However, few of the poor get ahead of the rest in this respect compared to the privileged working
class among whom conspicuous and wasteful consumption now appear to be common.

The evolution of class and political consciousness among the poor in Ibadan is not without its negative aspects. For one, their aspirations appear to be those of middle-class society. Secondly, from interviews with the urban poor, it is clear that polarization is taking place setting the poor against the working class and vice versa. This is a point stressed by the Brazilian sociologist Glaucio Soares who has suggested that the class conflict evolving will be different than that predicted by Marx. The conflict, he suggests, is not between the owners of the resources (or their agents), the means of production and the proletariat, but rather between the small middle class and the poor with the working class providing a buffer zone between these two classes (Soares 1968: 196).

The poor are thus by no means bound by a high degree of solidarity, perhaps because they are unable at present to transform their low status into one of greater equality with the working class. More fundamentally this is so because the poor have virtually no control over modern resources, their exploitation, production and distribution. The urban poor in Ibadan live on the fringes of a craft and neo-traditional trading economy which has dominated this town of about 800,000 people for many years. Furthermore, the poor, particularly the unskilled unemployed, are weakly integrated, if at all, into oredegbe (various types of associations of friends) or into the lineage structure of the Yoruba. The latter while very important to traders and craftsmen, because of the resources they control (such as bringing lenders into contact with borrowers), are virtually closed to the unskilled and the poor who are unable to participate in that aspect of lineage affairs—although participation in ceremonial obligations is one activity which most of the poor try to preserve. This was brought out strongly among many of those who had subsisted for a number of years on intermittent casual labour such as head load carriers. Many shared the view that keeping some connection with their lineage was important particularly should illness strike them. There was also considerable fear that should death take place only lineage members would show any concern.

The Poor in Ibadan

If solidarity among the poor is low, a sense of populist consciousness is widespread and quite highly developed. Thus the poor often and freely characterize themselves as the mekunnu (the common people, or those without money), or the very poor, as the talaka (a very poor person; those who do not even have enough to eat), or as otosi (a totally destitute person), or, finally, as alagbe (a beggar). These categories, which collectively make up the lower class level, are contrasted with five other
categories which make up the middle or upper classes, the élites. They are the olowo (the wealthy, a rich person), the onowoo (the wise and educated), the oloola (the nobility, the chiefs), oloye pataki (the men of honour and prestige), and the alagbara (the powerful). Within the mekunnu and talaka are, of course, various further sub-divisions as these relate to particular circumstances and life styles, such as the sick and disabled. However these are not our concern in this paper.

The differences between the mekunnu and the talaka are made up of a set of interrelated circumstances and characteristics. Generally the mekunnu see themselves to be many notches above the talaka. While many of the mekunnu are illiterate, they see themselves to be more educated in a general knowledge sense; to be more versatile in the possession of work skills however modest these might be. Above all the mekunnu universally feel that they have more initiative than the talaka and, hence, that they have a right to more opportunities. The mekunnu may hold jobs as petty traders or sellers, in semi-skilled occupations, the lower ranges of the artisan scales, roadside craftsmen, labourers in various capacities, cleaners, and occasionally in other odd jobs. The talaka on the other hand are viewed as lazy, as lacking in enterprise and are often discussed by the mekunnu in terms not very different from the attitudes expressed by lower caste members towards untouchables. Mekunnu and talaka alike have usually experienced long periods of unemployment or sporadic employment. While the mekunnu are generally long term urban residents, or even urban born, the talaka are most often recent rural migrants or ‘strangers’ from other parts of Nigeria. In contrast the talaka are far more restricted in the work they do. The majority are totally unskilled labourers and if work is available they do the heaviest and most menial work. Unlike the mekunnu who often work for larger establishments, the talaka can only offer their services to small scale traders, and those with very small enterprises. Hence their pay is exceedingly low. Some of the mekunnu characterize the talaka as ‘those who push carts’ and ‘carry loads on their heads’ or simply as ‘scavengers’. The talaka come closest to what can perhaps be called the dispossessed. Because the incidence of unemployment appears highest among them (although exact information is exceedingly difficult to obtain), the talaka, it is said, are readily available to political leaders and parties to form a (paid) supporting mob when called upon. The talaka fervently deny this and instead point their fingers at the mekunnu simply because they have more frequent and closer contact with the politicians.

The talaka express considerable hostility to the mekunnu whom they perceive as a more significant barrier to their upward mobility than the olowo or the alagbara. It is not unusual for the talaka to express the view that the olowo and the alagbara are understanding and sympathetic to them while the mekunnu treat them with contempt, believing all talaka to be thieves and lay-abouts. A consistent theme among the talaka was the view that traders and craftsmen cheated them in one way or another.
One recent migrant from a rural area in Ilorin expressed this view as follows:

'The small traders are worse than the big traders. All the *talaka* have the same experience. We are treated with contempt and cheated out of our rightful goods and money [small change]. The *mekunnu* think that they are better people because their friends are the chiefs and the rich. We are not lucky to have friends who can help us [. . .] I think that there are many *mekunnu* but many more *talaka*.'

*Talaka* class consciousness is a reflection of the fact that few of the really poor can obtain sufficient resources to be self-employed—which is a universal aspiration among them. Hence the self-employed *mekunnu* are not seen as subject to the same exploitative forces as the *talaka* who are generally unable to raise the resources needed to purchase a cart or tools of even the simplest kind. Thus politically the *talaka* cast themselves as among the most exploited in Ibadan. Few, if any, political leaders, they assert, ever pay attention to them except at election time although many of them also indicated that better-off Ibadanites occasionally offer casual work (such as washing a car or sweeping a yard). The *talaka* express bitter resentment that their low bargaining power allows even minor civil servants, such as gatekeepers, messengers and cleaners, to either ignore or abuse them when they visit government offices. They are very aware of the fact that their appearance places them in a vicious circle out of which they seem unable to break. Many of the *talaka* express anger and cynicism about what they term the arrogance (*igberaga*) and the dishonesty (*aisoto*) of the *mekunnu*, qualities which they attribute to all those they consider wealthier than themselves. While the *mekunnu* constantly try to find a patron or 'helper' (*oluranlowo, or atunise*), the *talaka*, who also make these efforts, claim that nobody wishes to be associated with them. The *mekunnu*, an unemployed and down-and-out labourer explained, 'try to make friends with the *olowo* [the wealthy] because they need each other'. The fact that such alliances are real is an observation which clearly has not escaped the illiterate urban poor.

Different as these two sub-classes are, nevertheless they have much in common. During periods of economic recession the small traders, roadside craftsmen and semi-skilled artisans all join the ranks of the *talaka*—at least that is how the *mekunnu* may then characterize themselves. While ethnic and other cleavages may still persist, a common struggle appears to produce common sentiments, attitudes and perceptions. The rich withdraw feeling unable and unwilling to help as they might have done in the past. Lineage kin withhold whatever resources they have feeling that the risk of making these available to their poorer members is too great. Economic recession is followed by social withdrawal and a contraction of obligations normally rooted in traditional expectations. Then a common sense of class oppression may light the flames of political consciousness—if not necessarily political activism. Perhaps this has
greater reality among cash crop farmers than among the urban poor as the history of rural protest is more explicitly linked to market forces (Beer 1971; Berry 1967; Post 1972).

As Nigeria has been under military rule since January 1966, and the activities of political parties are banned, as have been strikes and most other forms of workers protest, public political activity is constrained. Although attempts have been made by the unemployed to organize themselves, such as protest marches, or declarations and petitions requesting more government aid, most of these efforts have failed and lacked sustaining power and able leadership. Despite this, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, and the State governments, have been sensitive to the potential political power of the talaka and the mekunnu as a whole. Police surveillance of potential leaders of the poor, in both rural or urban areas, and in particular of trade union leaders, has further constrained political activity and freedom of expression—although compared with other African military régimes, the Nigerian press has been allowed considerable freedom. However, political consciousness of the Ibadan poor has not stood still as comparison between a small group of unemployed interviewed in 1966 and again in 1971 indicates (Gutkind 1973). Hence we must now turn to some interview data obtained in 1970-71 involving about two hundred of Ibadan's poor.

The Survey Data

As was pointed out earlier, the assumption is often made, falsely, that the political consciousness of the African urban poor is not very highly developed, a view rightly disputed by Iliffe (1970) and Van Onselen (1973). While some of the interviews support this conventional observation, the majority of the poor do express political view—and did so despite their occasional reluctance fearing the ban imposed by the Federal Military Government on political activities and suspecting the interviewers as agents of the police. The political consciousness of the poor was revealed in their attitudes both to those of higher class status, and toward those who operate the organs of government—both at the federal and the State level.

Firstly, it is generally assumed that political leaders, past and present, and civil servants, serve primarily their own ends and needs at the expense of the mekunnu. Furthermore, the political consciousness of the poor is primarily concerned with the immediate, their local and personal experiences, such as lack of respect shown by civil servants or the often expressed view that a local political figure ignores the needs of the people after the votes are counted. As elsewhere, men in public office are often deeply mistrusted and suspected of being involved in corruption. Thus a frequently expressed view was that men in public office can get away with it because they have bought protection in one way or another.
That poor are poor because the rich steal from them—and the worst thieves are the political leaders and the civil servants—was a commonly held view. ‘The rich look after themselves,’ said a bricklayer’s assistant who had lost his job two years previously and had not been able to find permanent employment since, adding that the time would come when the ‘mekunnu will have to fight the rich’.

Although a larger number of those interviewed expressed a strong feeling of ‘we the poor’ and ‘they the rich’ only a small number gave much evidence of what they thought might be the reasons for this sharp division. Some of the poor pointed out that wasteful consumption by the rich was at the expense of the poor; that the rich could spend in one day what it might take a year to earn for another man; that many people have to ‘struggle’ to obtain a small share of the limited opportunities; that the British, while not corrupt in public office (a point made frequently), had endowed the country with major changes and cleavages. The British, it was sometimes stated, ‘favoured the chiefs and their children’; that political parties served the leaders rather than the people; that Kingsway (a foreign-owned department store chain) was full of expensive things for the rich, while the ordinary person faced great difficulties in obtaining basic necessities. All of these reasons, and others less precisely formulated, indicate that the poor do put their fingers on those aspects of the economy and polity which they feel are related somehow to their predicament. Even more clearly, in the rural areas the farmers express anger that they have virtually no control over the pricing and marketing of their products, and that they are at the mercy of distant forces with which they are unable to establish contact.

It may well be argued that these responses do not illustrate what is normally understood when discussing political and class consciousness. For many of the poor in Ibadan, political affairs at both national and regional (State) levels are of peripheral interest and only vaguely understood. Yet the daily struggle by no means inhibits the poor from expressing their political sentiments, even though their concerns are such that local and personal affairs are of prime importance. To recognize that local economic and political affairs are merely a reflection of the policies and the structures designed and imposed at the national, regional and international levels is most often only vaguely recognized.

The evolution and operation of an international system of complex political and economic relations is, quite frequently, discussed on the radio and in the press. Yet few of the poor have access to these media, even those who are ‘functionally’ literate, while those few who do appear strongly influenced by the media take what they hear and read seriously.

In an earlier paper (Gutkind 1973) I indicated how some of the unemployed in 1971, whom I had interviewed previously in 1966, expressed a far more aggressive and politicized posture. There was some evidence to suggest that they had acquired their more radical views from trade union influences and a weekly trade union sponsored newspaper.
Furthermore, interest in political affairs by the poor has been heightened by the leaders of the Federal Military Government, and local State Commissioners all of whom frequently refer in their speeches to the need for 'social justice' and 'social equality', and that 'national unity' cannot be achieved in any other way. The speeches and declarations of the leaders, at every level, are literally peppered with references to 'progress', 'development', 'stability', 'modernization' and emphasis on hard work. While these complex constructs are found in every speech, few references are made to the class structure in Nigerian society, a dimension in which the press seems to have a greater interest. Thus in an article in the Lagos *Daily Times* the author (Akaragun 1971: 7) made this point:

'I salute the ordinary working man in this country. What will Nigeria be like without him? The ordinary working man keeps the wheels of progress moving; the future belongs to him. Because he is poor and meek like the masses in other countries he will inherit the earth.'

The writer concluded: 'Unfortunately many of our rulers and top civil servants pretend that they [the workers] do not exist, or they try to minimise their importance in society. It is this erroneous thinking on the part of the decision makers which is responsible for social injustice and the scandalous inequality of wealth which is so noticeable in Nigeria today.'

Such sentiments, or the much publicized view expressed by the Military Governor of Lagos State, speaking about a housing programme for both low and middle income groups, that 'my government does not believe in dividing the society into various classes' (*Daily Sketch* 1970: 1), do not escape the attention of the poor particularly when they eventually realize that bad housing conditions prevail at the same time as costly mansions rise like mushrooms (Nwosu 1973).

The extent of political consciousness of the poor was revealed in the responses to a set of simple questions designed to ascertain attitudes to, and knowledge about, the ongoing national debate concerning the future of the country, the pathway it should follow, the political system most suitable to particular conditions (generally seen to be rooted in ethnicity), and the part to be played by the citizens. The questions dealt with those subjects which all levels of government, and all leaders past and present, most frequently discussed such as progress, development, stability, unity, cooperation, integrity, corruption, patriotism, loyalty, constitutional means, legitimacy, authority, democracy, politics, tribalism (a term rarely used by non-Africans, but extensively used by Nigerians both

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1. Although occasionally a comment by a Military Governor will appear such as the following (in this case even on the front page) : 'Ours is an Unjust Social Order, Few Rich, Many so Poor', *Daily Times*, 20 Nov., 1970. Headings such as the following are quite frequent in the Nigerian press. 'The Dilemma of [the] Nigerian Middle Class', *Daily Sketch*, 25 June, 1971, or the following title of an article: 'Diagnosis for the Masses: Eradication for the Ruling Class', *Sunday Times*, 20 Dec., 1970; 'The Joy of Capitalism', *Sunday Times*, 7 Feb., 1971; 'The Trouble with us is our Privileged Elite', *Daily Times*, 30 Dec., 1970.
publically and socially), equality, social justice, tradition, modernity, intellectuals, elites and national priorities. Over two hundred people were asked to give their responses to some thirty-seven questions. In this article only the briefest summary to some of the questions can be given.²

In the first case, almost all the poor believe, at this stage, that while progress and development are, of course, good, only the rich and powerful benefit from the policies and the actions of government(s). Secondly, there is a deep rooted suspicion that local and national leaders ignore the poor, i.e. the poor might benefit only incidentally because the rich are greedy; yet it is also assumed that some of them feel guilty about how they acquired their wealth. ‘The rich have money and that is why they are progressive,’ said an apprentice Yoruba youth who was learning to repair bicycles, adding that ‘once a person is rich he wants more.’ Thirdly, the poor believe, strongly, that they are being deliberately excluded from opportunities, a conviction which was brought out most clearly by an ‘older’ woman, in her mid-thirties, who had been a yam seller for some years and whose profit rarely exceeded seven shillings a day. ‘The rich,’ she said, ‘hate us and hate our children for going to school and get good work like the children of the rich.’

Most of the informants believed that Nigeria had made progress—thinking of this complex concept in terms of growth, something which gets bigger, rather like a child getting stronger and growing up. Thus not infrequently progress was seen in terms of Ibadan getting larger, more cars on the streets, more houses, better facilities or (even) increased pay for workers. Yet progress as growth and change was rarely seen as something that happens to the poor. ‘Progress,’ a casual labourer said, ‘happens to everyone because we grow and get older [. . .] But the rich steal real progress from us [. . .] I mean more pay, more work for the poor [. . .] and better houses and happiness [meaning, evidently, security].’ A few informants insisted that there had been no progress and development since the British left because, as some put it, corruption and tribalism had become the hallmark of Nigeria’s national life. Indeed, corruption and tribalism were almost invariably seen as attributes of the rich.

The questions made a distinction between the idea of progress, and the actuality of development. A small number of the poor had heard of the National Development Plan (1970-1974) launched by the Federal

2. All the questions were posed in Yoruba (and a separate project dealt with returned Ibo to Ibadan) using not only the exact words taken from the speeches of political leaders, but in addition eight Yoruba speakers were asked to translate from Yoruba into English and English into Yoruba these rather complex concepts to obtain further insights and the range of usage involved. Frequently those interviewed explained these terms further and often helped the interviewers to understand how the mekunnu or the talaka perceived and used these words. A semantic and cognitive analysis of political and ideological language in Africa is long overdue.
Military Government, or previous plans operationalized under civilian régimes. Those poor who had heard about these plans could not specify any of the major objectives, although a few said that the plans would mean better pay and more work.

Almost always, progress and development are seen as aid from the government such as loans, credit facilities, scholarships for children, reduction in taxes (but increased taxes for the rich), more medical facilities, more schools, better roads (particularly in the rural areas), better housing and, above all, better wages or more profit. Few, very few, of the poor identified progress as something they could get for themselves, even if they tried working harder or showed greater energy or enterprise. Progress is externally imposed; the poor are the recipients of progress rather than its creators.3

Another set of questions dealt with the much discussed conditions of stability, unity and peace in the nation. A significant feature of the responses was the view that until tribalism and corruption were rooted out there could be no stability, peace or unity. Few of the respondents accepted the suggestion that these ‘evils’ were also perpetrated by them. The feeling among the poor was that the rich were to blame, and the political leaders in particular were the worst offenders. A small number of the poor, approximately ten percent, expressed strong ethnic sentiments. When it was pointed out to them that the national leaders condemn such attitudes, they generally justified them on two grounds: (a) that the ‘other people’, those of a different ethnic group, were the real disturbers of peace and unity, and (b) that men of stature and learning were both tribalistic and corrupt which, evidently, gave legitimacy to their own views.

The political consciousness of the poor was often strongly revealed in those responses which blamed the leaders for the present conditions on the ground that they had ignored the mekunnu and that they had failed to understand how important the ordinary people were to Nigeria. Thus an unemployed driver said that ‘without the mekunnu nothing can be achieved and no work would be done’. Likewise a woman seamstress suggested that the ‘mekunnu have always suffered’ and that they ‘follow Awolowo because he is the only leader who understands the poor, the other leaders always abuse the mekunnu at their will’. A municipal labourer suggested that Nigeria should ‘treat all the rich like the Ibo’. When asked what he meant by that he exclaimed: ‘To fight and kill them!’ Asked why, he said that conditions were ‘hard for the mekunnu because of the greed of the rich’.

Particularly since 1966, when the military took over the government of the country, the leaders have emphasized the importance of the people

3. In this regard the responses from Ibo in Ibadan tended to differ. Many of those interviewed emphasized individual initiative. It is hoped to publish comparative data at a later stage.
expressing their desires and needs constitutionally (*ona ti o ba ofin mu*, in accordance with the law), that recourse to violence would achieve nothing and merely shatter Nigeria's peace and unity. Almost half of the respondents declared that if the government took notice of the needs and views of the *mekunnu* then they would act constitutionally. But the government was in the hands of people who did not care to help them so that pressure had to be brought on the leaders. Because open political activities were prohibited, few of the poor were prepared to specify what they meant by pressure, although some volunteered the view that *(a)* petitions would have to be presented (a commonly used device during the last sixty years); *(b)* the *mekunnu* would have to demonstrate on the streets; *(c)* all the people should refuse to work; and *(d)* appeal to those leaders who would understand their plight.

From time to time, the poor attempt to organize themselves although most of these efforts lack in leadership, organizational skills and, of course, funds. Hence as political pressure groups they are not particularly effective as they lack a sustaining framework (Gutkind 1968). To government such organizations are an irritant rather than a political threat, but this is not to suggest that the police are not quick to arrive when demonstrators appear who are usually dispersed with tear gas and clubs.

The attempts at political organization and the reaction by the authorities to suppress these efforts had led to a modest populist sentiment among the poor which, before the military takeover in 1966, was funnelled into activities of the political parties. During the Nigerian Civil War, popular sentiments were largely directed toward winning the war although even during this period serious tax riots, and unrest among farmers, took place in Ibadan and surroundings. Since the end of the Civil War in January 1970, populist sentiments have regained only limited expression. While strikes are forbidden, as is the strategy of the ‘go-slow’, worker unrest has been considerable. Trade union leaders have been in and out of jail, and journalists and editors have often been harrassed. Newspapers are now taking a hard look at the structure of Nigerian society, and Nigerian ‘leaders of thought’ are contributing various critical assessments, while the poor complain about their plight more aggressively, and at times publically, and respond cynically when efforts are proposed to study wage and salary structures.

A commission of inquiry studying wages and salaries was established in 1970 (the Adebo Wages and Salaries Review Commission, chaired by Chief S. O. Adebo) which initially recommended, late in 1970, an interim award of an additional 1s 7d a day to daily paid workers and a £2 a month increase for those on a monthly salary with an annual income under £500. By the time the retroactive award was received in two instalments in January and March 1971, cost of living increases had all but consumed these very modest awards. However, those receiving higher salaries were awarded very considerable increases. As this outcome was antic-
ipated by many workers, members of the commission, as they moved around the country to take testimony from various organizations and individuals, often faced hostile demonstrations.

The populist sentiments of the urban poor in particular were revealed by the demonstrators, the posters at these demonstrations, and the manner in which some sections of the press supported the demands of the poor. Thus at an Ibadan demonstration the following posters were seen: ‘Bring Relief to the Oppressed’; ‘Reward the Overworked’; ‘Hope to the Destitute and Pay Us a Revolutionary Pay’. One newspaper which asked ‘Can Adebo Fulfill Worker’s Hope?’ began its article as follows: ‘The Adebo Wages and Salaries Review Commission is the last hope for the Nigerian workers’ (Daily Sketch, Mar. 1971: 2). A number of papers (Daily Sketch, Oct. 1970: 5) taking up the cry of the poor, warned the government:

‘In a country like Nigeria which denies to be capitalistic or plutocratic, a salary and wage structure which is not based on the reasonable standard of living for the average Nigerian and which creates a special class in the tradition of colonial days, will be sowing the seed for future revolution.’

Five weeks later the same paper warned the government that unless relief was forthcoming the ‘risk of a holocaust’ (Daily Sketch, Nov. 1970: 2) might be difficult to avert. In sympathy for the poor and lowest paid, a number of papers wrote about the ‘squandermania’ of the ‘top-class people’ and the suffering of the ‘lower classes’. While frequent demonstrations were not tolerated by the Military Government, the poor in Ibadan were clearly determined to have their voices heard.

It was during this time, between September 1970 and March 1971, and before the final recommendations made by the Adebo Commission were announced, and later accepted by the Federal Military Government late in 1971, that the unemployed and the poor in Ibadan expressed strong political convictions—a period which coincided with my research. It was also a period during which the poor expressed their cynicism and hostility with vehemence complaining about the constraints placed on the freedom of public action and implicating the leaders and the rich in preventing the Adebo Commission from coming forth with recommendations to ease the ‘suffering of the mekunnu’. During this time all the interviewers were treated to an aggressive display of anger and resentment. Indeed some of the interviewers were accused of being ‘spies for Adebo’. Somewhat the same sentiments prevailed in June 1964 during the Nigerian General Strike which lasted two weeks and likewise involved conflict between workers and the Morgan Commission which had been charged with a review of salaries and wages.

Naturally during such periods when wages and salaries are discussed at the national level and, as in 1964, when party activities were at their zenith, the urban and rural poor exhibited a degree of political conscious-
ness which reveals how sharply drawn the class lines can be. Thus many of the Ibadan poor were not only convinced that the rich would sabotage any efforts by the Adebo Commission recommending major increases in wages, but even more so the view was often expressed that the only people who would benefit from the commission recommendations would be the rich, the intellectuals, the professionals and the civil servants. 'When the rich talk about wages and salaries,' said a young Yoruba who had lost his job as an office messenger some seven months previously, 'they never think of the poor [. . .] Because the rich are powerful they are also greedy [. . .] Adebo will not help us because they [the commission members] never ask the ordinary people about our suffering.' He went on to say that 'only the political parties could make Adebo work'—meaning the once powerful Action Group under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo who, he thought, had for a number of years championed the demands of the poor.

CLASS AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN IBADAN

This brief outline of responses to a number of questions, still to be more fully analyzed, reveals two distinct characteristics of class consciousness of the poor in Ibadan.

On the one hand, the poor clearly look to the élite as a 'reference group' (Lloyd 1973: 10). It is their style of life, their values and goals, to which they appear to aspire—if not for themselves certainly for their children. The élite are expected to be benevolent and to have a sense of charity; to help the poor. The poor have considerable faith in the rich to carry out what are generally referred to as 'duties' or 'obligations'. But the poor also insist that the rich are arrogant, careless of the needs of others less well placed and, above all, that their activities and their power and influence are responsible for the oppression the poor suffer. Thus on the other hand they resent their presence and are even willing to blame the élite for their own low status and their restricted mobility.

Hence the élite are cast as the villains who, in the words of a roadside tinsmith, 'keep us poor and steal from us the little money we have', while another man who had carried headloads off and on for five years commented that the 'rich and powerful only work for themselves. If they help the poor it is only because they may want our work [labour]'. Thus the rich are frequently accused of outright cruelty and callousness, such as the liberties taken by the rich who, chauffeur-driven, race along the road with little respect for pedestrians, or that the well-to-do ignore the hand of a beggar, or their tone of voice which is authoritarian and demanding.

The talaka, as indicated before, may view some of the mekunnu as their enemies. Thus anyone with a steady or better job is assumed to have obtained such a privilege by dishonest means. Those who have become
successful have achieved this circumstance in one of two ways; either by machinations of one sort or another—such as witchcraft (Marwick 1958)—or by humbling themselves before the rich and offering their services to a patron. As such it is assumed that an economic and political alliance has been established which consolidates power still further in the hands of those who care little for the poor, particularly the very poor. Thus the suspicions which some of the really poor have of the mekunnu was clearly brought out by an older man, between 45 and 50, who had at last obtained a job as a bus cleaner after many weeks without any work during which time he moved from one friend to another, eventually being forced to sleep outdoors. Standing in a group of other men he made the following comment which seemed to have their approval:

‘The mekunnu are not like us. They think they are better people than we are because they can eat food every day [. . .] They are lucky because their rich friends help them. They give them work and money but they must serve the rich [. . .] Not everyone [can be called] a mekunnu. Many Nigerians are mekunnu but we (pointing to his friends) are talaka because we have no money, no house [. . .] no regular food and because many people despise us because of this [fact].’

Such sentiments may not characterize a Lumpenproletariat. Yet the talaka clearly are conscious of their unsettled and very inferior position, moving in and out of jobs (the most menial and the dirtiest), despised by many, suspected by the political leaders and the rich to harbour criminals, ever ready to steal, to attack the innocent and to have no other purpose in life but to reject hard work and thrift. Indeed, that is exactly how some of the ordinary people, who feel that they are the true mekunnu, view the talaka. Thus a small scale artisan, a carpenter, expressed this view:

‘The talaka are thieves and many of them have been executed by the Military Government [. . .] They refuse work when it is offered to them because they are lazy [. . .] and they are also dirty and they live by stealing and begging which they teach their children [. . .] They are bad people because they can follow anyone who will give them a sixpence [. . .] and then they might rob and beat anyone at night because they walk on the street and have no place. They have no place because nobody wants to see them [. . .] There are many stories I can tell you about the talaka [. . .] All my friends try to keep away from them.’

This man thought that ‘Ibadan had too many talaka’ and that they hang about ‘Kingsway Store to which my wife goes for food sometimes’ and around the post office where ‘they beg from my children’. The same informant told the interviewer that ‘people like me’ (such as other craftsmen) try to ‘help the military leaders to destroy the politicians and to bring corruption to an end’.

Many of the poor in Ibadan make a sharp distinction between the alagbara (the powerful), the olowo (the wealthy) and the omowe (the educated and wise). It is generally assumed that the latter are cooperative with and respectful of the poor. The omowe are treated as honour-
able and fair people whether they are poor or not. The omowe may be part of the mekunnu but in almost every respect are ‘above’ the ordinary people. Many of the latter treat the omowe as keepers of the human conscience, of what is good and eternally valuable. To be an omowe one must not necessarily have received a higher education. There are illiterate omowe, men and women whose lives have always been honourable, who help others, who give carefully reasoned and helpful advice. Omowe do not oppress or exploit others, they want all people to succeed. The social status of the omowe is not associated with cars, large houses, big parties, or well dressed women and children—a set of features associated with the olowo. Thus the omowe have something in common with the oloola (the men of honour and prestige). An oloola, although almost always a man of wealth, rises to high status because unlike the olowo, he may and often does distribute his wealth not only to his kin but also to those unrelated to him simply ‘because an oloola is a good man [who knows] that even a scavenger [meaning in this context a nightsoil collector] is a person who must be respected’, was the opinion expressed by a construction labourer.

From the responses offered it is clear that class membership is conferred not only by material wealth, education and occupation, but also by good and honourable behaviour. Wealth alone, or if a man has been able to collect many titles, does not decide a person’s status. Yet an oloola who can also back up his status with wealth, and to share some of it, is clearly a person to be respected.

The interviews thus indicate that the poor envy the resources of the rich, yet they stand condemned for their selfishness, their alleged exploitation of the poor and their contempt for the underprivileged. ‘It is impossible to achieve equality and social justice because the rich people are not ready to help the less privileged people’, said a twenty-four year old factory worker who was also a member of the Nigerian Tobacco Company’s Workers Union. A slightly older man who was an unemployed painter and sign writer made the following comment when asked whether it will ever be possible for the poor to achieve equality and social justice: ‘It is impossible,’ he said, ‘because the leaders cannot limit the wealth of the rich people,’ and a small-scale trader in fish felt that ‘equality cannot be achieved in this country because those who should fight for it are too selfish to sacrifice themselves for the majority of the people.’ Many of those interviewed expressed the same kind of sentiment. Yet few of them were prepared to admit that should they become wealthy they would likely be characterized in the same way.

Despite these antagonistic class sentiments directed against the mekunnu and the rich, the poor (if not the very poor) feel that they can make progress, and achieve some of their ambitions (for their children rather than for themselves) if either they (a) work hard, (b) believe in God or (c) manage to become a client (to get a ‘helper’ oluranlowo) of a richer and more influential person such as a chief, a well-placed civil
servant, or a more educated individual. While many of the poor succeed in finding such a person, class cleavages have hardened in the last few years to the extent that some of the older respondents claimed that it had become increasingly difficult to find a helper; that more of those approached were rejecting such a relationship and that an increasing number of those with higher wages or incomes had become abusive, arrogant and short-tempered to the poor. Thus at least half of those interviewed felt that they were being driven to depend more on their own resources, on what wits and skills they had to get along, that the hurdles in their way were getting higher and more difficult to cross; that they would have to rely more on grassroots leaders who, in the words of a young man (an apprentice shoemaker who had been dismissed by his 'master' for insubordination because, he claimed, he was being used as a servant rather than trained for a skill), 'were themselves poor and understood how ordinary people suffer and can't get chop [food] every day'. An apprentice carpenter very firmly told the interviewer that with the exception of Awolowo 'the rich politicians will never speak for us because they are too busy being politicians'. In short, the poor are moving, however slowly, toward a class position of progressive isolation from the middle and elite sectors of the population.

It is thus out of the totality of a person's experience, his past and his present, his work and his social life, that perceptions and ideas of how the society ought to change, if change is seen as necessary, are fashioned. The majority of the urban poor interviewed strongly supported what might be termed evolutionary reformism rather than radical and 'heroic' or revolutionary change. While younger men and women (mostly those under thirty) sometimes spoke of the need to 'fight the rich', or 'demonstrate our grievances to the government by marching on the streets', or as one young messenger put it 'form a political party of all the mekunnu and get a good leader to stop the rich from stealing from us', the majority of the poor insist that 'progress [ilosiwaju] depends on education and hard work'. For many 'work is the remedy for poverty' (Safa 1971); yet those who say this will equally assert, most emphatically, that 'For me it is not possible to achieve my life desires because I have had a bad [badly paid] occupation. My children will have to do other work.' While it was generally felt that children might be better off than their parents, nevertheless a good many informants also felt that evolutionary reformism, a faith in the leaders to respond to pressures from the poor, might not produce a better life for their children to achieve their aspirations. This was brought out very clearly by a man of about 43 years of age who had been at various times a gatekeeper, an office cleaner, a night watchman and a farm labourer:

'When the British were here we did not have any trouble [. . .] We did not fight each other because we were rich or poor [. . .] No, my children will never do the same as I have done in my life. But I am afraid for them because I have never had any money to give them. Only a very little money [. . .] My father
and his father never did fight for money, but I think that my children may have to fight the politicians and the leaders and the government to get their rights [. . .] All the people of Ibadan suffer because the rich are always fighting us [to rob which is our due, i.e. better wages] so my children must know that they ought to fight the rich to get more for themselves.'

Such sentiments perhaps disguise some sort of apocalyptic vision of the future. Many informants expressed attitudes which exposed what might be thought of as different but interrelated perceptions of class and political consciousness and of strategies of change. At the level of class consciousness, discontent rooted in a clear rejection of the great inequalities of wealth was very widespread. Some of the younger informants expressed sentiments which, unless their economic conditions are improved, open the way to an understanding of how the ‘class struggle’ evolves. However, the majority of the poor continue to have faith in the possibility of change for the better. While the rich are often blamed, more in private than in public, much anger is reserved for ‘the government’ (akoso ilu). The government is seen as benefitting those who serve it. It is a corporate body which can be attacked, as distinct from individual civil servants who in their private capacity are relatives and friends—some of whom help the mekunnu. The strategies of demands and actions adopted vis-à-vis the government differ radically from those seen as legitimate in personal relations.

At the level of political consciousness and activism there appears to be a basic conflict between individual action, competition between people, and collective (class) action designed to change the structure of Yoruba society. Although the literate poor, many of whom see themselves as mekunnu, may occasionally suggest that concerted and sustaining political action is necessary (as some of the interviews cited in this article clearly indicate), they often hasten to add that only individual efforts and patronage will bring about the desired improvements—which are seen as a move into individual entrepreneurship. Help from the government to individuals is generally seen as the best help for the poor. Peter Lloyd (1973: 18), it seems to me, expresses the ambivalence toward political activism most succinctly when he states:

‘These long term hopes based upon an acceptance of the structure of [Yoruba] society, are not incompatible with strike action to gain immediate wage increases—especially when the cause of the tension [springs from] the government’s apparent reluctance to accept the recommendations of important [salary and wage] commissions.’

Lloyd (1973: 19) concludes that the ‘discontent of the masses can be interpreted as frustration, both with the failure of living standards to rise and with their individual failure to better themselves.’ Thus his emphasis is on an ‘ego-oriented model’, rather than on what he terms the ‘externalised analytical structure’ which implies that the individual ‘surveys his society in its entirety from without’ (Lloyd 1973: 8-9).
It is the contention of this paper, and of previous research results presented (Gutkind 1967, 1973, 1974a), that perceptions and actions concerning various strategies and possibilities of change will reveal themselves more clearly when the poor recognize the 'irreconcilable antagonism of their interest to the whole of the modern [Nigerian] political and social system' (Lenin 1929: 32). However, economic deprivation itself explains little as it is not correct either to assume or conclude that the poorest workers are or will be inevitably the most class and politically conscious, or the most radical (Nelson 1969; Zeitlin 1967). Thus there may not be recognized objective conditions (Wolpe 1970) which create a high level of political consciousness. It might be a matter of how the poor perceive their personal circumstances, rather than how the poor perceive the economic, political and social institutional reality. Hence there might be little class consciousness and limited political activism among Africa’s first generation of urban poor, withdrawal being, perhaps, the more normal reaction of recent migrants (Nelson 1969; Melson 1971; Powell 1969). It is possible, of course, that the poor are imbued with radical attitudes but do not express these because of the constraints imposed by the coercive actions of the State—as these have become increasingly common in Africa (Gutkind 1974a). Hence it becomes essential to analyze class consciousness and political activism in the context of the historical evolution of economic and political institutions and social forces. The repressive actions of many Third World governments force the poor to (a) work hard, (b) obtain a patron and (c) follow the advice of these governments preaching that the road to success lies in becoming a small-scale petite bourgeoisie. But because, to date, capitalist development in Africa is very limited in scope, most African workers are only 'semi-proletarianized' as the bulk of the African urban and rural wage workers participate, the lowest levels of the non-traditional economy.

Are the poor lacking in political consciousness because the capitalism of Third World countries is essentially still in the early 'manufacturing phase'? Does this circumstance provide a 'revolutionary situation', or has most of Africa (other than South Africa) already been bypassed? Or is a revolutionary situation in the making? P. M. Sweezy (1968: 33) suggests that 'If the revolutionary opportunities of the early period of modern industry are missed, the proletariat of an industrializing country tends to become less and less revolutionary.'

While this is the soil in which class consciousness might grow, it may not invariably generate political activism which might have to be stimulated, as Lenin (1929) proposed, from outside the ranks of the poor. But will members of the intellectual élite in Nigeria, or elsewhere in Africa, act as a spearhead of political action when they belong to the very class with which the workers are in conflict?

Class and political consciousness, and political activism, are all closely linked to the history and functions of urbanization in Africa. Over most
of the continent, but not necessarily in Southwestern Nigeria, urban developments were induced by the structure and the objectives of colonial capitalism which produced complex processes of dislocation. Murray and Wengraf (1963: 19) offer the following comment:

'The leading towns [in Africa] were not the creation of industrialization and inherent technical progress, but were rather the product of an export-oriented colonial agriculture, whose rents and profits found an urban outlet in consumption and speculation.'

The implication is, of course, clear: the urban areas of Africa are stagnant economically being no more than centers for the display of conspicuous consumption of wealth by the national bourgeoisie, while they are also the magnets for the rural migrant escaping from poverty and agricultural stagnation—only to enter into the overpopulated tertiary sector of the underdeveloped urban economy. It is in this context that Armstrong and McGee (1968: 354) offer the following proposition:

'A basic reason for the slowness of revolutionary change is the persistence of labour-intensive traditional economic systems which while characterized by low productivity and underemployment, serve a vitally important function (from the point of view of maintaining the social and political status quo) of providing a "sense of employment" to many Third World populations.'

Already to date, the urban centers of most of Africa's new nations are the pace-setters of an irreversible class system. As the social structures of the new nations are transformed from, as Geertz (1963: 48) suggested was taking place in Modjokuto, Indonesia, 'a composite of self-contained and socially segregated status groups to a more broadly comprehensive set of across-the-board social classes' the conditions and influences which fashion class and political consciousness will, we feel certain, reveal themselves more strongly. Consciousness influences action, and common actions, as these will gradually emerge, influence consciousness. Class-based associations are likely to replace, or at least to complement, ethnic rooted groupings (Melson 1971).

When and how truly revolutionary proletariat will come into being is not easy to predict, for an ideologically committed and politically cohesive urban working class is still in the making. At present one is left with the uncertain impression that the majority of the poor in Ibadan have faith in the existing order and, at times, even appear strongly optimistic about their future. The poor are much concerned with themselves in an inward manner as they cling to the view that their society is an 'open society' in which achievement is possible and which carries considerable rewards. They blame 'the government' for their difficulties, but they also blame themselves—an attitude which has the support of the intellectuals and other members of the national elite! Thus while some of the poor express the view that inequality is the natural order,
others insist that hard work opens the heavens of property ownership and entrepreneurship. While most of Ibadan’s poor are as politically minded (as most Nigerians seem to be) as people anywhere, political activism has still a low profile among them. Individual and collective efforts face enormous hurdles to be overcome, generate great frustrations and, for many, create complex dependency relations and networks. To these manifestations the national bourgeoisie responds with modest reformist measures such as increased wages (which inflationary pressures nullify even before the awards are made), while at the same time blaming the victims for creating the conditions of their own poverty!

There is a general lack of political organization among the poor to attack the problems of their inferior status in society, although Dorothy Nelkin (1967) has shown clearly how the poor and the unemployed can join with others and topple governments down. Thus there is a process of ‘becoming’ in the making which contains the ingredients for a revolutionary class struggle. Hughes and Cohen (1971: 1) suggest that we are witness to the development of a ‘social aggregate toward some form of common identity born of its [the proletariat’s] shared experience and disabilities under colonial [and, I would add, post-colonial] rule’. However, at the group level significant forces inhibit class identity.

Internal economic and social variations among the poor in Ibadan are considerable. The poor are deeply concerned with attempts at self-improvement, education, and a ‘false consciousness’ which often finds an outlet in chiliastic religions. Despite this we must be cautious and avoid possible errors of interpretation such as denying that consciousness exists, that it is a wholly recent development (a point of view taken by many observers) to dogmatically assert that it is there for all to see and always has been, or to attempt to analyse it outside of the context of society as a whole and its history.

We must also avoid the error of too specific a definition of consciousness as there are clearly many different forms ranging from ‘trade-union consciousness’ to class and national consciousness. The assumption is made, falsely, of a homogeneous working class and of the absence of doctrinal differences. Perhaps it is useful to make a distinction between a ‘labour aristocracy’ (skilled and permanently employed workers), proletarians (unskilled workers and the unemployed) and a Lumpen (the unemployable, the criminals and lay-abouts). Furthermore, we must likewise take into account the interdependence between the national elite and the proletariat, i.e. how the workers provide that ‘critical mass’ which the national elite needed in the past in their anti-colonial struggle, and needs today in the context of the politics of ‘internal colonialism’, and the kind of ‘manipulative populism’ which Saul (1970: 145) has described for Africa. Thus Hughes and Cohen (1971: 16) caution us against a ‘display of a narrow focus and an incomplete awareness of available information’ in regard to a broader concept of the anti-colonial struggle, a caution which we must also apply to the view that both
Indeed, recently John Iliffe (1970: 119-120) has shown, in his study of political consciousness of the dockworkers of Dar es Salaam, how this consciousness evolves, and that its roots are far deeper than some observers had thought. He summarizes his views of how workers achieved political consciousness and political activism:

"The history of a labour movement must be based on a history of work, and the most profound source of change in such a movement is the changing nature of the work in which the men are engaged. [Thus] organization and group consciousness among workers are created by the workers themselves. It is commonly said that "industrialization creates a working class", or in Africa that the needs of a colonial economy create "the embryonic proletariat of the towns". Yet industrialization or a colonial economy creates only workers. If these workers then come to feel solidarity among themselves, become conscious of forming a group with special common interests, and organize to advance these interests, then the workers are the agents in this process, creating their own group consciousness and organization in response to their common status. Further, at all stages in this process there is an interplay between consciousness and action. Men work together, share common experiences, and realize that they have common interests. By acting together to advance those interests, they learn their need for unity. This growing consciousness enables them to act more effectively, and shared experiences of successful action in turn intensifies group consciousness [. . .] This is how a working class creates itself."

He concludes this passage with the following appropriate quote from Karl Marx (1928: 195):

'Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers [. . .] This mass is thus already a class against capital, but not for itself. In the struggle [. . .] this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself.'

Marx wrote this, in The Poverty of Philosophy, in 1847 when he first joined the Communist League. Some one hundred and seventeen years later W. O. Goddluck (1964: 55), one of Nigeria's more radical trade union leaders, commenting on the Nigerian General Strike of 1964, made a somewhat similar observation:

'Although the cause of the strike was based on economic demands, yet in its development it has raised possible political action which, with a developed Marxist-Leninist party, could have led to a proletarian revolution.'
Why such a revolution did not then take place, or why it has not occurred since, and why there seems no immediate prospect of it taking place in Nigeria, and elsewhere in Africa, raises a host of questions still to be researched.

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Earlier in this paper I suggested that the 'native bourgeoisie' have preempted, for the moment, by virtue of the influential positions they occupy in Yoruba society, the possibility for the poor to alter their inferior position in any significant manner. While the Ibadan poor clearly contribute to the conditions and definition of change, and hence to their own class and political consciousness, they are also subject to the definition given their status by the élites. The poor appear to be encapsulated in a situation in which they define the future in terms of individual mobility without a clear understanding as yet of the common constraints which severely restrict their actual possibilities. Indeed, the poor, today as in the past (Hopkins 1966), turn to their 'class enemies', the national élite, for help, for it is to them at present that they owe what opportunities the élite make available. At the same time, the labour history of Nigeria (Gutkind 1974b) likewise indicates that the workers, particularly those doing the most menial work, have developed not only a political posture but also a class consciousness. As Hughes and Cohen (1971: 1) have put it, the workers have sought 'some form of common identity born of [their] shared experiences and disabilities under colonial [and neo-colonial] rule'.

Class consciousness, while fathered in the context of new economic relationships, and new social formations, is strongly rooted in a willingness to act in accordance with, and in pursuit of, shared experiences and goals. Where, when and how these conditions will prevail in Africa, and how deep the roots are as Hughes and Cohen, Hopkins, and Iliffe have all shown, calls for a great deal more research, and documentation of the historical processes which have given rise to both general and specific conditions.

The poor in Ibadan, as in other Nigerian towns, ought to be seen as a new social formation born out of colonial society and its particular economic, political and social make-up. Such social formations are not apolitical although in the present circumstances prevailing in Africa, class conscious political struggles by the urban poor are not yet very widespread. They are spontaneous, sporadic and localized rather than predictable and consistent; although it must be reasserted that both in objective economic and political terms, and in subjective individual terms, the ingredients for proletarian pressures exist. Perhaps, at present, these pressures may be seen more clearly from above than below, but as time passes a more expressive and sustaining class consciousness is almost certain to reveal itself, based on the enormous disparities of
wealth and incomes which have been exposed in some recent studies (Charle 1970; Ewusi 1971; International Labour Office 1972; Steel and Mabey 1973).

At present the political initiative is in the hands of the national élite made up of the high and middle range of civil servants and traders, political leaders, professionals and intellectuals. These groupings are not likely to support measures which strike at their privileged position. Hence the spontaneity of the class antagonism of the urban poor is often more revealing than planned political action. A good deal of the literature about the Third World concentrates on the landed aristocracy, the peasantry and the urban élites while the urban poor and the proletariat seem almost to disappear from the stage of history. Indeed in the Fanonist model, the urbanités are relegated to a minor, yet a nefarious, role in the class struggle (Fanon 1966: 88-91), while others have virtually dismissed 'workers' protest as insignificant in the recent evolution of industrial societies. It is evidently their view that the modern world is reaching out beyond ideology and the class struggle. There are revolutionary intellectuals, but no revolutionary workers. While I do not share this view, nevertheless the question must be asked whether the African nations will repeat, in whatever form, the class struggles of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries as we know them to have taken place in the 'developed' world.

What matters in political and class consciousness is not invariably the income or occupation of the worker, but the position he or she occupies in the process of and relation to production, and how this places the worker in a specific relationship to others involved in different productive processes and ownership. This is a relationship determined by particular modes of production and in the case of the poor and the ordinary worker the mode of production 'extracts and distributes the fruits of surplus labour over and above the labour which goes to supply the consumption of the actual producers' (Dobb 1946: 15). The question to be asked therefore is: How does one group (class) take away the surplus created by another? It is this relationship, the class relationship, which determines the mode of extracting surplus, which likewise determines the nature of individual and group consciousness—and the political aspirations commensurate with this consciousness.

While class conditions tend to evolve from the objective circumstances of various modes of production, political aspirations are the expressions of subjective factors. Political consciousness is brought about by the interaction of structural with subjective conditions rooted in education, belief and ideology (Wolpe 1970: 275). On the one hand we can postulate that consciousness emerges spontaneously from the objective conditions in which people find themselves, such as economic deprivation of the poor. Yet there is also much evidence that deprivation is translated into passivity and quietude. While deprivation is a causally related sequence of exploitation under capitalism, it may not generate political
or even class consciousness (Marx 1928; Bottomore and Rubel 1961: 195). Although contradictions may well be acute under a capitalist dispensation, political pressures may not result from them (Wolpe 1970: 264), presumably because, as some have suggested, class struggles are out of date (Herkommer 1965; Mallet 1965; Marcuse 1964, 1965) and because we are now allegedly witness to the ‘end of ideology’. I do not share such views.

The exact interrelation of the objective and subjective conditions is likely to vary from one society to another. Yet what appears to be common to most low-income societies is that consciousness is brought about in stages rather than revealed in sudden bursts, or sustained struggles fed at a high level of class consciousness and political activism. Contradictions, while predictable in an objective sense, only reveal themselves over time at the subjective level of understanding. The poor and the proletariat eventually meet in situations with the national bourgeoisie which expose the extent of the contradictions involved. At times, but by no means always, conflicts and confrontations are brought to light by educated members of the bourgeoisie—intellectuals in most cases—rather than by the actions of the poor or the workers. It is the unique contribution of Engels, Marx and Lenin which have revealed these circumstances. In Nigeria, as in most of contemporary Africa, the various modes of production, and the economic, social and political relations which have evolved from these, have still to crystallize into a sharply defined and class consciousness. But it is my view that there is considerable, if not sufficient, evidence to suggest that, if ‘viewed from below’, class consciousness is clearly revealed in the attitudes, and sometimes in the actions, of the urban poor in Ibadan.

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P. C. W. Gutkind — *La vue en bas : la prise de conscience politique chez les citadins pauvres d’Ibadan*. Une analyse d’attitudes parmi les couches les plus pauvres de la population urbaine d’Ibadan fait apparaître la prise de conscience d’appartenir à un groupe distinct, et antagoniste, par rapport à l’élite politico-économique et à la petite bourgeoisie nationale. Cette conscience de classe naissante s’accompagne d’une prise de conscience politique, aboutissant actuellement à des positions plutôt réformistes que révolutionnaires, qui s’expliquent par des raisons diverses, entre autres le manque de solidarité entre la couche la plus pauvre (talaka) et la couche immédiatement supérieure (mekunnu) de ce prolétariat. Discussion, dans une approche marxiste, de cette formation de classe et des perspectives qu’elle offre.

See infra critical comments of J. Copans and M. Vernière, pp. 37-55.