

## BOOK REVIEWS

Title	Author(s)/Editor(s)	Reviewer
<i>The African Poor</i>	John Iliffe	Aidan W. Southall
<i>Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia</i>	Brooke Larson	B. H. Slicher van Bath
<i>Arms, Country, and Class</i>	Steven Rosswurm	Jack P. Greene
<i>Family and the Female Life Course</i>	George Alter	Michael R. Haines
<i>Anarquismo y anarco-sindicalismo en Asturias</i>	Angeles Barrio Alonso	G. A. Kelsey
<i>Autonomie Ouvrière</i>	Jacques Julliard	Patricia J. Hilden
<i>The Czech Red Unions</i>	Kevin McDermott	Robert K. Evanson

ILIFFE, JOHN. *The African Poor. A History*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne 1987. ix, 387 pp.

Poverty is not intrinsically a very glamorous subject, being a relatively passive rather than active state, lacking the romantic horror and excitement of other misfortunes, such as murder or rape. So Iliffe's extraordinarily thorough and painstaking account of the whole continent, throughout all the history he can trace, is necessarily loaded with a burden of voluminous detail, often narrowly specific, quite obscure, even bordering on the trivial, yet always related to the main argument and calling forth admiration for the indefatigable scholarship which dug it out. When the data offers opportunity for fashioning an intriguing episode it is dramatically exploited, as in the "brilliantly successful confidence trick" of the leprosy cure by chaulmoogra oil, used in India for 2,500 years and adopted by European doctors in 1853. It appeared to be a tremendous success in Africa, because it gave renewed energy and enthusiasm to doctors, and fresh hope and confidence to patients, calling them to treatment

centers in huge numbers, so that some got better nutrition and more resistance, or achieved cure because caught at an early stage of infection, yet in the end the scientific evidence held that the beneficial effects of “the best drug available” were slight or negligible. Other drugs have raised great hopes only to dash them by causing rapid resistance to their effects.

Ilfie made this monumental study because “poverty is growing in sub-Saharan Africa, terribly in the form of mass famine and insidiously in the declining living standards of remote villages and urban shanty towns”, because he believes that Africa’s splendor lies in its suffering, that its heroism lies not in the deeds of kings but in the struggles of ordinary people against the forces of nature and the cruelty of men, just as the most noble European activities have been by those, often forgotten, who cared for the sick, the starving and the homeless, and because while the old imperial history was marred by an élitism which could “degenerate into racialism”, the national histories which replaced it are marred by parochialism, so that a comparative social history is needed which treats people on a basis of equality rather than subjection.

Since “perhaps most Africans at most times” have been poor – “obliged to struggle continuously to preserve themselves and their dependents from physical want” – their history would be “almost a history of Africa” so this book is about the *very poor*, the destitute, those who have temporarily or permanently failed in the struggle and fallen into physical want. With this realistic attitude Ilfie rejects “the myth of merrie Africa” subscribed to by many colonial officials, anthropologists and also Africans, to the effect that the extended family guaranteed welfare and there was little inequality, deviance or abnormal behavior. He distinguishes structural poverty of personal or social circumstances, from the conjunctural poverty of temporary crisis for those ordinarily self-sufficient. “The ubiquitous structural poor of pre-colonial Africa were mainly those lacking access to labour”, the old, the handicapped and the very young. “Structural poverty resulting from land scarcity appeared only slowly” – first in eighteenth-century South Africa and then in other areas of ruthless alienation or unusual population density.

After setting the stage and providing definitions, Ilfie begins with Christian Ethiopia and the Islamic Tradition, because these literate societies can show how deeply and indefinitely far back African poverty goes. Though indefatigably pursued, the evidence is inevitably fragmentary and we see poverty from the point of view of élite attitudes towards it and attempts to address it, and not so much how rulers *caused* it by their exactions, though *jihād* and other wars are mentioned.

In chapters on poverty and power, poverty and pastoralism and Yoruba and Igbo, Ilfie struggles to present a coherent account of precolonial poverty in sub-Saharan Africa from such places as the fragmentary evidence permits, from missionaries’, traders’ and travellers’ accounts. Early European initiatives in attempting to deal with poverty, and the special history of poverty in South Africa from 1886 to 1948, are given, followed by general accounts of rural poverty in colonial Africa and urban poverty in tropical Africa. Finally, the care of the poor in colonial Africa, the special case of leprosy, the growth of poverty in independent Africa and the transformation of poverty in southern Africa, where structural and conjunctural poverty converged. As structural poverty from land scarcity began in South Africa, so it was there first, by the 1980s, that the old African world was turned upside down, with

abundant labour and scarce land and work, “the great transition which has dominated the history of the poor in every continent”.

This is meticulous and pioneering scholarship in a noble cause, most worthily awarded the Herskovits Prize of 1988 by the African Studies Association, setting the appalling story of African poverty, so relevant to questions of the cultural and racial status of African peoples in the world, in a balanced context of time and place, although the author warns that “a comprehensive history of the African poor is still decades away”.

*Aidan W. Southall*

LARSON, BROOKE. *Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia, Cochabamba, 1550–1900*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 1988. xv, 376 pp. \$ 65.00. (Paper: \$ 25.00.)

In the flow of historical studies on Latin America during the last two decades the most astonishing is the high quality of so many books and articles. Most of them deal with Mexico (New Spain) and Peru, but Brazil, Guatemala and Bolivia (Alto Perú) are not forgotten. The ethnohistorian Murra was the initiator and stimulator of a new view on the history of Incaic Peru and Bolivia. He studied the Spanish documents of the sixteenth century in research of the vestiges of old Incaic institutions and social relations. He emphasized the importance of the “vertical control”, the system by which villages or tribes possessed and used land in the various climatic zones from the low tropical or subtropical valleys to the arid and cold *puna*, high in the mountains. Typical for this form of economy was the self-sufficiency and the absence of trade and markets.

Murra’s ideas have been elaborated by a multitude of scholars, both anthropologists and historians, like Spalding, Stern, Pease, Platt, Golte, Sempat Assadourian, Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, Espinoza Soriano and Málaga Medina. Now this long list is continued by Brooke Larson, again with a standard book.

Meanwhile the model of the vertical control has been combined with the theory of the moral economy, the reciprocal rights and duties of the authorities on the one hand and the ordinary people on the other hand in the prae-Incaic and Incaic age. From this base Mrs. Brooke Larson studied the history of the political, social and economic development of a densely populated region, the district of Cochabamba in central Alto Perú.

During the Inca-period the original inhabitants were privileged warriors in the army, while other tribes were settled in the valleys to produce maize for the government and the army. An ingenious irrigation system turned the valleys into the granary of the Inca-empire. After the Spanish conquest the fortune of the Indians in the valleys became closely connected with the ups and downs of the silver mining in Potosí. The adult men were coerced to work in the mines and on large haciendas wheat and maize were grown to feed the more than 100,000 inhabitants of the *Villa Imperial*. During the decline of the silver production the hacienda-system disintegrated into small-scale farming; the increased population lived well by special-