

Correspondence

The Problem With "Problems in African Political Philosophy"

To the Editors: Father James V. Schall's impressive academic credentials did not prevent him from writing an article that is, in my opinion, a misleading oversimplification of the "Problems in African Political Philosophy" (*Worldview*, Excursus, September).

He admits that the continent "has more ethnic and cultural groups and diversities than the other continents," but he fails to follow out the implications of this fact. The first implication is that one would suspect such diversity to be reflected in a variety of approaches to development—as indeed it is reflected; Father Schall, however, reduces the diversity to two camps: one in opposition to development; the other flaunting perfectionist rhetoric.

No responsible leader of an African state is opposed to development simply because it is not a product of his state or the continent on which he lives. The exercise of some selectivity as to the forms and direction it will take seems only prudent, especially in view of some of the problems developed nations have produced as direct results of their development: unclean air and water; deforested areas exposed to soil erosion; the disfigurement resulting from strip-mining; technological unemployment, etc. One could mention, too, the urgent need, tied to political independence, for achieving freedom in economic matters, from what is commonly called neocolonialism.

The rhetoric of some African political leaders is not hard to understand either: These men are faced with a problem of great magnitude, left to them by Europe's irrational imposition of boundaries on the old colonies, now the new nation-states—the problem of creating a unified nation out of peoples differing in language, tradition, and culture. If flights of rhetorical exaggeration and ambition can help them

achieve this important end, who are we to criticize or ridicule? Did we not hear, and were not many of us moved by, the idealism of President John F. Kennedy or the determination of President Nixon to make the city streets of America safe?

Twice in his rather brief article Father Schall seems to indulge in a bit of ethnocentrism (which is not the same thing as racism). He clearly believes that the developed Western world is the only model for African nations to follow. President Nyerere of Tanzania, on the contrary, believes that in his nation a new political/economic system might be a viable alternative to both the capitalism of the West and the Communist systems in Eastern Europe and Asia. The Tanzanian system, if it works in the long run, will be a distinctively African creation—and development is an essential element in the plan. It is not a matter of being good because it is African, but being good because it meets the needs of an African people, including those whose existence hitherto has been marginal.

To play Schall's historical game of looking at eighteenth and nineteenth-century backgrounds: It hardly comes as a shock to Africans to realize that much of the nation's tribal diversity so evident in the continental United States was virtually destroyed by migrating Western Europeans manifesting their Christian(?) destiny. And, furthermore, the fact that much of the U.S.'s economic development was a product of the enforced contribution of imported African labor is not overlooked by them either.

The Rev. Rollins E. Lambert
Advisor for African Affairs
Dept. of Social Development
and World Peace
U.S. Catholic Conference
Washington, D.C.

James V. Schall Responds:

Father Lambert's good comments are quite representative, I think, of someone concerned with and engaged in action positions designed to aid peoples in achieving what they conceive to be their tasks.

My remarks were the opening portion of a considerably longer essay; that the editors cut down with my permis-

sion, but in which several of Father Lambert's points were touched upon. The entire essay was devoted, in my mind at least, to what the title indicates, that is, to political philosophy as such. The context was provided by the inaugural lecture Professor Ali Mazrui gave at Makerere University College, Uganda, in 1966 entitled "Ancient Greece in African Political Thought," and by an essay in *The Economist* (August 31, 1974), which remarked that the structure of African politics has not changed very much since independence. The main question I was interested in was whether this tendency to insist so much on an autonomous African political experience did not beg the scientific question of whether Africans did not in fact behave pretty much like most other men. I think that the fact that they more or less do is a good thing and a rather consoling reminder of the unity of the human race, in good and evil. I believe I rather illusory for any people to pretend it is so different that the forms of classical political philosophy cannot apply to them. It usually means that they will appear in some other unattended form.

I am considerably more hesitant than Father Lambert to write off exaggerated political rhetoric as merely that. Rhetoric is political power, as Aristotle noted, and too often in political history binds the rhetorician, whether he likes it or not, to practice his exaggerated claims and ambitions. There are many dark pages in ancient and recent political history in which people did not pay sufficient attention to such exaggeration. And I think no one can doubt that the rhetoric of African leaders has been a major source of conflict and worry in the Middle East. I would agree (at least I am hopeful) that there is much exaggeration; but certainly Africa has had its share of tragedies, and not all of them the result of calm reasoning.

I should like to grant too that there is wide variation in African political backgrounds and experiences. But at the theoretical level, as I suggested in my original comments, at the level of what is actually written or philosophized about by African leaders and writers, I am struck by a certain repetitiveness and structural similarity.

(Continued on page 52)