For BU African Studies Magazine

BOOK REVIEW

Allan Low, Agricultural Development in Southern Africa - Farm-household economies and the food crisis (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1986). 217 p.

Low has here provided a useful analysis of how small farm families in southern Africa allocate their labor-time to maximize family welfare. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of the World Bank and other aid agencies, he develops a model of household economics to explain that these families take advantage of improved technologies (hybrid seeds, fertilizers, even tractors), not to produce a surplus for market, but to release labor. He notes that only in Malawi, characterized by exceptionally low wages in the "modern" sector, did peasants seek to expand their cash crops. Depending on the sex, age, and stage in the family cycle, he shows that, elsewhere, farm families use the time saved by increased subsistence crop productivity for other activities like migrant labor which provides a higher return than marketed crops; collection of water and firewood which impose a heavy time burden on women; and education, perceived as a valuable investment in the future. Low suggests that, applied to the rest of Africa, his analysis may help to explain why, despite no serious land shortage and the possibilities for improved productivity, so many African countries seem to confront an almost chronic food crisis,

What Low perceives as the policy implications of his study remains somewhat unclear. He justifiably claims it underscores the value of a greater stress on household economics. Unfortunately, his note that low wages in Malawi apparently encouraged peasants to expand cash cropping might be interpreted as an argument for holding down wages. He also suggests a reason for freehold land tenure different from those conventionally advanced: Families would be more likely to put land to more productive use if it had a cost. He emphasizes, however, that, unless the state undertakes "a massive investment in housing, social security, and permanent job creation" (p. 164) in cases where an absolute land shortage prevails, as in parts of southern Africa (especially in some of the bantustans), the introduction of freehold will likely increase landlessness and unemployment. He concludes rural development planners should take into consideration the larger economic context.

Two aspects of Low's analysis tend to limit the insights it offers. First, he presents it in an a-historical context. Explicitly rejecting what he terms the "radical" explanation of land alienation, taxes, and discrimination, he infers that peasants actually prefer usufruct subsistence farming and migratory labor. He tends to overlook the way, precisely to coerce Africans into a low-paid labor force, the colonialists, especially in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Swaziland, favored large-scale settler-owned commercial farms, and limited the potential returns to peasant cash cropping. Yet these historically-shaped objective factors pressure peasant families to rely on usufruct landholdings for subsistence, while migrating to work for wages widely recognized as below the poverty line.

Second, Low does not adequately examine the way several post-independence southern African governments perpetuated inherited institutions -- including those for markets, provision of inputs, credit, extension and research -- that favor large scale as opposed to peasant farms. He points out that the returns to peasant agriculture, given prices adequate only to cover the costs of large scale farms or imports, are insufficient to provide a surplus (beyond peasant farm costs) competitive with the wages of migrant labor. He adds that to raise the prices would help little, since peasant families, too, would have to pay more for whatever food they purchased. Low's praise for Zimbabwe's 'success' in stimulating increased peasant agriculture fails to mention two critical facts: First, the new Zimbabwean government did consciously reshape the critical institutions to enable at least some peasants to compete effectively with the commercial farms. Second, since the government cannot afford to provide the assistance required to enable all peasant farmers to compete with commercial agriculture, the Zimbabwe policies tended to aggravate rural stratification in the peasant sector by assisting primarily the more well-to-do individual peasants, with access to larger amounts of fertile, well-watered land and capital.

These qualifications do not vitiate the essential value of Low's contribution. Rather, they underscore the need for more careful analysis of the larger political economic context within which the household economics model functions in order to reach more useful conclusions concerning the policy implications. In particular, they argue the need to elaborate Low's own suggestion as to the need for state action to meet the people's basic needs. In short, they underscore the necessity for southern African governments to restructure their national -- or, better yet, regional -- economies to provide increasingly productive employment opportunities and rising living standards for all their inhabitants.

by Ann Seidman

Adjunct Professor, Clark University

Visiting Professor, Brandeis University