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**Politics, Privilege and Progress in Liberia —  
A Review Article**

*by*

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J. Gus Liebenow, LIBERIA, THE EVOLUTION OF PRIVILEGE. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969. 247 Pp.

Liberia seems to inspire in those who observe and write about it a peculiar polarization of attitude. One or two writers have seen the Liberian experience as something like an Horatio Alger story, with few villains and one towering hero - W. V. S. Tubman. In this view Liberian history before 1944 consists mainly of the struggle of a small band of immigrants against hostile tribesmen and grasping European colonizers. After 1944 it is all Tubman, leading his country to remarkable economic growth and an important place in the world. This is a minority view. It is most clearly seen in a book like Marinelli's The New Liberia.<sup>1</sup> It leaves so much unsaid and is so uncritical that it cannot be taken seriously.

The more common analysis is at the other extreme. Its main themes are villainy, selfishness and exploitation. Its central players are scoundrels or clowns. Its interpretation of what has happened in Liberia is far harsher - it is the home of a ruthless black colonialism, of political oppression and economic exploitation. In this view the economic changes of the recent past have affected mainly the Americo-Liberian elite, and only surface changes have occurred throughout the society. This is the Liberia portrayed in the recent volume Growth Without Development,<sup>2</sup> by Clower, Dalton, Harwitz and Walters, a team from Northwestern University. It is the Liberia of Fletcher Knebel's novel, The Zinzin Road.<sup>3</sup> It is essentially the picture of Liberia drawn in Professor J. Gus Liebenow's book Liberia, the Evolution of Privilege (Cornell University Press, 1969). Liebenow has in fact written a political counterpart or supplement to Growth Without Development. He might have called it "Economic Growth Without Political Change," for this is the general thrust of his argument.

Liebenow's thesis can be summarized as follows. Liberian society is essentially "colonial" in character, with the Americo-Liberian minority (some ten per cent of the population) in the role of colonizer, and the tribal majority the colonized. This colonial society has managed to survive a variety of threats, internal and external - from rebellious tribesmen who resisted the authority of the colonizers, from the colonial powers, from the nationalist and other ideological winds coming out of newly-independent African countries. The persistence of the colonial relationship and the survival of the ruling Americo-Liberian elite in recent years has been due to the "political adroitness" of President Tubman. Most policies in Liberia are explainable as calculated attempts to assure survival for the elite, while at the same time allowing them to gather for themselves the benefits of change.

1. Lawrence A. Marinelli, The New Liberia: A Historical and Political Survey (New York, 1964).

2. Robert W. Clower, George Dalton, Mitchell Harwitz & A. A. Walters, Growth Without Development. An Economic Survey of Liberia (Evanston, 1966).

3. Fletcher Knebel, The Zinzin Road (Garden City, 1966).

World prestige and remarkable economic growth... have not brought substantial change in the lives of the tribal people who constitute the bulk of Liberia's million inhabitants... By various mechanisms, for a century and a half they (the Americo-Liberian minority) have not only dominated the political destinies of the tribal majority but also controlled the evolution of most economic, educational, social, and religious structures within the Republic. Although outwardly much has changed in the "new" Liberia, the essentially aristocratic relationship between the descendants of the settlers and the descendants of the original tribal inhabitants has remained substantially the same. The most significant difference is that privilege has been raised to a new level of magnitude.

Professor Liebenow surveys, in fairly general terms, the historical background, the characteristics of tribal societies, party politics, the presidency, the effects of recent economic growth and recent changes in administrative and political organization. But he makes no attempt to be comprehensive in this small volume. His is rather an interpretative study, an evaluation of the performance of the Liberian political elite. Their performance, in Mr. Liebenow's view, has been morally deficient; moral disapproval runs through the book. It is stated more explicitly in Professor Carter's comments in the Foreword: "...the story is disturbing... Americo-Liberians, particularly of the governing class, have long sought, with signal success, to capitalize on their privileged social and economic position. The Americo-Liberian elite has maintained its often oppressive domination over the majority tribal people and exploited its own poorer groups."

There is of course nothing illegitimate about these kinds of value judgments so long as the facts are reasonably straight and the basis of judgment is understood. Unfortunately, in the Liberian case the "facts" are not all that clear, and more important, the standard against which the political system or the performance of the political elite is being measured is exceedingly imprecise, the criteria unspecified or incomplete, the judgments highly personal. Thus the real questions are not whether Americo-Liberian rule has been "humane" or "brutal," "oppressive" or "benevolent"; or whether the benefits of economic growth have been "widely" or "inequitably" spread. These are extremely difficult to define in concrete ways, and are all questions of degree in any case. There must also be some yardstick, some defined standard of performance against which to measure Liberian performance. And the rate and direction of change must also be taken into account. When Liebenow says that "the essentially aristocratic relationship" in Liberia has remained "substantially the same," he is making all kinds of judgments about what is essential in the relationship, and about what is or is not to be taken as "substantial" change. And presumably the Liberian story is "disturbing" to Professor Carter because it fails to meet some expected standard of performance.

Evaluations of political systems or political performance occasionally differ because of disagreement over the facts - over what is actually happening in a given system. Most of the time, however, differences in the weighting of agreed-upon "facts" account for varying evaluations, and these different weights in turn spring from different perceptions of the nature of the problems at hand, and the different standards, expectations, ideologies of the observers.

Thus it is entirely possible, and even reasonable, to look at the record in Liberia not as "disturbing" but as extremely encouraging, not as "the evolution of privilege" but as a case of quiet, rapid and fundamental transformation of a society. On the economic side, Liberia twenty-five years ago was overwhelmingly subsistence-oriented, the options for income-earning available to its people highly limited, its stock of human and physical capital appallingly low. In one generation a network of schools and roads has been created, the productive capacity of the economy has expanded enormously, new economic horizons have been created. Whereas only ten per cent of the adult male population worked for wages in 1950, something like thirty per cent now does so - a very high percentage in low income countries. The 600-odd vehicles of 1949 have grown to number 15,000 in 1969, implying a revolution in physical mobility. The presence of thousands of foreigners throughout the country has opened up Liberia in ways and to an extent scarcely imaginable a few decades ago. In the space of a decade a new educated class has been generated. More Liberians after all, graduated from universities since 1955 than during the whole previous history of the country. The visible impact of all of these changes on traditional agriculture remains slight, reliance on foreign capital and skill is still intense, the benefits of growth have surely not been distributed in a fashion pleasing to equalitarians. But given the short time span involved - really not much more than fifteen years since appreciable rates of economic change got under way - the effects are extraordinary.

Politics has been changed by economic growth, as has the nature of the relations between elite and the governed. Some change has been of a formal kind, such as giving the former interior provinces full-fledged political status through their erection into counties. But most has been indirect. The growth of a modern transport system, for example, has widened the labor market, stimulated the demand for goods, reduced the need for resort to forced labor. Better control from Monrovia, the presence of foreigners and Liberia's international role (itself financed by recent growth) have sharply reduced the prevalence of the old abuses of privilege in the countryside. Elite rule has become more orderly, and more humane. Access to power and influence has widened, and has become more dependent on competence and education, as is evidenced by the dramatic change in the composition of Cabinets - technicians coming, during the 1960's, into a dominant role. It is hard to think of a country in which national integration has moved forward so substantially in the past twenty years, with much more systematic and intense relationships developing, on both economic and political levels, between the coastal elite and the rural masses.

Professor Liebenow is not unaware of these changes, and indeed mentions many of them. He apparently puts a low value on them, however, and gives a low estimate of their depth and extent. In surveying the uneven pattern of change he chooses to stress those features of the political landscape which have changed least or are most inequitable. There is nothing wrong with this kind of selectivity and emphasis, though it can result in a distorted image.

It is also uncharitable. Charity, indeed, is one of the qualities most notably absent in this book. Every shortcoming of the political system, every failure in public policy, every inequity in the society seems to be attributed to the Americo-Liberian elite, no matter how complex its causes, and how recent the awareness or ability to deal with it has emerged. Condemnations of the elite's performance are framed mostly in absolute terms; only occasionally is mention made of similar phenomena in other countries. Every positive event or development is noted reluctantly, almost begrudgingly. Liebenow is systematically critical.

This generally negative posture is reflected even in matters of language. In discussing the general environment within which Liberian history unfolded, for example, he apparently finds it difficult to use the word "hostile" as an unqualified description. He calls it "relatively" or "potentially" hostile. Yet the hostility shown to Liberia by the colonial powers throughout much of its history was real enough to lead to successive slicing off of parts of the country, and there was nothing "potential" about the threat to Liberia's continued existence in the 1930's. And the years after the 1870 loan were dominated, on the economic side, by continuing attempts by creditors to impose financial controls which might have led to full foreign take-over, as they did elsewhere in numerous instances. Nor was there anything "potential" about the periodic clashes with tribal groups which on several occasions - the last as late as 1915 - brought the Americo-Liberian communities to the edge of disaster. As for the "relativity" of the environmental difficulties in Liberia, it is hard to think of places where the odds against development and modernization were greater. On the one side were a handful of black settlers, carrying antiquated cultural and technological baggage, with very little access to ideas, capital, assistance of any significance from the outside, inexperienced in self-government, exposed to genuine and continuing threats inside and out. On the other side was an ungracious, unknown West African ecology, unsoftened by social infrastructure, physically inaccessible. How was a modern economy and society to come from this unequal alignment of forces?

A similar severity of judgment can be seen in Liebenow's treatment of Liberia as a "colonial" situation. In fact, not much is known about the nature and evolution of relations between Americo-Liberians and tribal people, so any discussion should be framed in cautious terms. The literature touching on these matters is sparse and biased, most of it deriving from self-interested observers. Liberian history needs reappraisal fully as much as African history in general.

But putting aside the uncertainties about historical facts, how useful is Liebenow's proposition that the Liberian political and social systems can best be understood as an evolving colonial situation? Liberian society has had in the past and continues to have today some "colonial" features - notably the monopolization of political power by a distinct minority, unequal treatment in law and in fact between the dominant minority and the subordinate majority, and generalized cultural denigration of the majority. But similar "colonial" elements can be found in almost all societies which are ethnically heterogeneous or highly stratified socially. What is more important, however, and is passed over in Mr. Liebenow's analysis, is the extent to which the colonial concept does not apply in Liberia.

Two aspects in particular of the Liberian situation considerably dilute the meaningfulness of the colonial description. Until twenty-five years ago, Liberia could be called a "country" or "state" only in a strictly legal use of the term. It was in reality a collection of coastal communities, cut off from the hinterland and each other, and quite autonomous in most things that mattered. There existed almost no significant area of public activity which could give substance to the "state". The central government had at its disposal a few hundred thousand dollars annually, much of it periodically earmarked to pay off foreign loans. There were few schools, roads, or dispensaries. There were indeed almost no public goods and services at all. The administrative system could hardly be said to reach beyond Monrovia, so there was little knowledge and less control over happenings in the interior. This meant that tribal people were by and large left alone most of the time with the exception of occasional harassment by government officials acting more often than not on their own. Under these circumstances "contact" was limited. The "colonia-

alism" of the Americo-Liberians was more theoretical than real, more potential than actual.

Moreover, to the extent that contact did take place between the two groups in question, it was marked by considerable interpenetration. This undoubtedly is related to the highly relevant fact that both colonizer and colonized were of the same race. Where dominant and dominated groups in any society have few visible physical differences, the colonial features of the relationship are inherently fragile and evanescent; they can be perpetuated only by social devices aimed at preventing group mingling, the most elaborate of which is of course the caste system. Now the evidence is fairly abundant in Liberia that intermingling and interpenetration did occur to the extent that technology and settled administration permitted contacts between coastal settlers and the surrounding tribesmen. The instruments of this interpenetration are mentioned by Liebenow and are well documented elsewhere, though their extent is not known. One was the practice of taking in "wards," which seems to have been quite widespread. Another was intermarriage, which has taken place on an extensive scale for many decades. Finally, widening educational opportunity over the years allowed the absorption of tribal youths into the dominant group on the coast. Buell, in his classic description of Liberia in the 1920's, makes an interesting comment:

Because of the decreasing number of Liberian families who have not intermarried with aboriginal tribes, the number of aboriginal children in the schools now far exceeds the children of the colonists. According to some estimates, all but six hundred of the 9,000 children in school in Liberia are 'aborigines.'<sup>4</sup>

This was in the mid-twenties. Today, in Monrovia's secondary schools, recent studies indicate that over ninety per cent of the pupils speak a tribal language as a first language and the University of Liberia is very largely a "tribal" institution, though in the face of these kinds of figures it has become increasingly irrelevant to talk in these terms.

Professor Liebenow's sociological analysis suffers, then, from too heavy an emphasis on the division between immigrant elite and tribal mass, and its unchanging character. There are, moreover, ambiguities in the general treatment of social stratification, evident even to the amateur in these matters. Liebenow uses "True Whig elite" interchangeably, in some parts of the book, with "Americo-Liberians," and references to lower-class Americo-Liberians further muddies the definitional problem.

Many of the same kinds of issues can be raised about Mr. Liebenow's political analysis. Because of his general orientation, and the nature of the thesis he is anxious to document, he tends to focus on questions of secondary or transient political significance, while omitting from consideration or dealing very briefly with more important matters. Take the question of political recruitment and the nature

4. Raymond Leslie Buell, The Native Problem in Africa (New York, 1928), II: 751.

of political influence. Issues of great interest are involved, crucial to better insight into what has happened in Liberia and what will happen next: the political role of cabinet ministers, their influence as compared to the legislature and the True Whig Party; the kinds of connections between cabinet members and other pockets of influence or power, both among traditional and new elites; the balance of influence between young modernizers and the old guard.

Very little light is shed on these kinds of issues in Mr. Liebenow's book. They are dealt with briefly, if at all. Instead considerable space is given to a discussion of the role of family ties in Liberian politics; one of the key chapters is entitled "A Family Affair." Liebenow presents an expanded and updated version of a table he has published previously, and which has been much-cited, showing family links among prominent public officials. He argues that family clusters can be seen, and that these provide insight into patterns of influence and power.

... the geneologies of the political leadership of Liberia over a period of years provides the objective observer as well as the active participant with an explicit map of the Liberian political terrain, plotting not only the immediate strength of a given family and its patrons but also a history of the upward and downward movement of various families in the political scene. A political genealogy (sic) for 1960-1961, for example, indicated that there were three primary pockets of national strength, each dominated by a dominant patron: President William V. S. Tubman, Vice-President William R. Tolbert, and Secretary of the Treasury Charles B. Sherman...

I doubt it. The chart of family linkages, for example, may provide raw material for political gossip, but its political significance is by no means obvious. The fact that the elite is highly interrelated by marriage and that most individuals in public office have family ties to each other should hardly surprise anyone. Given a long time period, a small community and relative isolation it could hardly be otherwise. Nor do family patterns provide anything like "an explicit map of the Liberian political terrain." The abundance of interconnections makes the political significance of any particular set of relationships highly ambiguous. What political weight is to be put on the fact that the Secretary of Planning's cousin is an official of the Liberian Rubber Grower's Association, or to similar kinds of interconnections? It would be hard to find members of the elite who do not have scores of such links.

Family position is not a good explanatory variable in understanding past political events, nor a good predictor of future political trends. It is striking to note how few of the family names of past presidents are found among the political leaders of substance in contemporary Liberia. The Barclays, Kings, Gibsons, Howards and Colemans, the families of 20th century presidents, have notable descendants, but none of them are at center stage today. Positions of greatest influence, such as some of those in the cabinet, have for a decade or more tended to go to technicians, a number of whom did not have much in the way of conventional family credentials. As Mr. Liebenow himself notes, even two of the three family clusters he found to be important in 1960 are now in an uncertain political position.

Family connections may still be important in Liberian politics, but it is surely a declining factor, subordinated to many other considerations, such as income, education, competence, acceptability in terms of class, ethnic and regional origin. Just as the past twenty years have given broader content to the meaning of the "nation", so too has it transformed the basis of Liberian politics, which is now perhaps only a bit more of a family affair than is politics in Massachusetts.

Professor Liebenow's central theme is the maintenance of Americo-Liberian supremacy, the preservation - as he sees it - of an "island of privilege in a sea of hostility." His treatment of this theme is uneven. In some sections of the book - in his chapter on "A New Deal for the Hinterland," for example - he recognizes the substantial magnitude of the recent changes in the country. But elsewhere he writes as though that chapter was in someone else's book. Thus in one place he underscores the impact of change by drawing attention to the larger numbers of Liberians who have entered the wage sector. But this does not prevent him from concluding in another chapter that "the most striking result of the dramatic change in the Liberian economy is that the new roads make it easier for the Americo-Liberian - officials and non-officials alike - to exploit the tribal hinterland through labor recruitment, the imposition of extraordinary taxes and the constant requisitioning of crops and livestock." Similarly, he notes the importance of foreign capital and technicians as motors of change, but later alleges: "... in the present era the foreigner has become the witting or unwitting partner in the exploitation of the tribal masses."

These divergencies undoubtedly reflect Professor Liebenow's own uncertainty as to the depth and extent of recent changes. He is certainly aware that important changes have occurred since 1959. But he is the prisoner of attitudes and hypotheses developed in the early 1960's, and in the end these dominate his analysis. Thus he swallows wholesale the dubious conclusions of the Growth Without Development study regarding the extent of labor recruitment (which was very nearly dead at the time the Northwestern people were elevating it to so central a position in the economic system), land grabbing (which still goes on to an uncertain extent, but which cannot have been so extensive if land prices and ease of purchase by ordinary Liberians are any indication), and requisitions of crops and livestock (which certainly seems to have lessened by better government control over its agents, better communications, and a denser foreign presence throughout the country). Like the Northwestern authors, Liebenow attributes most of what is wrong in Liberia to the political elite, displaying little appreciation of the enormous objective difficulties and the fact that change is so recent.

All of this gives to many of Mr. Liebenow's criticisms of elite performance a carping or naive quality, and much indication of the lack of charity mentioned above. He says there is "an absence of rational planning" in Liberia. Perhaps. But is this not true of most governments? Capital is said to have been dissipated on projects that are never completed. Such incidents did occur in the late 1950's and early 1960's, but examples are few. None have occurred in the past six or seven years. Liebenow seems, illadvisedly, to believe that a small country like Liberia would be well-advised to do more along the lines of heavy industry. He attributes lagging or ineffective administrative reform mainly to lack of commitment, and stresses Liberian "formalism." But reform has been slow for many reasons, not least the intractability of the problems dealt with and poor advice from advisors. He makes incorrect or misleading statements about the educational effort. Enrollments may be less than the officially cited figure of 120,000, but not much less.

About thirty per cent of the school age population is in schools, not the ten per cent he mentions as the estimate of unidentified "neutral observers." With respect to educational spending, he says that Liberia spent only eight per cent of its expenditures on education during the decade from 1958 to 1968, whereas many of the new African states spend twenty to thirty per cent. It is not clear where Mr. Liebenow got these figures, but it is clear that he is not aware of the treacherous nature of these kinds of comparisons, which depend on definitions of the budget and of educational expenditure which are by no means uniform. In any event, in recent years budgeted educational expenditure in Liberia has been approximately fifteen per cent of total locally-raised revenue. Total public spending on education, including foreign loans and grants, has amounted to over twenty per cent of public sector expenditure, and over twenty-four per cent if debt service is excluded.<sup>5</sup> International comparisons, for what they are worth where data uncertainties are so great, show that Liberia has in the past five years made a considerably greater effort on the expenditure side than most African countries, whether this is measured by proportions of public sector resources devoted to education, or by proportions of GDP.<sup>6</sup> Liberia's enrollment ratio is above the median for less developed countries, and well above most countries in Africa, including Nigeria, Guinea, Dahomey, Tanzania (twenty to twenty-five per cent in 1964 or 1965). Liberia has many more university students relative to population than all but a few African countries, according to these UNESCO comparisons. In 1968 there were some 1,800 Liberian university students at home and abroad, or about 150 per 100,000 population. In 1964 or 1965 the following ratios existed in some other African countries: Ghana, 62; Guinea, 17; Nigeria, 14; Tanzania, 1; Kenya, 30. The Liberian educational effort has certainly been nothing to be ashamed of, however qualitative considerations might modify these comparisons.

The most questionable aspect of Mr. Liebenow's analysis is the perception of the nature of social change which underlies much of it. The picture that emerges from this book is that of a political elite making decisions rationally and consistently designed to guarantee their survival as a ruling group. Liebenow suggests that the elite prefers alien entrepreneurs and technicians for this reason, since they can be controlled politically; hence Africanization is not pushed vigorously. He sees the Open Door policy as a device which "ingeniously expanded the financial means for continued subsidy of the system of Americo-Liberian privilege." In the conclusion of his discussion of Liberian foreign policy he states (quite out of context, incidentally, and without having mentioned it before) that an activist foreign policy allows the regime to head off revolution by providing an outlet for "young educated talent." Elsewhere he mentions that he was not surprised to hear President Tubman say that Liberians are not yet ready for cooperative societies, since he (Liebenow) was aware of the role that cooperatives had played in the nationalist movements of Ghana and Tanganyika.

5. Total public sector expenditures, including foreign loans and grants, were about \$80 mn. in 1967, and educational expenditures about \$16.7 mn. About \$10 mn. went to debt service.

6. See UNESCO, Statistical Yearbook, 1966, 255 ff.

What is interesting about these statements is not their validity or lack of it. It is rather the peculiarly rationalist, power-maximizing political behavior that they assume to exist. Though this may be useful in explaining some specific policies, it is not adequate as a general proposition. Aside from problems in defining the elite (are they Whigs? Aristocracy? Americo-Liberians?) and exactly what they are maximizing, it is simply too unreal a view of how things happen to be meaningful. In fact one set of decisions has been determinant - that which opened Liberia to foreign capital and influence, starting with Firestone, accelerating during World War II and the American link, and moving into high gear in the middle 1950's as iron ore mining expanded. These put into motion far-reaching, uncontrollable and essentially spontaneous forces. Nobody knew even approximately how these changes would work themselves out, and nobody is confident that they know even now.

This is the crux of the matter. What has happened in Liberia is that elements of change have been injected on a broad scale into a society that had known only slight and gradual change for decades. The political elite has benefitted more than any other group from these changes, partly directly, partly indirectly, because of its greater access to education. But far from being in control of the new forces, the elite has been swept along by them. And in the process most of the political substructure upon which the old society was based has been unalterably eroded. It has become physically one country and has made strides along the more difficult paths to national unity. Government is no longer a club-like affair involving a bit of money and a few cronys. It is not a \$1 million government any more, but an \$80 million government, seriously engaged in the complex business of modern government, an engagement which demands skill, competence, commitment. As it has begun to administer a modern state the elite now finds itself in the presence of more "modern" political forces. These may be embryonic but they are nonetheless visible - a more aware and articulate countryside, budding social and economic differentiation regional pressures, and complex external influences. The shape of Liberian politics after Tubman remains unknown. But nobody, including Mr. Liebenow, supposes that it will ever be what it was before 1950.

All of this happened quickly and quite peacefully. One can if he likes call this "the evolution of privilege," if by this is meant that economic and political rewards are unevenly spread and political power remains concentrated, at least formally, in the old hands. But in a real sense one elite has been replaced by another, though both can be called Americo-Liberian. And nobody will rule Liberia for long who does not have the support of the newer men and the acceptance of the rural population. Economic growth and its unplanned consequences have thus already yielded political fruit, though it is not yet mature. In this sense Mr. Liebenow's conclusion - that although outwardly much has changed in the "new" Liberia the basic political structure remains substantially the same - should be put precisely the other way. Although outwardly much remains unchanged in Liberia's political system, the old structure has already been destroyed by economic development, increased national unification via better communication and greater mobility, the enormous increase in the stocks and flows of educated people and the impersonal demands of a modern state.







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