



Ujamaa-Essays on Socialism

Julius Nyerere

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Baraka Elikana says

nothing

Esther_essy says

good

Phillip says

As a socialist, this is an amazingly thought-provoking book for me. Nyerere lays out the basis for his theory of African socialism, which differs from European socialism in several important ways, but most importantly in that Nyerere's work locates communal living and communal tradition at the heart of the socialist project. He points out at one point, and I think this is a great insight, that European socialists fetishize capitalism, making it the necessary precondition for socialism, as well as the basis for a fundamental division within society between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In this way, society is seen as fundamentally at odds with itself, which explains why Marxist ideas are so fundamental to the social-conflict school of sociology. However, Nyerere's proposed alternative for Tanzania is the tradition of ujamaa, which is a broad concept meaning something like respect and togetherness. But the simple interpretation misses the beauty of the idea, which envisions a return to the traditional African (and Nyerere doesn't really account for the wide range of African traditions) of holding land and goods in common, and ensuring the health of the community through a just distribution of goods and resources. He argues that traditional African society was marked by 1) the holding of land in common, meaning that anyone could utilize land productively without anyone making money from rent, and therefore without anyone who wasn't using the land being able to deny the productive use to another person; 2) a social commitment to supporting all members of the community. While not everyone in each community had the same amount of stuff, everyone was assured of having their basic needs for food, shelter, and so on met by the community as a whole; and 3) the assumption was that everyone contributed to society based on their capacities, whether that was agricultural work for the majority of people, wisdom and guidance from older people, or whatever else.

Nyerere takes this basic model of social organization and makes it the basis for the ethical system of African socialism. This collection of government documents, speeches, and pamphlets explains how Nyerere envisions the process of transitioning Tanzania to a fully socialist, agricultural nation. He proposes that Tanzania's policy should emphasize self-reliance and socialism, and that this socialism should be based in a deeply grounded commitment to equality and to communal life where local farming villages would work together to improve their productivity within the available means for an impoverished agricultural country.

Andrea says

Ujamaa by Julius K Nyerere, is a collection of essays and pamphlets, a mix of ideals and strategies for establishing the new Tanzania on a socialist foundation of mutual aid and equality. It is a very different kind of work than Freire's quite intellectual theorisations of the role of struggle and popular education, or Myles Horton's storytelling, yet all three contain very similar and inspiring understandings of radical and revolutionary change. Perhaps my favourite quote encapsulates for me a key aspect of the world I would like to build, and in doing so highlights one of the things I hate most about the world as we have built it to date:

The real question, therefore, is whether each of us is prepared to accept the challenge of building a state in which no man is ashamed of his poverty in the light of another's affluence, and no man has to be ashamed of his affluence in the light of another's poverty. (104-105)

Thinking about it, seems like much of the nastiness of rich people comes from the various rationalisations they have invented to avoid feeling this shame.

From the preface:

The primary purpose of this book is to make this material available in a convenient form for use by the leaders and educators of the new Tanzania. Its secondary purpose is to contribute to the growth of a wider international understanding of the aspirations and purposes of the Tanzanian people, and perhaps to promote further discussion about the relevance and requirements of socialism in relation to mankind's march to the future.
-- J. K. Nyerere, July 1968 (viii)

This is an exciting moment where everything is possible, yet an immensely challenging time where everything must be done in the face of great opposition. Nyerere was a teacher before he became prime minister, first of Tanganyika, and then the new formation of Tanzania as it joined with Zanzibar. He held power until 1985 in a one party state, so this post is looking much more at the ideals than at a more tarnished and controversial reality that I don't know enough about. It does seem though, especially given the failure to transfer power which signals a failure to develop other leaders, that Nyerere's life did not quite embody these ideals the way that Horton and Freire's did. I will have to come back to that, and the very real pressures from the U.S. and international lending agencies and the warning to all Socialist leaders through Lumumba's assassination and etc, but I look forward to exploring more the histories of ujamaa communities. Reading Ella Baker's biography I found out that Bob Moses of SNCC was there as a teacher for a couple of years, in the early 70s, but I haven't found out more yet. From Highlander to Tanzania, though I know a lot happened in between.

Here Nyerere describes a process of building socialism on Tanzania's cultural base, starting where people are and moving forward, recovering from the past what should be recovered to build a new society. For Nyerere:

Socialism--like democracy--is an attitude of mind. In a socialist society it is the socialist attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern, which is needed to ensure that the people care for each other's welfare.
(*'Ujamaa -- The Basis of African Socialism'* - 1)

There is much in Tanzania's heritage that Nyerere is able to look to in building a better future, and such clear common sense that it makes me even more ashamed of the constant fear-mongering and ever present greed in the US, and growing in the UK:

Apart from the anti-social effects of the accumulation of personal wealth, the very desire to accumulate it must be interpreted as a vote of "no confidence" in the social system. For when a society is so organized that it cares about its individuals, then, provided he is willing to work, no individual within that society should worry about what will happen to him tomorrow if he does not hoard wealth today. Society should look after him, or his widow, or his orphans. That is exactly what traditional African society succeeded in doing. (3)

This sense of community is one key here, of taking care of each other. A second is holding land in common, and understanding its use value above its land value:

And in rejecting the capitalist attitude of mind which colonialism brought into Africa, we must reject also the capitalist methods which go with it. One of these is the individual ownership of land. To us in Africa land was always recognized as belonging to the community. Each individual within our society had a right to the use of land, because otherwise he could not earn his living and one cannot have the right to life without also having the right to some means of maintaining life. (7)

The TANU Government must go back to the traditional African custom of land-holding. That is to say a member of society will be entitled to a piece of land *on condition that he uses it*. (8)

I quite love his critique of actually-existing socialism, some things never change I suppose -- the following quotes are all from *The Varied Paths to Socialism* (Address to Cairo University, 10 April 1967):

Unfortunately, however, there has grown up what I can only call a 'theology of socialism'...the true doctrine... (76)

Even better:

It is imperative that socialists continue thinking. (77)

And best of all:

For socialism the basic purpose is the well-being of the people, and the basic assumption is an acceptance of human equality. For socialism there must be a belief that every individual man or woman, whatever, colour, shape, race, creed, religion, or sex, is an equal member of society, with equal rights in the society and equal duties to it.

A person who does not accept this may accept many policies pursued by socialists; but he cannot be a socialist. (78)

It is perhaps the headings of the various sections that give the clearest idea of not just the vision, but how he believes it can be achieved through flexible, adaptable, place-specific actions holding key principles constant: 'Socialism is against Exploitation and Injustice' (79), 'Group or Communal Ownership' (82), 'The Purpose of Socialist Organization must be the Central Factor' (84), 'Socialist Policies will vary from Place to Place' (87). Above all -- and this is how it connects with Freire, Horton and others -- is that:

First and foremost, there must be, among the leadership, a desire and a determination to serve alongside of, and in complete identification with, the masses. the people must be, and know themselves to be, sovereign. Socialism cannot be imposed upon people; they can be guided; they can be led. But ultimately they must be involved.

If the people are not involved in public ownership, and cannot control the policies followed, the public ownership can lead to fascism, not socialism. If the people are not sovereign, they they can suffer dreadful tyranny imposed in their name. If the people are not honestly served by those to whom they have entrusted responsibility, then corruption can negate all their efforts and make them abandon their socialist ideals. (89)

The USSR showed what such dreadful tyranny could be.

The question becomes then, how people are involved in building Socialism and in public ownership, and what is necessary for that to happen. First, there is a policy of 'Education for Self-Reliance' (policy booklet published March 1967). There is a need to reject the current idea of education as preparation for a profession, or to inculcate values of the colonial society, with all of its emphasis and encouragement of the individualistic instincts of mankind where wealth establishes worth. Instead, education should be seen as the way in which we:

transmit from one generation to the next the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of the society, and to prepare the young people for their future membership of the society and their active participation in its maintenance or development. (45)

And for the purpose of building a new world, this is what education must accomplish:

The education provided must therefore encourage the development in each citizen of three things: an inquiring mind; an ability to learn from what others do, and reject or adapt it to his own needs; and a basic confidence in his own position as a free and equal member of the society, who values others and is valued by them for what he does and not for what he obtains. (53)

Nyerere looked to the creation of what he called 'ujaama villages', cooperative villages where socialism could be practiced and perfected. From 'Progress in the Rural Area' (speech to University College branch of TANU Youth league, 21 Jan 1968)

In the past we worked together because that was the custom; now we have to do it deliberately and to do it in such a manner that modern knowledge can be utilized for the common good. (181)

An acknowledgment that people learn through doing, through committing to action and then reflecting on that action:

In villages 'people must be allowed to make their own decisions; people must be allowed to make their own mistakes. Only if we accept this are we really accepting the philosophy of socialism...

It notes that sometimes people get it right and experts get it wrong.

Progress needs leadership, but not of the bullying, intimidating kind... A good leader will explain, teach and inspire. In an ujamaa village he will do more. he will lead by doing. (183)

More on leadership:

You can lead the people only by being one of them, but just being more active as well as more thoughtful, and more willing to teach as well as more willing to learn--from them and others. (184)

'Socialism and Rural Development' (Policy booklet published Sept 1967) outlines the underpinnings of traditional ujamaa living:

The first of these basic assumptions, or principles of life, I have sometimes described as 'love', but that word is so often used to imply a deep personal affection that it can give a false impression. A better word is perhaps 'respect', for it was--and is--really a recognition of mutual involvement in one another, and may or may not involve any affection deeper than that of familiarity. (107)

The second:

...the second related to property. It was that all the basic goods were held in common, and shared among all members of the unit. There was an acceptance that whatever one person had in the way of basic necessities, they all had; no one could go hungry while others hoarded food, and no one could be denied shelter if others had space to share. (107)

The third:

Finally, and as a necessary third principle, was the fact that everyone had an obligation to work. (108)

These are villages founded on the full equality of all residents, and with self-government in all matters concerning their own affairs. Some issues will have to be decided through cooperation with villages near by, and a few through democratic structures at an even larger scale:

National defence, education, marketing, health, communications, large industries -- for all these things and many more, all of Tanzania has to work together. The job of Government would therefore be to help these self-reliant communities and to organize their co-operation with others. (129)

These communities must also address the inadequacies of traditional system, especially the treatment of women. Nyerere writes 'it is essential that our women live on terms of full equality with their fellow citizens who are men.' The second change is that poverty must be improved, they cannot remain with an equality maintained at a very low level. (109)

Above all people learn by doing, step by step, in their own time.

All of this has to be achieved through persuasion and choice, rather than force. Looking at step-by-step transformation, carrying out little by little, testing out, evaluating

Village democracy must operate from the beginning; there is no alternative if this system is to succeed...It does not matter if the discussion takes a long time; we are building a nation, and this is not a short-term thing. For the point about decisions by an ujamaa village is not just whether the members do or do not decide to dig a well or clear a new shamba. The point is that by making this decision, and then acting upon it, they will be building up a whole way of life--a socialist way of life. Nothing is more important than that, and it is not the work of a few days, nor of a few people. An ujamaa village is the village of the members, and the life there is their life. Therefore everything which relates exclusively to their village, and their life in it, must be decided by them and not by anyone else. (136)

For more...

nick says

A fascinating book, unlike many books on the topic of socialism of the time, this book does not bombard its readers with complicated and/or vague concepts. The reason for this is the original audience, the book is a collection of papers written to be read across Tanzania and to be understood by every citizen of average intelligence. This does not mean that this book is mere propaganda material or a book without any nuance and depth. On the contrary the author (Nyerere former president of Tanzania) and his advisors never claimed to know the absolute truth (there is even a part of the book dedicated to the danger of dogmatic belief). A reader who has some insight in politics and ideologies will also notice that Nyerere was far from an orthodox Marxist a high degree of anarchism can be found in this book as well as aspects from the ecological, feminist movements and even some points of what would later be called post-modernism. This interesting mix combined with a small history of Tanzania and at the time economic situation of Tanzania presented in an easily accessible style resulted in this excellent piece of political rhetoric.

Who should read this and why?

It was written for a Tanzanian audience of the 60s and 70s but that does not mean it has no meaning anymore. Anyone who is interested in the history of Tanzania, Africa, socialism, cold war will find this interesting. Other people who should take the time to read this are: leftist political activists, people involved in development projects and even politicians. But it is vital to read afterwards or beforehand a decent book on the reign of Nyerere and to realise the gap between discourse and reality and to not be blinded by the words of a politician no matter how eloquent.
