

# COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN GHANA

The only requisite was that the Assembly should take a permanent holiday and that the republic's motto 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité', should be replaced by the unambiguous words, 'Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery!'

(Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*)

Thomas Hodgkin

**A**LTHOUGH General Ankrah is no Louis Napoleon, the Ghana *coup d'état* of February 24, 1966, was a counter-revolution of a classic type. It is only necessary to underline this point because the event has been widely represented in the British Press as the substitution of a popular, liberalising regime for a hated autocracy. (It is customary, of course, for counter-revolutions to be presented in this way by their promoters and backers.) No doubt the coup was popular in a certain sense—in the sense explained by Mr. Cameron Duodo, editor of the Ghanaian edition of *Drum* (who, when I knew him, was living comfortably in Accra, but has since found it convenient to reveal himself as a 'self-advised exile') in an article in *The Observer* of March 13:

'I was astounded by the spontaneous demonstrations of the people,' Colonel Apiah said. 'One man gave me a bottle of champagne just like that.'

The coup, that is to say, was 'popular' in the sense that it was approved by the bourgeoisie (or a substantial section of it) and by those elements among the urban population that can always be persuaded to parade as stage crowds in front of Western television cameras—and had no doubt been demonstrating as enthusiastically for Kwame Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party a week or two earlier as they demonstrated on this occasion against them. Of course food shortages, rising prices, import restrictions, gave rise to discontent and desire for change that any new regime could exploit, temporarily, in its favour. But there is no evidence that the coup was 'popular' in the deeper sense that it was genuinely supported and welcomed by the mass of the Ghanaian people.

I have described the Ghana counter-revolution as 'classic' because it reveals certain characteristics that are typical of counter-revolutions in contemporary African, Asian and Latin American states—and, in some respects also, in 19th Century Europe. At the same time it

has its own distinct features, associated with Ghana's history and social structure and the special part which Ghana has played, during the nine years since independence, in the struggle for African liberation. It therefore deserves careful study, both as an example of a general pattern and as a special case. I shall confine myself in this article to a few preliminary remarks.

First, whatever its mistakes and weaknesses (which inevitably in the present situation are presented in the grossest and most exaggerated form), the CPP Government, against which the coup was directed, was an essentially progressive regime. It was attempting to lay the foundations of a socialist economy; to reduce economic dependence by relatively rapid industrialisation; to achieve a rapid expansion and improvement of free public education at all levels. Directly and through a variety of Pan-African organisations (which it played a major part in helping to bring into being) it gave practical support to movements seeking national liberation in territories remaining under colonial rule. It exposed the manoeuvres, and sought to resist the pressures, of neo-colonialism (thereby earning, naturally enough, the deep hostility of the neo-colonial network). As a means to overcome these pressures, and as a precondition of any really effective advance towards Socialism, it worked for the realisation of an African political union. It attempted to give definite meaning to the concept of 'positive neutralism' by avoiding an exclusive Western orientation and developing closer political, economic and cultural relations with the socialist countries. (None the less, the number of specialists and technicians from the West and from the capitalist countries in general greatly exceeded the number from the socialist world.)

Second, the bourgeoisie had an active and long-standing dislike for Nkrumah and the CPP. Since, contrary to the view generally put forward in the Western press, a considerable degree of liberty of expression existed in pre-coup Ghana, this dislike was commonly and vigorously expressed by members of the Ghanaian intelligentsia in particular—and, together with the views of taxi-drivers and dancing-girls, formed the basis for much of the 'objective reporting' of Western journalists. In crude terms the bourgeoisie can be regarded as consisting of (a) the hereditary bourgeoisie, those belonging to the great Coastal professional and intellectual dynasties; (b) those from other sectors of Ghanaian society who, through attendance at 'the best' secondary schools and/or universities, had acquired bourgeois status and tended to absorb bourgeois culture and values.

In a sense the bourgeoisie never forgave Nkrumah and the CPP — the party of the petty bourgeois, the ‘Verandah Boys’, the *sans-culottes*—for having defeated them in the struggle for power in 1949-51 and thus established themselves as the political heirs of the British. To say that this bourgeoisie had no ideas is perhaps an exaggeration. They had in fact one central idea: that they themselves were an élite, whose social status and superior intellectual qualifications equipped them for the exercise of political power. Everything that Nkrumah and the CPP could do they could do better. It was primarily the banned United Party (whose precise part in the coup remains obscure and controversial) and its predecessors, that provided a means of political expression for this bourgeoisie. But of much greater importance, from the standpoint of effective power, was the fact that they manned the higher ranks of the Civil Service (including the Diplomatic Service and the Police), the Judiciary, the teaching profession, the various Church hierarchies—and the Armed Forces.

This leads to the third point: Ghana under the CPP regime was far from being the kind of ‘totalitarian’ state controlled by an all-powerful ‘monolithic’ party that appears in the stereotypes of Western writers and journalists. Nor was it, as Mr. Dennis Austin, in a petulant little attack on Nkrumah and the pre-coup system in *New Society* of March 3, asserts, ‘a ridiculous, cruel and capricious form of personal dictatorship’. The system, as anyone who took the trouble to observe its actual working quickly discovered, was essentially pluralistic. The party might claim to be the only source of power within the state. But in practice power was diffused among a variety of institutions and agencies, subject only to the partial, intermittent, and frequently ineffective, control of the party. The Civil Service, the Judiciary, the Universities, the Public Education system, the Army, functioned as great estates of the realm, possessing a considerable degree of autonomy and initiative, subject to occasional directives (which were by no means always carried out) from party, Cabinet and President. In practice the Civil Service was controlled by (in general very competent) British-trained bourgeois senior civil servants; the Judiciary was controlled by bourgeois judges; the Universities were controlled by bourgeois dons; the Army was controlled by bourgeois Sandhurst-trained officers. Of course the President could dismiss a Chief Justice or a Chief of Staff, make life difficult for a Vice-Chancellor, deport (and later bring back) a Bishop. But what difference did such individual acts make to the working of

the system? Indeed, those promoted to take the place of those dismissed might (as in the case of the Police) prove to be less loyal, more hostile to the objectives of party and President, than those dismissed.

Why, it may be asked, did Nkrumah and the party tolerate for so long a system in which there was such a sharp and evident contradiction between the socialist, revolutionary, Pan-African objectives for which they claimed to stand and the predominantly bourgeois, conservative, territorialist norms of those who controlled the institutions through which they were obliged to work? Partly because Nkrumah, whatever else he was, was not a 'cruel and capricious dictator'. Revolutionary in his conceptions and aims, he was essentially Fabian in his political methods. He believed in putting people whom he thought he could trust into positions of power within the system rather than seeking fundamental transformations of existing political structures. In any case, to bring about such transformations, to replace bourgeois civil servants and officers with socialist civil servants and officers it would have been necessary to have an adequate supply of committed Socialists, with the requisite theoretical and professional training. Such people simply did not exist as yet in any numbers, though it was the intention that the Winnebuh College of Political and Economic Science should in time produce them. But Winnebuh itself was under heavy fire from the right wing within the party. And Nkrumah had to work within the limitations imposed by the actual character of the party as well as those imposed by the actual character of the state and its institutions. Far from being the kind of Tamburlaine figure that appears in the fantasies of Mr. Austin and others, he was in fact a highly intelligent, somewhat Utopian, radical, with a good grasp of the history of his time, confronted with a very restricted range of political choices.

Fourth, one must take account of the serious weaknesses within the CPP itself. In regard to these there is not much room for disagreement. Over the past ten years the party had tended to undergo the kind of process of deterioration that is familiar in the history of radical nationalist parties. Though devoted, disinterested and hard-working individuals could still be found at all levels of the organisation, the party bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy of the para-party organisations, had tended to transform themselves into a political élite, using their status within the party to further their own careers (and those of their relations and friends) and to achieve a bourgeois style of life. The party machine had come to be used as an instrument

for transmitting orders to the people, and for mobilising them to take part in periodic rallies and celebrations, rather than for expressing their demands and criticisms, developing their political understanding, and enabling them to play an effective part in the work of economic and social reconstruction. The cult of Nkrumah's personality, the mystique of the leader, was used by the Old Guard of the party to cover up deficiencies in party organisation and strategy. The committed Socialists within the party were in a definite minority, and, though their relations with the press and with Winnebah, together with Nkrumah's protection in intra-party conflicts, gave them a certain influence, they had no effective body of mass support. Party discipline had become weakened, and internal faction-fighting gave encouragement to those who were working for counter-revolution. (At the same time it is important not to exaggerate these weaknesses. Little recent work has been done on the organisation and functioning of the CPP at a local level. My own guess is that democratic processes and attitudes have survived in many areas to a much greater extent than is often supposed.)

The Ghana counter-revolution cannot, of course, be explained simply in relation to its internal causes—the contradictions between the interests and objectives of the CPP and those of the bourgeoisie, the conflicts within the party and the running down of its organisation, the special function of the officer caste as the shock troops of the bourgeoisie. Its success (from a short-term point of view) depended also on external factors—above all on the drastic fall in the cocoa price, Ghana's principal export, which played a far larger part in bringing about a situation of economic crisis, favourable to military adventures, than all the prestige projects, waste of resources, mismanagement and corruption, which constantly recur in the flood of anti-CPP and anti-Nkrumah propaganda unloosed in the Western press. We shall have to wait for more evidence before we can say with any degree of definiteness how important and direct a part the Western powers, their business interests and intelligence agencies, played in bringing about the downfall of Nkrumah's government. To judge from the chorus of satisfaction which greeted this event it can hardly have been negligible. One thing at least is clear: the real ground of Western hostility to Nkrumah and the CPP was not (as is often claimed) that they were illiberal or corrupt—reactionary regimes, like those of General Abboud in the Sudan or of the late Sardauna of Sokoto in Northern Nigeria, can be as illiberal and corrupt as they like and they will continue to enjoy the goodwill of

the West. Nkrumah's unforgivable crime was that he sought to be progressive, Socialist, anti-colonial, Pan-African, neutralist, not a puppet of the West. Hence the need, from the point of view of the West, to replace his regime, which did, in however inadequate and partial a way, genuinely seek to enlarge human 'liberty, equality and fraternity', with one that would take its stand on the unambiguous, and entirely acceptable, principles of 'Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery'—that would reduce public expenditure, open up new fields to private investment, disinterest itself in the struggle for liberation throughout the African continent, break its ties with the socialist countries, and, in general, transform itself into a nice, docile, chauvinistic, Western-orientated, English-speaking version of the Ivory Coast, incapable of playing any significant part in African or world history.

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## ANNOUNCEMENT

*25 Years Ago . . .*

Bernard Shaw wrote on the occasion of our 20th Anniversary:

I forget the name of the Frenchman who, on being asked what part he had played in the French Revolution, replied that he had survived it. The survival of *Labour Monthly* for twenty years is a feat no less remarkable.

And over the years since then, personalities from all over the world have written in this vein; for the survival of a socialist journal, without wealthy backers or subsidies is indeed remarkable in the modern press jungle.

Thus, we are proud once more to announce our lusty liveliness still, as we reach on July 1 of this year our 45TH ANNIVERSARY of continuous publication under the unbroken editorship of R. Palme Dutt.

We intend to celebrate this event with a 'Birthday Party' on Thursday, June 30, at the Chatham Restaurant, Victoria (look for further details next month), where our readers and supporters can meet the Editor, Board and Contributors of *Labour Monthly*.

Will you join us in the celebration and help make it a success by giving *your* magazine a special Birthday Donation?