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Order and Chaos

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
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Dear Mr. Martin,

I recall here a conversation I had three weeks ago with Mariano Matsinhe, Politburo member and Governor of the northern Province of Niassa. After an hour and a half of aggravating queries about human rights violations and the quality of Soviet economic aid, I put a question designed to encourage free-form rambling: "What are the greatest achievements of the first ten years of Mozambican independence?" Independence itself, his answer began, and the freedom to discuss issues of substance. Under the Portuguese government "all I was allowed to talk about was football. And even with football there were things you couldn't say. And despite the constant aggressions against us, we've made great advances in economic development. We built two big dams, extended the electricity grid, built a big new textile mill. Even with all our difficulties, we've had more development in 10 years than the Portuguese had in 500."

I surely hope the governor did not see me wince as he declaimed on the various monumental works credited to the Revolution. I could not help it. If his vision of development is shared by his colleagues in the top echelons of power (and since the decisions to proceed with these projects were almost certainly taken by even superior authorities, there is every reason to believe it is), I see little prospect of Mozambique ever recovering the measure of prosperity it enjoyed in the early 1970's. The great majority is likely to go on subsisting in a manner little better than it does today, without access even to such basic items as cloth, soap and salt. The industrial sector will remain an irrecoverable handicraft basket case, and the country a foreign aid addict and voice in the chorus for a new international economic order.

Whence this widespread misconception that "development" is the equivalent of bridges and railroads and textile fac'tries (the "These are a few of my favorite things" school)?

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The official graffiti peeling off the walls of Maputo, slogans such as "We Will Defeat Underdevelopment" and "We Will Only Have Development If We Work Harder And Better" support the conclusion that "development" here is no more than a code word for "a better life" or, at worst, a vague and easily abused abstraction, akin to "salvation" in medieval Europe. Although state-sponsored sentiments and official exhortations are dismissed with cynical contempt ("Let minister such and such raise production -- his stomach is full"), the notion persists that development is the acquisition of hydroelectric dams and steel mills. Or, to be more precise, no active verb in practice attaches to the notion: it is conceived of as an end-state. The distant and distorted image of Western plenty, and the industrial might on which that plenty is presumed (wrongly, I believe) to depend, feed the "prestige project" view of development. The prospect of "petrochemical self-sufficiency" seduces, and the bigger the industrial bauble, it is felt, the more developed its possessor. There is no shortage in Africa of superhighways that lead nowhere and presidential palaces that rival the Hearst Castle. New conference centers are raised every day even as per capita food production plummets.

I would not presume an attempt to define "development," nor even to claim that, despite the lack of a fixed set of criteria, "I know it when I see it." It's easier and safer to point an accusing finger at what it is certainly not. Sometimes, however, one comes across a particular person or sentiment or, much less frequently, an object, and cannot help but pause and exclaim "Ah, this is the thing." This was the result of my visit to Mussa, more commonly known as "Luis Ferreira's machamba," or farm, north of Lichinga in Niassa Province. Luis Ferreira arrived alone in Niassa in 1969, single suitcase in hand, from the overcrowded island of Madeira. By 1975, the year of Mozambican independence, he was farming 570 hectares (1400 acres) of wheat, corn, banana and other crops, raising pigs, chickens and beef cattle, in a formerly empty and untouched valley. Even in his currently reduced circumstances, farming less than half his spread, he employs 70 permanent workers and as many as 400 at harvest time. He is considered the district's model private farmer by Governor Matsinhe, who, reports Ferreira, led a delegation of state farm managers on a pilgrimage to Mussa last September and told them to "learn from this man, this is how to run a farm."

We spent the morning trekking through his fields, eating cane and admiring the crops. Ferreira walks with a justifiable swagger, and posed proudly with a heavy bough of banana as I snapped his picture. "I have twenty thousand banana trees now," he told me, "and within three years I want to cover this slope with banana. If they would let me have an irrigation pump, I could have fifty thousand trees. Bananas are a great crop -- one bough is always producing, whatever the season." He is equally enthused with his corn, pineapples and experimental strawberries,

and convinced that anything can be made to flourish in well-watered Niassa's temperate climate. Although all his new projects -- a restaurant, new warehouses, drainage canals -- are suspended for lack of materials, spare parts and fuel, he envisions a day when the entire area will be an irrigated cornucopia, a Mozambican Imperial Valley. And when he sweeps his arm across the horizon, one can well imagine the rolling hills that lead to Lake Niassa transformed into a bountiful garden. Unfortunately, one's eye tends to dwell on the site of a village, not two kilometers distant, which was burned to the ground, its residents murdered, in an attack two weeks earlier.

Luis Ferreira represents the singlemost neglected, even despised, resource in development theory: the ego. The man's will to create is astounding. No matter how admirable or charming local efforts to start beekeeping or weaving collectives may be, no project I saw in Niassa begins to rival Ferreira's creative power. Paradoxically, the problem is that he is one while they are many. It is the reified collective which is exalted and supported here. Despite the fact that, in recognition of his dynamism, Ferreira's monthly fuel ration was raised, the system cannot, in theory, admit individualism and self-enrichment as motive forces of development. I asked Governor Matsinhe what Mozambique had learned from the new Chinese example of decollectivization and the notion that "it is good for some to get rich before others." He replied that "we never copy others' solutions." That's too bad. When one contrasts Ferreira's operation to the model collective village of Lussanhandu, (where residents were made to line up and sing "We will be with our leader Samora Machel until death" for a group of visitors), Matsinhe's claims about the matchless transforming power of collective life ring hollow.

By actively opposing, until now, individual initiative and self-interest, the government has driven the most able Mozambicans underground or out of the country. I recently made the acquaintance of a bank manager who left his low-paying position to work as a truck driver. His cousin, who owns pastry and butcher shops in Nacala, is throwing in the towel and applying to work in the South African mines. "The capable people that were here have all left," a bank director told me, referring not to the Portuguese who departed en masse in 1975 and '76, but to the Mozambicans who initially stayed on. This was illustrated poignantly in today's newspaper. President Machel yesterday inspected a factory he had previously visited in 1980, and found it a disorganized mess. Remembering an employee who had made constructive suggestions that helped put the place in order in 1980, he ordered that Judith, the worker in question, be presented to him. Her colleagues replied that "Judith left for Swaziland years ago."

Luis Ferreira is a Portuguese citizen. Braz da Costa, his neighbor in Lichinga, is a former Portuguese who took Mozambican citizenship in 1975. He is known throughout the

country as a national hero. As a collaborator with FRELIMO, he was the victim of what he refers to charitably as "his accident": in 1969, PIDE, the Portuguese secret police, sent him a letter bomb which blew off his right hand, where he now has a grabbing device, and his left arm. Braz da Costa arrived in Mozambique in 1942 from Lisbon, where he had been an assistant to a cobbler. He became first a lumberjack, then a professional hunter and last, a farmer and businessman in remote Niassa, where his political sympathies were, until the guerilla war heated up, of little import to the local authorities. He spoke animatedly to me about Niassa's agricultural potential, his manner confirming all I had heard about his sincerity and generous nature. But through his discourse, as was the case with Luis Ferreira, there ran a pronounced strain of paternalism. "We have everything we need," he explained, referring to himself and his wife. "Our role here now is to raise peoples' level. To show them what civilization is, what it's like to live in a house, eat with a knife and fork. So they'll want these things too."

Now, four weeks ago, I would have taken immediate exception to such a comment. Governor Matsinhe, earlier that day, had himself repeated the complaint one so often hears from Africans, that Westerners conceive of and treat them as children or simplehearted charges to be uplifted and enlightened. But neither Ferreira nor Braz da Costa, each many years in Niassa and each liked and respected by his African workers and neighbors, had seen fit to put down the white man's burden..

How can I explain (justify?) my lack of discomfort with this sort of paternalism? I expect it comes from seeing how great a difference there in fact is between the white Portuguese who came to settle in Niassa and the Africans who have always been here. Even in the case of Luis Ferreira, who arrived from Madeira and continues illiterate, a man who would probably guffaw at Braz da Costa's knife and fork version of civilization, the gulf between him and his untutored workers is enormous.* A visit to an isolated African village (and anything accesible to me is ipso facto less than isolated,) breathes new life into the archaism "benighted."

This is not to say that the traditional African way of life merits contempt. Far from it. My afternoon in the village across the road from Mussa drove home with a force rarely felt in high-technology societies man's genius in manipulating his environment. The thoughtless ease of a Cuisinart-made salad or the twist of a key in the ignition dulls our sensitivity to the stunning brilliance of technologies such as knives and fire.

For example, across from Mussa, bananas are ripened artificially (consider the appropriateness of the term) in the following manner: two shallow pits are dug in the ground

* Ferreira is a living example of the human type Eric Hoffer celebrates in his landmark essay "The Role of the Undesirables." Hoffer's observations about the American pioneers shed light on the Portuguese experience in Mozambique.

and connected by a narrow tunnel. The unripe bananas are placed in one and covered with earth; a small fire is lighted in the other, and the smoke is fanned through the tunnel into the banana-hole. The fire is then extinguished by sealing the second hole with earth. The trapped carbon dioxide speeds the ripening process, and in a day or so, I was told, the bananas are ready to be eaten. A simple and elegant method.

Indeed, only a fool or a churl would deny the African way of life the respect it deserves. The fool misses the magnificence of any system with the time-tested capacity to sustain human life. The churl denies his historical identity with the people he despises. For it matters not at all that these Africans are using technologies the West discarded, or, rather, improved upon, centuries ago. When two scientists make the same discovery independently, we don't salute the one and sneer at the other. We don't think any less of Euler just because Newton popularized the calculus they each conceived of separately and simultaneously. The fact that Africans discovered independently in time and space the same marvellous technologies Europeans hit upon millenia ago should impress upon us the wonderful synonymy of the human intelligence across race, ethnicity and any other irrelevant classification one cares to impose.

But to respect a thing is not to romanticize it. Village life may not be solitary, but it is inarguably poor, nasty, brutish and short. "Benighted," therefore, is a meaningful term when used relatively. Thus applied, it does describe the state of a typical African village compared to Luis Ferreira's farm. On the other hand, a Midwestern agro-industrialist would be certain to find Ferreira's operation primitive. His pigs are fed slops and greens and rubbed down with crankcase oil; he produces excellent "banana-lightening," but his still is an unsophisticated arrangement of tubs and tubes. Everything is relative.

Ferreira's relatively unadvanced level of technology and Braz da Costa's remarks about sreading "civilization" combine in a provocative and potent colonial formula which was, tragically, destroyed just as it began to operate. We may call it, pretentiously, the "demonstration and attainable means nexus" (DAMN). More precisely, it is the junction of the demonstration effect, which engages to ego and desire an awareness of the possible, and technological means into which any intelligent and motivated individual can be educated. It's a matter of planting a novel hunger in someone and showing him how to satisfy it.

A common Mozambican lament is that "we were colonized by an underdeveloped country." It is quite possible that had Mozambique been a British colony, there would be more and better telephones and bridges than one finds here today. But this complaint seems to presuppose Governor Matsinhe's vision of development: the mass accumulation of capital goods, endless ribbon-cuttings, paeans to the nation's steel capacity and so on, the Socialist version of what E.F. Schumacher criticized as high-technology islands in

a sea of underdevelopment. One may do well to stand the "underdeveloped colonizer" argument on its head and claim that it was precisely the "intermediate technology" that the uneducated Portuguese brought with them which held promise for relatively painless dissemination and rapid results. Luis Ferreira told me that he had four African neighbors, each with 100 hectares (247 acres) and a tractor, at independence in June 1975. Their land and machinery were "intervened"* by the provincial government and consolidated with abandoned private holdings into Matama, a mammoth state farm. Heavy machinery was brought in to work the land, ambitious and detailed plans were drawn up, and East Bloc managers engaged to oversee production. The project turned out a colossal and expensive failure. The managers followed central directives rigidly, and sowed long before the October rains were due. When the seedlings promptly dried up and died, they sowed again -- still too early -- and again, the seedlings died. Matama has never met its projected goals or, for that matter, produced what the unsophisticated Portuguese and private Mozambican farmers coaxed from the very same soil. But the Portuguese are gone, and the Mozambicans are too exhausted and mistrustful to start again from scratch.

The government here is coming around to the realization that the centrally-planned state agricultural system has been less than a total success. On May 18, the Council of Ministers announced the decontrol of prices of turkey, duck, rabbit, fruits and vegetables. The next day, it raised fixed prices for meat products. During the last few weeks, the state press has been saying nice things about private farmers, that they in fact make a contribution to economic development, that they have been heretofore frustrated by excessive bureaucracy, etc. There is, evidently, some sentiment for reform.

Indeed, there are people in intermediate positions of power who recognize that the economic administration of the past years has been chaotic and irrational. A limited-circulation government document which was recently lent to me, entitled "Plan, Project and Physical Planning," opens with a quotation from Francisco Goya: "The dreams of reason produce monsters." It goes on to warn that

"It is now evident that the objectives proposed in the PPI (central plan) will

* As opposed to nationalization. When the government resolves to nationalize something, it must, depending on the nature of the property, pay some token compensation. When it intervenes, it need not. It simply takes over the management of the property for its own profit. In theory, the hapless owner remains the legal proprietor. In fact, he has been despoiled by the State.

not be achieved. Therefore, to take the PPI as a point of reference for projects or plans is false or even dangerous.... There does not exist a new mobilization project with economic content (his italic) in the program of our internal policy. To recognize that we have erred does not suffice to fill this lack. We must begin, with the greatest political courage, the detailed and objective criticism of our errors in order to elaborate new perspectives of development and define the ways to achieve them. If this task is not done in the coming weeks, we run the risk of improvisation in the domain of economic decision-making."

Despite the lucid moments of particular individuals in the Party and the government, the fears of the aforementioned author have been fully realized. In practice, government policies are characterized by expedient improvisation, and carried out through intimidation and violence.

The new state policy of price incentives to private farmers will not produce the hoped-for production boom for that very reason: in addition to the scarcity of state-supplied inputs and the stratospheric prices of their black market substitutes, people are profoundly mistrustful of the government. The vicissitudes of policy and the arbitrary way in which it is applied have created a climate of economic decision-taking marked by paralyzing uncertainty. The undercurrent of fear and intimidation that carries through everyday life here is suggested by the warning that accompanied the announcement of selected free prices:

"These measures should not be utilized by opportunists to violate the commercial ethic by practicing speculation and black marketeering, for in such cases these same will be soliciting the intervention of popular justice."

Popular justice in economic matters usually involves seizing a person's property and publicly flogging him. Initially, only the most stouthearted producer will run the risk of being denounced to a People's Court by a customer who doesn't like his prices.

The government's arbitrary conduct affects everyone at some point. Last Saturday, President Machel made a public speech at the closing ceremony of Youth Week. (We've been having celebratory weeks here for some time now -- Transport Week, Justice Week, Solidarity Week -- in anticipation of the tenth anniversary of independence, June 25th.) In it,

he exhorted the nation's young men to join up to fight the Resistance, saying that "to defend the nation is the duty of each and every citizen." The following day, Army impressment gangs patrolled the streets of the city and suburbs, stopping in front of movie houses and cigarette queues and spiriting away any and all males who looked to be between the ages of 18 and 40. People began complaining about it, and on Thursday an announcement was made that Resistance "infiltrators" in Army uniform were responsible for the abuses. On Friday it was appended that three soldiers would be disciplined for their role in the cabal.

There are so many rumors ricocheting through Maputo about what the Resistance (or alternately, the "armed bandits") has or hasn't done, where they are or aren't, that it's difficult to know just how much to disbelieve. One of the least credible items of gossip and one which everyone seems to believe is that the bush is crawling with Israelis. How do they know they're Israelis? "They wear turbans and blackface on maneuvers," comes the reply. The Israeli part of the rumor is unlikely, but it's quite reasonable to think there are whites, probably South Africans, travelling with guerilla detachments. As for the story of a white woman in a mini-skirt leading a Resistance unit in Cabo Delgado Province, I suspect someone has overdosed on "Mod Squad" reruns.

It is clear that the Resistance is "á vontade," or at will, in Matola, an industrial suburb 13 km from downtown Maputo. A friend and I drove out to the site of a match factory which was attacked last Saturday night. The director told me that he had been receiving threatening notes for some weeks before the event. On the evening in question, the guerillas drove through the gate, placed explosive charges by the machines, set fire to the chemical stores and fled, expecting the place to blow sky high. As it turned out, only about half the factory was destroyed. Enormous chunks of twisted metal were left dangling grotesquely from the rafters; the tin roof was shot through with bullet holes where it was not blown off. The factory had been without telephone service for several months, and the watchman had to run some 8 km on foot to call the firemen.

One thing is certain: if the guerillas are in Matola, they are in Maputo. The grapevine tells daily of this or that murder -- yesterday's news was of two soldiers killed on duty in Polana, the neighborhood in which the Presidential compound is located -- but it is impossible to know whether a given homicide was a Resistance hit or a personal vendetta. There has not yet occurred any spectacular action inside the city, but people are bracing for Independence Day when, rumor has it, the Resistance plans to raise its own flag in Maputo. Soldiers on duty are tense. The other night at 2 a.m. a patrol stopped our car at gunpoint and demanded papers.

The government's own fear and frustration are in turn expressed in the state press. The President is on a new

"offensive" this week, paying surprise visits to various factories in the area. Every day brings new photos of him, arms akimbo, glaring squarely at barrels of chemicals left out in the rain or pointing at bales of rotting calfskin. Management problems are increasingly attributed to "infiltrators" sabotaging production "to spread hunger chaos and misery." But today's front page editorial, by a journalist I previously considered a sane man, was shrill beyond reason. It begins as an account of Samora Machel's visit to the MAGMA shoe factory, and is worth quoting at some length:

"...(The President) understands where there is, in fact, ignorance. He detects where there is suspicion of enemy action, organized crime committed so that the People accuses the FRELIMO Party.

But the People refuses to make that accusation because it will never be a traitor. The People knows that it is neither Samora nor FRELIMO who is responsible for so many evils which are caused. The People knows who are those responsible for hunger, the lack of clothes and shoes, for so much misery. For this reason the Offensive proceeds to where the People directs it...

In the cities as well (the enemy) organizes its agents. They're Mozambicans. It's our brother, it's our uncle, it's our son who is turning traitor to our people for a handful of nothing and another without anything at all.

They are agents of their former bosses. They are lackeys of those who want to keep the People in misery, oppression and exploitation. They are agents who correspond by letter or telephone with their former bosses who fled and abandoned their factories because they rejected the equality, dignity and honor that FRELIMO brought our country...

To study how the enemy acts is an obligation...

Those responsible for so many evils must be fought and punished. With the same violence. With the same hatred. With the same determination with which the armed bandits are fought...

To detect and denounce one another is to be patriotic. To punish them exemplarily is necessary. And no one can forgive that the criminals be hidden or protected. Be they who they may, for the good of all."

The foregoing is by far the most vitriolic essay I have read since I arrived, and its tone suggests that things are coming to a head. The economy is totally paralyzed; the Army controls only a few bush garrisons and the cities,

and these are heavily infiltrated. Both FRELIMO and the Resistance attack defenseless populations they suspect of being sympathetic to the enemy. Everyone is hungry, especially in the cities. The most gruesome rumor about is that people in the suburbs are killing albinos (there are quite a lot of them here) and selling the flesh as pork.

It is interesting to note that peoples' assessments of the situation vary by race and class. Whites and mestizos, or individuals of mixed race, and blacks with professional training tend to be less credulous than working-class blacks. Only members of this last group have opined that "FRELIMO hasn't got a chance." One might be tempted to favor the non-black skeptics, but the fact is that Maputo's inevitable urban guerilla war is being prepared not in the city's high-rises but in the African neighborhoods that surround it. That's where the hunger is fiercest.

I see that I have strayed quite far from my opening topic, what development is and isn't. But there is an irony that binds together the diverse contents of this letter. The beauty, creativity and order of a free society derive from the chaos of individual liberty. FRELIMO took power here ten years ago to impose its own vision of order on what it perceived as the dog-eat-dog anarchy of colonial capitalism. But each time the Party attempts to force people to conform to the new order, the result is chaos. Farmers won't produce at the Party's "just" prices, workers won't toil for fixed, low wages, young men dodge the draft for a war the Party insists is their patriotic duty. When the government reinstated public flogging in 1983, judges and court workers conspired to avoid the infliction of the mandatory sentence. All efforts to coerce conformity to an order imposed from above have led to alienation, resistance and disorder.

From freedom comes order: from coercion, chaos. Will someone please translate that into Latin and market it?