

Marxism and Social Action in Nigeria

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Marxist theory, as it relates to explanation of crisis, social upheavals, wars, violence and so on, is highly relevant to Nigerian situation. Marxism provides insight into Nigerian contemporary economic and social problems. On the other hand, although a revolutionary situation has been in existence in Nigeria, its concomitant factor, the subjective condition, is problematic. A limitation of Marxism is that the doctrines of the proletariat, the proletarian revolution and dictatorship are highly problematic, especially in the Nigerian situation.

First of all, I shall examine Marxism as a theory of social action. Secondly I shall examine Marxism and the current socio-economic formation in Nigeria. And finally, I shall examine class struggle and the problem of proletarian revolution in Nigeria.

For Marx, social action, resistance and revolution are subject to the laws of the development of human society. "Socialism or communism is not merely desirable, merely an objective for social action. It is historically, inevitably made so by the forces of social order, by the dialectic of history. Social action including force, violence, wars, and bloodshed, is necessary, given the effort of the old to maintain itself; but these, however passionately mobilised and supported by the courage and aims of the workers, are destined to utter failure unless the historical moment is a propitious one"¹. For Marx, therefore, social action in societies is necessary and historical. The working class and its demands "are a necessary outcome of the present economic system, which together with bourgeoisie inevitably creates and organises the proletariat"². Secondly, "all recorded history hitherto has been a history of class struggle, of the succession of the rule and victory of certain social classes over there"³. Thirdly, "the interests of proletariat demand the destruction of these foundations and therefore the conscious class struggle of organised workers must be directed against them"⁴. Marx provided a comprehensive theory and explanation of economic and social problems in

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industrial capitalist society. The issue here is to what extent this is applicable to Nigerian situation.

Marxism not only revealed the reasons for colonialism, imperialism, lopsidedness in the world economic order and disparity in incomes among individuals, societies, and nations; it also provided the colonised and third world countries and the less-privileged (or the proletariat) in all societies with the theory and consciousness for revolution and social action. Nineteenth Century marxism provided an effective weapon for the rapid decolonisation of the colonised world. Various leaders, writers and intellectuals of different nationalities adapted marxism to their local situations to explain the prevailing injustice. For example, Kwame Nkrumah's *Consciencism* Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* and Walter Rodney's *How Europe under developed Africa* are all crudely marxist oriented to promote the rapid decolonization and transformation of Africa and the third world generally. In all these books, Marxism is extrapolated to reveal the false beliefs of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism which be cloud the mechanism of exploitation, regression and subjugation of the third world countries, and to expound the virtues of self-consciousness, freedom, and justice among individuals and nations. Marxism, therefore, gave impetus to the nationalistic struggle. It is not by accident that all nationalist leaders in Africa, Asia and Latin America came to be marxists; it is because marxism seemed to be unequivocally on the side of the poor and the developing nations. For example, Marxism and Leninism gave impetus to the Cuban revolution, the decolonization of Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique and the current struggle in South Africa, among others.

Within nations and societies like Nigeria, Marxism has been an inspiration and weapon for radicals and progressives who could not stand aloof to watch the spate of injustices and human degradation in the societies. Some of these Marxist radicals and progressives have led various revolts and resistances against their various governments, and more often than not, these actions have landed them in jails or detentions. In addition, there have been cases of intimidation of marxist-oriented radicals in Kenya, Tanzania, Congo, Liberia and so on. In Nigeria organizations like the Nigerian Labour Congress and Academic Staff of Nigerian Universities and always, Marxist oriented and they always criticise the governments and make proposals based on a marxist developmental framework.

Marxist theory postulated that society follows a progression: slave-holding society feudalism, capitalism, and then the final stages socialism and communism. Communism would be the end of this evolution as well as the most advanced form of human society. But events all over the globe in modern times have not proved the postulate that communism would emerge from the contradictions in capitalism. Political and economic changes in Eastern Europe, and the introduction of 'Perestroika' and Glasnost in Soviet Union are an admission of the limits of marxism. While these changes in socialist countries could be an appreciation of the complexity of human

nature and the problem of a proletarian revolution, one must appreciate the ingenuity of marxism in explaining the causes of social action, violence, wars and crisis in modern capitalist societies.

Marxism And The Post-Colonial Nigerian Socio-economic Formation.

The current capitalist socio-economic formation of Nigeria is a transition from a society (primitive communal system) which did not have classes to a society which had them. The transition from a communal system to capitalism is considered to be a social revolution because it involved a fundamental change of social relations. The post and neo-colonial socio-economic structure of Nigeria is at an imperialist stage which Lenin called the highest stage of capitalism. The socio-economic formation of modern Nigeria provides what Lenin would call a revolutionary situation. This is seen in a number of objective conditions such as the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, exploitation of the working class and the peasant, inflation and the increasing external debt. The ingenuity of Marxist theory lies in predicating these social problems on the material productive forces and relations of production of a definite historical epoch. It could be recalled that Marx described capitalism as a stage when there would be upheavals and crisis that can lead to revolution. Nigerian capitalist socio-economic conditions and the associated student and mass social actions are a vindication of Marxist theory's correspondence with its object.

In his economic theory, Marx lays bare the economic laws of motion of modern society in which he sees the introduction of money as exacerbating the exploitation of the masses by the capitalists. As the highest product of the development of exchange and commodity production, money conceals the social character of all individual labour, the social link between individual producers united by their labour. In the present day Nigerian capitalist society, 'money' has not only abetted corruption but has also encouraged exploitation of workers by the employers.

While acknowledging that the pre-modern Nigerian communal system was crude and less sophisticated, it must also be admitted that the present socio-economic formation has sophisticated arsenals and mechanisms of exploitation unprecedented in history.

There are thousands of companies and industries owned by individuals, governments and expatriates which thrive from surplus value accrued from underpayments of the labourers and workers. United African Companies (UAC), Lever Brothers, PZ industries, Nigerian Breweries, to name but a few, have numerous workers of lower and middle classes that are underpaid monthly.

On critical reflection, it must be appreciated that Marxist theory on the problem of capitalism corresponds to the realities of the present Nigerian socio-economic formation. Nigerian society is at best ultra-capitalist in view

of the fact that surplus value going into the purse of the capitalists comes from both the lengthening of the working day and the introduction of division of labour and machinery.

The current retrenchment exercise going on in Nigerian industries shows the intensity of Nigerian capitalism and testifies to Marx's prediction of the problems and contradictions inherent in capitalism, money exchange and form of value. Apart from the anti-social nature of capitalist exploitation, there are again the evils of primitive accumulation, the divorce of workers from the means of production, the driving of peasants off the land and the stealing of communal lands by the capitalists. According to Marx, "primitive accumulation creates the free proletariat at one extreme, and the owner of money, the capitalist at the other"⁵. These evils of capitalism obviously exist in Nigerian society today as can be seen in the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, differences in life-style and housing accommodation, corruption, riots, crisis, social upheaval and so on.

The capitalist socio-economic system of Nigeria today confirms Marxist theory to the effect that under such conditions, life is miserable for the common person. In Nigeria, the level of the exploitation of the working class is rising. The aggravation of contradictions between labour and capital increases the class struggle and the strike movements. Workers in the lower and middle classes are left with little or no money for the sustenance of their life after paying taxes and house rents. Class differences are also obvious in the life-styles of the Nigerian populace. For example, people in the higher echelon of the society live in magnificent, western-styled buildings located in different places in Lagos like Ikeja, Victoria Island, Festac Town, Ikoyi, and may own three or more cars. Their children go to private schools, government colleges and university secondary schools. On the other hand, the peasants, the working class and petty traders live in slums and dirty villages like Amukoko, Maroko, Mushin and Ajegunle and their children either go to public schools or stay at home. Since few of them have cars, they face the excruciating pain of struggle on buses popularly known as "Molue", a name that depicts the inhuman and class significance of those who enter them.

The acquisition of rural agricultural lands in the present socio-economic formation of Nigeria is another dimension in the process of creating an army of unemployed and exploited labour in the country. The Federal Government decree on Land in 1978 offered the privileged and the capitalist the opportunity to steal these lands from the rural populace for their personal ends. Stipends worth less than the value of the land are paid to these peasants. According to Marx "The expropriation and eviction of a part of the agricultural population not only set free for industrial capital, the labourers, their means of subsistence and material for labour; it also created the home market..."⁶ As in France in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Nigerian capitalists "exploit the individual peasants through mortgages and usury; the capitalist class exploits the peasants class through the state taxes"⁷. In Nigeria the

peasant cedes parts of his or her wages to the capitalist class and so becomes more *marginalised*. In the system, the prices of agricultural products are low because the peasant hands over to the capitalist society part of his or her surplus product.

The current capitalist socio-economic formation of Nigeria has dispersed a great population to the urban towns and cities to take up menial jobs privately or in companies. The few that remained in rural areas operate and till the soil at a high cost. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), a form of economic imperialism, was instituted in Nigeria in 1986. Since then, instead of the envisaged benefits of conservation of foreign exchange and the mobilization of local human and material resources, there have been capital outflows through the flamboyant life styles of those Marx would call the bourgeoisie and the equivalent strangulation and marginalization of peasant farmers and workers. The costs of textbooks and food in the universities have become outrageously expensive. The prices of staple foods like gari, cassava and yam have gone beyond the reach of most Nigeria including the farmers themselves. Paradoxically, the farmers of gari, yam, cassava and other agricultural products, cannot sell their commodities, and even when they sell them, they cannot afford to buy other necessities of life. *Newswatch* revealed that "In 1987, the real worth of the N125 minimum wage was N35, at a time when four naira was equal to one dollar. Since that time, the value of the naira has deteriorated further and most economic experts think the N 125 of 1987 is probably less than N15 today."⁸ The situation in Nigeria today, especially with the introduction of SAP, is one which, according to Marx, generates conflict and contradictions that will lead to social action, violence, war and revolution. It makes the poor poorer and the rich richer. Commenting on SAP, Dr. Patrick Wilmot, a former lecturer at Ahmadu Bello University, says, "How can it be possible for a man in Lagos or Manila earning the equivalent of 20 dollars per month to reproduce himself and his family in order to continue the cycle of exploitation? The answer is that he cannot, which is why SAP says that he should be sacked, reduced further in pay, or sent back to the countryside to work on the plantations of the rich who have already appropriated most of the land the peasant fled from in the first place."⁹

SAP could be described as the highest stage of capitalism which definitely led to the mass riot in May 1989. For Marx, the May riot, among others, indicates the contradictions inherent in capitalism. The May riot is testimony that the material conditions of life of the people explain every event in the society and that at a certain stage in capitalist development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production or with property relations. This engenders social actions that will probably lead to revolution. Marxist theory has been able to explain the cause of social action, resistance and crisis in capitalist societies, but whether these actions by people and groups outside of government can lead to a

revolution is highly problematic.

Class Struggle and the Problem of Proletarian Revolution in Nigeria.

Marx postulated that in every given society the strivings of some of its members conflict with the strivings of others and that social life is full of contradiction. His historiography reveals a struggle between nations and societies as well as within nations and societies. According to him the conflicting strivings stem from the difference in the position and mode of life of the classes into which each society is divided. Nigerian society was transformed from a communal system to a capitalist socio-economic formation as a result of the colonialism and imperialism of the west. The present socio-economic formation is characterised by class wars and conflicts. Adewale Ademoyega, while writing on events that preceded the 1966 coup, observed that "socially, we realised that the society was split into two broad divisions, the privileged class that were housed in Government Reserved Areas (GRA) and the masses who lived in slums ..."¹⁰. Unfortunately successive military regimes, after the 1966 coup, conservative as they were, constituted the military with their bourgeois civilian compradors as a class conflicting with the rest of civil society. President Ibrahim Babangida acknowledged the existence of classes in Nigeria, in his inaugural session of the Armed Forces Consultative Assembly. According to *African Concord*. "The President had identified groups joined by the desire to pull down the military, cause trouble, undermine the government and humiliate it out of power. The groups so identified by the president are the business community and professional commission agents who had been decreed out of making quick money; the political class, whose members allegedly plunged the country into external debts; professional politicians who want to hold the nation to ransom for ever and extremists who must have been offended at being prevented from exploiting religious and ethnic sentiments to further their private selfish interests"¹¹. When the president identified a class distinct from the military as exploiters of the masses, he is at best identifying another class competing with the military class for the exploitation of the masses. So in the present Nigerian socio-economic dispensation, the masses, instead of being alienated and exploited by a particular class, are being doubtly alienated and exploited by the military and political class.

In Marxist theory, the proletariat is a motive force in the revolutionary transformation of the capitalist society.

This analysis will show that the Nigerian proletariat is not revolutionary.

The political tactics and methods of the masses in the May 1989 riot in Nigeria were far from revolutionary, although the social action was potentially revolutionary. During the riot, most of the rioters among the peasants, the unemployed, working class and students were opportunists who were not really committed to any revolutionary tactics but wanted a better life by joining the band-wagon of the bourgeoisie. In the miasma and confusion,

some demonstrators forcefully extracted money from motorists. At Benin, the demonstrators "looted prison, stores of gari, rice, tomatoes and beans"¹² In Lagos, at the headquarters of International Telephone and Telegraphs, "assorted equipment were carted away from the block of offices. At James Robertson Street in Surulere, the Leventis Stores situated along the road was ransacked and emptied of foodstuffs and other items"¹³ And at "Agege district, motorist paid up to N50 each before they could leave the area. Those who could not, had their windcreens smashed"¹⁴ Even before and after the riot the so called members of the working class took bribes at various points in the discharge of their duties. A security man takes a bribe from a visitor who wants to enter the industrial house. A clerk takes a bribe from whoever needs his file for official transactions. The fact is that the labourers, the peasants, all want to join the higher class, that is, to move to the next stratum of the society. One can see that the potential proletariat in Nigeria is not willing to carry out any revolution. In fact, the masses are opportunists and bourgeoisified. Marx foresaw this problem of the proletariat when he was writing about the British labour movement in 18th century. According to him, at this period "industrial prosperity leads to attempts to buy the proletariat to divert them from the struggle"¹⁵. He observed that industrial prosperity at that time demoralised the workers and bourgeoisified them.

In Nigeria, the nature and tactics of the May 1989 riot portray them as bourgeois proletariats (as Marx would argue). They were demoralised by the quantity of money in circulation and by the life-style of those in upper classes and so wished to join them. They were interested to maintain the status quo. It would be possible that if the rioters had overthrown the government, instead of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat, they would have established themselves as a class and the former ruling class would have become the ruled class. Marx argued in his *camera obscura* that bourgeois ideology is constituted in such a way that the masses who are the exploited only perceive the phenomenal forms in the relations of production without clearly perceiving the categories like the real social relations of legality, religion, domination and exploitation. This is what Marx calls false consciousness or the opacity of ideology. But it is highly problematic whether a change of consciousness will lead to a proletarian revolution. In the Nigerian context, a change of consciousness could lead to the overthrow of those in power without necessarily establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx would also argue that the historical period or the objective conditions for the revolution have not been reached. But the widening gap between the rich and the poor, corruption, social and political instability in the country today are objective enough condition for the proletarian revolution. It seems to me that the revolution and the dictatorship doctrine is a myth. The doctrine of the revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat is just like the doctrine of the second coming of Jesus Christ. As marxists are continuing to hope for the dictatorship of the proletariat without seeing it

reality, so also some Christians are waiting for the second coming of Jesus Christ indefinitely. The doctrine of the proletariat is an ideal which can be appropriated and which may not be realised. Jesus Christ has come and gone leaving behind a legacy.

Again, Marx saw capitalism as a moral evil just as Christianity described paganism as evil. But metaphysically speaking, good and evil are necessary in life. Neither can exist without the other. "Subjectively, the evils of capitalism are foremost in the subjective consciousness of Marx, just as the evils of paganism in the late Roman Empire were foremost in the subjective christian thought. Objectively, however, it is possible to see these evils as necessary and therefore historically good, a step towards ultimate redemption of man and society".¹⁶ If the evil of capitalism is necessary and the proletarian dictatorship is problematic, then we should be thinking of a meeting point between socialism and communism. The doctrine of the revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat is at best a doctrine to show that there are usually underdogs and suffering masses in society. Marxist theory is therefore limited by the fact that even in societies of actually existing socialism, the interest of the critical class, the proletariat or the working class has not been adequately represented and articulated by the vanguard classes or communist parties. It is also a fact that there have been economic and political changes in Soviet Union and other member countries of the Warsaw pact in eastern Europe. It is also a fact that Mikhail Gorbachev, since he came to be the president of the Soviet Union in 1985, has introduced political changes which include Perestroika (restructuring), glasnost (openness) and a multiparty system. All this shows the difficulty of marxist theory of the proletariat. It is not a retreat from socialism as such, but an appreciation of the limit and difficulty of a proletarian state or communism. Nor can it be a transition to capitalism, instead it should be a transition to democratic socialism.

Again, the problem of the proletarian revolution in Nigeria is compounded by the factors of religion and ethnicity. Religion and ethnic considerations are so deep rooted in the consciousness of Nigeria that leaders use them as a means of divide and rule. In using religion as an instrument of divide and rule, the so called common people are brainwashed with the dogma of their religion to the exclusion of other religions. And using ethnicity as an instrument against social action, the common person is made to see Nigeria as a nation with many nations under it. Because of these factors, the masses, peasant, working class and so on may never be united in concerted action against injustice in the society. Suffice it to say that social action is effective if and only if there is little or no difference among the people in terms of religion and ethnicity. Political struggle is therefore limited by ethnic and religious considerations in African politics. Low literacy levels also inhibit social action in Nigeria. As Marx would argue, religion and ethnicity are elements in bourgeois ideology which obscure

reality. The people need a change of consciousness to observe the real underlying material conditions of life as against the phenomenal with which the capitalist exploits them. But it is difficult to predict whether the change of consciousness will lead to a revolution.

The fact that it is difficult to reverse history, the fact that tradition dies hard, and the social consciousness of the Africans, especially their love of prestige and wealth, create obstacles to social action and proletarian revolution in Nigeria. African culture has a pre-capitalist origin and, following colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism, is being transformed to ultra-capitalism. In African society, success is exalted while poverty is considered to be a symptom of laziness. That is why most African leaders are either social democrats or capitalists. Democratic socialism as an ideology is widely accepted in Africa because it best fits the pre-capitalist and socialist nature of African culture. The tendency to acquire wealth and prestige by the African is shown by their mad quest for prestigious titles like Chief, Dr. Professor, Alhaji and various traditional titles.

The workability of any theory, especially a revolutionary one like marxism, depends very much on the state of consciousness of the people. Theory as an explanation of facts, events and ideals therefore has ideological functions. It aims at guiding, connecting and uniting the political and social actions of people towards specific and definite goals. A theory expresses the ideology of a particular people. It seeks to bring a specific order into the total life of the society. It is also a means of articulating the ideology and belief system of a society. Nkrumah observes in *Consciencism* that "the ideology of a society displays itself in political theory, social theory and moral theory, and uses these as instruments. It establishes a particular range of political, social and moral behaviour, such that unless behaviour of this sort fell within the established range, it would be incompatible with the ideology"¹⁷ Marxism and Leninism have guided marxists in their political and social actions. Nigeria needs a theory as an ideology to give it direction and purpose in social and political actions. A situation where a fraction of the society is theoretically conscious is ineffective. "Thought without practice is empty and practise without thought is blind",¹⁸ Nkrumah argues. It has often been said that Nigeria has no ideology and that ideology might not be necessary for Nigeria. This kind of talk is unfortunate. What it means to say that a country X does not have ideology is that the country does not have a coherent and consistent theory governing the social and political behaviour of individuals, groups and governments. It might not be legitimate to say that Nigeria does not have ideology; the point is that the ideology of capitalism that it has embraced instinctively and unconsciously without having any bearing on the culture, values and goals of the people. It should be the function of theory to express the culture, values and goals of the people in form of ideology thereby giving their lives a sense of direction. The absence of coherent theory of actions makes a people

flounder in darkness.

Theory is always definitive; it makes a distinction between what is good and bad. It expresses a particular ideology. If it is a theory that, given the culture and values of the people, is pro-socialist ideology, then capitalism will be incompatible with it. On the contrary, given a capitalist ideology, in the U. S. A. for example, a socialist ideology will be incompatible with it.

A theory of social and political order is born out of the philosophy of the society. Philosophy is therefore the theoretical basis of a proposed social order. This means that philosophy has an ideological function. Philosophy as the theoretical basis of a society throws light upon the nature of moral principles and judgements on social and political actions. Nigeria and other developing countries should have a philosophy that guides them in their social actions. This philosophy must be a dynamic one based on critical reflection on the people's values and traditions. In that direction, marxism or Nkrumah's 'consciencism', 'Nyarere Ujameah' or 'Humanistic Theism'¹⁹ could be the answer.

But theory as a means of guiding a people in their social and political behaviour is replete with certain problems, especially in a heterogeneous society with diverse individuals like Nigeria. A theory is a kind of commitment to ideological beliefs. But people often disagree in their degrees of commitment to ideological beliefs or moral commitment, Peter Bodunrin argues. Two persons Y and Z may both agree that capitalism is evil; which means that they agree in their moral belief. Y and Z can be said to agree in moral belief when they would pass the same moral judgement on an action, situation or state of affairs. "They disagree in moral belief when they do not give the same moral evaluation to the same situation"²⁰, Peter Bodunrin again argues. In that context, therefore Y and Z may both agree that capitalism is evil and both may in fact believe that something ought to be done to abolish it, but they may disagree as to the degree of commitment they feel about acting on their belief. That is why though there are many marxists in Nigeria, only a few can be Marx or Lenin, or have the commitment to proletarian revolution. And that is also why only about 10% of Nigerian proletariat can be revolutionary. There are many factors which could account for the limitations of theory in Nigeria. These include corruption, poverty; illiteracy and ethnicity.

Conclusion

Marx's analysis of the history of European societies of his time is an ingenious work unsurpassed in his time. One point that was valid and is still valid today is his materialistic explanation of class struggle in the societies. That working class demands, war, violence, social action and resistance are a necessary outcome of the present economic system is a reality today in many countries. Marxism also shows that all recorded history in Europe hitherto has been a history of class struggle, of the succession of the rule and victory of certain social classes over others. But when it comes to

the doctrine of the proletariat as the revolutionary class that will abolish all classes as well as the state, marxism becomes doubtful, especially in the Nigerian context. □

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