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Historical Materialism in Marx's Political Thought

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Introduction

In the ongoing academic enterprises, it is somewhat customary to begin an article with terminology or conceptual clarifications. The burden of this article is to show the centrality of historical materialism in Marx's Socio-political thought and how historically relevant to contemporary events they are.

In doing so, attempts are made to establish the close linkage between Marx's Materialist thesis and his socio-political thought.

What is Political Thought?

From classical to contemporary times, political thought is used to refer to thought about the state, its structure, nature and purpose. Political thought has to do with the moral phenomena of human behaviour in society. Political theorists believe that, Political Thought deals in addition with the existence and continuation of the state in terms of the individual. Ollawa (1979), Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1974), Nkrumah's *Africa Must Unite* (1963), Awolowo's *Path to Freedom* (1946) and Erikson's *Studies of Martin Luther* (1972) all agree that Political Thought must perforce examine and be product of politico-cultural milieu which exert influence upon the ideas of the scholar or author of a particular epoch.

Our understanding therefore of Marx's political thoughts, capsulized as Marxism, based on a vast array of literature on the subject, was a response to the economic and socio-political hardship which accompanied the growth of Western industrial capitalism.

Meyer (1973: 35-46) agrees no less when he notes that "the intellectual heritage from which Marxism drew its insights, attitudes and concept is a

synthesis of many ideological currents embodies 'empiricism' or 'materialism' of Bacon, Hobbes and Helvetius. From Rousseau and the Romanticists, it has taken strongly ambivalent attitude towards past and present institutions, together with a strong commitment to historicism and its Hegelian form – Dialectics. Finally, this mixture is seasoned with the anthropocentrism of Feuerback, economic doctrines of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, and the class war theories of Micheler or other historians of the French Revolution”.

Historical Materialism

While in close concert with the above, historical materialism represents 'that view of the course of social history, which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the mode of production and exchange in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another' (Marx and Engels). This materialist conception of history which Marx and his friend Engels (put forward and adopted by their followers later with a doctrinaire Marxism) has a far-reaching theoretical implication in Marx's political thoughts.

Pre-Marxian Interpretation of History

Literature is replete with facts that Karl Marx (1818 – 1883), was not the first scholar to show interest in the interpretation of history using a materialist base.

King Solomon, for example, in his entire splendor, has said "There is nothing new under the sun", lending credence to previous works to Marx's Madunagu (1981: 11) ² sees the saying as the oldest and most misleading view of history.

According to him, the statement expresses the view that history proceeds in a cyclical form, that every stage of human history is a repetition of an earlier one. In other words, there is no historical change. In his strive to impart this view to his audience, Madunagu traced its origin to the ancient Greeks and noted that human ideas and field of vision are necessarily limited by human material development.

As early as the 6th century B.C., Madunagu (1981:18) ¹ notes that Atonists, Sophists and Epicureans recognized that change was characteristic of social history which resulted from human inventive powers.

In the introductory chapter of his work of excellence on the four main 'isms' of the contemporary world, Ebenstein (1973) outlined the several inter-

pretations of history which prevailed prior to Marx's interpretation of Religion, which sought the key to history in the working of divine province and conceived of human development as a part of the unfolding of God's design of the universe.

Emmanuel Kant, a student of the age of Enlightenment, who posited that a regular march could be ascertained in the movement of history, demonstrated that the human species has experienced a continuously advancing, though slow unfolding of its original capacities and endowment.

A second dominant approach in the pre-Marxian understanding of human history was political. Great Emperors, Kings, Legislators, Soldiers and Scholars were seen as the Decisive Forces in history. Following from acts and deeds of heroism and failures. Historical writing was mostly the records of kings, parliaments, wars, insurgency and counter-insurgency, peace and treaties (Walsh 1967: 321)³.

A third major view is the one popularized by Carlyle in modern times and which is the Hero Interpretation of History. This approach believes that most heroes in today's world are chosen from Great Kings/Presidents/Generals, Legislators, Founders of New States, Pioneering Reformers and Revolutionaries. Our thinking in this approach is that stands on weak grounds from the frame of reference of sociology (especially political Sociology and Development Studies). Political science and other social sciences. The argument we proffer against this school is that it over emphasizes the role of the individual at the expense of larger cultural groups, religious, social and economic interest and circumstances that form or constitutes the bulk of the background of the state or society without which there can be no meaningful exercise of political or military leadership that brings the king or leader to the fore. While we concede that leaders mold events, it is no less true that events in society mold leaders. These events do not occur in a vacuum. People as groups are the moving force of events and hence need sociological prying into.

The impact of ideals, conceived as the principal causes of the historical process and the material conditions, is another very important Pre-Marxian approach to the understanding of history. As student of Hegelian Philosophy would be quick to admit, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is a prominent actor in this school of thought, which has far reaching effects or impacts upon the intellectual growth of young Germans-nay Europeans including later Karl Marx. Hegel, made profound contribution to debate on Reason and more so in relation to the real existence of the objective world and how man's understanding could assist him appreciating Hegel's notion of change and development as well as his analysis of history as unfolding world of spirit.

To Hegel the main purpose of ideas or Reasons or better still philosophical knowledge, as argued by Ollawa (1978)⁶, is to identify and analyze the essential ingredients of those aspects of man's existence. He (Hegel) employed the notion Reason as immanent in the process of the organic development of society.

From Hegel's point of view, Reason is immanent in historical existence and fulfills itself in and through it, implying as noted by Kolakowski (1982:72) that world history is also the history of Reason i.e. its course follows a Rational design which the philosopher's eye is capable of perceiving.

In this sense, reason is inseparable from the real existence of the objective world, and it is the nature of this reason or spirit to "know all things". Gardiner (1972:162)^{8a} agrees with Hegel as we do also that Hegel's thought was premised on the assumption that the universe is a coherent whole, in which what he variously called the ideas or spirit or Reason or the divine Mind is the only reality; and every other thing, including matter and the external world, is the creation of this ideal or spirit or Reason. Hence, it was a truism to say that "Reason is the Sovereign of the world."^{8b}

By and large, we submit that Hegel's account of Reason is closely linked with his view of freedom and as Kolakowski, (1982) has note that his (Hegel's) philosophy of history is an account of the spirits search for freedom through the variety of past events. He considered that history of the human race is a development from less to greater freedom and from less adequate forms of freedom to freedom in its perfection. Thus, as succinctly stated by Acton, his philosophy of history can be understood only in terms of his conception of freedom - (Acton 1967: Vol: 3 & 4)⁹.

What could easily be discernible from the postulates of Hegel and other earlier pre-Marxian thinkers seem to have anchored on Dialectics the struggle of polar opposites, mutually conflicting conditions which ultimately result in what scholars-including Marx terms Dialectical materialism and development.

An Outline of Marx's Interpretation of Historical Materialism

In the proceeding sketches, our attempt has been to identify the various ways in which history had been interpreted prior to Karl Marx. We also linked political thought to our perception of Historical Materialism as conceived from classical to contemporary times. This section aims at focusing our "lenses" at the concept of Historical Materialism which represents Marx's interpretation

Karl Marx (1818-1883), son of a middle class Jewish family, obtained his PH. D at the age of 23 years. He probed deeply into the various aspects of life in society and instead of leading a conservative life of the son of a lawyer that his father was and wished his son to be Karl chose to lead the radical path, having been properly schooled in Romanticism and Hegelian dialects.

Marx called his conception of history "Materialist" to make a distinction with what was obviously metaphysical with the Hegelian analysis. But Rudolf Hilferding in Tom Bottomore (1981:125)¹⁰ notes that the unfortunate designation is responsible, in no small degree, for repeated misunderstandings and sterile polemics in Marxian scholarship. The truth is that such misunderstandings should not be unexpected because several authorities have stated that the nuances of the concept was nowhere fully elaborated but scattered throughout Marx's works, so that the pieces must be taken and fitted together into a more precise pattern than Marx himself provided. Marx's designation. Though improvised and somewhat misleading, is sufficient to be accepted basically as an economic interpretation of history, according to which all mass phenomena of history are determined by economic conditions.

To buttress the views above, we draw inspiration from Engels' definition of historical materialism as:

"that view of the course of history, which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another".¹¹

it is instructive to extrapolate the principles of Historical Materialism from Engels' definition in conjunction with Marx's own diving force as outlined in his *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as he states inter alia:

I was led by my studies to the conclusion that legal relations as well as forms of state could neither be understood by themselves, nor explained by the so-called general progress of the human mind, but that they are rooted in the material conditions of life. In the social production in which men carry on, they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, these relationships of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure

of society – the real foundation in which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material forces of production in society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or- what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they had been at work before. From forms of development of the forces of production, these relations turn into their foes. Then occurs a period of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation, the entire immense superstructure is more or less transformed. In considering such transformations, the distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production which can be determined with the precision of natural science and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical in short, ideological – forms in which man becomes conscious of the conflicts and fight it out. Just as an opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this form of consciousness must rather be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production”¹² (in R. Hilferding 1981: 124ff).

In academic enterprise such as this, it is worthy to pry into the minds of Engels and Marx by equating their underlying economic forces – to imply the manner of gaining a living in society. The productive forces constitute the tools, skills and technique by which man obtains the wherewithal of life. The superstructure in Marx's thinking could be X-rayed to mean the system of law, politics, morals religion, philosophy and art – in short speaking in a sociological sense, – the whole way of life or culture. This agrees with Edward Tylor's (1891) conceptualization of culture to imply the ideas, habits of thoughts, ideals and system of justification – in terms of which the members of the society think of themselves and of their relations to one another.

A second view point to the above is that corresponding to any particular mode of production, there are appropriate “relations of production” or rela-

tions, which concern mainly the form of ownership. As submitted by the duo of Udoka and Esoh by their discussions in the character of organic composition of capital which agree in essential respect with Rudolf Hilferding's submissions, this relations is not a matter of a particular relation between an individual and a certain quality of productive forces, or of the behavior of an individual in the application of his tools and the use of the land, but the relation of people to each other- i.e. the relationship of being who are specialized because they produce, and by the manner in which they produce. The production relation is not therefore a mechanical, natural state of affairs, but a social condition “entered” into by thinking, willing and acting human beings, or better still, a condition in which they find themselves at any giving time in society.

From the foregoing, it can be discerned that Historical Materialism is premised on the truth that man must eat to live. Both the productive Forces and the Relations of production are referred to as “the material conditions of life” in Marxian terminology. As far as Marx is concerned, production is the most important of all human activities. Which always involves relations with other men, both in the work itself and in the distribution of products, e.g. The making of a university Graduate in Nigeria involves definite relationship from the point of entry through JAMB (Joint Admission and Matriculation Board) and convocation – a high point in the turning out of the graduate as a finished product for use or consumption by society. Or in the production of a soft drink called cocoa-cola involves definite relation between the workers and the employers and the distribution chain as a final product. It is upon these relationships that the political and legal superstructures are formed. And to understand the religion, morality, art or philosophy of a society as well as its politics and laws, it is necessary to know the nature of that society's productive forces and economic structure which determines certain social structures into which men are forced to fit their activities.

Mayo (1960) joins the debate by reference to Marx's opinion that the modes of production usually and gradually change and come into conflict with the existing and more static property relations. Since the modes of production always get their way due to man's inventive ingenuity, the conflict can be resolved only by the creation of a new set of property relations appropriate to the new modes of production, and thus a new dialectical synthesis is achieved. According to Marx himself, this situation has happened several times in the distant past which made him designate the Asiatic, the Ancient, the Feudal and the modern bourgeois (capitalist) modes of production as no epochs in progress of the economic formation of society.¹³

A third point of departure to note is that the historical conflict expresses itself in practice in the form of class struggle so that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."¹⁴ Marx erroneously believed capitalism to be the last and fiercest struggle of all the class struggles – which would amount to a final polarization of society into two diametrically opposed and antagonistic classes – viz the Bourgeoisie (capitalist or owners of production) and proletariat (peasant/workers class or operators of the means of production that sustains the Bourgeois class). This Marxian approach becomes more glaring when one examines the incessant disagreement of labour (workers) with their employers (or management) in contemporary world society especially here in Nigeria. A typical example being the struggle over minimum wage by the Nigeria workers and the resistance posted by the privileged ruling elite class – which in this case spanned the IBB era, through to Abacha and the General Abdulsalam Abubakar led military government to president Olusegun Obasanjo's Ist three years in office as a democratically elected civilian president (1999-2003). Or more specifically, the struggle for equitable justice between the staffers of Nigeria's University of Uyo led by the leaders of the three labour unions on campus-Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU), Senior staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU) and Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) against the management team of the University with its first vice-Chancellor Professor Fola Lasisi at the centre of the crisis. One clearly sees the operation of the Marxian theory and how it neatly fits into Labour – Management disputes in not only Nigeria but also across the 3rd world as to the *raison d'être* why this polarization occurs.

An important point of departure to note as the fourth is that Marx deposed that the class struggle becomes intolerable after a time, noting that as capitalism matures or develops, the proletarian strength gathers momentum and the bourgeois class becoming richer and fewer, the conflict between the two comes to a decisive head way with a revolutionary overthrow of the conservative capitalist (bourgeois) class by the now dominant proletariat. Following this overthrow a period of transition sets in whereby the proletarian class consolidates its hold on power, the dawn of a new era marked by the presence of classlessness or classless society in which the state will wither-away becomes an important feature in Marx's political thought.

It is true to state that the framework of Marx's concept of historical materialism although formulated in opposition to Hegel is undeniably Hegelian. Whoever studies Hegel's system carefully would admit as did Marx (in his

writings), that he (Marx) accepted Hegel's analysis of historical change as proceeding in accordance with Hegelian dialectics. What Marx essentially did was the rejection of the metaphysical explanation of this process and Hegel's application of the dialectics to nations as fortuitously superficial. He (Marx) preferred a materialist dialectics – meaning an explanation of the dialectical process of history in economic terms.

Applying the dialectics, it follows ipso facto that each dominant class necessarily develops its opposites and form the clash between the two, a new ruling class emerges. And this class reaches its climax when the capitalist is face to face with the proletariat. The cycle of coup d'état and counter coups in Nigeria but much of the 3rd world countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America within the first four decades of their political sovereignty makes this phenomenon a truism. And so are examples earlier cited of Africa Civil servant/workers with their management government.

The concept of historical materialism makes two main social predictions possible. The first, as adumbrated in Marx's *Capital* has to do with the breakdown of capitalism.

Capitalist economy was out of human control which made economic crises its characteristic feature. In their competition with each other (amongst and between Capitalist class) to sell their wares (goods) at a profit, the capitalist class finds it necessary to push down the wages of their employees to the lowest level not consistent with their being able to produce at all. Furthermore, a s Action (1967)¹⁵ and Haralambos (1980) and (2000) put it, 'the advantages of large-scale production occasioned by intensive division of labour would be such that the larger capitalist, will drive weaker rivals to of business into the ranks of proletariat – thus creating cartels. As a few capitalist become richer, the mass workers would become poorer. The conditions of life imposed on the workers by capitalist production teach them how to organize against their employers'. This, as we know, is a self evident fact as cited in replete circumstances in contemporary times in Nigeria – nay Africa and the poor nations of the world. This phenomenon, in addition, tends, in political economic parlance, to explain the concept of Globalization which is dominating the world scene as pioneered by the G8 i.e. eight richest countries of the modern world.

Thus while the proletariat oppose and criticize the bourgeoisie, they constitute the rising, progressive class, and when they have overcome by ousting the bourgeoisie elements, there will be no other elements, there will

be no other class for them (proletariat) to oppose. Dialectically expressed, capitalism – the thesis, calls into being its anti-thesis – organized labour, and from the resultant clash – the final synthesis of the classless society or communism will result. And this leads us to the second social prediction – the arrival of communism. In the absence of classes and hence class conflict, politics and the state will become redundant and social order will arise in which production will be carried out in accordance with plans devised without coercion for the good of all. This idyllic state will however, be preceded by a transitional period known as socialism. At this, goods and services will be distributed not merely because of need but according to work performed. The thesis, according to Action and Lenin, holds that the state continues to be a repressive organ of the class controlling the means of production as was the case prior the revolutionary struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat classes. Instead of the minority lording it over the majority, the majority will oppress the small group of former exploiters, thus making the worker's state to be more democratic than the bourgeois parliamentary democracy.

Implication and Conclusion

From the outset, we had admitted the burden of this article to be one which set out to pry into the place of "historical materialism" in the political thought of Karl Marx. After deciphering political thought approaches, we were burdened to operationalise "Marxism" as the political thought of Karl Marx. Through a sustained intellectual discernment and survey of his works, we found out that even though Marx never wrote a book specifically on "historical materialism" he has produced a number of works which contained ideas which when pieced together provide a relatively adequate outline of his "materialist conception of history". Among these works are *The Holy Family (1845)*, *The German Ideology (1845-1846)* with Engels, *The Poverty of Philosophy (1847)*, *The Communist Manifesto (1848)* with Engels and an unfinished work *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844* first published in 1932 – 49 years after his (Marx's) death. In these works, Marx sketched out the theory of society and history which is an important interdisciplinary boundary for the students of sociology, political Economy and History. Marx repudiated both Hegelian and Post-Hegelian speculations and built rather on Feuerbach's anthropological approach to historical phenomena. Drawing as he did from French materialism and British empiricism and classical eco-

nomics, Marx sought to explain all social phenomena in terms of their place and function in the complex systems of society and nature without recourse to what Rubel calls "Hegel's metaphysical explanations"¹⁶.

Apart from skirmish of revolutionary tendencies replete in the Americas, France and England, we have seen the application and operation of Marx's materialist conception of history in socialist Eastern Europe (the Bolshevik Revolution of October, 1917) until its collapse following Mikhail Gorbachev's reform measures of Glasnost and perestroika in 1989, and the Gulf War that precipitated the final collapse of Marxism-socialism in Eastern Europe in 1991. I believe that the high degree of success attained in China under Chairman Mao Tse Tung and his successor during and after the Green Revolution of 1949 and Cuba under Fidel Castro since 1959 in terms of the change, development, revolutionary content and zeal derive inspiration from the well laid down intellectual ferment of Karl Marx. It is equally a known fact that from contemporary events that a number of Latin American countries and scholars as is the case in Africa-Tanzania's Ujamaa (Arusha Declaration), under Julius Nyerere, Nkrumah's Ghana, Mengistu's Ethiopia, social unrest in African Universities and other social stirrings are predicted on the framework of Marx's dialects or historical materialism by which Hegel and earlier scholars had provided operational definitions.¹⁷ Like Rousseau, Marx was profoundly interested in exploring the inequalities of men because he shared his belief that there can be no democracy as long as there are inequality and special interest. These are areas in which the special student of sociology, political Economy and Development studies should express interest even if in history perspectives vis-à-vis its effect upon society and its constituents.

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