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Article

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AN EXAMINATION OF KARL MARX'S CONCEPT OF ALIENATION AND THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Humankind's history is fundamentally a struggle between social classes. The productive capacity of the society is the foundation of that particular society, and as this capacity increases over time, the social relations of production, class relations evolve through struggle of the classes and pass through definite stages (primitive communism, share feudalism, capitalism). People are alienated not only from products of their labour but also from themselves through the process of production. The nature of labour's productive activity results in people's self-alienation. This comes about because work is not voluntary but imposed upon them. Such imposition induces a feeling of misery instead of well-being. So, rather than fulfilling themselves, they must deny themselves, not freely develop their physical and mental capacities but are instead physically exhausted and mentally debased. As a consequence, workers feel alienated from work because it is not their own work but work for someone else, the capitalist. According to Marx, 'man's ability to work and create makes him what he is'. It is work that distinguishes man from animals. But in the capitalist system man's work has become a process of alienation. Man works merely to survive. Marx argued that all aspects of the culture become capitalistically oriented with monetary value

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attached to everything. Humans are used as mere instruments having no intrinsic value but only extrinsic instrumental value. Hence, this research took a study of Marx's view on alienation. It also brought in the connection it has with capitalism and its relationship with class struggle. The paper also relates the discussion to the Nigerian situation and suggests the possible way forward. Thus, with the philosophical tools of expository, analysis and synthesis, the research argued that Marx's critique of alienation was based on a tacit theory of human nature and desires that grounded an ethic of dignity that was systematically thwarted by political economy and masked by ideology.

Keywords: Alienation, Capitalism, Class Struggle, Exploitation, Human Dignity.

Introduction

Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) was the last of the great critics in the western intellectual tradition. His ideas exerted a decisive influence on all aspects of human endeavour, and transformed the study of history and society. He was a brilliant agitator and polemicist, a profound economist, a great sociologist, and an incomparable historian. Marx was the first thinker to bring together the various strands of socialist thought into both a coherent world view and an impassioned doctrine of struggle (Howe, I. (Ed, 5). However, from its very inception Marxism was faced with a variety of criticism and critical acclaim. In fact, the controversies within Marxism are such that Marxism like liberalism has become an umbrella ideology. In the contest of Marx's writings, scholars spoke of two Marxs: the young and the old. The young Marx was concerned with alienation, human nature and morality; the old was more deterministic, with his in-depth study of the workings of capitalism (Mukherjee, and Ramaswamy,348). Nevertheless, this paper focuses on the concept of alienation in Marxian philosophy.

Humankind's history is fundamentally a struggle between social classes. The productive capacity of the society is the foundation of that particular society, and as this capacity increases over time, the social relations of production, class relations evolve through struggle of the classes and pass through definite stages (primitive communism, share feudalism, capitalism). The legal, political, ideological and other aspects of society are derived from these production relations as it is the consciousness of the individuals of which the society is composed. However, in his early work, economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844, Karl Marx analysed alienation from a historical, anthropological, and socio-economic perspective. Marx argued that the problem of "alienation" is a major problem of class divided society where one section of the people (Proletariats) has been exploited by another section (bourgeoisie). He argues that in capitalist society, an economic minority (the bourgeoisie) dominate, alienate and exploit an economic majority (the proletariat). According to Marx, the exploitation of proletariat could be measured with the help of surplus value-the difference between the wages paid to the labourers and the final price for which the product was sold. He held further that while the production process is socialised, ownership remains in the hands of the bourgeoisie, and as such the bourgeoisie will continue exploiting and alienating the proletariat. Without the elimination of the fetters of private ownership of the means of production, human society is unable to achieve further development and so exploitation and alienation will continue. Hence, for Marx, quoted in Mukherjee and Ramaswamy:

Alienation and exploitation made possible the revolutionary transformation of capitalism. It was the individual as a producer who rebelled against society to free himself from exploitation and oppression. The basis for

change was therefore moral. Unless private property was abolished, the worker could not be truly free. But once this was achieved, human nature would undergo a transformation, for a true communist society was one of socialised humanity (363).

In the *Manifesto*, Marx described the nature of communist society as one in which the classes and its antagonisms would have disappeared. The bourgeois society would be replaced by “an association”, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all (76). This paper is basically to discuss Marx’s concept of alienation. But before we reach the critical climax, it is imperative to note that alienation of labourers is a result of the evil of capitalism that is exploitative in nature, which gives rise to a perpetual social class struggle, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Therefore a consideration of class struggle and analysis of capitalism is important. This shall aid our proper understanding of the concept of alienation. However, we shall in our evaluation and conclusion, relate the discussion to the Nigerian situation and suggest the possible way forward.

Class Struggle in Marx’s Ideology

In every society there were two classes, the rich and poor, one that owned the means of production, and the other that sold its labour. During different historical phases, these two classes were known by different names and enjoyed different legal statuses and privileges, but one thing was common, that in the course of all these phases, their relationship had been one of exploitation and domination. According to Marx, freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, Lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another (76). Marx objected to the idea of the middle-class historians that class struggle has ended with the rise of the bourgeoisie, just as he opposed the perceptions of the classical economists that capitalism was eternal and immutable. He harnessed the rising consciousness and power among the industrial proletariat, and emphasized that it was their desire to bring about economic equality that kept class struggle and revolutionary change alive. He summed up his own contributions to the notion of class struggle in a letter to Josef Weydemeyer in 1852, wherein he confidently declared that class struggles would not be a permanent feature of society, but were necessitated by the historical development of production. Class struggle would end with the destruction of capitalism, for communism would be a classless society (Mukherjee, and Ramaswamy,360).

Class, for Marx, symbolises collective unity in the same manner as the nation in Hegel’s theory. Each class produced its own ideas, and beliefs, and operated within a particular economic and social system. The individual was important with respect to his membership within a class, which determined his moral convictions, aesthetics preferences and every kind of reasoning (78). It is important to decisively state that, for Marx, ideology played a pivotal role in controlling the oppressed. There were three main features of ideas. First, they depicted the existing order as entrenched in forces that were beyond human control. Things were not arbitrary, but instituted by certain sections of people for their own benefit. Second, ideas explained how the existing order benefited everyone in society. Third, ideas depicted the existing order as beneficial in a particular way, namely to promote the interests of the dominant economic class and protect class privileges (Mukherjee, and Ramaswamy, 361).

Marx's Analysis of Capitalism

Marx defined capitalism by two factors, First, by the use of wage labour. In *Capital: A Critique of Philosophical Economy*, he pointed out that “capitalism arises only when the owners of the means of production and subsistence meet in the market with the free labourer selling his labour power.” The basis of capitalism was wage labour. The second defining characteristics of capitalism were private ownership of the means of production, which was distinct from personal property, like household effects and home. The ownership of the means of production was the crucial feature of capitalism, for it was restricted to a few. Those who did not own anything were forced to sell their labour power and became wage earners. The idea that labour was only the property of the poor was derived from William Cobbett (1763-1835). Unlike the medieval guildsmen, they did not work for themselves but for others. Hence Marx observed as follows:

The man who possesses no other property than his labour power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men, who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. He can work only with their permission, hence live only with their permission (228).

Marx's chief criticisms of capitalism revolve around his theory of surplus labour. He began with what is known as the “labour theory of value,” which was held by many of the economists of his day. The theory states that the value of any commodity is a function of the amount of labour that it took to produce it. In capitalism, the worker's labour is in commodity, so the value of the worker's labour is determined by its cost. What it takes to produce a worker's labour is what it takes to sustain him. Given what he thought was the most charitable account of capitalism, Marx assumed the product will be sold for its just price. However, this alone would leave the capitalist without any profit. So the capitalist must find some way to work profit into this scenario. He does so by forcing the worker to labour more hours than is necessary for his own survival. (Quoted in Lawhead, W.F. 393). However, in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx paid some tributes to the bourgeoisie, while highlighting its negative side. There were three reasons that made capitalism attractive. First, it brought remarkable economic progress by revolutionizing the means of production and developing technology as never before. It built and encouraged the growth of commerce and factories on a scale unknown before.

By the very range and extent of its activity, capitalism made its second contribution. It undermines national barriers. In its search for markets and raw materials, capitalism and the bourgeoisie crossed national boundaries and penetrated every corner of the world, drawing the most backward nations into their fold. Capitalism was cosmopolitan and international (Mukherjee, and Ramaswamy, 362). Being worldwide, the third achievement of capitalism was within its territorial confines. It eliminated the distinctions between towns and country, and enabled the peasants to come out of what Marx called “the idiocy of rural life.” Marx contended that, in spite of all these achievements, capitalism has outlived its use because of the sufferings and hardships it caused. It would have to yield itself to a new socialist organisation of production (Mukherjee, and Ramaswamy, 362). Marx outlined and examined the sufferings with capitalism, which were rooted in its origin: the eviction of workers from their land, the loss of their sources of income; an income that is based on starvation of wages, and most importantly, the creation of the proletariat. Hence, according to Mukherjee and Ramaswamy, 362:

The suffering required for the creation of the free-wage labourer was the first cost of capitalism. The exploitation of the proletariat could be

measured with the help of surplus value-the difference between the wage paid to the labourer, and the final price for which the product was sold. The rate of profit indicated the degree of exploitation. The capitalist squeezed the working class like a sponge to extract the last drop of profit. Exploitation was therefore the second disadvantage of capitalism. The third was the alienation of workers. To Marx, labour had to be satisfying and fulfilling, which was not possible under capitalism. The reason was the lack of control the workers had over productive process.

Marx asserted that capitalism contained within itself seeds of its own destruction. He rallied the working class under the call "workers of all countries unite," a phrase that he borrowed from Karl Schapper. Within capitalism, increase in monopolies led to growing exploitation, misery and pauperization of the working class. Simultaneously, as the working class increased in number, it became better organized and acquired greater bargaining skills. This initiated a revolutionary process, leading to a new socialist arrangement in which common possession replaced private ownership of the means of production (Johnson, 56).

Marx's Concept of Alienation

Up until the 1930 both Marx's sympathizers and his critics had viewed his philosophy primarily as a ponderous economic and social theory that purported to give a scientific analysis of the large-scale forces operating in human history. The bulk of what we knew about Marx's system, represented by his monumental work in *Das Kapital*, seemed to have little concern for the individual and ignored any issues of existential significance. In 1932, however, Marx's early, unpublished manuscripts, now known as the Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844, came to light, which necessitated a complete reassessment of Marx's ideas. In this series of essays, written when he was twenty-six, Marx spoke eloquently about the human condition and the sense of alienation that has swept over humanity. Paralleling similar concerns in the existentialists, Marx claimed that the happy optimism of the nineteenth century that resulted from its uncritical faith in science, technology, and human progress, rested on a rotten underside (Lawhead, 385).

Alienation is a state of being separated from one's true self. According to Marx (117), alienation, separation of the worker from himself, his species, fellow human beings, labour and the product of his labour, is inversely proportional to ownership of the means of production. One premise of this theory is that wage-labour creates surplus value that is the source of private property. Private properties, in turn, cause alienation, and was defined as owned income producing objects. This was the basis of the reason for the proletariat to have appropriated the means of production. Marx was motivated to solve the problem of alienation through communal ownership of the means of production, which was impossible for his theory of alienation, is physically untenable and thus his solution to alienation was wrong as a result of this (Russel, 385)

In earlier times, a person would toil long hard hours to cultivate the soil, construct a home, or build his fishing craft. He did not live a life of luxury, but he had the experience of meaningful labour. He owned his tools and materials, and he owned the product of his labour. It was the external embodiment of his individual, creative powers. But as capitalism developed, the workers relation to their labour changed. The means of production gradually fell into the hands of a few people. The majority, who were propertyless, had only one way to survive and that was to sell their labour as a commodity. This poses as a free exchange between the employer and the employee. However, the worker's lack of economic power

turns into a form of servitude. The problem is that if meaningful work is the fundamental defining quality of human life, and if our work is alienating, then we are alienated from ourselves (Lawhead, 385).

The Four Types of Alienation

According to Marx, (117), alienation was inversely proportional to ownership of the means of production, and wage-labour created surplus value that was the source of private property. Private property, being owned income producing objects, in turn caused alienation and acting upon this conclusion the proletariat was to appropriate the means of production. Marx insisted on “appropriation” and not destruction. This means that after the act of appropriation, the act of labour should no longer have been alienating. However, according to Marcuse “transition from capitalism to socialism was a political revolution; the proletariat destroyed the political apparatus of capitalism but retained the technological apparatus” (Marcus, 22). The power relationship was supposed to change under communism not the process of production, but in effect. Production continued as usual and alienation was carried over into communism because the process itself was not destroyed. The process had to be continued in order to continue production. Mandel noted that alienation would be inevitable and still exist after such appropriation (Mandel and George, 33)

Alienation from the Product of Labour

Based on the “fact of private property” and by following the path or “material process” of private property. Marx concluded that labour was alienated since it did not own what it produced. The product, or objectification of labour, is lost to the labourer and the labourer becomes poorer the more objects he creates because they take on a life separate from the worker who has no control over them. The workers production of surplus value for the owner of private property may surpass the value returned to him. Hence, according to Marx:

It is true that labour produces for the rich wonderful things-but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces-but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty- but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labour by machines-but some of the workers it throws back to a barbarous type of labour, and the other workers it turns into machines. It produces intelligence-but for the worker idiocy, cretinism (7).

Alienation from Economic Activity or the Labour Process

The second dimension of alienation describes the alienation of the labourer from the act of production or economic activity. Here, it is necessary to differentiate between two distinct forms of alienation from economic activity. The first form describes the external character of labour, which is not part of human nature and does not generate spiritual and physical energy (Marx, 514). This type of labour is intrinsically alien to the worker and is not practiced or affirmed during leisure periods. To the worker, it is “forced labour,” an agent without an end itself: it is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. The second form deals with the separation from private ownership and wage labour. Since labour belongs to the owner of the means of production rather than the labourer, the economic activity of the labourer is abstract, determined by others, and not liberating (Marx, 514). Here, Marx compares the alienation of labour to the alienation in religion where human independence is confronted by an external, divine or diabolical activity (514).

Alienation of Workers from Species-Being

For Karl Marx, the human is a species-being. In contrast to animals, humans act not only in their own interests, but also towards their own species (515). To Marx, the human is a social and working being, created as a representational species-being. Labour and productive life-freely practiced- is for Marx not merely a means of self-sufficiency but essential genus lifestyle. As labour evolves into simply a means of self-preservation and supply of food, the labourer becomes alienated from his species and the genius lifestyle becomes merely “an agent of individual life” (Thompson, 23).

Alienation of the Individual from Other Individual

Having been degraded themselves, the labourers view others as degraded also. They see their employer as merely a source of money and see one another as competitors for jobs and wages.” The increasing value of the world of things,” Marx argued proceeds in direct proportion to, the devaluation of the world of men. Labour, human potential and the genus lifestyle become the means of self-preservation (Marx, 71). Just as human interrelationship becomes a means rather than an end itself, so are individuals alienated from one another. As a result of alienated labour, the relationship of humans toward products, production and other humans is self-producing. It is important to note that Marx is not calling for piece meal adjustments in the way things are run. For example, he did not think a more equitable distribution of money was the solution. As he pointed out, an increase in wages would be nothing but better payment for the slave, and would not conquer either for the worker or for labour human status and dignity”. Hence, according to Lawhead, what is necessary is nothingless than a radical reorganization of the structure of power and economics in society (380).

Evaluation and Conclusion

We have seen in this paper that historically speaking, as Marx asserted, is the struggle between social classes; the rich and the poor, the privileged and the less privileged, the oppressor and the oppressed, the factory owners and the workers, to put it in Marx most preferably terms, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This is because in capitalist society, the economic minority exploit and dominate the economic majority. However, Marx argues that alienation and class struggle would not continue in the society, for capitalism is not a permanent feature of the society. Hence exploitation and alienation made possible the revolutionary transformation of capitalism. This will lead to the emergence of socialism”, the first stage of communism. Here the state takes over the means of production. However, this will eventually give way to the final stage of true communism, for a classless society was one of a socialized humanity. It is hard to deny that many of Marx’s comments about capitalism hit the target. One hundred years after the publication of the Communist Manifesto, Sidney Hook listed the features of capitalism described by Marx that are still on-going concerns today:

Economic centralization and monopoly, the cycle of boom and depression, unemployment and the effects of technological change, political and economic class wars, excessive specialization and division of labour, the triumph of materialistic and money values on the rest of our culture (Quoted in Lawhead, 396).

However, many of Marx’s predictions were off the Mark. Most significantly, he thought the collapse of the capitalist system was just around the corner. But capitalism seems to have a resiliency he could not have fathomed. The power of labour unions, the government’s

prosecution of monopolies, the extensive regulations governing the health and safety of workers, affirming action programs, the increased leisure of workers, and numerous employee benefits are just a few of the developments in the twentieth-century workplace that Marx never imagined would develop within capitalism. He seemed to assume that the only alternatives were a total laissez-faire economy or a total collectivism and did not allow for the mixed economies of today's world (Lawhead, 396).

Another problem is Marx's conception that workers were alienated from the products of their labour and from the labour process. The labourers' creations are appropriated by strangers as their private property to be turned into their profits. But for Marx to suggest that the labourer should own the product or the means of production was to promote appropriation of what the labourer did not create. This means that the labourer did not necessarily design the machinery it used to make product, design the product itself, or owns the materials used in making the product. However, Marx would have rather speak emphatically of non-commensurable payment of workers' wages, the excessive surplus value enjoy by the capitalists and the right of the workers not to be forced to labour excessively outside work hours and days(Lawhead, 385). Marx's theory of alienation is of immediate relevance to the Nigerian situation, especially in the area of non-payment and non-commensurable payment of workers'salary and wages by both the government and the capitalists, when compared to their counterparts in world class nations. The implication of this is that, the Nigerian salary structure is exploitative and alienative in nature. A typical example is the perpetual conflict between the federal government of Nigeria (FGN) and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASSU), concerning their salary structure. According to Igboin, the reality today, in spite of the October 2009 FGN-ASSU Agreement, a professor earns lesser than a local government councillor, let alone a senator. According to him, in 2010, Aluko had showed the wide discrepancy in the salaries of a senator in Nigeria vis-à-vis a professor and their counterparts in America (Igboin, 334)

Whereas a National Assembly member earns a 'legitimate' sum of about N88 million per annum, a professor earns a paltry sum of N 3.5 million. In the US, a senator earns \$169,000 per annum which is N25.4 millions; an American professor earns \$116,000or N17.4 million. When we weigh the differences that have occurred in the remuneration policy in Nigeria, it will be absurd to conclude that the package being offered is an improvement of what had been. It can be argued on the contrary that with the economic consideration at present, what universities' lecturers earn is far different from the reality on the ground. It is certainly this poor condition of service that led to the intractable problem of brain drain, and sale of hand outs. There is need for proper rethinking in order to find solution to the problem of non-commensurable payment of workers' salaries and wages, which manifest a sense of exploitation and alienation in Nigeria. It is in view of this that I will suggest a reworking of our political arena, not necessary along line of western democracy, but also those that suit us and our existential political reality. This will enable us to restructure our economic structure, for what organizes society for its developmental end is not purely economic but also political.

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