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# Marxism through African Eyes

*How Africa sees the Marxist interpretation of the African revolution*

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B. D. G. FOLSON

IT IS NOWADAYS becoming increasingly rare to come across a Marxist who is not also a Communist. The great divide is between Socialists or Social Democrats and Communists, including Trotskyites. Socialists tend more and more to disavow Marxism both in theory and in practice; so that when we speak of Marxist writings on African politics we are almost exclusively concerned with Communist writings. True in Africa itself both Sekou Toure and Kwame Nkrumah profess Marxism. (But neither of them, in truth, is a Marxist!)

When we therefore refer to Marxism here we refer to Marxism as modified by Lenin and incorporated in present-day communist theory.

Marxist writings in African politics have always started from the fact of Imperialism. That Africa has for a long time been the playground of Western Imperialism has been the starting point of these writings. This approach simplifies to a considerable extent the task of those Marxists who write on African politics, for Imperialism is a subject that has been widely elaborated in its own right in Marxist theory. It has, ever since Lenin wrote his pamphlet, "Imperialism, the Highest State of Capitalism", exercised a strong fascination for the Marxist mind. The theory is a rather simple one. Lenin, taking his cue from Engels's statement that imperialism had in his time become purely a branch of the Stock Exchange, and leaning heavily on Hobson and Hilferding, maintained that Imperialism was a manifestation of capitalism at its highest stage of development, that when capitalism had developed to a stage where industrial processes and industrial capitalists themselves are all dominated by finance capital then finance capital begins to roam about the earth in search of the highest possible rate of return and in this process secures the domination of vast regions

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of the earth, reducing them to mere appendages of the economics of the major countries from which finance-capital springs. Africa, it goes without saying, is one of these areas, and an important area at that.

BEGINNING FROM SOME SUCH TIME as the end of the Second World War, the obverse side of the theory has been pushing its way into the forefront of Marxism, that is the process of "dis-imperialism", the process of the disintegration of colonial authority and the achievement of independence by colonial territories. This, in Marxist theory, is also firmly linked with capitalism in western Europe and America. Dis-imperialism is simply a reflex of the disintegration of capitalism. Since Imperialism was only a manifestation of the greatest strength of capitalism it is only to be expected that with the decay of capitalism Imperialism will also be on the retreat; from which the Marxists also draw the conclusion that Imperialists on the retreat must also be evidence of decaying capitalism.

Historical materialism, that is Marxist philosophy of history, as is well known, does not purport to explain the evolution of any particular societies. It purports to explain the whole of the historical process. Imperialism is, therefore, not merely an isolated phenomenon to be studied and explained by itself: it is part of the historical process and has a definite place within this process. According to historical materialism, history moves from the pre-feudal or ancient stage to the feudal stage, then to the capitalist stage and, via the dictatorship of the proletariat, to the classless stage at which all evolution presumably stops. It is through the revolutionary exertion of the working-class that the classless society will be achieved and since it is only in this state that humanity truly realises itself it is only the working-class that is the true bearer of the interests of humanity, the true bearer of human progress. Now, Imperialism is at the stage where capitalism has realised its fullest potentialities and dis-Imperialism sets in with the decay of capitalism. But as we have seen this is the stage where the working-class comes into its own and assumes its historical destiny. We shall see that this greatly colours the Marxists' attitude to nationalist movements in Africa. But before we look at this let us look back at the whole theory as it is applied to Africa critically.

I AM NOT GOING TO EMBARK upon a really fundamental criticism of the whole theory of historical materialism as applied to Africa: I am not going to tread again the well-worn path of questioning the usefulness and the validity of explaining all that is going on in Africa in economic terms: to ask whether it makes sense to talk of the disintegration of capitalism in the West today; nor question the attempt to pre-determine the course of history in Africa. I am, merely, going to look at this Marxist interpretation of the African Revolution through African eyes. How does at least one African nationalist see this attempt to interpret the African scene in a Marxist way?

The first thing that strikes such a person is that Africans are completely denied the ability to make their own history in their own way. An autonomous history of Africa, affected, of course, by outside influence, is

denied. Everything that happens in Africa is a mechanical response to change in the economic structure of Western Europe. Imperialism was the result of a certain stage of capitalism in Western Europe and so is dis-Imperialism. The landmarks of African history lie outside Africa. Neither the independence of Ghana nor the Accra Conference of 1958, nor the Bandung Conference nor even in the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 is recognised as a landmark. True, these are sometimes mentioned and given some prominence, but they are already subordinate to the true landmarks of African history which lie outside African history itself and, on any common-sense view, are only indirectly connected with African history. Indeed, it appears that in Marxist writings only one landmark in African history is recognised, and that is the great October Revolution in Russia in 1918! "The Great October Revolution," says Professor Potekhin, "was the first important landmark in Africa's march to the World Stage". This view of the significance of the October Revolution to the evolution of modern Africa cannot but strike an African as rather far fetched.

THIS INTERPRETATION OF AFRICAN POLITICS smacks of the worst type of imperialism, for it is the imperialism of the mind. Not only does it deny the African any ability to make a history of his own; it also denies him the ability to interpret this history in his own way. For historical materialism is not supposed by the Marxists to be only one way, or a possible way of interpreting history but the *only* true way of interpreting history; it is supposed to possess exclusive truth. Such intellectual imperialism is unknown in the West. No one in the West ever did make an attempt to impose one particular interpretation of African history on all others. Where an interpretation of such a kind is embarked upon at all there is bound to be disagreement and no attempt can be made to impose any one interpretation on all. Thus the African too is at liberty to place what interpretation he likes on his history.

Nor is the African merely denied the right to make and interpret his own history; he is, indeed denied the right to choose the ends that he seeks to achieve. It is quite possible for Africans to hold the view that stratification of society, against which Marxism as it came to us from

# COMMENT

## Lessons for Zimbabwe

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WHEN SOME EUROPEAN fortune-hunters found out that the imposed Federation was nearing its grave, they looked somewhere for a paradise.

The Federation itself has been sent to its grave by some white extremists who wanted to see the government stay in the hands of the white minority. The architects of the Federation had refused to put partnership into practice and did very little to legislate against racial discrimination.

The evils of racialism contributed to the downfall of the Federation. The Federal constitution was discriminatory in essence. The number of African seats were very few in the House, and this destroyed the whole conception of non-racialism. In its lifetime, the Federation put up many expensive primary and secondary schools for Europeans, "Coloured" and Asians. African schools which were under the Territorial management were inferior indeed. Africans saw and resented this.

Equality of opportunity for all was preached, but never practised. The Federation gave opportunity to a privileged few to

enrich themselves at the expense of the majority. One's bank balance should not have been the criterion to assess the dignity of a human being.

The Federation fostered gradualism which the Africans found to be a detestable pest in their advancement.

SOUTHERN RHODESIA HAS STILL a tougher time to face ahead. It still has Europeans who believe that they are, by the virtue of their skin, inherently superior in everything including intelligence, and that the Africans are inferior because of inherent causes -- the main one being the skin.

Many average Europeans in Southern Rhodesia clamour for preferential treatment in public places, hotels, cafes etc. The feeling of superiority which dominates the daily conduct of the privileged few must be discouraged. Southern Rhodesia must legislate against all discriminatory practices in all places; must repeal the vicious Land Apportionment Act.

What is imposed is always doomed to failure and the winner is, in most cases, the one upon whom things are forced. Therefore, segregation in Southern Rhodesia must be outlawed; community development must be shelved, and all laws that discriminate must be scrapped without delay. Education must be under one Ministry so that it will give equal opportunity to all students irrespective of skin.

Africans want now to be advanced politically, economically, and socially. To say that Africans in Southern Rhodesia are not yet ready for the Government is another lesson that must be learned from the fall of the Federation. If Southern Rhodesia boasts of being one of the countries in the forefront of African education, why then, are its majority unable to rule themselves? When shall the majority be ready to govern themselves?

SOME EUROPEANS IN ZAMBIA, Malawi, and even in Zimbabwe never thought for a moment that the governments in the two northern countries would be in the hands of the African nationalists, who were constantly referred to, in most cases, as extremists and power-hungry leaders. Such things are inevitable here in Southern Rhodesia. Southern Rhodesia must learn from the harmful mistakes of the late Federation.

M. J. CHAITA ●

*Expressions of independent opinion are welcomed as "Comment".*

Marx and Engels was such an eloquent protest, ought not to be permitted in African society. On any rational view this is the policy best calculated to prevent the tensions, the iniquities and the injustices that accompanied industrialisation in Western Europe. Moreover a policy like this would have a lot to recommend it from the point of view of consideration for humanity, a consideration that should be dear to the heart of every African for Africans have most to gain from it. But this is anathema to the Marxist, for to him one cannot, in the words of Joyce Cary, "argue with the Dialectic."

We must allow stratification in African society; we must produce a bourgeois to be butchered at the Revolution; we must produce a landless and property-less proletariat to smash up the state, which is to be set up in the Marxism sense, and usher in the millennium of the classless society; for all these are the injunction of the Dialectic and they all have to be carried out if true humanity is to be realised.

SINCE THE DIALECTIC IS INFALLIBLE it has also to determine the attitude of Marxists to African nationalists and nationalist movements. We have seen that on the theory of historical materialism, the period of dis-imperialism is the period of the decay of capitalism and therefore the time during which the working-class step into inheritance. When the Marxist therefore comes face to face with a nationalist movement in Africa which is not a working-class movement or not led by working-class people or avowed Marxists he is apt to look upon the movement and the leaders with suspicion if not with outright contempt: he takes them simply to be the stooges of imperialism.

In 1954, for example, Dr. Potekhin maintained that Nkrumah and the C.P.P. were facades behind which the Imperialists continued to rule the Gold Coast.

They were, in other words, not true nationalists who really wanted freedom for their country. At the moment there is a split among the Marxists in their attitude towards non-working class nationalists, who, it must be admitted, are clearly in a majority. The Chinese are not in a mood to water down the purity of Marxist doctrine. They rigidly stick to the doctrine, following the Engels, Lenin and Stalin, that it is only when the working classes have taken over political power that colonial territories will be liberated. From this the Chinese conclude that there is no reason to tolerate the bourgeois nationalists for a day. The Chinese Marxists are therefore in a state of permanent antagonism towards the present non-working class nationalists alike in Africa and in Asia. The Russian Marxists, however, have changed their tactics. They are prepared to countenance bourgeois or non-working class nationalists. This change came over the Russians with the Bandung Conference when it became quite clear that the non-working class nationalists can also be sincere anti-imperialists. But it must be stressed that the Russians merely tolerate these nationalists only so long as there is no effective working-class leadership or Marxist leadership. They have not abandoned for a moment their belief in the ultimate communist or Marxist victory which will usher in the reign of the working-class, and ultimately the universal millennium of a classless society. ●

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## My First Five Years

*Encounters with a School Principal*

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J. AMIE

WHEN ONE LEAVES University to take up a teaching post in a high school one enters a new and exciting world. Firstly, one has to adapt oneself to routine school life which differs markedly from the carefree life of campus. One feels a sense of exhilaration in contemplating the receipt of one's first official cheque, although this feeling is sadly tempered by the realisation that the particular amount to be received will be exactly R60 per month less than that to be received by one's former fellow-students who had written the very same examinations as oneself, but who happened to have a fairer pigmentation of skin. Then there is the serious matter of appearing regularly before an audience of students and trying to convey facts, ideas and concepts to them. Not to mention the prospects of working together professionally and extra-murally with fellow-teachers and a principal. How would things turn out? I did not have long to wait . . .

On the very first day of school towards the end of January, 1959, a staff meeting was held where the principal welcomed new staff and generally spoke about the school and its administration. At this meeting the teachers received timetables on which appeared the subjects and classes to which they had been allotted. To my surprise, I noticed that I had one class for religious instruction.

Now, I am a scientific humanist and can never agree to teaching religious instruction.

That evening I delivered a letter to the principal in which I requested to be exempt from any religious duties on the grounds of conscientious objections, for which the Ordinance makes provision. While reading my letter the principal was visibly shaken and told me bluntly that if he had known that I had "atheistic" ideas he would never have appointed me. My educational qualifications seemed to be of no importance.

He would have to raise the matter with his circuit inspector and would let me know the outcome. But what, he asked, would happen if they could not accommodate me? I knew that an adjustment to the timetable was possible, so refused to reply, leaving the problem entirely to him.

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*J. AMIE is a nom-de-plume.*