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# Marxism through African Eyes

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B. D. G. FOLSON

THE RIGIDITY OF THE MARXIST ATTITUDE has led Marxists into a large dose of self-deception, and may in the future lead to dangerous misunderstandings.

They are apparently of the opinion that they are fundamentally at one with African nationalists and if anything at all they are in a more advanced stage. But it requires only a little closer examination of the facts to realise that there is a divergence between the Marxists and African nationalists. The Russians and Chinese Marxists on their theory cannot, by definition, be Imperialists. Foreign aid from the West therefore is Imperialism whilst theirs is not. Americans cannot be sincere about their anti-colonialism; they are merely treacherously trying to substitute their own Imperialism for that of their allies. The satellite countries cannot possibly be in colonial dependence on Russia. The Suppression of the Hungarian Revolt in 1956 could not but be in the interest of the Hungarians themselves whereas Mau Mau was an innocuous religious society whose atrocities were "imagined" and activities "invented" by the Imperialists.

Quite clearly all these are not shared by African nationalists. The "neo-colonialism" of Nasser and the "new Imperialism" of Nkrumah are clearly conceived of as being capable of coming both from the West and the East. Nasser has shown in many speeches that he is not much interested in the Marxist idea of the ultimate goal of colonial territories. What he sees is Communist pretensions in the Middle East and these he has denounced as rigorously as he has denounced Western Imperialism. To African nationalists whether foreign aid is an attempt to establish neo-colonialism or not depends not on its source but on the strings attached to it. That to the African nationalists the Marxists of the Eastern bloc are no more reliable than the West is shown by the fact that even the

most militant and left-wing of the nationalists do not ally themselves with the East but adopt a policy of neutrality between the two power blocs. This has been demonstrated time and again at the United Nations. On the Congo question especially even the most militant of African nationalists, Sékou Touré and Dr. Nkrumah, repeatedly repudiated Marxist analyses of the Eastern Communist bloc and as a result, in most of the voting where unanimity could not be achieved, the communist bloc every now and then found themselves completely isolated. In their internal policies, too, these African nationalists show clearly how suspicious they are of Marxists generally.

NASSER HAS HAD NO SCRUPLES in putting his communists in gaol even during periods when his relations with the Soviet Union may be said to be very good. Almost all the nationalists when they have gained control of political power in their countries have not hesitated to put stringent restrictions on travel to Communist countries by their citizens, restrictions which are much severer than any on travel to Western countries which officially repudiate Marxism. A Ghana citizen, for example, who wants to visit any non-Communist country, whether he is outside or inside Ghana, has no difficulty in getting his passport validated for that particular country. But if he wants to visit a Communist country and he is outside Ghana, his passport has to be sent all the way to Accra for a special decision to be made before he is either allowed or disallowed, and, indeed, a very good reason has to be given before the passport is endorsed.

Above all, even the most militant Nationalists make sure that their economics are not tied to the economics of the Eastern countries. Economic aid from the Eastern countries is carefully balanced by economic aid from the West.

The present-day Marxists claim to speak in the main of the toiling masses, and they are apparently sincere about this. But they cannot go anywhere near succeeding in this unless they bring their thinking about African politics in line with that of the African nationalists who undoubtedly wield the support of their peoples. This cannot be achieved unless it is recognised that Marxist-Leninist historical materialism is inapplicable to Africa, for the very simple reason that the class structure that it presupposes does not exist in Africa and is never likely to assume the importance that it assumed in Western Europe in the 19th century. Indeed, the insistence on the class-structure and class struggles in colonial territories is not wholly compatible with an interpretation of dis-imperialism which refers the process to change in the class struggle in Europe.

Bandung proved to the Marxists (at least in Russia) that bourgeois nationalists can also be anti-Imperialists. This alone is sufficient to establish the case for a revision of the Marxist approach to African politics.

THESE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MARXISTS AND AFRICAN nationalists should not be taken as something that is of secondary importance, or merely practical divisions due to the pressure of events and which are therefore compatible with a fundamentally similar approach. They are, I think, due to the fact that Marxism is fundamentally alien

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to African society in general and to the thinking of virtually all African nationalists of any weight.

If we take four very uncompromising and influential African nationalists, Jomo Kenyatta, Dr. Namdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré, and analyse their thoughts we see that they are all fundamentally opposed to Marxism.

Jomo Kenyatta's uncompromising defence of Kikuyu culture and traditions is well known, but from a Marxist standpoint most of this culture is reactionary, blocking the way to progress. On the question of land for example (and land is the most important economic asset still in the life of many an African), Kenyatta maintains that in relation to his tribe a man is the inalienable owner of his land, but that in relation to his family or immediate dependants, he is no more than a partner or a trustee for the land. This clearly is a tradition that is anti-collectivism.

Much the same thing can be said of Dr. Namdi Azikiwe, the present Governor General of Nigeria and a militant Africanist of long standing. His recently published speeches bear ample testimony to the fact that the cast of his mind is overwhelmingly anti-Marxist. The class-struggle, the indispensable base of social analysis for any Marxist is completely absent from his thinking. "This country," he says, "should not condone the stultification of its indigenous political philosophy by giving special representation to a particular stratum of any section of its community."

He repudiates violence. And, moreover, he has a profound respect for private enterprise and the citizen's right to the enjoyment of his private property untrammelled by the restrictions of the State.

Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré are in a category apart in that they proclaim themselves to be Marxists. Nevertheless, a closer look at their thought makes it quite clear that they are not Marxists at all. The evidence in Nkrumah's case, as in the case of Azikiwe, is clear in his collection of speeches recently published.

AS IN THE CASE OF Azikiwe, the concept of the class-struggle is completely alien to his way of thinking. He speaks in terms of the people or of the masses. He does not look forward to the abolition of classes but of equal opportunity for all "regardless of class, tribe, colour or creed". He does not believe in economic determinism. "The history of the past ten years," he says, "has shown indubitably that political power is the inescapable prerequisite to economic and social power." Political power must precede economic emancipation. The furthest he goes is to admit that economic distress often precedes political change and "some would go as far as to say that it is the main cause of it". Moreover, he is always quick to maintain that he is also a Christian, and his belief in a God that guides the destiny of people comes out clearly in his speeches. ". . . nothing in the world can be done unless it has the support of God . . . let us now ask for God's blessing . . . and give thanks to Almighty God for having led us through obstacles and difficulties . . . to the end of our trouble today". This was at midnight on March, 1957, on the eve of Independence and it was per-

haps the most dramatic speech he had made up to that time, but it sounds strange on the lips of a "Marxist".

IT IS NOT, at first sight, easy to suggest that Sékou Touré is not a Marxist, for of all the Nationalist leaders in Africa he is perhaps the one that speaks like a real Marxist. He believes in the Class Struggle and uses this tool in his analysis of the African scene on much the same pattern as the communists. But the class-struggle in the end is only an unnecessary tool in the hands of Sékou Touré, for he maintains that the colonial problem facing Africa now overshadows all others and the need is for the closing of ranks, the union of all classes to overthrow colonialism. One of the resolutions passed at the 1950 Congress of the General Union of Negro African Workers, at Conakry, maintains that ". . . colonial domination makes all reference to the class-struggle irrelevant. It renders it essential to avoid the dissipation of strength in doctrinal conflicts". Sékou Toure gave his blessing to this resolution. Indeed, according to him "the real driving force of history is the people" and not classes or clashes between classes as an orthodox Marxist would maintain.

NOR IS THIS ALL. Almost all African nationalists are at pains to explain that their policies and actions are not primarily dictated by any theory but are responses to conditions in Africa itself. Even when they prefer Socialism or Marxism, they are quick to add that this is Socialism or Marxism as conditioned by African society. "African Socialism" is becoming an increasingly popular term used as well by Sékou Touré and Nkrumah and by Leopold Senghor. In Ghana an attempt is being made to weld the different facets of this African Socialism into a coherent political philosophy known as "Nkrumaism". A recent authoritative exposition of this philosophy shows that it wears its Marxism thin.

In other words, Marxist language is used to express an essentially African ideology. It is not accidental that the sub-title of Nkrumah's *I Speak of Freedom* is "A Statement of African Ideology". The same desire to be African rather than anything else is true of those militant trade unionists who would be Marxists if Marxism had any fascination for the African mind. As far back as 1959 Sékou Touré argued that African trade unions should disaffiliate from the three main world trade union movements, namely the I.C.F.T.U., the W.F.T.U. and the W.F.C.T.U. The All-African trade union conference at Casablanca brought this idea to fruition.

The conference passed a resolution calling upon all trade unions in Africa to disaffiliate from all other national trade union movements and join together in forming an All-African Trade Union Federation.

ALL THIS IS NOT TO MAINTAIN that there is no part of Africa where the Marxist analysis is applicable. The present multi-racial societies are almost copy-book examples of stratified societies where Marxism is so appropriate. The division between the races almost coincides with the economic divisions within the societies with the Africans at the bottom and the Whites at the top. Where there are

coloureds, as in South Africa, or Indians as in Southern Africa generally, they are in the middle position.

In other words, the Africans are generally the proletariat and the peasantry in these societies. There they are, therefore, most likely to develop revolutionary tendencies. In Algeria they have already erupted violently. Nevertheless, African nationalists have almost to a man eschewed Marxism or Communism with the possible exception of Mr. Oginga Odinga of Kenya. It is remarkable that in South Africa, where the Africans have been conscious of their unprivileged position longest and where the proletarian element is greatest, the most militant nationalists to spring up, the Pan-Africanist Congress, have been prompt with denunciations of communism.

There is evidence that Marxists are coming increasingly to recognise that the rigid application of their theory to African politics is unrealistic and does less than justice to the facts. The working class is recognised as the minority that it is, the peasantry is recognised as the broadest mass basis of the national liberation movement and the bourgeois and "many intermediate strata" are recognised as playing special roles. Most significantly the power and role of education are recognised. These concessions make for a more flexible and more convincing analysis of the role of classes in the national liberation movements in Africa. But the whole analysis is still vitiated by the basic weakness of historical materialism as applied to Africa. It is confined within the boundaries of historical process which is to end with the dictatorship of the proletariat and it still attributes overwhelming importance to the role of the working-class. The working-class is still the only class capable of carrying the struggle through to the end, whereas the peasantry although it forms "the broadest mass basis" is only "a tremendous potential force", the bourgeois are inconsistent and vacillating and the intermediate strata take wavering positions.

Perhaps it is Jack Woddis who has made the most radical break with historical materialism in his writings on Africa, although he writes from a completely Marxist standpoint. In his recent book on Africa he goes into a great deal of detail of the economic conditions of Africa itself for the causes of the present anti-colonial revolt and he gives an analysis of the class-structure which tries to encompass the known facts. But on two points he breaks decisively with the usual Marxist view. Firstly, he makes no attempt to suggest that the revolt is the result of economic activity in Europe, although he recognises the impact that Europe has had and is having on Africa. Secondly, he refrains from any attempt to put the African Revolution in any predetermined pattern in history. This is to say no more than that he abandons historical materialism although he retains the class-struggle as a tool of social and political analysis. This is, far and above, the most realistic Marxist analysis of the African Scene.

Jack Woddis has, indeed, pointed to the path that Marxists have to tread in their writings on African politics if they are to retain any influence over African minds. In particular, Marxists have to take seriously the abandonment of the rigid application of historical materialism to Africa. It is clear that what present-day Marxists mean by the dictatorship of the proletariat is not what Marx

meant by it, but a People's Democracy and a "people's democracy" secures not the dictatorship of the proletariat but of the Communist Party or anyone who establishes his ascendancy over the Party. And the corollary follows that the proletarian revolution of present-day Marxists is not the same as the proletarian revolution of Karl Marx. To the latter, it was a revolution of the immense majority in the interest of the immense majority, whereas to the present-day Marxists it is a conspiratorial seizure of power by a coterie of people. And those who take this seriously, work within the international communist movement which is directed from Moscow. In the end, therefore, historical materialism, when applied to Africa, is no more than a theory which has the aim of substituting Soviet domination for Western domination.

No African nationalist is taken in by this. ●

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## In Aden goats

*In Aden goats  
Morosely pick among the dusty stones  
And skinny Yemeni  
Doze beneath their turbans and the Muslim moon.  
And blue from dingy cellars  
The shish-kebab smoke whips  
Salivations from the  
Famished streets.  
Blind men shuffle through rubbish,  
Prodding the pavement sleepers  
With their blinking sticks.  
Here are two: the father is leading the son.  
Clutching the morbid shadows, a crippled dwarf  
Laughs horribly  
As the moon un.masks his giant head.*

*In Aden the back-streets, showing their sores  
And deformities beg.  
On the garish front you may buy all kinds  
Of optical goods  
At reduced prices —  
But the ragged Yemeni blown in from the desert  
Sleep in the streets  
Like heaps of rubbish.  
It is said that they queue for a drug,  
That makes them forget  
And endure  
When what they need is:  
A leader.*

DAVID GILL