A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF KARL MARX’S MATERIALISTIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical appraisal of Karl Marx’s theory of historical materialism and a deployment of its emphasis on economic factor in addressing Nigeria’s socio-economic situation. As we applaud Marx’s materialistic approach to history as an account that is rich enough to promote contextual understanding of past events in various part of the world, we identify its limitation in providing a scientific framework that could serve as the sole interpretation of world history. In this paper, we exposed Marx’s explanation which holds that it is simply the human-productive forces that drives history. Since there are many interpretations of historical materialism among Marxist’s scholars, we limit our reference to ‘historical materialism’ in this essay strictly to the theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Therefore, we ensure that our discourses are extrapolated from their primary writings and direct our comment towards their ideology by recent studies. Meanwhile, we consider the influence of Hegelian dialectics and Feuerbach’s materialism on the formation of Marx’s theory of historical materialism. This paper, based on our awareness of the recent works of historians and philosophers like Richard Tarnas, Lyotard, and Foucault, argues that even though there might not be an objective or a singular interpretation of history, and that some unconscious forces and tendencies might be playing their own powerful role in shaping human history, the economic superstructure cannot be ignored.

Keywords: historical materialism, socio-economic situation, dialectics, history, superstructure.

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1 A Marxist might either be someone who holds all the beliefs that Marx himself thought were his most important ideas or someone who can trace the ancestry of his most important beliefs back to Marx.

2 This contention is based on the fact that Marx and Engel’s discourse is different from Marxists’ discourses – with variation along different versions or school of thought. Since according to Sabirov (1987: 289), Marxism is defined as the revolutionary teaching of Marx, Engels and lenin, an integral, scientific system of philosophicel, economic and socio-political views expressing the outlook of the working class.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

Marx is obviously a ‘world-historical’ figure on the basis that his thoughts are deeply rooted in world history, and his unique account of history cannot be ignored in any theory of historicism. The world, as we know it today, has turned into a global village such that occurrences, happenings, and events in various nations can have a global outlook as it influences other part of the world.

The questions Marx tried to address in his theory include: What exactly shapes the direction of history? Are events happening in various parts of our world interconnected? Could there be a uniform factor that governs the direction of events in all parts of the world? Is the meaning and direction found in history determined by materialistic or idealistic factors? Could any of the existing theories of historicism survive the test of events in our contemporary time? Marx, through his theory of historical materialism provided reasonable answers that still provide a framework for historical and social reflection on the past events within the human race.

To decode Marx’s conception of history, it is essential to understand his conception of man and his society. Man’s consciousness, according to Marx, led him to production – which is a necessary activity for self subsistence.

As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.\(^3\)

Man, by necessity, finds his material life within a particular mode of production. Marx asserted that “the further back we go into history, the more the individual, and therefore, the producing individual

seems to depend on and contribute a part of a large whole”\(^4\). Thus, he believes that man is not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society\(^5\). Well, this is true on the ground that there cannot be a possibility of production by isolated individual outside of society or the development of language without individuals living together and talking to one another. Our material condition therefore relies on our productive capacities, a context in which mankind act as the subject of production while nature becomes the object.

The pertinent question as this point is: How do general historical conditions affect production and what part does it play at all in the course of history? How do the other instruments of production, such as capital and labour, enter into the whole picture of the material condition of man? How does human society develop? What are its driving forces? Are the changes in society accidental or are they dictated by necessity, by objective laws? If society's development is causally conditioned, what is the chief cause, the foundation of social life?\(^6\)

The attempt to provide answers to these questions led to the formation of the ideas and laws that constitute Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ materialistic account of history. Meanwhile, we shall examine the ideological antecedents that informed the central idea of historical materialism. By this statement, we are simply referring to the two blocks upon which the basic tenets of Marx’s account of history were built: Hegel’s dialectics and Feuerbach’s Materialism.

### 2.0 HEGELIAN DIALECTICS

To every ideology, there is always a philosophical underpinning; in other words, most ideologists often have metaphysical and epistemological assumption and foundation upon which their theory is built. In giving an account of the social history of mankind, Marx deployed his philosophical theory: *Dialectical Materialism* – which is an alternative ontological theory towards the understanding of reality. It will be pertinent at this point to discuss his materialistic interpretation of history along the line of the influence from Hegel’s dialectics and Feuerbach’s materialism.

The underlying ideas behind Hegel’s dialectical method, as process of thinking, is that mankind is separated or alienated from the Absolute, and the historical process is man’s gradual movement towards the Absolute, or in Hegel’s mind, God. For Hegel, it is the dialectical process that will bring them together over the course of history, and the state of reality where man and the Absolute are reunited is the end of history\(^7\). In other words, the newer and truer forms of reality that leads man to the end of history are created through the interaction between the thesis and antithesis — a sort of contradiction. In dialectics, contradictions are the oppositions that are necessary for and yet destructive of each other. This enable the thesis and antithesis to compete with each other until a tipping-point is reached and the existing thesis is overthrown and replaced with the synthesis. Thus, the actors of dialectic are the thesis, antithesis and synthesis.

It should be noted that in the formation of the synthesis, both the thesis and antithesis contributed; and the dialectical process continues as this synthesis becomes the new thesis — which is on a higher level of development or understanding than the previous thesis. How? This new thesis was able to combine the good of both the thesis and antithesis, thereby allowing the thesis to benefit from the contradiction. For Hegel, this newly formed thesis faces another antithesis, and as they interact, the process will start all over again until another synthesis is formed. Hegel believed that this process continues until a thesis is formed where no antithesis or contradiction exists — that is actually the point when the Absolute is reached.

How then did Marx apply this Hegelian dialectics? Marx (who was said to have ‘stood Hegel on his feet’) actually tried to locate Hegel’s thesis and antithesis in the material world. As a materialist, he believes that it is the action of men, not ideas, that move them closer to the Absolute. For Marx, this ‘Absolute’ is not ‘a kind of deity’ but a connotation of ‘Freedom’.

### 3.0 FEUERBACH’S MATERIALISM

Marx, though inspired by the materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach (Hegel’s former student), considered it inadequate. In his eleven \textit{Theses on Feuerbach}, he considered Feuerbach’s materialism a ‘contemplative’ one. For Feuerbach and other materialists before Marx, the things, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object or of intuition, but not as human sensuous activity, practice,

\(^7\) \textit{C.f.} Kaleb Shimp, “The Validity of Karl Marx’s Theory of Historical Materialism” in \textit{Major Theories in Economics}, Spring 2009, p.36
not subjectivity. But for Marx, men are the products of circumstances and upbringing, such that changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing. This is on the basis that man changes his circumstances, just as the educated himself needed to be educated.

It should be noted here that Hegel’s starting point is ‘abstract thinking’; Feuerbach’s own is ‘sensuous contemplation’; while Marx’s own is ‘sensuous and practical activity’. Unlike Feuerbach, whose materialism proclaims isolated individuals, Marx’s materialism promotes social relations:

Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of man. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations.

Furthermore, Marx’s materialism advocated for socialized humanity. He said that “The standpoint of old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social humanity.” Thus, Marx moves from naturalism to materialism in order to promote praxis or action.

4.0 UNDERSTANDING MARX’S THEORY OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

For a proper understanding of Marx’s theory of historical materialism, a thorough explanation of certain concepts and categories is required. Such concept include: Mode of production, Forces of Production and Relation of Production.

4.1 Mode of Production

Since historical change or development is seen as a transition from one mode of production to another, Marx had to explain the past by identifying three essential modes of production:

a. The Ancient Mode of Production: with classes of the slave owners (as ruling class) and the slaves (as the lower class)

b. Feudalism: with classes of Land owners (as ruling class) and the serfs (as the lower class)

c. Capitalism: with classes of Capitalists (as the ruling class) and the working class (as the lower class)

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9 Ibid., p. 570
10 C.f., Ibid., p. 571
11 That is why Marxism is seen as the ‘philosophy of praxis’
The mode of production leads to division of labour, which invariably leads to various forms of ownership. These forms, in relation to the three modes of production listed above, are: Tribal Ownership, Ancient Communal and State Ownership, Feudal or Estate Ownership/Property respectively. In towns, where we have industries and commerce, we see individuals/classes such as the Masters, the Apprentices, the Journeyman, and the Casual labourer. While in the country, we find the Nobility (as the ruling class), the Princes, the Clergy and the Peasants\(^\text{12}\). The factors in Material Production are: The Productive Forces, and the Relations of Production.

### 4.2 The Productive Forces

The productive forces are the means of production, and above all the instruments of labour created by society and the people who produce the material wealth. It determines the relations of man to nature and his power over it. *The working people* are the principal element of the productive forces.

### 4.0 The Relations of Production

Relations of production are based on the *form of ownership*, i.e., the relation of people to the means of production—the land, its mineral resources, forests, waters, raw materials, factory buildings, instruments of labour and so on. On the form of ownership depends the dominating or subordinate *position of various social groups in production*, their relations in the production process or, as Marx put it, the mutual exchange of their activity. If property is publicly owned (if the means of production belong to the working people), relations of production assume the nature of cooperation and mutual assistance between workers free of exploitation, as is the case under socialism. If property is privately owned (if the means of production belong to the exploiting minority) the relations of production are relations of domination, subordination and exploitation (for example, of capitalism). Since the working people in an antagonistic class society are deprived of the means of production they are forced to work for the exploiters who own these means.\(^\text{13}\)

At this point, it is vivid that Marx believes that history can be divided into discrete periods, or epochs, and that each epoch has its own distinctive economic dynamics. They nevertheless differs in relation to what drives the transition from one epoch to another—whether it is class struggle or property


\(^{13}\) C.f., *Ibid.*, p. 17
Before we delve into his theory of historical materialism, we need to raise the alarm that there are many interpretations of historical materialism among Marxist’s scholars, but our discourse below will be limited to our understanding of this theory espoused by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

5.0 HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

As discussed above, historical materialism has two major components: Dialectical (unlike Feuerbach mechanical materialism) and Historical (unlike Montesquieu’s materialism). The basic premise of historical materialism is that people play the decisive role in social development or that society’s spiritual life depends on economic, material relations between people. Meanwhile, it should be noted that Marx never used the phrase ‘historical materialism’ to describe his method; Engel did.

The fundamental proposition of historical materialism can be summed up in a sentence: “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.” Historical Materialism asserts that economic forces are the primary forces that propel men through history as social classes interact. The class struggles between the ruling and the lower classes of each mode of production provide the contradiction that causes the dialectical process to work. Those two classes struggle against each other until one eventually wins and become the new ruling class.

From this new ruling class, another lower class develops, continuing the process. It should however be noted that these classes develops as a result of conflict between the productive force and productive relations in every mode of production. Since productive forces are always changing and improving as men labour in the world, the division of labour also grows and men find new and better

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way to master the environment. In other words, the dialectical relationship between the ruling and the lower classes develops out of private property and the presence of a surplus.

The contradiction of classes culminates in social revolution, in which the lower class overthrows the ruling class and forms new relation of production that are better suited to work with the productive forces. Thus, the superstructure changes with the relations of production and the new relations of production and superstructure serve the interest of the new ruling class. The new thesis remains in existence until there exist another incompatibility between the productive relations and productive force, and results in a clash between classes as the antagonism begins again.

According to Marx, history is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity. He opined further that the more the original isolation of the separate nationalities is destroyed by the advanced mode of production, by intercourse and by the natural division of labour between various nations arising as a result, the more history becomes world history. 19

Thus, we have world-historical facts and occurrences. This implies that the transformation of history into world history is by no means a mere abstract act on the part of “self-consciousness”, the world spirit, or of any other metaphysical entity as posited by the idealist (particularly Hegel), but a material, empirically verifiable act. 20 For Marx, and from an empirical point of view, it is actually the enormous power of the ‘world market’ that enslaves individuals in the course of history 21.

Who are the history-makers? It is neither those outstanding individuals—kings, military leaders, scholars, etc. nor some great men that make history. For Marx and Engels, it is the masses, the working people that are the real makers of history. 22 Meanwhile, it must be stated that French bourgeois historians (Guizot, Thierry, Mignet) pointed to the existence of opposite classes and the class struggle in society. The British bourgeois economists (Smith and Ricardo) tried to find in economic life a basis for the existence of classes. The Utopian Socialists (Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen) anticipated individual features of future communist society.

Also, a big contribution to the theory of social development was made by Belinsky, Herzen, Chernyshevsky and other Russian revolutionary democrats of the 19th century. Their ideas about the role of economic life in social development, about the people as the makers of history, the irreconcilability of the class interests of the exploited and the exploiters, the class character of philosophy, literature, art, and so on, were profound for their time.

To conclude this section, we need to highlight the fact that historical materialism studies the *most general* laws of social development. As an integral part of the Marxist-Leninist world outlook, historical materialism furnishes a scientific, dialectical-materialist interpretation of phenomena of social life. It enables us to understand what role the people and individuals play in history, how classes and the class struggle arose, how the state appeared, why social revolutions occur and what is their significance in the historical process, and a number of other general problems of social development.²³

### 6.0 CONCLUSION: APPLICATION OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM TO AN ANALYSIS OF NIGERIA’S SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION.

In this essay, we have been able to show how Marx’s theory of historical materialism uses the evolution of productive forces and class struggle to explain history – specifically world history. We noticed that his theory is based upon the primacy of economic forces in social change throughout history, and that these economic forces will continue to transform the world until its culmination in communism. Meanwhile, events after the death of Marx have shown that his prediction of a communist society was somewhat misplaced after the demise of socialism and communism in the late 20th century. Also, his economic interpretation of history denies the individuality and uniqueness of history and reduces it to an automatic repetition of abstract formulae.

Meanwhile, Marx’s doctrine of historical materialism needs to be appraised for calling our attention to economic factor, amidst other factors, of the historical process. Though, he has been accused of saying that the economic motives dominate political, social and religious elements of the society. For

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²³ V. G. Afansayev, *op. cit*, p. 2
example, Benedette Croce has said that interpreting the historical process solely from that point of view would lead to ‘darkness’ and ‘confusion’²⁴.

Using Marx’s lens to take a panoramic view of Nigeria’s history, we notice that most of our historical analyses focus on political transitions from a “pre-colonial era”, to “colonial era”, then to “post colonial” era (both the military regime and the present democratic regime). Analysts seem to be blinded to the fact that the motives behind the quest for political powers by the ruling individuals or group of people in each era, which invariably affects the social structure, actually lies in economic motives. Even the so called quest for readjustment in the socio-political structure is actually driven by the need to have equity in the access to the forces of production – economic interest as Marx displayed in his theory of historical materialism.

Meanwhile, it must be noted that Marx’s historical materialism cannot explain all history; it can only be valid when used in the way Marx and Engel’s did and only in relation to the historical instances available to them. Once again, let us take a look at the material condition of our Nigerian society. Questions that would come to mind include: How did we get to where we are? How were some people able to acquire landed properties in Lagos, Abuja and other big cities, others are left homeless or frustrated tenants across the city? How did some very rich business men get the capital to venture into those huge investments and enterprises? How did some families or some group of individuals find themselves in power, in such a way that their generation remains perpetually in leadership positions within the society? What are the patterns that could be noticed by observing the past of our society and how has such framework led us to where we are today?

Furthermore, Can we really say we have two social classes in Nigeria? Where do we group the elites and the non-ruling politicians, the civil servants, the unemployed youth, the underpaid workers, the low and top business men? If the essence of change is contradictions, in which thesis (A) collides with antithesis (~A) to give a synthesis (~~A), and we have social classes that are contradictory in Nigeria, why then do we not experience a social transformation? This makes us to agree with Kalep Shimp that there can’t be a singular interpretation of historical occurrence²⁵. We need to consider other factors that hinder or promote progress and development in any society – for example, Nigeria.

²⁵ C.f. Kalep Shimp, op.cit., p.55
The desired social and political transformation we anticipate in our Nigerian society can only be attained if we examine how our economic structures (government and private ownership of various means of production) influence various aspects of our political structure (the parliaments, police forces, judiciary, journalism and press, private sector and civil society). We need to examine the current situation of the Nigerian economy and understand the dominant way of thinking among our people – especially ideologies that promote tribalism, sectionalism and religious sentiments. We need to engage our youths in the production process so as to attain changes and development we desire in our society.

If we compare China, Europe and America, as at the time Marx wrote, with the present growth and development they have experienced, one would realize that ‘capitalism’ is not essentially the problem but the ignorance of the populace on their right within a capitalist society. Most African nations, while emphasizing the fact that they are in a democratic society seems to over concentrate on the political processes at the expense of their socio-economic determinants. In Nigeria for instance, considering the relationship between states or groups of people over the years, arguments are being raised towards structural adjustment rather than focusing on issues that could enhance our factors and relations of production in order to achieve concrete economic development.

Consider a situation, for example, in which the technologies (in particular communication, transportation and media) upon which we build our lives and activities are the productive effort of another society. We are just there, like any other consumerist society, draining the little income we make from our petroleum-based economy on purchasing good and services from other productive nations. In this situation where technology is imported, whether appropriate or inappropriate, and majority of the people rely on serving the government to earn their living, money can never be in circulation.

How then, we ask, can a non-productive society attain any form of social transformation? Isn’t it always going to be very difficult for a nation with jobless and frustrated populace to resolve the problem of terrorism, religious fundamentalism and tribalism? How does a society hope to meet the requirement of the material conditions of her citizens without first engaging their minds and bodies? We need to encourage and provide opportunities and a just platform that would enable transition from one social class to another – a transition which could portray a vivid picture of improvement in standard of living and welfare of people within our society.
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