

Marxism and the analysis of the African reality

Kwesi Botchway*

Over the past few years, there has been a noticeable upsurge in anti-Marxism in Africa. This trend is to be found not only in academic writing, but also in the pronouncements of African politicians. Much of this anti-Marxism — in fact *all* of it — is based on very superficial readings of Marxism, or non-reading of it. Charlatanism of the most amazing kind, has become the distinguishing feature of this anti-Marxist crusade. Accustomed by many years of training never to read Marx from the source, and/or urged by their own class interest to fight science in the study of history, African scholars have continued to repeat old anti-Marxist theories, completely unaware that they been put forward before. In this regard, these petty-bourgeois scholars are years behind their mentors in Western circles who now conceded that Marxism is a way — one of many equally acceptable ways (!) — of looking at history. Their Marxism is more vulgar than their mentors'. In this essay, we examine some of the so-called theories that are ascribed to Marx.

There are a number of variants in this new — fangled vulgar-Marxism in academic and political circles today. Among these, the most dominant ones are :

- (1) Marxism states that only the economy determines the progress of history ; that the « *base* » always determines the *super-structure*.
- (2) Marxism asserts that all societies must go through the same successive stage of development ; that all these stages are pre-ordained, with no alternatives left.
- (3) Marxism is Eurocentric, i.e. valid only for European history, and even then, for a very limited period of this history — the capitalist period. It is argued from this that the study of the African reality, in particular, its pre-capitalist modes of production, cannot be undertaken by the application of Marxism. A populist and thoroughly chauvinist fringe also argues that to talk of Marxism in Africa is to deny Africans « a chance to experience the full impact of intellectual innovation ». (1).

All these positions stem from a complete lack of understanding of the meaning of Marxism and, of course, represent the same *political* position. But it would conduce to greater clarity to consider them separately.

THE PRIMACY OF PRODUCTION RELATIONS

The struggle against Marx's discovery that economic relations ultimately determine history began long ago. In fact, it began during the lives of Marx and Engels, and they both wrote numerous letters

* Faculty of Law, University of Ghana, Legon.

and articles answering their critics in their usual thorough manner. Lenin, Mao, Labriola and many modern Marxist and pseudo Marxist scholars have written numerous works on the nature of the relationship between the *base* and *superstructure* in Marxism. It is a telling commentary on the abysmal depths into which bourgeois and petty-bourgeois scholarship has sunk, that criticisms that were made in the last century and ably answered then should be repeated today as original critiques. But then this phenomenon itself can only be explained scientifically by the application of the Marxist world outlook.

To take a recent example of the first view, B.D.G. Folsom, in a paper on what he calls « Afro-Marxism », asserts that the view that « the political revolution ought necessarily to precede the economic revolution » is « a realistic modification of Marxism » (2). Elsewhere in the same paper, he states that « historical materialism relegates the state to a secondary role and makes it an inert reflection of economic forces » (3), and finally, « Whenever Marx himself analyses the concrete politics of a particular society, of France in the reign of Louis Napoleon, of the United States of America, or of parliamentary politics in England, for example, it comes out only too clearly that there is too close an interplay between politics and economics for either politics or economics to be said to be more basic than the other » (4).

Marx of course did not relegate the state to a secondary role, if by that is meant that he denied it a role in social and economic change. If he did, he would not have urged the working classes to smash the bourgeois *state* to bits and to create their own in its place. Characteristically, not one single work by Marx on France under Louis Napoleon, the United States or England, is cited in support of the view that these writings show that « there is too close an interplay between politics and economics for either to be said to be more basic... ». Indeed, it is hard to imagine that anybody who has read Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (or his article on *The Coming Election in England*) can fail to notice the derivation of the politics of the contending parties from economic conditions and the dialectical relationship between politics and economics in these struggles.

The bogey of the primacy of politics in history is a very old one. It is the gist of the force theory propounded by Duhring and dealt with comprehensively by Engels in his *Anti-Duhring*. As Engels points out there, the theory of the primacy of politics is as old as written history, and was first assaulted by the French historians of the Restoration, Thierry, Guizot, Auguste Mignet etc. What is new about the theory today, as with Duhring is that its advocates know nothing of its age. Even the Communist Manifesto (1847-48) which is often cited in support of this charge of economic determinism, is very clear on the role of political relations and on the nature of the relationship between the *base* and the *superstructure*. There, in discussing the rise of the bourgeoisie, the authors note :

« An oppressed class under the sway of the feudal nobility, an armed and self-governing association in the medieval commune ; here independent urban republic (as in Italy and Germany), there

taxable « third estate » (as in France) afterwards, in the period of manufacture proper, serving either the semi-feudal or the absolute monarchy as a counterpoise against the nobility, and, in fact, cornerstone of the great monarchies in general, the bourgeoisie has at last, conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway. The executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie » (5).

The role of political relations is here brought out clearly ; so also is their derivation from economic development. Both Marx and Engels pointed out, *ad-nauseam*, that political and ideological relations do exercise an influence on economic development, but that they are created in the first instance by the economy. Moreover, they also pointed out that the refutation of historical materialism cannot be accomplished merely by assertion ; that this can only be done by a study of social practice.

The debate over the primacy of the relations of production is important not from the point of view of abstract philosophical rumination but for an understanding of the African reality both in its pre-colonial and post-colonial forms. It is by no means an accident that over the past decade or so, a highly paid Anglo-American liberalism has begun to inundate African Universities with so-called theories of development which trace the causes of underdevelopment in Africa and the rest imperialism's peripheries, not to this area's link with imperialism, and the inescapable consequences that flow from it, but to the alleged inappropriateness of political and legal institutions. According to this line of reasoning then, the problems of underdevelopment must be solved, not through class struggle, and the liquidation of the hegemony of finance capital, but through the imposition of an idyllic juridico-political structure on the neo-colonial economies.

The writings of Schumpeter, Baldwin, Myint, Meier (6), abound with such mystification. In legal writing, Robert Seidman, Pozen (7), *et al*, have done a lot to steer the energies of African legal scholars away from political economy, into the arid paths of « formal » legal research. Objectively, there is no doubt that the denial of the primacy of the production relations, or a vulgarisation of the relationship between the *base* and the *superstructure* serves only to cloud a real understanding of the dialectic of the African situation.

Indeed to deny the fundamentality of the relations of production is to subscribe to a nihilism that asserts there can be no science in the study of history. It is interesting that Professor Folson, in the paper already quoted, states that « there is too close an interplay between politics and economics for either politics or economics (sic !) to be said to be more basic than the other » (8).

THE THEORY OF SUCCESSIVE STAGES

Another variant of vulgar Marxism that is rapidly gaining adherents among African academics is the theory that Marx prescribed one path of development for all world's peoples.

Despite the seeming erudition with which this view is put forward, it is totally devoid of science, and, in fact, is criticism only of imagined Marxist positions. It completely misses the essence of Marxism, its epistemological theory, viz. dialectical materialism (contradiction).

Mao Tse-Tung, in his brilliant essay on Contradiction attempts a comprehensive analysis of the Marxist theory of development. He quotes Lenin, who in his short article *On The Question of Dialectics*, notes that « Development is the « struggle » of opposites. The two basic (or two possible ? or two historically observable ?) conceptions of development (evolution) are : development as decrease and increase, as repetition, and development as a unity of opposites (the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation) » (9). The theory that all humanity goes or must go through the same successive stages is the very anti-thesis of Marxist theory. For Marx, as Lenin points out, « all phenomena and processes of nature (including mind and society) » are contradictory. In order therefore to understand the development of anything, we must study its internal contradictoriness (the fundamental cause of its development) and the action of external factors upon it. This way, we do not miss any aspect of the phenomenon, since we see it both in its particularity and its generality. We also discern « leaps », « breaks in continuity » and the transformation of phenomena into their opposites. We do not, for instance, see capitalist exploitation in primitive society !

Marx himself expressly repudiated this so-called theory of successive stages in his letters to Vera Zasulich (March 1881) and to the editors of the *Otechestvennie Zapiski* (Nov. 1877) (10). In the latter, he explains that similar events taking place in different places may yield different results. So, for instance, in ancient Rome, the separation of the producers from their means of production, did not turn them into wage labourers, but into a « mob of do-nothings », whereas the same process turned the direct producers into wage workers under capitalism. « Thus », he concludes, « *events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historical surroundings led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them, one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by using as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical* » (11). This is nothing but a statement of the particularity and universality of contradiction.

Some critics purport to find textual support for the theory of mechanical, rigid stages of development in Marx's *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, where he states : « ...Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve ; since, in looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation. In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient feudal, and modern bourgeois modes of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society » (12). Quite clearly, only the philistine can deduce from the statement that in general,

the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and bourgeois modes of production may be designated as *progressive* phases in the economic history of human society, a theory that every society on the face of the earth has gone through or must go through these stages in mechanical succession. Clearly, such a theory has no affinity to the materialist conception of history, whose function incidentally, is not clairvoyance, but scientific analysis.

THE CHARGE OF EUROCENTRICITY

The charge of Eurocentricity, or the non-applicability of Marxism to Africa, is also completely devoid of scientific content. Like the other anti-Marxist positions it is based on a lack of knowledge of the very meaning of Marxism, and the historical circumstances in which it developed.

As is well known, Marx himself described the course of his researches in his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. The materialist conception of history which he summarised in this critique, was not simply the product of brilliant intuition. It was the summation of the study of social *practice*, a study which covered a wide variety of subjects — commodities, capital, labour, money landed property, the history of technology, international trade, literature, colonialism etc. Having on the basis of this study formulated the theory of development determined ultimately by the economic structure of society, he set out to analyse the most complex mode of production known to history up to that time, a mode of production which already, by the middle of the 19th century had unified the world market, ravaged Africa, Latin America and Asia and brought to the working masses in Europe itself, a degree of misery and deprivation never known before. This study, which covered a period of upwards of twenty-five years, was undertaken (amid taunts of academicism etc. from the anarchists in the working class movement) for the purpose of showing the working class the way out of the impasse in which it found itself, following the crushing of the revolutions of 1848-50. With the aid of the categories of historical materialism, Marx analysed a wealth of empirical data and showed scientifically, how commodity production developed, how it got transformed into the capitalist mode of production, developing antagonism within the relations of production (between the working class and the bourgeoisie) and how capitalist development created conditions for its own overthrow.

It is meaningless to accuse Marx of Eurocentricity because he spent the major part of his life studying the laws of motion of the capitalist system, instead of studying pre-capitalist socio-economic systems in Africa. What is important is that he provided the only scientific way in which pre-capitalist modes of production in Africa and elsewhere, can be studied.

Bourgeois and petty-bourgeois sociologists, anthropologists, historians etc. have for a long time peddled a simplistic and completely metaphysical conception of the African reality before capitalism. This view sees all pre-capitalist African societies as stagnant « traditional »

societies, all at the level of primitive communalism, knowing no exchange, or any degree of class differentiation. It is only with the application of the Marxist method, by Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars, to the study of these societies, that we have begun to obtain something approaching knowledge of their general and particular features. In place of a metaphysical « traditional » society existing everywhere and at all times, Marxism requires that we study *concrete* African societies, ascertain the mechanisms by which labour is united to the means of production, and the product of labour appropriated.

As Marx reminds us in *Capital*, « Whatever the social form of production, labour and means of production always remain factors of it. But in a state of separation from each other, these factors can be such only potentially. For production to go on at all, they must be united. The specific manner in which this union is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of society from one another » (13). It is only when the scientific method of enquiry appropriates available material in this manner, that discussion of pre-capitalist, or contemporary African societies can be conducted intelligently. Anti-Marxists like Ali Mazrui, Folson, Okello-Oculi etc. and African politicians who have made a profession out of talking brilliantly and saying absolutely nothing, simply do not understand any of this. A recent study by Claude Meillassoux and the discussion of it by Emmanuel Terray (14) show the degree of rigour required in a scientific analysis of pre-capitalist modes of production in Africa.

Moreover, and even more important, one must clearly understand the political function of a scientific analysis of pre-capitalist modes of production in Africa. We undertake a scientific study of these modes of production for the purpose of showing the exploited classes, without resort to mystification, the character and logic of capitalist development, so that on the basis of real *knowledge* about the mechanisms of their exploitation under capitalist imperialism, they may be better able to fight imperialism and local reaction. In this connection, it is to be noted, that contrary to the imaginings of petty-bourgeois academics, there is nothing patriotic about the denial, a priori, of the existence of class differentiation, (and therefore of exploitation) or backwardness (in terms of the development of productive forces and knowledge of the workings of nature generally) in Africa before its contact with nascent capitalism.

CONCLUSION

As Marxism gains more and more adherents in Africa, with the steady deterioration of the objective conditions of the mass of the people, the possibilities for distortion and vulgarisation are getting multiplied. Vulgar Marxism is on the upsurge not only from the right where it is perfectly understandable but also from the left. Among Marxist adherents, certain tendencies and theories have begun to emerge, which equally mystify reality, and are thus potentially dangerous from the point of view of correct political practice. Notably, there is a tendency towards academicism — a tendency to see Marxism only as a method of analysis to be employed for purposes of careerism and academic

brilliance. This academicism brings in its wake « economic » theories which create the impression that socialism is just an economic order that can be installed by *any* class in power ; that nationalisation indicates a society has begun « a transition towards socialism ». Even more dangerous again from the point of view of revolutionary practice, is the tendency to identify classes in the superstructure — e.g. the theory that a bureaucratic petty-bourgeoisie is the ruling class in Africa — and to see the exploitation of the African masses at the level of *exchange*. So, also is the theory that the European working class partakes in the exploitation of the African workers and peasants, a theory which surely cannot have any affinity to the Marxist concept of capitalist exploitation. These theories often come from an indecent haste to « go beyond Marx » and to concoct abstract, often populist, categories that have no roots in reality. If Marxism is to perform its function as the ideology of the oppressed classes in their struggle against imperialism, it is important that at the level of theory, a struggle be waged not only against the crude anti-Marxism of the right, but also against these neo-Marxist tendencies. In this connection, Professor Nabudere's work on the Political Economy of Imperialism (15) is a truly invaluable contribution. Marxism is not a closed and absolute body of knowledge. But the abandonment of dialectical and historical materialism in the study of Africa's history, past or present, is bound to produce mystification.

NOTES :

- (1) Ali Mazrui, « Africa, My Conscience and I », *Transition*, (October-December 1974), p. 69.
- (2) B.D.G. Folson, « Afro-Marxism — A Preliminary View », seminar paper, Political Science Dept., University of Ghana, (mimeo) p. 12.
- (3) *Ibid*, p. 5.
- (4) *Ibid*, p. 12.
- (5) Marx and Engels, *Selected Work*, Vol. 1, Moscow, 1969, pp. 110-111.
- (6) See Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development*, Harvard, 1951 ; also, Meier and Baldwin, *Economic Development, Theory, History, Policy*, New York, 1957, pp. 218-290.
- (7) See e.g. Seidman, « Communication of Law and the Process of Development », *Wisconsin Law Review*, N° 3, (1973) esp. at 686, and Robert Pozen, « Public Corporations in Ghana », *Wisconsin Law Review*, N° 3 (1973), *Passim*.
- (8) Folson, *op cit.*, p. 12.
- (9) Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 38, p. 360.
- (10) Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, (1953), pp. 379, 412.
- (11) *Ibid*, p. 380.
- (12) Marx, « Preface to the Critique of Political Economy », in Marx, Engels, Lenin, *On Historical Materialism*, Moscow, 1972, p. 138.
- (13) Marx, *Capital*, Progress Publishers, 1971, pp. 36-37.
- (14) See Terray, « Marxism and Primitive Societies », *Monthly Review*, 1972, *Passim*.
- (15) Nabudere, « The Political Economy of Imperialism », (mimeo), University of Dar-es-Salaam, 1975.

RÉSUMÉ

Durant ces dernières années nous avons vu une recrudescence de l'antimarxisme en Afrique, non seulement dans les milieux universitaires mais aussi dans les prononciamientos des hommes politiques africains. Dans la grande majorité des cas ce n'est qu'une copie conforme des anciennes théories antimarxistes développées en Europe depuis la fin du XIX^e siècle. Ces théories reposent sur trois principaux postulats :

- (a) que d'après la théorie marxiste l'économie détermine la marche de l'histoire et que la base détermine la super-structure ;
- (b) que chaque société doit connaître les mêmes étapes de développement ;
- (c) que si le marxisme revêt une importance quelconque c'est uniquement pour une analyse de l'histoire européenne.

Pour répondre au premier postulat, Marx et Engels n'ont jamais négligé le rôle de l'Etat dans l'évolution économique et sociale. A la lecture des classiques, il est clair que les relations économiques et idéologiques influencent le développement économique mais que ces relations elles-mêmes dépendent du fait économique. Nier la prépondérance des rapports de production dans l'analyse scientifique c'est empêcher une compréhension réelle de la dialectique de la situation en Afrique.

Une simple lecture des classiques marxistes aiderait à réfuter la thèse simpliste de certains chercheurs africains qui prétendent que le marxisme prescrit un modèle universel de développement valable pour toutes les sociétés. Marx a certes décrit les différents modes de production au cours de l'histoire comme des phases successives de façon générale, mais il serait faux de dire que toute société doit nécessairement et mécaniquement passer par ces étapes.

En ce qui concerne l'accusation de l'européocentricité, lancée aux marxistes, celle-ci n'a aucun fondement scientifique. Il est vrai que Marx a, sa vie durant, étudié les rouages du système capitaliste plutôt que les systèmes socio-économiques pré-capitalistes de l'Afrique, mais ce qui est important c'est qu'il a tracé la seule voie scientifique possible pour une analyse valable de ces sociétés en évitant les écueils d'une appréciation métaphysique des sociétés « traditionnelles » pérennes.

Ces théories erronées sur le marxisme ne proviennent pas uniquement de la droite intellectuelle mais aussi des chercheurs qui se réclament du marxisme mais qui, en effet, tombent dans l'académisme et le marxisme vulgaire. Il existe aussi une tendance qui affirme que l'exploitation des masses africaines se fait au niveau de l'échange, la conclusion logique étant que la classe ouvrière européenne participe à l'exploitation des ouvriers et paysans africains. Si le marxisme doit accomplir sa tâche idéologique de conscientiser les masses opprimées dans leur lutte contre l'impérialisme, il faut combattre non seulement la théorie antimarxiste de la droite mais aussi les tendances pseudomarxistes.