

Opinion

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Notes on Leftist politics

By Edwin Madunagu

RECENTLY, a young man who teaches English in Abia State University phoned to inform me of an impending conference on the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx. But what the call provoked in me was not the remembrance of Marx and his enduring legacy but anger over the fact that some people still regularly irritate me with chants of "death of communism" and "disappearance of socialism." However, my voiced response was to play the "teacher on teacher" by calmly asking my telephone friend whether he meant the birth of Karl Marx or his death. He also calmly replied that Marx was born on May 5, 1818. "Hence, May 5, 2018 makes it 200 years," he said. I played on by pleading that I thought that May 5 was the date of Marx's death. He again calmly responded that Marx died on March 14, 1883. I thanked him and pledged to assist in the bicentenary in whatever manner I could.

For a considerable length of time after my telephone chat with the University teacher my mind remained with the subject: Karl Marx and his legacy, or more specifically, Marx's political legacy. From political legacy - which is a very large subject - my mind zeroed on Marxist politics. And in Marxist politics, my mind selected and focused on Marxist political strategy and vanguardism. Hence, if I were to contribute to ideas informing the planning of Marx's bicentenary conference I would advise the organizers to begin from Marx in historical context. From there, move on to Marx's total legacy; then proceed to Marx political legacy, Marxist politics and Marx's political strategy and vanguardism. Finally, it is necessary to place a theme like "The relevance of Karl Marx today" in the agenda of the conference. This is not because it is logically expected but because the current calamities, monstrosities and historical retreats in Nigeria - of which we are all living witnesses - clearly appear to summon Leftists of Marxist persuasion as

well as patriots of popular - democratic credentials.

Karl Marx was born in Germany. He had his primary and secondary education in his home town, Trier. For his university education he went to Bonn and Berlin, both in Germany. He studied law, history and philosophy, obtaining his doctorate in philosophy at the age of 23. His doctoral dissertation is usually taken by academics as the beginning of his work. But I find his letters to his parents, before this, as very indicative. Marx died a poor man on March 14, 1883, at the age of 65. He died in London where he had settled 35 years earlier. So much was the official prejudice against this man that, according to Isaiah Berlin, one of his biographers, his death was treated almost as a non-event by the European press. Although Marx died in London, *The Times* of London reported the event as a short obituary notice, quoting its Paris correspondent.

At his graveside Engels, Marx's life-long friend and collaborator, said: "Karl Marx's mission in life was to contribute in one way or another to the overthrow of capitalist society. Fighting was his element. And he fought with a passion, a tenacity and a success which few could rival. His name will endure for ages, so will his work."

On Sunday, October 10, 1999, my essay, Marx as thinker of the millennium, was published by *The Guardian* newspaper. A week earlier, according to the newspaper, he had been voted the greatest thinker of the millennium in a BBC news on-line poll. Marx was reported to have beaten several great thinkers including Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Thomas Aquinas, Stephen Hawking, Emmanuel Kant, Rene Descartes, James Clark Maxwell and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the second paragraph of that essay I proposed: "I would say humbly but responsibly that Karl Marx deserves to be named not only the greatest thinker of the millennium but also the greatest thinker humanity has so far produced among mortals. Even if he had been

killed in 1848, at the age of 30, after the publication of his and Engels' Communist Manifesto, he would still have emerged the greatest thinker since antiquity". Today, I re-endorse this 19-year-old assessment.

Activist Leftists who are inspired by ideas whose origins are attributed to Karl Marx conceive politics in two senses: the broad and the narrow, or the general and the restricted. In the broad or general sense politics refers to the "totality of all guiding principles, methods, systems that determine collective activities in all domains of public life". But in the narrow or restricted sense politics is used to designate a "definite part of public activity directly concerned with the struggle for power". From this understanding follows the definition of Leftist politics and Conservative politics. Leftist politics is broad while Conservative politics is narrow. You may see this difference clearly in the character, programmes and methods of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) organized and led by Leftists and in the careers of Leftist teachers, lawyers, writers, journalists and priests, for example. Whereas, Leftists actively recognize the relationship between the broad and narrow dimensions of politics as that between water and fish, conservatives recognize only the narrow dimension and play politics like fish trying to swim on dry land.

Leftist politics is broad because it is aimed at the total transformation of society and not just the capture of political power. Its ultimate objective is the liberation of society - the oppressed as well as the oppressor. Leftist politics is broad because liberation - from exploitation, oppression and humiliation - which is its mission is essentially self-liberation. And this demands popular education for critical consciousness. Leftist politics is conscious of itself as the movement of victims of injustice: "not a particular injustice or a set of injustices, but injustice in general", as Marx put as a young man. All these attributes inform the methods of Leftist politics.

In Leftist politics, vanguards may be recognised and described by three main attributes. One: In the struggles of the working, toiling and oppressed masses of all nationalities and all regional, ethnic and religious groups, vanguards point out and bring out the common interest. Two: In the various stages of development which the struggle of the masses has to pass through vanguards always and everywhere represent the historical continuity. Three: Vanguards are very resolute segments that seek to defend, unite, invigorate and push forward all other segments. They care passionately for the present; but in caring for the present, they do not forget the future of the struggle.

The following eight components of the strategy of Nigeria's Leftist vanguard can be distilled from Leftist politics as a whole: One: Strengthening the vanguard and its capacity to ensure minimum continuity of popular-democratic struggles across the country at all times and in all conditions. Two: Expanding alliances, collaboration and networking in the national movement for popular democracy. Three: Expanding popular-democratic and socialist education among the toiling and working masses and all strata and segments that suffer specific or general oppression under the present social order. Four: Engaging in systematic research, information and documentation and building institutions and centres for this engagement. Five: Expanding fronts of popular-democratic struggle across the country and in all strategic segments of the working, toiling and oppressed masses: women, workers, peasants, students and youths, the intelligentsia and intellectuals and strata of middle classes. Six: Uniting organisations of popular-democratic struggle across the country. Seven: Supporting and learning from popular-democratic struggles in Nigeria, in Africa, in black diaspora and in the world. Eight: Struggling for political power - alone or in alliance - as a realizable political objective.