

Unpopular Essays

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Professor Olatunbosun Does Not Understand

It was one of those dreary moments. I had sat through a rather long but stimulating lecture by Professor Ikenna Nzimiro, and the schedule provided for two "discussants" to appraise the professor's 51 page paper before the matter was thrown open for debate.

This particular "discussant" was not exactly as lively as the main speaker. Where Nzimiro urged his case on his audience, Professor Dupe Olatunbosun read his refutation on a flat note.

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It was one of those "the-trouble-with-this-country" analyses. This means that Professor Olatunbosun had started with a dutiful disagreement with the social order and all the previous models advanced for solving the country's problems.

Nzimiro's Marxian model he dismissed with uncharitable observations on the man himself, and his other socialist brothers.

But to justify his professorial chair, and in answer to this country's dire need for an ideology created by Nigerians for Nigeria, Olatunbosun let it drop that he had settled for an ideology by the name of (hold your breath), MINIMA ET MAXIMA.

Don't look at me, I do not really know what he meant, and the learned professor was not saying much by way of explanation.

But off stage, one of his friends who admitted to being amused by the term, explained it off as a basket ideology. "A little happiness, a little freedom of thought, a bit of social welfare and the right to property. By picking bits and pieces from all existing ideologies, you will have a full basket, a unique Nigerian

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creation".

Unless one was inclined to laugh, Professor Olatunbosun's paper was a vexing document. It did not indicate that the Professor had any information whatsoever concerning socialism.

And, socialism is what he set out to criticise. "There are a number of pit falls along the socialists path. First, it puts too high a premium on structures, and too little on the values and attitudes of people".

This observation, of course, is wrong. Socialism is primarily about values. It's insistence on democratising the location of wealth and culture is clearly a valuable position. Structures are just as important. The one does not take precedence over the other.

The professor's paper is a catalogue of fallacies and criticism of improperly understood issues. He alleges, for example that Cuba is in a financial mess on account of its welfare policies, and lumps the country (Cuba) into the same category as Britain, Uruguay, and Sri-Lanka.

Most of the Professor's careless remarks can be excused on the ground of ignorance but his dissertation on power in socialist socie-

ties deserves an appraisal because there appears to be a number of people like him who make the same mistake.

"In most socialist societies", he said, "power rests in the hands of the selected few who control the sole political party allowed to operate, who tend to be intolerant of criticism and perpetuate themselves in office".

This view of power in socialism is superficial and unhistorical. Unhistorical because it does not acknowledge the primacy of events over persons.

A scientific understanding of history on the other hand, obliges us to see that at each historical stage of the development of the human society, organisation for production places power in the hands of a particular class, not individuals as such. Individuals in government are important in so far as their actions and policies correspond with the interest of the ruling class.

In other words, an election, say, in America is not so much a choice between Carter and Gerald Ford or between Nixon and Kennedy as between one agent of the industrial/commercial class and another. (The amount of money it

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takes to run an election makes sure of this).

The vast majority of the American people have been reduced (by this wealth qualification) to choosing one such candidate or the other. They can never take part in the race for political office!

The point being made is that in all the history of the human society, the crucial issue has never been who wields political power, but on who's behalf. In whose interest and to what end. The question of personalities and regime-change are incidental to this central issue.

But people like Professor Olatunbosun must always confuse the form for the content. They are excited about Nixon

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replacing Johnson, Ford replacing Nixon and Carter taking over from Ford without bothering about the implications (in fundamental terms) of such changes for the various segments of the American society. For the business community as well as for the working class and the lumpen proletariat.

Organised society is a dictatorship. It is

either dictatorship by slave owners, feudal land owners, the industrialists/commercialists, or the dictatorship of the proletariat. Each is an advancement on the one that went before.

That is to say, the dictatorship of the proletariat is the one that is the one that comes closest to democracy. The point about "proletariat" in socialism is the effort to replace property income with earned income.

If this is successful and everybody earns their living through work, and not through rent on property or stocks in enterprises (as in capitalism), then everybody becomes a worker.

Under this condition, a dictatorship of the working class in a socie-

ty where everybody is a worker, is the most democratic idea ever.

Dr Julius Nyerere underscored this point in a lecture he once gave at Oxford University. "We are seriously trying to build a democratic and socialist society (in Tanzania)", he said. "We seriously believe we cannot be de-

mocratic without being socialist."

That, however is not the opinion of Professor Dupe Olatunbosun. "The new socialist system being proposed, may be unduly doctrinaire, following rather closely, the theoretical dictates of Marxism — Leninism without adapting these to the cultural realities in a country like Nigeria," he said about Nzimiro's call for scientific socialism.

The professor had earlier quoted from Professor Ayandele who, according to him, once observed that "no less a striking feature of the cranks of socialism is the fact that they have not perceived unto this day, the contradiction of the cushy 'bourgeois' position they occupy with the rest of the educated elite and their refusal to make a gesture aggregate to the life-style of the masses on whose behalf they are eager to employ incendiary language."

Powerful language. But we can reduce this submission to a simple sentence. That the exponents of socialism (in Nigeria) do not practice socialism or that they do not permit themselves to be enmeshed in the poverty of the masses.

The statement is as misinformed as it is diversionary. It is such as should never come from a university professor.

If Professor Ayandele in fact said so, then he is guilty of ignorance. Ignorance concerning what socialism is all about. Or what else could have led him to demand that some individuals in a capitalist society practice public ownership of the means of production?

In discussing socialism, it is always fashionable for those who do not support it to divert attention from socialism to socialists. When they are ordinary towns folk, you can explain to them that no individual can practice socialism, that poverty does not describe socialism. But what do you do when they are not ordinary towns folk?