

I WAS privately criticised from the left for my article *A critique of radical criticism* which appeared in this column on Thursday, October 19, 1989. In that article, I attempted a review of the processes leading up to the state dissolution of the 13 political parties and the creation, by government, of two new parties: "The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). I had argued that radical criticism, by failing to foresee the possibility of that outcome or failing to act upon the possibility, was partly responsible for it.

Radical criticism, I had argued, committed a grievous political error not by its characterisation of the transition programme as an unpopular bourgeois imposition. For this is essentially correct. The thrust of my argument was that proceeding from this correct characterisation to implicitly advocating abstentionism was utterly irresponsible. In the event, when the 13 political parties were dissolved, radical criticism found itself with no moral, or even political, right to criticise the action. Indeed, as I argued in my October article the dissolution of the 13 parties was based on arguments partly borrowed from radical criticism. This ought to have sent a signal to radical criticism and forced a change of strategy or tactics, however belated.

My criticism of radical criticism is anchored on two well-known radical maxims. The first axiom is that although man makes his own history, he does not make it under circumstances chosen by himself. Man

## A critique of radical politics (1)

By Edwin Madunagu

makes history under circumstances given and transmitted from the past. But to use the given circumstances to make history is not, as opportunists and philistines would argue, to worship these circumstances. For, whoever worships the accomplished fact cannot prepare for the future. To use the given circumstances to make history is to use certain elements within them to pose new questions, and mobilise around these questions. These elements can always be found provided one is not only revolutionary but also *political* and *practical*. The question whether or not one has 'faith' in the transition programme does not arise. For 'faith' belongs to the sphere of metaphysics, not of politics. The task before radical politics is to try to find one's way through a tissue difficulties and contradictions, not to take a flight from reality. That is radical politics as I understand it, and I think, as it should be.

The second axiom is that a political struggle is in its essence a struggle of social interests and forces, not of argument. Argument only *services* the movement of social interests and forces. It cannot substitute for them. The first axiom comes from Karl Marx *Eighteenth*

*Brunaire of Louis Bonaparte* and the second is from Leon Trotsky *The Revolution Betrayed*. These two men, among many others, paid close and committed attention to this matter.

The private criticism which my

article provoked deserves public examination because the former, like the latter, was not motivated by private interests, but by the noblest public interests, namely, the interests of the popular masses of Nigeria. It is with this understanding and not from any feeling of self-righteousness that I am now continuing my criticism under the title *A critique of radical politics*.

The weakness of radical politics in Nigeria is rooted in deep theoretical misunderstanding. It is fair however to say that these roots go beyond our particular experience in Nigeria. Our misunderstanding is partly rooted in the history of radical politics. Radicals world-wide are now reaping the bitter fruits of that misunderstanding. It is therefore imperative for every leftist or radical to go back to the basics and carry out a major and critical, review of the theory of social change which has so far influenced him or her and the concrete experiences that had so far been accumulated by partisans of that theory.

This epoch demands that lessons that have been forgotten in the heat of battle be dusted up, that debates already "closed" be revived, that propositions refused a hearing by presented, that cults and dogmas be dissolved and "sacred cows" desecrated. For those committed to the creation of a world where human solidarity replaces individualism and where equality replaces

domination — the type of society that socialism still proclaims in spite of the disaster in Eastern Europe — there is simply no other way to proceed. If this "looking back" appears as another concession to reaction at home and abroad, then, let reactionaries add it to their false "victories."

In 1927, in the heat of the desperate, but determined struggle to check the consolidation of the victory of the stalinist faction in the party and state, Leon Trotsky, a hero of the 1917 Russian revolution and a leading intellectual of the Party whom Lenin described in his testament as the "most capable" of the Bolshevik leaders suddenly withdrew from open political debate. When he finally emerged, he put out in the newspapers a series of essays on culture, literature and arts under the general title: *Not by politics alone*. These essays have now formed part of the classics of marxism. But in the Soviet Union itself they have remained banned since 1928. The present situation, at home and abroad strongly recommends them. They constitute one of the most perceptive critiques of radical politics available to us.

The post-Lenin internal struggle in the party and state had been a bitter and bloody one. It never abated; rather it was to become more bitter, and bloodier, as the years rolled by and the fate of the revolution and the new nation hung in a delicate balance. It was a struggle to determine the direction of the

revolution, and *ipso facto*, its leadership. Suddenly it dawned on Trotsky that the proletarian masses who had been the heroes of the 1917 revolution were taking less and less active part in this equally historic struggle to determine its course. Those who still participated in revolutionary politics had by then undergone a tragic transformation. From being conscious revolutionaries, they had now become the unthinking thugs of the stalinist faction. Trotsky's cry for popular intervention went largely unheeded. The struggle was fast becoming an exclusive one between the leader of the factions, Trotsky among them.

It was at this stage that Trotsky took a short break from "politics" to find sufficient explanation for this political observation, namely: Mass indifference to the political struggle of the leaders, dogmatism and intolerance on the part of the revolutionary leaders and extreme brutality in conducting political struggles. For the standard explanation, namely, that the masses were indifferent because they were weary from the long civil war and were dispersed by economic difficulties, although valid, was no longer sufficient to explain the tragedy that now befell the revolution.

Despite the superiority of the arguments of his opponents, despite their brilliance, despite unshaken adherence to the leninist principles, Stalin was winning the battle almost by default. What has happened? Has *historical materialism* failed? Are there historical factors which the revolutionaries had ignored?

• To be continued next Thursday.



• Continued from last week

**NIGERIAN** radicals are perfectly correct in considering politics as primary in the struggle to reconstitute society, or to administer it. Our mistake has been to detach politics from its roots and sources of nourishment by ignoring the dialectical relationships between the economy, politics and culture. Radical Bolsheviks made the same fatal mistake in mid-1920s. For in the course of their battle against stalinism, the radicals first separated politics from the economic relations on the ground.

Later they operated as if socialist culture had not only arrived but had become dominant in the Soviet Union: That is, in a country that had just been liberated politically from centuries of slavery, medievalism and feudal despotism! As Trotsky admitted in his essays, not only was the bourgeois culture still dominant, socialist culture would require decades of hard struggle to create and a longer period to become dominant. But he made this "discovery" after the battle had been lost and the fate of the revolution determined.

The central proposition of the radical view of history is that in every epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production, distribution and exchange and the social organisation necessarily following from it constitute the *foundation* upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political, legal, cultural and intellectual history of that epoch.

## A critique of radical politics (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

*materialism* does not reduce to class analysis.

The conditions for a new epoch, or *social order*, come into being when the economic foundation of the existing order runs into contradictions which cannot be resolved internally, that is, through the application of mechanisms available and legitimated *within* that order. From this point, the society can either move forward by overturning the existing foundation and creating a new one or degenerate culturally and politically on a foundation that has become historically obsolete. Nigeria has entered the latter phase.

This general proposition necessarily leaves many critical things unsaid. For a general proposition cannot anticipate all possible details and inter-connections. For example, it says nothing of the role of culture both in the crisis of the foundation (its inception and development) and in the political resolution of the crisis. It is the task of radical politics to supply the links which are always concrete in every theatre of struggle. It is these links that radical politics in Nigeria has ignored. And yet politics is sterile when not based on them.

Radical politics must internalise and be guided by the fact that not everything can be explained directly through class analysis. For social reality does not reduce to classes and the relations between them. It is also necessary to emphasise that the marxist method of *historical*

relations between them (that is class struggles), although constituting "the motive force of history", do not exhaust social reality, the subject-matter of the marxist method. If a formula is needed, we can say this: Although classes and class struggles constitute the motive force of history, they are not equal to society — in the same way that a car engine is not equal to a car.

Hence, social analysis on which politics is based embraces the analysis of classes and class struggles as well as the analysis of *non-class* social phenomena such as ethnicity, ethnic characteristics and prejudices, religion, culture, national character, etc. And all these interact with, and influence, class formation. But sufficient weight has not been attached to non-class factors in our popular struggles in Nigeria. This is responsible, in a large degree, to the inability of socialism to become a material social force.

Just as culture influences politics, so does non-class social phenomena contribute in moulding social classes. And in their interaction, they give rise to the aggregate called social formation. My own conclusion is that although politics has class character, it takes place on the level of social formation. For neither the

bourgeois class nor the working class seeks power to rule over itself alone.

A social class seeks power to rule over society as a whole, to capture the entire social formation as its constituency. Hence, since culture is an important element of the social formation, radical politics ought to pay critical attention to it and the medium through which it is expressed and communicated, namely, literature and the arts etc. But our radical politics has so far failed woefully in this respect. Its ideological base has remained either narrow or amorphous; so has its social base.

Radical politics has been pursued as if society is inhabited exclusively by well-formed social classes with rigid and clear-cut boundaries; as if all cultural attributes are class-based; as if there are no ethno-religious and cultural contradictions within the ranks of the working people; as if all social contradictions are class-based; as if there are only men or only women in the working class; as if there are no generational gaps, etc.

In short, radical politics has been conducted as if the "working people" is a purely economic category or signifies purely economic relations: No cultural attributes, no religious sentiment, no ethnic consciousness. Radical politics has been pursued in the abstract. More directly radical politics has largely

refused to come to terms with the fact that the Nigerian working class, as it exists today in reality, not in text-book, is defined not only by economic relations but also by social and cultural relationships.

Nigerian radicals are embarrassed that there are many "traitors", "tribalists" and "religious bigots" within the ranks of the working people and the popular masses. Rather than confront this state of affairs as the real subjective condition of the people, Nigerian radicals allow themselves to be paralysed by it.

In their paralysis, they either move round in a circle, or go deeper into sectarianism or retreat to the abstract where only sanitised masses reside. But whenever they peep into the real world, they are confronted by the same ugly reality, namely, that the majority of the popular masses are in their daily lives influenced by economism, petit-bourgeois individualism, bourgeois proprietary mentality, tribalism and religious bigotry more than they are influenced by the proletarian ideology, properly so called.

But while radicals ignore these concrete realities within the working people, the bourgeoisie pay close attention to them, seize upon them and viciously exploit them. This explains why bourgeois influence among the working people has not steadily declined. It also explains why the balance of social forces has been against the radicals even when they have retained the "balance of arguments." *But the tide will turn*

• To be continued as the occasion demands.