

PEOPLE frequently advise me on political realism. I take every piece of advice in good faith, replying to those admonitions that require responses. Some of these, like the present one, I use as pegs for articles in this column. The latest "advice" came from a man who claimed he had been a "long-standing comrade" of mine. He said that though he believed I was a "good man," "a man committed to the welfare of the masses," a "consistent socialist," etc, he thought that I was unfortunately "behind the times," a mental state that would render me irrelevant in the task of "recreating" Nigeria. He went on to advise me on what I could be doing for the country, my family and myself, assuring me that nothing I get from these efforts can be regarded as "too much," judging by what I had "suffered" for the country.

What did I say to provoke my "adviser"? Nothing much, I would say. We had both bemoaned the level of corruption in the country. We had also lamented the deepening mass poverty and unemployment, although he was more concerned with the state of infrastructure, especially public electricity supply. We both expressed support for the striking workers of Oyo State. We tried to figure out how a sole "bread-winner" who earns about N10,000 a month could sustain a family of even four. "It is a miracle," we both agreed. Perhaps I should have stopped there, and not overstretched what later turned out to be an accidental consensus. But then I had proceeded to criticise the policy of privatisation.

My luck dried up when I pleaded with my friend to forget the fact that privatisation is a "global trend" and consider privatisation in Nigeria of 2007. Since he is a public intellectual I had invited him to consider, even for academic purposes, the question of privatisation in Nigeria from our concrete history and prevailing circumstances, and from first principles. My proposition was that public assets like NEPA, Nigeria Airways, refineries, unity

Notes on the movement of history

By Edwin Madunagu

schools, former federal government-owned buildings in Lagos and Abuja, etc, ought not to have been sold. Why?, he queried. I replied that with a more patriotic, less corrupt and more independent ruling bloc these assets could be utilised to lay the foundation of a system that could substantially improve the human condition in Nigeria - while still remaining loyal to global capitalism. It was at this point that my comrade broke ranks with me and launched his homily. The casual meeting ended unceremoniously - as most of my meetings with middle-class personages tend to end these days.

Just as my adviser was suggesting that I was "behind the times" in the movement of history, a United Nations (UN) agency announced, quite suddenly, that no country in sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria, was likely to achieve any of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). I suddenly recalled that a couple of years ago, an American intelligence agency "predicted" that Nigeria would cease to exist, as a country, in about 15 years from the date of "prediction," and that if, by any miracle it still existed, it would be as a "failed state". We had all denounced the American prediction - even if for different reasons. Our government's implicit response to the agency's prediction seems to be that Nigeria is aspiring to be, by the year 2020, one of the top 20 most developed countries on earth. Do I laugh, cry or pray?

Before the United Nations' sudden announcement several international agencies and foundations had painted a depressing picture of Nigeria: At least 70 per cent of the population of about 140 million people live on less than an American dollar (N125) a day, that is, less than N3,750 a month; Nigeria is near the bottom of human development index; it is one of the most insecure countries to do business; etc, these agencies and foundations are "with the times," and are deemed

to be in the position to know the facts, and to be preeminently qualified to make pronouncements on such facts. Beyond that, they are the forces directing our economy.

The announcement on the millennium goals was followed by a conclave at the UN. It was reported at the time that no African government leader was invited to that conclave which was meant to discuss the catastrophe in Africa. Rather, Africans were invited to several noisy jamborees that took place in the continent of America in the month of September 2007. Nigerian government leaders and their advisers went to New York and Washington with supplications, but did not look critically at what is happening in the southern half of the American continent. The renewed nationalistic stirring in Venezuela and Bolivia mean nothing beyond what the international community says of them. Why should we bother about "rascals" in Latin America when a Nigerian has just been appointed a Managing Director of the World Bank - not long after another Nigerian was appointed a Vice President of the same institution that controls the world economy!

The Millennium development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by member-states of the United Nations by the year 2015 have been publicised by the media and should be well known. But for the sake of completeness, as we used to say in mathematics, they may be summarised for the purpose of this article: Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; develop a global partnership for development; and develop and implement strategies for decent and productive

work for the youth". The UN says that none of these goals which are not more ambitious than President Yar'Adua's seven-point agenda, was likely to be met in the next eight years unless, perhaps, drastic measures are taken now.

In 1999, at the turn of the millennium, Pluto Press, London, released a book, *the Lugano Report: On preserving capitalism in the 21st century*. The author, Susan George (an American, but living in France), had, before then, and for a period spanning about a quarter of a century, written several books, based on painstaking research, on the causes of world poverty, hunger, famine, debt, structural adjustment and neoliberal globalisation. The books which are simultaneously academic and popular, liberally accessible as well as well-documented, include *How the other half dies* (1979) and *Fate worse than death* (1987). Then, in 1999, Susan George put out her masterpiece, *The Lugano Report*.

The comrade who gave me a copy of the book when it was newly published warned that it would "frighten" or at least "unsettle" me. The Lugano Report had both effects on me. Before presenting (or, representing) the central message of the book, let us hear from the author's own mouth why she decided to frighten her readers: "I was convinced that another book of analysis and criticism was pointless. I have spent 25 years of my life describing hunger, famine, debt and structural adjustment and what they are doing to the people, and virtually nothing has changed. So, I thought, why not make things really clear by taking the logic of the global system to its logical conclusion? I wanted to put the case clinically to show the horrific consequences of continuing down the economic road we are on". And she did precisely that.

The Lugano Report is, in form, a fiction; but the content is factual. The message is

issued through a fictional group of intellectuals commissioned by the owners of the leading transnational (or multinational) corporations that now dominate the global capitalist economy. The intellectuals assembled at the Swiss seaside resort of Lugano were to answer just one question: "How can global capitalism be preserved in the 21st century?" Well paid, well endowed, with all needs and facilities provided in abundance, the group went to work. The "egg-heads" who claimed to be "ideology-free" produced a report within 12 months. They asked to be taken seriously and apologised for their terrifying language. But they pleased that their report could never be as terrifying as what they had seen.

The Lugano Report can be separated into three parts: premise, warning and recommendation. Their premise can be summarised: "The market, at its broadest and most inclusive, is the closest we are likely to come to the wisdom of the Almighty". It is therefore desirable to preserve global capitalism, or rather free-market economy, they said. Then the warning: But the way the transnational corporations (TNCs) are currently pursuing production, it is not only capitalism that is endangered, but the planet Earth itself. The TNCs must therefore fashion mechanisms to discipline themselves in two directions: saving the environment and coming to terms with the inevitability of the "system" not being able to accommodate everyone. There should be no room for morality.

The Lugano Report's core recommendation was that population reduction strategies must be evolved to check population growth, and then reverse it, most particularly in the countries of the global South. The world had exceeded its optimum population by a least 40 per cent, and most of the "excess" population comes from the South. Drastic measures must therefore be initiated to bring back the population to the optimum. Population reduction measures must become conditionalities for economic assistance, the Lugano Report recommended. Has my comrade ever heard of this?

Notes on the movement of history (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

ALTHOUGH I had, in this column, rejected the charge of being "behind the time" in my views on privatisation (October 25, 2007), I agree, without hesitation, that even the most alert public advocate could easily fall "behind the time" in this epoch of very rapid developments and changes. The world has changed so much in just under 20 years that a comparison would be unbelievable to someone from another planet. And anyone from our own planet who is old enough would be genuinely shocked each time he or she takes a break to consider and reflect on the matter. It is therefore a bitter irony that it is precisely at this moment that History is vanishing as an academic subject.

It struck me recently that anyone presenting a quiz on current affairs which requires short answers to questions would be massively deceived because monumental ignorance can hide under this type of exercise. One of the quickest and most effective means of discovering those "behind the time" is through their perspectives, analyses and prescriptions - in politics, culture, economy, information and communication technology, international relations, alignments of forces and balance of power. And, by the way: If being ignorant of recent changes and developments is described as being "behind the time" what do we call the ignorance of what preceded the current state? If you are not averse to comparing two bad situations, which type of ignorance is worse?

The transformation the world has passed through in the last 20 years is so massive that it can be said, quite seriously, that 1987 and 2007 are points in two different worlds - at least from the perspectives of those of us in Africa. The world in which 2007 is located has developed its own lexicon, its language, of social science: international community, stakeholders, zero-tolerance, focus, template, human development index, etc. In the new world, informa-

tion is obtained so quickly, and travels so fast and so wide, that yesterday's news is, a sense, stale. One can therefore easily fall "behind the time". I am acutely conscious of this just as I am conscious of the fact that many of our compatriots are "living in the air" by not knowing what preceded the present. Each type of ignorance is a serious impediment to the type of engagement that leads to transformation.

The friend who broke ranks with me when our dialogue came to the question of privatisation - on the grounds that I was "behind the time" - had, as I later confirmed, gone through a double ideological conversion: in politics and in religion. But, for a strange reason, he was hiding the fact. It was however unnecessary to hide one's transformation. He did not owe me, or anyone else for that matter, any obligation of fidelity to an ideology. Is it not a matter for pride and celebration that one has seen the light after so many years in the dark? In retrospect, however, I think I should thank my unnamed friend for raising the question - quite unconsciously - of the movement of history, and drawing attention to the global changes that have taken place. How we interpret this movement, and the changes that constitute it, and how we act on it, are different matters entirely.

I reflected on how to present the recent changes, and came upon the idea that they can actually be captured in a number of short phrases, sentences and slogans: "The fall of Communism"; "the death of Ideology"; "The world is now a global village." "Terrorism is the leading enemy of all humanity"; "There are no alternatives to free market"; "There is no hiding place; anywhere you are the Big Brother sees you, hears you, and can get you"; "Many are called, but few are chosen"; "Military coups and revolutions are out of fashion and, in any case, no longer possible". I am conscious of the developments that are indicated by these statements and that I am

always informed by them. Anyone who is not, for whatever reasons, conscious of them, or inclined to be informed by them, may still remain on the planet Earth, but should retire from public discourse.

Many of us have been affected profoundly by the changes and developments under discussion: our relationships with individuals and groups; our expectations from people and people's expectations from us; the exponential growth of cynicism and opportunism, even in non-political relationships; de-radicalisation of politics and ideology; mass poverty, despair and desperation to which we must continually respond; atomisation of the movement which had defined and shaped our activities and in whose context our political consciousness had developed.

With particular reference to the impact of the ongoing information and communication revolution on the struggle for mass emancipation, I would paraphrase what Friedrich Hegel once said about historical progress: No historical advance is achieved free of charge, without a price. Sometimes the price is so high that one begins to wonder whether progress has, in fact, been made. Computers, mobile phones, text messages, email, internet, cable television; etc. Hegel may be paraphrased: "All forward movement in history has been doubled-edged, since the creation of the new inescapably entailed the destruction and transcendence of the old, its particular virtues included."

What Hegel saw was the contradiction between expanding productive forces and stagnant relations of production. We may, however, return to the slogans by which recent and current changes and developments are captured. The starting-point is, as always, this "Communism is death" tri-umphalism. The most dramatic events sig-

naling this were, of course, the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. By the end of 1992 the segment of the "socialist world" in Eastern Europe and Africa had disappeared - leaving only China, Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea, to continue with the flag. As the "socialist world" was contracting, neoliberal capitalist globalisation was advancing.

Today, the first phase of that particular dimension of the movement of history has ended with neoliberalism and the market penetrating every corner of the globe. And the movement is characterised by wars and conquests. Today, with the possible exception of Cuba, no state calls itself socialist without qualification, and no "socialist" state objects to being described as building capitalism. But, then, there is hardly a country in the world without an anti-imperialist, and explicitly anti-capitalist, political movement. And most of these were formed after 1992, that is, after that claim to be building one form of anti-capitalist system or another. There are several international coalitions that are both anti-globalist and anti-capitalist. That is the current situation.

The world has indeed become a "global village": You lie in your bed in Lagos and, with an almost weightless object placed between your ear and your mouth, you talk to someone in a bathroom in Los Angeles at any time of the day or night. You put someone on the road to Sokoto and he or she briefs you as the journey progresses. Depending on your material status you could watch from your bedroom in Calabar the Nobel Prize being awarded in Oslo, or American troops entering Baghdad, or Osama bin Laden issuing a threat from a jungle between Pakistan and Afghanistan. A meeting takes place between 10 people each of them comfortably sitting in an office in a different Nigerian State capital. An emissary runs into trouble in a distant location and you are able, instantly, to avert a

tragedy.

The list of the technological wonders of the present epoch can be continued indefinitely. They were unthinkable, at least in this part of the world, 15 years ago. Many things that were impossible then are now possible; and many things that were possible them have become easier now. But, alas, from the point of view of popular struggles, these are double-edged swords because precisely on account of these same wonders many things that were possible 15 years ago are either no longer possible or are now very difficult. Popular-democratic forces appear paralysed. Then, suddenly, out of mass frustration and desperation, a new movement emerges and attempts to short-circuit history that appears to be running away. That movement is called terrorism. It is a leap in the dark. But as Omar Khayam would have said, no amount of weeping can wish it away... until the masses again re-posses their history scientifically.

Last line: It is in the interest of the new imperialism, the global dictatorship and the "international community" that we forget our concrete history and behave as if our real history started with their introduction of "democracy", "human rights" and "due process" to our land. These values and concepts are, no doubt, very important; but the most important point is that they do not owe their origins to the "international community". Long before the Cold War ended and the "international community" emerged, we had been waging battles against exploitation, oppression, class and ethnic domination and exclusion, poverty and hunger, corruption and state robbery, and for democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Although there are continuities and discontinuities in our national history that is no reason to allow the international community to impose its self-serving historical periodisation on us.

* Concluded.