

# Opinion

## Time to recall, and to honour

By Edwin Madunagu

IN the early years of my revolutionary political consciousness, taken roughly here as the second half of the 1970s, I was almost continuously in *personal* theoretical crises arising from the need, which I strongly felt, to explain and defend my political actions, positions and pronouncements ever more strongly, robustly and confidently. Not that I had any doubts about the correctness of my revolutionary actions or participation in organised revolutionary activities. Not at all. I did not suffer any doubts. Indeed, by the time I left the University of Ibadan shortly after the Nigerian Civil war, I had seen, and had been convinced, that the vast majority of the Nigerian people were exploited and oppressed.

I had also seen, during my Ibadan days, and indeed before then, the coexistence of obscene wealth and abject poverty. I had seen that some Nigerians suffered discrimination on account of their ethnic origin (or "tribal" origin as we described it then) and that others got undue privileges for precisely the same reason of ethnic or tribal origin. I think I also saw and resented what I would later know as *patriarchy*. I had, however, been convinced, even before my consciousness became explicitly revolutionary, and then Marxist, that the injustice I saw in those days could only be corrected through action by the victims and those who sympathised with them - and not by supplication to the oppressor. I was therefore a convinced "rebel," before my "transformation."

The "theoretical crises" I am talking about came with the leap in my political consciousness - that is, from mere "rejectionist" and "radical," to "revolutionary and Marxist." They had to do, as I said earlier, burning need - whose origin I can only guess - to provide ever more powerful explanation and defence of my activities, beliefs, pronouncements and positions in Nigeria of mid-1970s and early 1980s. The crises became more and more acute on account of the intensity of my entire political involvement and the particular critical roles, which I found myself playing - sometimes by the deliberate decision of my comrades, sometimes by my own deliber-

ate personal choice and sometimes by sheer accident.

In the partial resolution or re-formulation of some of the theoretical problems that assailed me during the period under consideration, that is, when I was between late 20s and early 30s, a number of personages played critical, even decisive, roles. One of these personages was Samir Amin, the Egyptian-born radical thinker whose 80 birthday anniversary is currently being celebrated by the global community of radical intellectuals and students.

This tribute is appropriately dedicated to Samir Amin. He inspired it. But Amin does not stand alone in the category of my "critical teachers" in the period under review. Taking Marx and Lenin as foundational teachers who belonged to a different category, Samir Amin is joined by at least two other personages: Biodun Jeyifo and Leon Trotsky. But of these two, Biodun Jeyifo appears in a shade of red because not only was he right there when I took the most decisive step in my entire life, so far; he was also the chief inspirer.

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, otherwise known as *The Communist Manifesto*, was written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In it I saw the authors call on the working people of all countries to unite and fight for their liberation. Workers, they urged, had nothing to lose, but their chains. On the contrary they had the world to gain. Shortly before the *Manifesto*, or about the same time, Marx, now writing alone, said that the working people were victims, not of any particular injustice, but of injustice in general. That was a hint that the revolution would, and should, be fundamental or total.

During the same period, Karl Marx proclaimed socialism the "resolution of the riddle of history". Beyond that, socialism recognised itself as such a resolution. And yet another, "proclamation" but one of which I have remained passionate about and which some of my comrades used to take as the root of my "anarchism" and "romanticism". I have cited it several times in this column. It can be put like this: Since it is not for revolutionaries to aspire to create a system and a structure that would last forever, they should never deviate from the

"categorical imperative" to mercilessly criticise every situation, every condition, in which the human being is exploited, oppressed, abandoned or humiliated.

Revolutionaries, I understood Marx to be saying, should carry out this "merciless criticism" without fearing the consequences, including personal inconveniences and denials; and without fearing conflicts with the powers - that - be. I accepted completely. And, for me, it followed that revolutionary Marxist criticism must be capable of being applied to *self*, that is, to the movement itself - concretely and honestly, beyond the rituals of "criticism" and "self-criticism," but with revolutionary humanism, humility, love and appropriate respect. This combination could indeed have appeared "romantic" in theory and "anarchistic" in practice. But in this turbulent period of my life I found sympathy - critical sympathy - in Biodun Jeyifo.

Theoretical and ideological problems arose for me not only because Marx's proclamations and exhortations made profound impact on me - challenging my actions and thoughts - but also because I was seeing and encountering contradictions "in the field." I saw and encountered contradictions not only between oppressors and the oppressors - that was the basis of the entire struggle - but within the ranks of the oppressed and also within the ranks of revolutionaries and between the two allied forces.

Lenin had written that there were three sources of Marxism, namely, political economy, philosophy and socialism; that Marxism was "integral" and "harmonious", and "irreconcilable with any form of superstition, reaction or defence of bourgeois reaction"; and that the "Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true". I read this and understood it. But, then, what concretely is Marxism? Samir Amin, in the introduction to one of his earliest books, *Imperialism and Unequal Development* (1976), indicated a line of inquiry: "The critique of economism has allowed the rediscovery of the unity of Marxism, which is neither an economic theory, a sociological theory, nor a philosophy, but the *social science of revolutionary socialist praxis*." (emphasis mine).

This provided a leap, not to "theoretical satisfaction", but to another problem: *Sociology of revolution*. Here Leon Trotsky and Biodun Jeyifo came in. First, *Leon Trotsky*: "It is understood that every great revolution is a people's revolution or a national revolution, in the sense that it unites around the revolutionary class all the virile and creative forces of the nation and reconstructs the nation around a new core" (*Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (1932). And then, *Biodun Jeyifo*: "One hardly need emphasise that since this revolutionary programme will demand the redistribution and re-deployment of wealth and power in African countries, it will not come from above, but from below, from the base up, from those classes and groups which have little or no stake in our present social system, but have everything to gain in a reconstituted Africa." (*Politics and the Future of African Culture*, 1977).

I was also, at this time, having problems with revolutionary Cambodia. How did the heroes of 1975 become "murderers" and "villains" by 1978? Why was the condemnation of the *Khmer Rouge* (whose "face" was Pol Pot) global and total: From East to West (except China); from South to North, from capitalists to socialists and communists, and cutting across global ideological and political lines - at the height of the Cold War? What were the *Khmer Rouge* revolutionaries trying to do? What type of society did they want to build? What was the source of their grave errors?

It was by asking and answering such questions, "rather than just giving us a catalogue of people killed, jailed and impoverished," I contended in an essay which appeared as Appendix to my *Tragedy of the Nigerian Socialist Movement* (1980), that we would "understand what happened in Cambodia and what lessons it offers," Samir Amin, through his essay, *The Lessons of Cambodia* (a chapter in his book cited earlier) assisted me in correctly posing, and attempting to answer, the Cambodian question.

So, Samir Amin, whose 80th birthday anniversary we are celebrating; Biodun Jeyifo who is older than me by mere 130 days; and Leon Trotsky who was assassinated 71 years ago - a revolutionary salute.