

Evaluating Socialism and its Ontological Foundations

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Abstract: The paper seeks to do an evaluation of socialism and its ontological foundations with a view to establishing the usefulness of such a political ideology in contemporary times. In so doing, the essay begins by establishing the basic tenets of socialism with special attention on the African brand of the ideology. Basically, the essay considers socialism as a theory of beings in society and it also emphasises the ontological roots of society. This root of society is premised on the fact of human beings' equality in essence and of the inequalities of their bodily and sensory natures. With the Marxist materialist ontology in the conception of scientific socialism, the emphasis of what socialism is about now rests solely on the material well-being human beings in society. This is indeed a narrow perception of what socialism, as a theory of beings in society, should be. At yet another level, the African concept of *Ujamma* which often grounds socialism from an African point of view, is defective in that familyhood mostly points to the selective and particularist nature of the African normative disposition and cannot engender the kind of development Africa needs. The essay shows that, a true understanding of the ontological

roots of society is what can really aid the breaking of the sceptre of capitalism of contemporary life in society.

- **Key Words:** Socialism, Ontology, Ujamma, Marxism

Introduction

Johan Fornäs in writing the introduction to the 6th Volume of *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* titled: “Capitalism: Current Crisis and Cultural Critique” begins by noting that,

Capitalism is today again the focus of critical discourse. The virally spreading waves of financial crisis have lent renewed urgency to the critique of capitalism’s specific historical way of organising modern societies. New movements and leading economists share a growing doubt about the sustainability of the capitalist mode of production. This has simultaneously given rise to a wider interest in Karl Marx’s economy critique as a major inspiration (Fornäs, 2014: 15).

The wide interest in Karl Marx’s economy critique referred to above has taken diverse forms. Prominent among them is the perspective developed by Dimitris P. Sotiropoulos, John Milios, and Spyros Lapatsioras in their edited volume titled *A Political Economy of Contemporary Capitalism and its Crisis: Demystifying Finance* (2013). The most captivating section of the essay was the section on ‘rethinking finance’ and this was done using the Marxist framework as the addition to the section suggests. In all, the failures of capitalism, especially in its financial form, is the key reason for contemporary interests in socialism, particularly the Marxist variant. But the attempts at grounding modern economic features on socialism, particularly of the Marxist slant, needs further assessments in order to adequately establish its credentials as a worthy alternative to capitalism. This assessment is the focus of this essay and this essay focuses on exploring the ontological credentials of socialism. Basically, the essay considers socialism as a theory of beings in society and it also emphasises the ontological roots of society. This root of society is premised on the fact of human beings’ equality in essence and of the inequalities of their bodily and sensory natures. With the Marxist materialist ontology in the conception of scientific socialism, the emphasis of what socialism is about now rests solely on the material well-being human beings in society. This is indeed a narrow perception of what socialism, as a theory of beings in society, should be. At yet another level, the African concept of *Ujamma* which often grounds socialism from an African point of view, is defective in that familyhood mostly points to the selective and particularist nature of the African normative disposition and cannot engender the kind of development Africa needs. The essay shows that, a true understanding of the ontological roots of society is what can really aid the breaking of the sceptre of capitalism of contemporary life in society.

Ontology As the Science of Being

Ontology can basically be said to be the science of being. It is that branch of Metaphysics which focuses on the study of being as being. Etymologically, it is derived from the two Greek words, *onta* meaning existence and *logos* meaning discourse. It is the study of the nature and meaning of being (Aja, 2001: 4). The uniqueness of this field of study stem from the fact that it studies the most basic quality of all things which is not within the sphere of other disciplines. This because all that are in existence share one elusive property: being or existence. This quality or property is what concerns ontology. Aja further contends that, “ontology does not consider

beings either from a material or immaterial aspects; rather it considers them under the general features which are common to all things and which are attributes or determinations of being in general or being as such” (Aja, 2001: 5).

Ontology as an attempt at elucidating the nature of being is also an attempt at elucidating the essence of man. It is therefore also interested in the essence of man. For the essence of being also encapsulates the essence of man (Iwuchukwu, 1998: 82). Going further, Iwuchukwu still avers that, “since ontology is a way of encountering being, with man as the subject of the encounter, the nature of the subject necessarily delineates the scope of this encounter and, in a way, also determines the outcome. Limited in space and time, man can only take hold, in knowledge, of what is available of the object, that is, of being” (Iwuchukwu, 1998: 83). This claim raises the idea of perspectives within ontology.

With regard to the question of perspectives, Aja also submits that, each culture’s understanding of what ‘being’ or ‘reality’ is, is relative to that culture. This is because reference is inscrutable and if this is granted, it must have a consequence for ontology. Thus, the question of what exists is seen as a matter of what our theory commits us to... As such, once we try to spell out what such a claim involves in particular cases, the relativity of ontological claims become evident. On this ground, we can talk of Western ontology as distinct from African or Oriental ontologies (Aja, 2001: 5).

This claim is very important for, even though we shall be looking at the ontological basis for socialism generally, we shall also consider the ontological foundation of African Socialism too.

As a summary of the basic claim here, we submit that ontology is the science of being as being. It is a way of encountering being and man is the subject of this encounter. And since man is limited in space and time, this encounter cannot but be from a perspective and hence, the idea of different ontologies. Now we shall try to consider socialism as a theory of beings (men) in society.

Socialism As A Theory of Beings in Society

Socialism in its simplest form can be said to be, “a theory and a movement aiming at the collective organization of the community in the interests of the mass of the people through the common ownership and collective control of the means of production and exchange” (Appadorai, 1975: 115). It is also important to note, at this point, that socialism arose as a reaction to the excesses of capitalism. For the socialists, private ownership of the means of production and the desire for private profit are the root causes of the excesses of capitalism. For this reason, socialism advocates an abolition of private ownership of the means of production and desire for profit. And in its place socialism advocates the common ownership and control of the means of production. To the above was later added the idea of the central planning (Appadorai, 1975: 116). The idea of central planning was an influence from Soviet Socialism.

Broadly speaking, socialism can be broken into its evolutionary and revolutionary forms. To this, I add its African form. For O. P. Gauba, revolutionary socialism “seeks to introduce socialism in its totality so as to replace the capitalist system by the socialist system” (2003: 39). It makes a direct attack on the prevailing conditions of the social order. They hold that revolution or direct action is the only effective method of bringing into existence the new society. Under this kind of socialism we have the Marxists, the syndicalists, as well as guild socialism.

On the other hand, we have evolutionary socialism. This kind of socialism is achieved by the evolutionary process or by degrees, not by wholesale transformation of the society in a single

stroke (Gaub, 2003: 39). This kind of socialism admits an attitude of ‘compromise’- a compromise between capitalism and socialism, so that the capitalist system is allowed to continue with some of the changes here and there in the socialist direction. This kind of socialism, therefore, belongs to the liberal tradition in socialism. These believe that constitutional methods are not only possible in dealing with capitalist excesses, but also that this method (constitutional) has more lasting effects. Here we have: Fabian socialism, revisionism, and German Social democracy as some types.

From the African point of view, Julius Nyerere’s *Ujamaa* best describes African socialism. “*Ujamaa* is a Swahili word which means Familyhood; Nyerere uses it to translate African socialism since the root of African Socialism is the idea of Familyhood” (Nwoko, 1988: 248). The major difference between this brand of socialism and the ones above is the fact that Nyerere does not see it as a reaction to capitalism. This is because, Nyerere thinks it was already rooted in the African nature and culture even before the coming of the colonial masters (Afisi, 2009: 33). It is original to the African. Capitalism only came to hamper its full blooming. These other forms of socialism Nyerere calls doctrinaire socialism. And this kind of socialism “seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man” (Nyerere, 1968: 12). After making this basic distinction, Nyerere goes ahead to give the details of this African socialism.

As a theory of beings in society, it stresses the fraternal aspect of human beings. It abhors exploitation, cherishes emancipation and wealth for all. It believes in the fundamental equality of humans in their essences. It believes not just in the equality of opportunity, but also in the equality of outcome for people in society. This is why it places so much emphasis on the central regulation of societal activities. The truth of all of these is also made manifest in the socialist maxim ‘from all according to their ability, to all according to their needs’. Based on this unique quality in man (the ability to fraternise) socialism builds a theory of society. But then, what is the rationality behind developing an ontology for society generally? This question we shall address in the next section.

Ontological Roots of Society: A Prelude to the Socialist Ontology

As an answer to the question, what is the ontological root of society, Njoku writes that “an answer to this question will first seek to establish the reason in human nature why individual nature require integration through mutual association and why they are capable of this” (Njoku, 2002: 30). By the above, one discover that the need for society is firmly fixed in man’s nature, as the one who lives in society. Here in, lies the ontology of society. In dealing with this issue, Njoku poses two questions: why does human nature require integration with others through co-operation? What is it in human nature that makes this integration possible? He names them as: the fact of equality in essence and the fact of inequalities of bodily and sensory natures.

As for human’s inequality in essence, the basic association is that humans are alike in their essential nature, possessing bodies and souls. Besides, the existential ends of humans require equal moral responsibility from all. This equality, in humans, rests upon the equality of their spiritual and moral nature. As for the inequality in bodily and sensory natures, Johannes Messner contends,

Consisting of a unity of body and spirit, human nature is individuated by particular qualities and faculties which make completion possible. By virtue of this individual inequality in powers and identity of the ends proper to their essential nature, men are predisposed to combine their

qualities and powers to co-operate in order to attain to the integral human existence implied in these ends. Thus, man's social nature is rooted in the special character of his nature as a unity of body and spirit (Messner, 1965: 98).

As an embodied spirit, the spirit can become active only through the body. It is also limited by the body in comparison with the faculties and aspirations of the spirit. As such, the spirit, bound up with matter in human nature, is subject to the limitations of matter, hence the necessity of completion (Njoku, 2002: 302).

In line with the above, natural law philosophers have maintained that society is a specifically human reality. Animals' organizational abilities are only instinctual. If we must apply the word society to them, it can only be in an analogous sense. Also, pure spirits like angels are incapable of social life in the human sense, since their nature is fully equipped to realize or attain their proper ends. Besides, Aristotle's assertion that he who is sufficient for himself is either a beast or a god, goes to show that animals and divine beings are excluded from the realm of society. Hence, for the ultimate fulfilment of their existential ends, humans need social interaction. From all of the above, we discover that society is ontologically rooted in man's nature. This is premised on the fact of the equality in human essence and inequality in bodily and sensory needs. Moreover, since ontology also focuses on the ends and goals of being and existence, and society exists to complete man's ends, society is ontologically rooted in man's nature.

From our discussion on ontology as the science of being, we mentioned the fact that, because of the limitedness in space and time of man who is the subject of ontology, there are always perspectives to the question of ontology. For this reason, we can talk about ontologies alongside ontology. Having looked at the ontological basis for society, in general, let us now consider the ontological basis for socialism and particularly, the ontological basis for African socialism. Let us now see the ontological basis for socialism.

Ontology and The Socialist Enterprise

Socialism at its fundamental base was a reaction to capitalism and its excesses. The seed for this mode of economic and political outlook was present in Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production. Within Marx's philosophy too, can we distil the ontological basis for the alternative he proposes to capitalism. "Dialectical materialism represents the philosophical basis of Marxism" (Gauga, 2003: 32). By this, Marx takes over the dialectical method of Hegel and combines it with his materialism. But then, it must be noted that socialism emerged as a purely economic theory as such, it was not too strong in ontology. Marx puts this so well when he avers that, "philosophers (such as Hegel) have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (Tannenbaum, 1997: 251). As such, the focus of socialism was not really on giving any new interpretation of the world, but on changing the world.

Despite the above, socialism still had some ontological base. The basic tenet of this base is its materialistic nature. Engels commenting on this affirms that, "the final causes of all social change and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men's brains, not in man's better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in the changes of mode of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch" (Engels, 1892: 45). The basic claim here is that, the consciousness of humans does not determine their being, but it is their social being which determines their consciousness. "Matter (and not idea) is the essence of the universe and social institutions are a manifestation of changing material conditions" (Gauga

2003: 32). In this regard, matter is the most important of the four Aristotelian causes. The metaphysics of materiality is what determines the metaphysics of obligation.

With regard to human nature, Marx in his *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, opines that “human nature is primarily determined by economics, and offers a radical philosophy, which also sees conflict as a consequence of the constraints of human existence” (Marx, 1967: 263). Elsewhere Marx asserts that man “is a social being, he is no abstraction squatting outside the world, but is himself, the human world, the state, society...The real nature of man is that he is a social and historical being” (Marx, 1972: 43). Thus Marx conceives man as a purely socio-economic and historical being. Marx believes that a single assertion that all men are selfish, egoistic or altruistic does not offer us any understanding of ourselves, and must therefore not be accepted as an accurate description of the nature of the human being. The true nature of the human being in the Marxian account, according to Fayemi, is that “man by nature is social, economic, productive and dynamic being without alienation” (Fayemi, 2008: 2). From the Marxist paradigm, socialism develops the concept of man as a being akin to collective action, and as such works toward achieving an egalitarian society.

The concept of freedom within the socialist scheme is a further manifestation of the kind of ontology at work here. From the socialist point of view, freedom is not achieved when man’s capacity for rational self-determination is guaranteed, but only when the material conditions for man’s satisfying existence are met. Freedom, in Marxian terms, is the capacity of people to make decisions founded on recognised necessity, and to act with knowledge of the subject. It also means the human being’s control over nature, over social relationships and over himself/herself (Zakharov, 1985: 115). From this Marxist conception, the idea of central control becomes paramount within the socialist context.

In sum, we have established here that, from the socialist point of view, it is the metaphysics of materiality that determines the metaphysics of obligation. Also that the concept of human nature at work here sees man more as a being made for co-operation rather than a self-centred being. But in this state, he cannot be trusted with so much freedom as such this freedom can be sacrificed for sake of the satisfaction of the material needs of life. Given this ontological orientation in socialism, can African socialism be said to carry the same ontological orientation? This we shall now consider.

Ontology and Socialism: The African Experience

A unique concept of being underscores the uniqueness of the African concept of socialism. As was noted earlier, African socialism is based on the concept of Familyhood extend to the level of the tribe, and not just the tribe, but the whole of reality as well. As such, in the African context, socialism replicates what Aja refers to as a “spiritual commonwealth”. That is, “the African political community is therefore best described as a spiritual commonwealth, involving the union of the living blood relatives, the dead and the gods of the community” (Aja, 1998: 385). For this kind of socialism, there is a unique kind of ontology.

For Placide Tempels, the African concept of being is dynamic, as against the Western conception which is static (Tempels, 1957: 51). The static nature of this Western conception of being results from the truth of the principle of non-contradiction that says a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time. But in the African context, things can both and not be at the same time and this explains the dynamism of the African concept of being. The being here is not just anything that is, but is force. As Tempels puts it, “force is not just for them an adventitious accidental reality. For is even more than a necessary attribute of beings. For this is the nature of

being, force is being and being is force” (Tempels, 1957: 51). But then, it will be very wrong to refer to the African as dynamist or an energist.

The forces as mentioned above cannot subsist on their own. These forces must interact. As against the idea of the self-subsisting substances in Western ontology, African ontology permits of the interaction of forces. These or being interact based on their hierarchy. Hierarchically, the order of the universe is arranged thus,

God

Major /Minor Divinities, Spirits e.g deities

Man, Chiefs, elders and others

Things, animals, plants, minerals, and land

From the above, God is at the top, major/minor divinities and spirits follow next man and things. The relationship between these beings is, oftentimes, metaphysical. This is against the mechanical, chemical and physical interactions alone allowed by the Western mind set.

The concept of separate beings or forces which exists side by side, independent of one another is foreign to African thought. Rather, the forces have an intimate ontological relationship; they preserve a bond one with another comparable with that which binds the creator with the creature. Consequently, “the world of force is held like a spider web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network. Whatever affects an individual force influences other forces in their being. Nothing, therefore, moves in this universe of force without influencing other forces by its movement. An individual member’s behaviour or act, by extension affects the ontological order and consequently, the being of the entire human and non-human community” (Aja, 2003 56/7). Ontologically therefore, the fact of the metaphysical interaction of forces is fundamental to the making of African Socialism.

In this setting, the relationships and interactions are held sacrosanct because of the implication an infringement on the system will hold for the all the members of the community. Within this context, the question of taboos also arises. When a member offends another or goes contrary to the familyhood spirit that keeps this community going, the offence is no just to the individual alone, but destabilizes the whole cosmic order, since all are interconnected. This results in the order and struggle to keep the community spirit alive, in order to avoid the making of heavy sacrifices, banishment or even death as the remedy for the imbalance a disturbance of the system might cause, via a taboo. As such, in the African setting, the hallmarks of social relationships are: “fellow feeling, ontological solidarity and selflessness” (Aja, 1998: 385). Afisi corroborates this fact when he writes that, the “ontological foundation of African socialism was predicated upon the fact that the pre-colonial African societies were communalistic in nature. The three basic principles of communalism, collectivism and egalitarianism were said to be the guiding forces behind communities in pre-colonial Africa” (Afisi, 2009: 33).

One obvious implication of the ontology described above is that, the community is held supreme over the individual. The individual never owns anything, but holds in trust whatever he possesses. Even natural talents which are supposed to be the prerogative of the owner are regarded as social assets to be used for the benefit of the community. The right to land is simply

the right to use it, “for he (the African) had no other right to it, nor did it occur to him to try and claim one” (Nyerere, 1968: 7). Everybody here is a worker. As Njoku puts it, “African culture is participatory culture that is full of life and action” (Njoku, 2002: 130). This is because, “there is no other way of making a living for the community” (Nyerere, 1968: 4). How tenable are of the positions expounded above? This we shall try to establish in the evaluation that follows.

Evaluation

As an evaluation here, we will try to establish the deficiency of the ontological basis of socialism in general and African socialism in particular. Ontologically, socialism distrusts the individual and sees the individual as one to be controlled and regulated. A kind of social determinism is at work here, on this Njoku avers that, “in the process of social determinism, humans and their existential ends are not decisively important; but he/she claims that the person is wholly at the service of the bio-economic process, and claim as a sphere of self-determination (freedom) only what each organization permits. Consequently, even its system of values is imposed on society deterministically, with social values enjoying a primary place” (Njoku, 2002: 26). By this very orientation, socialism violates one of man’s fundamental quality, that is the ability to control one’s own actions. This ability is inborn in man and socialism with its social determinism relegates the value of this quality, in man, to the background.

Still on the question of socialism’s distrust for freedom, Afisi also avers, in our view, Marxism-Leninism does not give man the freedom to exercise his personal ambition. The intrinsic nature of man entails the desire for a purposeful life, being free from interference, the possibility to exercise manifold abilities and ultimately man’s desire to acquire personal property. These, to us, form the basic constituents of human nature. The argument here is that Marxism-Leninism as construed and practiced in some quarters of the world (such as the former Soviet Union, Cuba and China) expresses autocratic tendencies, and does not allow the individual to exercise his/her personal will. The problem here is not really scientific socialism as envisaged by Marx; rather, the difficulty is wrapped around the manner of adoption and implementation of this theory by many self-acclaimed communist societies (2009: 28/29).

Despite the final statement in the quotation above, socialism relegates freedom to the background.

Secondly, the overt emphasis the socialist ontology places on the material conditions of life is yet another issue. It seems to forget that balanced human existence is not just a function of satisfactory material conditions of life. Ike Odimegwu understands this point well when he submits that,

while the human factor is the fundamental element in economic development and indeed in all development initiatives, the metaphysical capital is the fundamental aspect of the human factor in the productive process. In this context, human labour is no longer seen as mere material productivity or means of economic advancement but as an expression of cosmic identification with Divine Essence. If the precinct of virtue is a defining element of the human person, development as human growth, will necessarily be a growth of the precincts of virtue. And considering that this is an inherent part of the human being, the cultivation and strengthening of the moral elements in the

individual should precede the formulation and implementation of development initiatives (2010: 57).

The importance of this metaphysics factor in development, the ontology of socialism fails to recognise and this is one of its fundamental flaws.

Still on the issue of the importance of the metaphysic in material affairs Agbakoba lends his voice. In his opinion, the human person is made up of mind, soul and spirit. And his reading of Osigwe's philosophy shows that he (Osigwe) gave more emphasis to the spirit as the supreme principle in man's being. He further contends that, the MDGs that are supposed to bring about the enhancement of the material conditions of life have failed. This particularly is because of its overt emphasis on the material conditions of life alone. In his opinion, "Anyiam-Osigwe's third dimension of man's being is the missing ingredient in the formulation of the MDGs and explains the reason for the failure of the MDGS to catapult the development of poorly performing nations that the rich countries had in mind" (Agbakoba, 2010: 217). This still goes to show that to ignore the immaterial conditions of life in trying to develop the materials conditions of life is quite an ontological oversight for socialism.

From the African

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