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Marx's Critique of Capitalism and the 21st Century Environmental Crisis

Ikeke, Mark Omorovie

Abstract

This paper interrogates Marx's critique of capitalism and its relevance in the 21st century environmental crisis. From the middle of the last century into this century, the earth and humanity have faced an unprecedented environmental crisis. In no other age and time have the earth and its people suffered so much environmental pollution and degradation. Despite the rise of the environmental movement and what it has accomplished, much is yet to be done. Why has the crisis gone unabated? Could it be as a result of the continuous expansion of global capital market forces, and the drive for industrial and economic growth without ethical restraints? These and some other questions are the concern of the paper. It uses a critical analytic method to examine Marx's critique of capitalism. It seeks to know if his critique is still relevant in this time of environmental questions. The paper concludes that there are some salient ideas in Marx's critique of capitalism that are still relevant and that if some of those ideas are put into practice it can help in alleviating the environmental crisis.

Keywords: Marxism, capitalism, environmental, 21st century

Introduction

The 21st century refers to the time frame and period beginning from the year 2001 and will last till the end of the year 2099. Humanity is in the second decade of the 21st century. Humanity entered this century with enormous challenges that threatened the survival, not only of human persons but also of non-human lives. These challenges include: armed and nuclear warfare, starvation and hunger, poverty, human rights violations, natural disasters such as Tsunamis and earthquakes, oil spillage, gas flaring, pollution of the oceans, soil erosion, climate change, desertification, deforestation, environmental racism, etc.

Humanity needs to search for solutions to all of them. In the search for solutions to the various problems, scholars and environmentalists have come up with various theories and ideologies that can help in saving humanity from the negative effects of the crisis. These theories and ideologies include conservatism, liberalism, socialism, feminism, nationalism, communitarianism, cosmopolitanism, democracy, citizenship, Marxism, etc. The focus of this paper is on Marx and Marxism. Eckersley (1992:75) avers that: "The

pressing nature of the environmental crisis.... have prompted many Marxist theorists to turn their attention to the relationship between environmental degradation, capitalism and social justice.”

It is imperative to ask if Marx can offer ecological ideas that can help in resolving the ecological crisis. It is important to note that there are various brands and interpretations of Marxism. Do all of these brands and interpretations have ecological potentials? If not, how can Marxism be refashioned for it to be useful to environmental protection? These and many others are the issues that this paper discusses. In proceeding this paper presents some basic conceptual clarifications, followed by an understanding of Marx’s theory, and also his critique of capitalism. The paper aims at determining whether Marxist theory can serve as a template for environmental preservation.

Brief Conceptual Clarifications

Key concepts or phrases that are important to explain to ground this paper are: capitalism, 21st century environmental crisis and Marxism. Adeyemo (2001) states that capitalism is an economic system of production based on private ownership of the means of production which include land, and capital. In capitalism, people hire out their labour to work for the entrepreneur, the manager of the labour and resources, for goods and services to be produced for a competitive free market. It is grounded in profit-making and can be exploitative. In it according to Marx, the labourers are alienated from the fruits of their labour, they are marginalized and oppressed. Chaturvedi (2008) says the term “capitalism” comes from the 17th century and meant wealth owner. Abonyi (2005) adds that in capitalism, the production, distribution and organization of economic life are rooted in free trade, limited government, and free competition. Many capitalist societies today are in liberal democratic settings. Chappelow (2019) notes that in capitalism goods and services are produced based on market demand (this is market economy) not central planning of a socialist economy. Because it can be unrestrained, the poor are vulnerable as the prices of goods and services may be above their reach.

Before examining whether Marx/ Marxist thought is applicable to the environmental crisis, it is imperative to state what the 21st century environmental crisis is. The word “crisis” is used here to denote a serious problem or predicament that requires urgent human attention. The environmental crisis refers to the devastation and degradation caused to both humans and the natural world as a result of ecospheric and atmospheric pollution, degradation of the earth’s surface and its resources, the extinction of endangered species, and other harms done to the planet and its people. As Boampong (2017)

avers it includes also: desertification, global warming, deforestation, garbage accumulation in cities, etc. Rajagopalan (2011) writing on the global crisis of the environment states that there is an environmental disaster taking place on earth and many of the environmental problems arise from the abuse or inadvertent use of the earth's resources. The signs of the crisis according to Rajagopalan (2011) includes the fact that many regions of the world are water-stressed, there is increasing destruction of biodiversity, destruction of forests, pollution of oceans and cities, pollution of coastal and marine areas, global warming, criminality arising from urbanization, etc.

With the above clarifications done, it is important to now clarify what Marxism is. Marxism could mean different things to different people. For some it is a political doctrine, for others a system of government, while for others an economic system, and for many others it is a form of philosophy. Pepper (1993) is right to note that you should not judge a worldview or system of thought simply from the actions of those who profess it. It is important to note this for Marxism is often discredited when people cite countries that claim to be communist or Marxist such as the former Soviet Union, Cuba, China, etc. Pepper (1993:59) defines Marxism thus: "... a western intellectual tradition" rooted in the teachings of Marx that examines capitalism and how it will be overthrown by socialism and eventually socialism will lead to "true communism."

Aspects of Marx's Theory

It is important to give the context of Karl Marx. He was born in 1818 and died on March 14, 1883. He was born in Trier and was the son of a lawyer. He studied philosophy at the University of Berlin. He travelled later on to France where he studied socialism. It was at France that he met his close friend, Engels. Their friendship was close and intimate and they wrote works together from then. Engels at that time was a factory manager in Manchester. With his experience of factory work, he was able to give detailed information on the conditions of workers to Marx.

According to Omoregbe (1991), Marx's theory is not quite original rather it is an eclectic collection of thoughts of other philosophers and theorists. He writes that from Heraclitus, he derives the idea of reality rooted in strife or conflict. This is the law of progress. His idea that reality is totally matter is derived from Democritus and the Epicureans. From Francis Bacon he took the idea that science is the means of conquering and controlling nature. It is from Machiavelli that he took the idea that any means could be used to get a good end. The idea that humans should not be used as a means to an end he took from Kant. Feuerbach is the root of his idea that religion is

man's self-alienation; and the idea of master-slave relationship he took from Hegel, including his dialectic and teleological view of history. It could be argued that no form of philosophy re-invents the wheel. Even the philosophy of the early Greek philosophers took root and grew from the religious thoughts and myths of the Greek society. Marx is original in the sense that he was able to take ideas from others and synthesize them into a new innovative system that has influenced almost all of history. The ethical dimension of his thoughts has informed many social movements for liberation and freedom. It informed the socio-political thoughts of African theorists like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Franz Fanon, etc. It has also informed the works of social theorists such as Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, etc. Much of liberation theology that has informed struggle for independence/emancipation for human rights in Africa, Latin America and many other regions in the global south is informed by aspects of Marxist thought.

In Marx, all of history is driven and directed by the movement of matter. Matter, which is seen as an economic force is the force of production. Matter is not something that is dead or lifeless. Matter is life and is in movement of dialectics or class struggle. Ogunmodede (2005:8) states that: "For Marx, the force of history is matter, not spirit. But it is matter that is humanized and socialized...history is concerned not with natural events like the coming into being of planets or the eruption of volcanoes; but that of human events, that is 'the activity of man in pursuit of his economic ends.'" Teleologically, this struggle is moving into the communist stage of history, the end of history. In the communist stage of history which is heralded by socialism, there is radical equality of all people, the people own the means and forces of production, there is dictatorship of the proletariat, end of alienation, abolition of private property, and the dissolution of the state. For Marx only a socialist revolution can destroy capitalism and put an end to its evils. Omoregbe (1991) is right to argue forcefully that Marx is a humanist to the core who opts for the freedom of human beings from alienation, capitalist slavery, exploitation of workers, dehumanization and instrumentalisation of man.

Marx's Critique of Capitalism

For Marx, it is only when capitalism comes to an end that the deplorable condition of workers will end. Capitalism is simply a higher form of slavery, where the owners of capital exploit the labour of workers for their own selfish benefits. This exploitation comes as a result of the capitalist class appropriating the surplus value from workers' labour unto themselves, while paying the labourers very poor salaries. As Appadorai (2004) puts it, surplus

value which is the value that labour produces above the cost of tools, raw materials and the cost of its own subsistence, ought to go to the workers or labourers. Appadorai cites Marx as seeing the modern state as simply an instrument in the hand of capitalists to put at bay the rebellion of workers.

The concern of this work is not to do a general critique of Marx or Marxism, the system of thought that came out of Marx or that of his followers. What is of interest here is how his critique of capitalism could be of relevance to the resolution of the environmental crisis. Whether Marx saw the environmental crisis or wrote about it the way the environmental crisis is understood today is debatable.

Some salient aspects of his critique of capitalism are reiterated as follows: capitalism exploits workers and appropriate the surplus value that should go to workers to the owners of capital; wealth and private property is in the hands of a few; workers who are the labourers live in a state of dissatisfaction and stress, workers are treated as slaves and are at the mercy of the owners of capital and the means of production; what matters to capitalists is their profits and gain not the welfare and wellbeing of the workers.

Capitalism has come a long way from its crude ways to become a worker friendly system where the wellbeing and welfare of workers are taken into consideration, workers can grow to own the means of production, labourers can be joint owners of companies, workers' rights are now well enshrined than before, etc. Some could argue that these are simply ways of capitalism adapting to survive and put the socialist revolution at bay. It is true that capitalism is not a perfect system, for no system is perfect. Capitalism needs to be reformed more and perhaps it needs to undergo a revolution that will make it better. The issue very often is not with political or economic systems. The problem is the people who operate the systems. As ideal as the ideas in communism, it could be operated in an oppressive manner as happened in the former Soviet Union, and as is happening in China and Cuba where fundamental human rights are violated.

For Marx, the only solution to the world problems is the dissolution of capitalism. In capitalism, nature is simply a thing to be used for productive purposes. Land only has utility if it can serve industrial production. In Marx, nature is a medium for human labour. Complete humanization which will come in a communist society requires that man has social mastery of nature. The inability of man to master nature makes him to be in bondage. In the earlier Marx, Eckersley (1992:78) writes that: Marx's treatment of humans as homo faber is a central feature of the antagonistic dialectic between humanity and nature set out in these early writings."

Marxism and Environmental Protection

It is contested whether Marx has relevance to the environmental crisis in the 21st century. It is true that the ideas of Marx were formed at a time when the global environmental crisis had not come into prominence. Eckersley (1992) shows that the environmental degradation has not been a traditional concern of Marxism rather it was seen as a mere epiphenomenon of capitalism, something that will be brought under rational social control in a socialist society; and this has made some Greens to reject him as irrelevant to the crisis. And according to these Greens it is not necessary to have a Marxist viewpoint to speak of the importance of equitable sharing of the cost of environmental reforms. Marx is incompatible with an ecocentric paradigm, they claim. There are scholars who have all together become critical of Marx and have taken on a new direction. Some like Andre Gorz are called ecosocialists, or like Rudolf Bahro called post-Marxist or ecoanarchists. These departures will not be focused on. It is those who have found some insights in Marxism in relation to the environment that is discussed hereafter.

That there is an environmental predicament and that both human beings and the planet are suffering and dying is rarely doubted nowadays. There could be a debate on what is causing or precipitating the environmental crisis. Capitalism is one of the culprits causing environmental degradation. Though capitalism aims primarily for profit; today many capitalists support the need to do business in an ethical manner. Business ethics is an essential aspect of many corporations. Businesses today have also recognized that they have corporate social responsibilities to society. A key aspect of these responsibilities is environmental protection and fostering sustainability. Capitalism when ethically retrained and well managed with the good of the planet in mind could also be a source of healing for the earth. The fact is that Marxist thought is still relevant to the environment. In *Capital*, Marx (1959:422) propounds that: "Every organ of sense is injured in equal degree by artificial elevation of the temperature, by the dust-laden atmosphere, by deafening noise, and not to mention danger to life and limb."

In speaking of the environmental crisis it should be understood that the environment is not only the non-human world. Human persons are an important part of the environment. There is tendency in some environmental circles to despise the place of the human person in the planet. If humans have been responsible for causing much environmental degradation, they also have to be responsible to heal the planet. Without humans the planet is incomplete. Whatever affects humans also affects and impacts the planet and other lives. Poverty for instance often drives people to degrade the earth by

continuing to cut down trees for domestic purposes. It should be noted also that even economic affluence drives global capital to desire for more wood and mineral resources from tropical forests. There is the need to strike a balance. Humans can only sustain themselves by making use of the things and goods of nature. But they should do this in a sustainable manner by renewing resources that are renewable and using with great prudence non-renewable resources. The desire for more profits can often be at the detriment of workers. The recent happening in the banking sector in Nigeria is an evidence of this fact. Many workers have been sacked without appropriate compensation in order for the banks to become more competitive and profitable. Human greed of some in management has often led to the downfall of great financial companies. Often, it is the workers who lose out in the struggle to keep these companies in business. When companies fail and workers are put out of work, some of them may suffer from poverty as a result of loss of income. In a situation of poverty people put pressure on natural environmental resources. The point made by Bharadwaj (2016) is worth noting here:

In my viewpoint, it is very important for everyone to recognize that poverty and environmental issues are interrelated. Poverty among people puts stress on the environment whereas environmental problems cause severe suffering to the poor. People, whether they be rich or poor, consume water, food, and natural resources in order to remain alive. All economic activities are directly, indirectly or remotely based on natural resources and any pressure on natural resources can cause environmental stress. Environmental damage can prevent people, especially the poor, from having good and hygienic living standards. As poor people rely more directly on the environment than the rich for their survival, they are mostly on the receiving end of environmental problems.

Capitalist's drive for more profits often is not concerned about environmental ethics. For some capitalists, humans are simply a means to obtain more profits. Humans can simply be substituted with machines to make more profits. When environmental procedures will cost the company more, the procedures are simply bypassed and ignored. Marx called for the destruction of capitalism in order to save man; there is need for radical practice of environmental ethics that brings capitalism under ethical restraints. It calls for the greening of capitalist ethical values that has come with all the reforms in the capitalist economy.

It is interesting to note that two main streams of thought have emerged out of Marx's thought, namely, orthodox eco-Marxism and humanist Eco-Marxism. Eckersley (1992:82) shows that: "Orthodox eco-Marxism have

strayed very little from basic position of the 'mature' Marx...that is, environmental problems, like social problems, are traced directly to the exploitative dynamics of capitalism." In this viewpoint, nature, wilderness preservation, protection of endangered species has value only if they have utility for human persons. This view is thoroughly anthropocentric. He cites Parson who thoroughly endorses this viewpoint and argues that humans cannot value nature for its own sake. On the other hand, humanist eco-Marxists affirm that it is necessary to appraise Marx's technological and scientific optimism. Eckersley equally cites Gorz who has argued that when the proletariat takes over the forces of production, it does not change anything drastically; they simply take over the machinery of domination. Technology, he argues now threatens the ecological support system of the planet.

It suffices here to limit this paper to see the possibility of overcoming the dichotomy between man and nature. Nature is humanity's inorganic body. Humanity must move beyond *humano-centricism* (human centered) and enter into care for nature. It is answered in the affirmative here that Marx's theory and Marxism can make a contribution to environmental protection. It should be understood that much environmental damage in the world has been caused by capitalism. Capitalist progress often comes from the use of science and technology to "master" the world. In this section then, it is imperative to say something on science and technology in capitalism in the light of Marx's theory. Marx's concern for human welfare will also be pointed out, first and foremost.

Ogunmodede (2005:1) writes that: "the vision of Marx is such that vices like injustices, inequalities...poverty would cease to exist. Rather true freedom and other virtues would abound and the social order, and values would change, and there would be a new creation and a new humanity." Aso (2017) and Jimoh (2014) corroborate this fact when they state that for Marx human welfare and elimination of oppression/exploitation are crucial to social organization. The reality is that if all humanity or even a great portion of humanity can imbibe radical values of sharing, generosity, hospitality, and other communalistic ideas it would reduce the human consumption impact on the resources of the earth. Imagine the billions of naira stacked away in banks whereas many are dying of poverty or the consumerism in which every morning, garbage bins are filled with excess food that those who bought them cannot finish eating whereas many are dying of hunger. With radical and thorough practice of communalistic values that serves as antidote against the excesses of capitalism, the natural resources of the earth will suffer less pressure from human beings.

The technological and scientific achievements of this age of capital-

ism have brought tremendous benefits to humanity and the planet. But they also have negative effects. Placed in the hands of terrorists or vandals, or those concerned only with economic profits or those with an imperialistic empire mindset they have become great sources of destruction on the earth. The compass is good but humans have also used it to discover territories and people to conquer and loot their natural resources. The plane is a good means of transportation but terrorist have also hijacked and used it as a weapon of mass destruction. All the information communication technology is good but people have also used them to commit fraud, child pornography and sexual abuse.

The problem is not with science and technology in itself. The problem is with human people who have misused them. This reveals one of the strong weaknesses of science and technology. It cannot provide for itself an ethics to restrain itself and its excesses. This is where the ethico-cultural, philosophic, and religio-humanistic traditions of the world need to converge and re-brand for an ethics that can restrain capitalism.

Another dimension of the issue is that science and technology may not be in the hands of vandals or terrorists or economic profiteers; it may simply just be in the hands of people who do not believe in preserving and protecting the earth. There are 'good' people who simply see the earth for its utility purposes only. You can exploit oil like in the Niger Delta without caring for the environment. The United Nations report on Ogoniland reveals what this kind of mindset can do. Years of prospecting for oil in the Niger Delta has caused a situation that the report says will take 30 years to remediate. When you think of how humans have polluted the oceans, dumped toxic waste in so-called Third World countries, deforested the forest, grazed lands into desertification, you cannot conclude that the present stage of capitalism leaves much to be desired. Berry (1988) argues that instead of becoming the crowning glory of the earth, humans have become instruments of degradation by polluting the atmosphere, destroying animal habitats, etc. He writes that while not ignoring the gains in human knowledge and accomplishments of science and technology we must enquire into the difficulties caused by human inventions. Science and technology has helped to cure diseases, provided jobs for people, made life better and easier in many places but the ravages of poverty, the extinction of human and non-human life caused by the nuclear weapons, etc are still on. This paper concurs with Berry that what is needed is a friendly mutual human presence on the earth that recognizes legitimate human development without degrading the natural world.

Eckersley (1992:79) argues that the mature Marx will later depart from this view by affirming that: "the struggle of man with nature could be trans-

formed but not abolished.” Though Marx was critical of capitalism, he welcomed technology as being a harbinger of transforming nature. This author just mentioned has shown that another aspect of the mature Marx is that he distinguished between the forces and relations of production. For him the forces of production are the technological means with which humans controlled nature to meet their needs while relations referred to combination of property, class, and the legal arrangement that controlled the ownership of the production process and fruit distribution. The relations in the capitalist mode of production were exploitative. There is need for relations in the capitalist system to change. Capitalism does not have to be abolished as Marx proposed, but it can be transformed to aid environmental protection.

Conclusion

The paper has done an examination of Marx’s critique of capitalism in this time of environmental crisis. The paper explained the meaning of the 21st century environmental crisis, capitalism, and also Marxism. It then presented some aspects of Marx’s theory before examining his critique of capitalism. It also examined and affirmed that both Marx and Marxism can serve environmental protection. Some of the areas in which it can serve environmental protection were also looked into. The environmental crisis is one of the gravest crises facing humanity. All resources should be harnessed to resolve it for the betterment of humanity. It is in this perspective that the ideas of Marx could be tapped to help in creating a better planet.

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