

**MARXIST APPROACH TO HISTORIOGRAPHY****BY:****YUSUF BOLANTA GANI****DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, SCHOOL OF ARTS AND ISLAMIC STUDIES,  
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This paper examined the various sources of writing history, the sources explored to gather information, editing and interpreting a particular event which has taken place in a society over a period of time. Historians investigate and select from available materials by adopting a multi disciplinary approach and then arrived by the most authentic of the source materials of historiography

Meanwhile, Marxist a German philosopher from his own perspectives believes that history is produced from a social relation and class conflict between the bourgeoisies and the proletariat that is history of all societies is that of class conflict or struggle.

He stressed that human history is produced as a result of the class struggle in the society and that the society is determined by the material conditions at any given time in order to full fill their basic need such as feeding, and clothing, which are basic necessities of life.

Marxist approach analyzes historical development within social relations and class conflict which Marxist historian has adopted in many societies.

**MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY****INTRODUCTION**

The Marxist approach to, and interpretation of history is very important. The body of principle tagged Marxist are believed to have been derived from the ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher. He developed the ideas of 'historical materialism' which emphasizes the importance of material force in historical development.

Marxist historiography has to do with method of historical investigation using Marxist theory. According to Karl Marx, history is produced not through the conflict of idea but class conflicts in a society. Therefore, a Marxist historian emphasizes the importance of class conflict and the power of economic relations in production of human history

The chief tenets of Marxist historiography are social class and economic relations in determining the historical outcome. Marxist historiography has contributed significantly in consideration of historical development. This paper examines Marxist historiography in general perspective. It explores the origin and development of Marxist historiography and its spread from Europe to other continents. It x-rays the contribution of Marxist historiography and historical development in Africa finally, the writer examines the problems of Marxist historiography

### **CONCEPTUALIZATION**

Conceptualization of ideas is very important in discussing a topic of this nature. Some of the idea/concepts include History, historiography, Marxism, Marxist and historical materialism etc.

### **HISTORY**

History as a discipline has, continued to attract varied responses as regards to its meaning. Different scholars have attempted defining history. Some of the definitions include, history is past politics, history is the biographies of great men, history is philosophy teaching by example history is something that never happened or something written by man who was not there. These various definitions clearly reflect lack of uniformity in the meaning of history as a discipline.

According to Professor Lasis in his inaugural lecture, history is all what man has done, witnessed and suffered since the beginning of man kind<sup>1</sup>.

Baba T. Brigel defines history as the study of man through the evidence of his past action<sup>2</sup>, from this definition, history is concluded as the activities of man as he relates with man and his environment in the course of production of material life leading to change. This process is what E.H Carr considered an unending dialogue between man and his environment

Professor Lasis observed a kind of synonym between history and time since it is within a particular time that man actions occur. Because of the problem of time and space, the study of history is compartment alised. Hence we have history of Africa; History of Europe because a historian cannot cover everything that happened in the past, history then becomes selective.

Prof. Erin O. Erin supported this as he defines history as past activities of human beings and as such produced a significant effect on the sub-sequent course of actions or on human beings in the course of actions<sup>3</sup>.

### **HISTORIGRAPHY**

This study of history presents a historian with a lot of problems which are historiographical. There is therefore the need for application of principles and techniques developed to confront these problems. Historiography is nothing other than act of writing history. According to Brigel, historiography is a critical or analytical philosophy of history directed primarily towards investigating the manner in which practicing historians proceed in the course of editing and interpreting particular events, developments and so forth of which human past is composed<sup>4</sup>. Historiography concerns itself with both issues of framework perspective and method<sup>5</sup>.

In the course of writing history, a historian selects from variety of materials and then decides on the ones he settles for. For objectivity purpose, a historian should investigate a material (book) the author and historian to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to the study and writing of history. If historiography is conceived as the discipline of writing history and techniques of historical investigation, oral tradition, archaeology, and enthrography etc. are useful instruments of historiography<sup>6</sup>.

### **MARXISM**

Marxism is considered to be a method of socio-economic analysis and worldview based on a materialist interpretation of historical development, a dialectical view of social transformation and analysis of class- relations and conflict within a society<sup>7</sup>. Marxism as an ideology has been associated with a German Philosopher, Karl Marx and Fedrich Engels. Both Marx and Engels believed that history is produced from social relations and class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. They believed that history of societies is that of class conflict or struggles.

According to Marx and Engles, the capitalists buy the labour of the working class to produce goods and services which in turn is responsible for more surplus capital. The labours of the proletariat or workers were exploited by the owners of the means of production so much

that the former were forced to embark on overthrow of those that own the means of production, and then led to proletariat revolution Karl Marx considered these class conflicts as the driving force of human history.

### **Origin and Development of Marxist Historiography**

Marxist historiography is the act of writing history employing Marxist orientation placing emphasis on the social relations in the society. Marxist historiography studies the society and people in the society as well. In Marxist historiography, the importance of class conflict and the power of economic interest is emphasized. Marxist historians believe that human history is produced as a result of the class struggle in the society.

Marxist historiography emphasizes historical or dialectical materialism. The Marxist concept of historical materialism claims that society is determined by the material conditions at any given time<sup>8</sup> put simply, the relationships that people enter into with one another in order to fulfill their basic needs such as feeding and clothing themselves and their family.

Historical materialism is applied to explain the past progressions of human society. As a methodological approach to the study of society, historical materialism looks for the causes of developments and changes in human society in the means by which human beings collectively produce necessities of life.<sup>9</sup>

### **Kari Marx (1818-1883)**

The origin of Marxist historiography is linked to Marxism which in turn is located to the writing, of Karl Marx and Fedrich Engels. Both philosophers were Germans. Marxism as an ideology derives from the theory of Karl Marx. Despite the influence of economics, sociology and philosophy, Marx's thought was profoundly historical. To him, the real driver of History is the conflict of social classes in societies, marx's understanding was influenced by the writings of English philosopher David Ricardo and Hegel. An economist, Ricardo made the conflicting interests of landlord's, employers, and workers the centre of his picture of the economy.<sup>10</sup>

Kari Marx along with Fedrich Engel developed Marxism through their writings. To them history of all hitherto society is the history of all class struggles therefore Marx identified five

stages of human development – primitive communism, slavery society, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. Karl Marx believed that each would lead to its down fall. It is believed that each stage would raise the standard of living of the masses while at the same time be doomed to its own downfall because of internal contradictions and class conflict<sup>11</sup>.

The emphasis of Karl Marx was on the last two stages that is capitalism and socialism. The reason being that the first three epochs primitive communism, slavery and feudalism had come and passed. The focus of Karl Marx in relation to the last two stages, was on the interaction between those who owned the means of production and those who supplied the production through Labour. To Marx, those who own the means of production always live off the fruit of (exploit) others labour.<sup>12</sup> because of the continued exploitation of labour of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, the former were forced to stage a revolution. If the revolution is successful, it will transform the society into another epoch, socialism.

Since the death of Marx and Engels, the ideals of Marxism has spread and socialism constituted the greatest threat to capitalism. For instance, there was a proletarian revolution in Russia where the workers overthrew the government as rightly predicted by Marx. The ideology also spread to China during the reign of Mao Tse Tung. Despite the death of the founder of Marxism, different scholars have employed various methods of historical materialism to analyze history, politics and economics among other disciplines<sup>13</sup> Marxist historians always analyze historical development within social relations and class conflicts in the societies.

According to Marxist historians, history is produced in accordance with the following observations:

1. Social progress is driven by progress in the material productive forces a society has at its disposal i.e technology, labour, capital goods etc.
2. Human beings are inevitably involved in production relations which constitute social relations;
3. Production relations progress, with a degree of inevitability in correspondence to productive forces;

4. Relations of productions (determine the degree and type of development of the forces of production for example, capitalism tends to increase the rate at which the forces develop and stresses the accumulation of capital.
5. Both productive forces and production relations progress independently of mankind's strategic intentions or will.
6. The super structure is ultimately an expression of the mode of production on which the society is founded?
7. Every type of state is a powerful institution of the ruling class; the state is an instrument which one class uses to secure its rule and enforce its preferred production relations (and its exploitation) into the society.
8. State power is usually only transferred from one class to another by social and political upheaval;
9. When a given style of production relations no longer supports further progress in the productive forces, either further progress is strangled. Or revolution must occur; and
10. The actual historical process is not predetermined but depends on the class struggle, especially the organization and consciousness of the working class.<sup>14</sup>

**The Theory of Historical Materialism**

In explaining his idea of historical materialism i.e the role of material things in history, Marx used some terms which we shall first explain.

1. 'Forces of production' or 'productive forces' are the material objects like tools, raw materials, e.t.c and the labour force employed in the productions of goods.
2. 'Relations of production' refers to the ways in which men co- operate with one another in order to produce goods.

Marx's idea of historical materialism could thus be summed up as follows: The general character of any society is determined by its economic structure. This economic structure refers to the manner in which goods are produced. The economic structure is thus seen as the foundation or base upon which the 'superstructure' of the society is built. This 'superstructure' is made up of the society. The economic base of the society has dominant, ideas of the society. The economic base of the society has two elements, the forces of production and the relations of production. These two form the mode of production because they are closely connected.

This mode of production of material life determines and affects the social, political and intellectual life processes of the society.

According to Marx, these results in different forms of societal being is based on different modes of production. He distinguished three major forms of society in the history of Europe down to his own time. The first was the ‘ancient’ society’ epitomized by classical Greece and the Roman Empire which was based in slavery. The second was the ‘feudal society’ as exemplified by medieval Europe which was based on selfdom in agriculture and the guild system in manufacturing. The third was the ‘capitalist society.’ His example of capitalist society was Europe of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards which was based on wage labour. However, it should be noted that the three stages outlined above are not universally applicable to all societies; they only represent Marx’s own observation in Europe.

Another idea of Marx about history, which demands special attention though still related to his concept of historical materialism, is the ‘class struggle’.

### **The ‘Class Struggle’**

Marx opined that. In societies, people are grouped according to their economic interests. These economically based groupings are called ‘classes.’ These classes have different objectives, for example, in the capitalist society the proletariat (working class) have the objective of improving their conditions and increasing their wages while the bourgeoisie (the class that owns the capital) have the objective of maximizing their profits at the expense of the working class. And the actions of these sets of people bring about historical change. But how does this change come about?

As societies advance, there is the development of new forces of production which exist alongside with the old ones. Then comes a stage where further development of the new forces of production is hindered by the existing relations of production. This incompatibility is called ‘contradiction’. The solution is that the out-dated elements have to be swept away to allow the new to develop without hindrance. This contradiction between the new forces of production and the existing relations of production means a conflict between the class who is developing the new forces of production and another committed to the preservation of the old order of production. In the capitalist society for example, the proletariat class wants the conditions to

change while the bourgeoisie class wants the conditions to be maintained. This situation results in a struggle between the two classes.

Therefore, to say that all history is the history of class struggles as Marx did is to reassert the predominant role of the economic structure. The struggle between the two classes could eventually lead to a social revolution that would transform the society's mode of production and its entire structure.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MARXIST VIEW OF HISTORY**

In an attempt to provide a single, all embracing explanation of historical development and change, the theory of 'historical materialism' has been heavily criticized by a number of scholars both on logical and factual grounds. But some of the idea it contained suggest a new approach to historical interpretation and explanation. And this has proved to be very useful to historical methodology. His emphasis on the predominance of the economic factor and also his motion of class struggle have challenged historians to look at their subject in exactly the same way as they had done before. Marx's analysis of the working class has encouraged a lot of historians to begin to look into labour history which examines the tradition of struggle in societies. It looks at the way the working class (proletariat) has attempted to organize itself collectively.

It can therefore be seen that the idea of Marx have made a tremendous impact on historiography. And it has been said with some justification that Marx redrew the map of history.

### **MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AND AFRICAN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

African history has been analyzed in different perspective according to different schools of thought. Some of the schools of thought that explain African history include Colonial historiographical school and Naturalist historiography has not been very popular in Africa as the ones mentioned earlier. Colonial historiography has to do with explanation of African history form Eurocentric point of view. Colonial historiography explains African history emphasizing the activities of the colonialists. While nationalist historiography can be said to be reactionary nationalist historiography attempts to replace Eurocentric view of Africa that

history with that of Afrocentric. The question that comes to mind is what is the relevance of Marxism to the study of African history?

Dealing with African history, Amikar Cabral began by making clear that the best he could do was to return to the basic methodology of Marx and Engels<sup>15</sup>. In his essay, the weapon of Theory Cabral looked at men in the process of production. He looked at mode of production in the history of Guinea. Kwame Nkrumah can also be considered as a Marxist.

There was even a time when Nkrumah referred to himself as Marxist. Initially, Nkrumah denied the existence of classes in Ghana until the petty bourgeoisie as a class overthrew him. He then believed that the petty bourgeoisie is a class with interests fundamentally opposed to workers in Africa. According to him, the class interests of the petty bourgeoisie are the same or at least are tied in with the class interest of international monopoly capital, and therefore we have in Africa a class struggle within the African continent and a struggle against imperialism<sup>16</sup>.

Walter Rodney was also a notable Marxist historian in Africa. Walter Rodney was one of the pioneers of Marxist historiography in Africa<sup>17</sup>. His popular book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was a critique of Colonialism and imperialism. He examined the development of African history within the social relations and class conflicts. Rodney maintains that the principal agency of underdevelopment of Africa over the last five centuries was the system. He believes that African development is possible only on the basis of a radical break with the international capitalist system<sup>18</sup>.

Other Marxist writers in Africa include Robert S. Love who analyzed historical process in contemporary Ethiopia using Marxist method; Henry Slater also explains the influences of Marxist historiography in Da'ar Salaam.

## **PROBLEMS OF MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Despite the contribution of Marxist historiography, the school of historiography has come under several attacks. The major criticism of Marxist method of historical writing is on the nature of history as determined<sup>19</sup>. It is believed that Marxist history is generally deterministic because it points to a direction of history towards an end state of history as classless human society.

Another criticism centers on the belief of socialism. Socialism can be accomplished through class conflict and a proletarian revolution as emphasized by Marxism. This criticism comes majorly from social Democrats. Some critics have blamed Marx's theory for inconsistency<sup>20</sup>. Some of those who alleged that Marx has been proved to be inconsistent include economists such as Paul Sweezy, Nobuo Okishio, Ian Steedman, and John Roemer among others<sup>21</sup>. Although some supporters of Marxism have debunked the allegation of inconsistencies and carried that the supposed inconsistencies are actually the result of misinterpretation<sup>22</sup>.

Another major problem of Marxist historiography is whether Marxist theory which is alien can be applied in Africa.

## **CONCLUSION**

Karl Max, in his attempt to explain the historical process came up with the idea of historical materialism. According to him, the course of human history is determined by material things namely, the economy. The society is built on an economic foundation and this foundation determines the nature of the political and legal institutions in the society. Major changes in the society are explicable only in terms of the economic factor. The class struggle is said to represent the contradictions in the economic structure of the society.

Although, the emphasis which Marx placed on the role of the material factor in historical development may be faulted on certain grounds, he had certainly made a great impact on historiography by presenting a new approach to historical explanation

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