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Title

The Teaching of African History: A Marxist View

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/65q6x6wn>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 1(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

1970

DOI

10.5070/F711016349

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THE TEACHING OF AFRICAN HISTORY: A MARXIST VIEW

by Harry C. Meserve

Marxian views of African history - like Marxian views of history in general - have only recently been given any serious consideration by established departments of history in this country. Beyond the stilted and dogmatic histories of Stalinist Russia and the concurrent unwillingness of American universities to give serious consideration to Marxism, the salient fact of our awareness of this revolutionary philosophy is the tendency for those who encounter it to combat its "pernicious influence" by setting up straw men and then knocking them down.

Marxism is neither a limited "economic determinism" nor a subjective attempt by its practitioners to distort history to suit their own political goals. Rather, it combines the best of science and humanism to tell us what our history has been - and thus how we can plan for and initiate social change.

Given this as a beginning point, the aim of this paper will be to examine the potential for a Marxist view of African history and present-day action, and to introduce some basic Marxist works for consideration. The works of Endre Sik and Basil Davidson especially will be considered for this purpose. This aim can be achieved only if we understand two important points. First, all views of history have, explicitly or implicitly, present-day implications for political and social action. Without this action-oriented emphasis, we are not historians but technicians, archivists, or (in Nietzsche's terms) (1) merely "monumental" or "antiquarian" thinkers.

Second, the term "Marxist", like most such terms (e.g. "Freudian", "Darwinian", or "Christian") serves to give us a general idea of where an historian may safely be placed for the sake of analysis. In order to be a "Marxist" it is not necessary to hold to one given analysis of history. Rather, a Marxist is simply one who philosophically views the world using dialectical materialism and applies the knowledge thus gained to contemporary social action and problems. (2)

Within the context of historiography, Marxism represents a direct challenge to those who enjoy the combat of ideas, to those who would sooner discuss the relative significance of this or that "school" of historical thinking than attempt to arrive at some constants. The university tends to do just that: to promote the idea that all concepts of historical change are relatively equal under the sun; that they are, in essence, not attempts to discover the truth of a situation, but are mere opinions to be bandied about.

I cannot accept this view. It implies that our history can mean nothing to us as socially existing human beings. It implies that the

discussions we take part in during seminar or in class should have no direct relevance to us outside of some abstract, academic interest.

The fact, is, of course, that the whole interaction of speech and writing that makes up the discussion of history correlates directly not only to the treatment of historical *data* but also to the attitudes we retain and the actions we carry out in our total lives. The Marxian view of history demands that we consciously correlate our knowledge of history and society to our everyday lives--especially to our political lives, whether we choose to consciously work for political goals or passively accept the status quo.

Historiography, then, must be an attempt to work out--dialectically and logically--a view of history that accurately portrays the past and gives us knowledge of the present. It is from this point of departure that we must move toward considering the kinds of subjects that demonstrate how we shall view the histories of African peoples and of Africa as a whole.

African history is peculiarly well-suited for the application of Marxian models of understanding. This is a result of the fact that African peoples are far less tied to the written word than are European peoples. Because the development of African societies has taken a different road from that of Europe and has produced far less in the way of documents, we are forced to begin with kinds of data which tell us much more about their societies than do written documents.

We are aware of the difficulties: the dependence on archaeology, anthropology, oral tradition--on the suspect testimony of outsiders who could only see African societies from their own frame of reference. But our very lack has helped us to deal with African societies more realistically than Europeans and Americans have done with their own. We are forced, that is, to deal directly with social structure and economic development before we can hope to get at particulars. These are just the areas which American history, for example, has only recently begun to deal with--having first exhausted and re-exhausted its documents. For documents are, by and large, only the formal and official expression of people in power, and the history of the powerful is but a minor part of the history of mankind. It is the collective effort and style of life of the masses that have shaped history.

European historians have only recently begun to expand their histories to deal with the masses. Works such as George Rude's *The Crowd in History* and Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* along with Mark Bloch's *Feudal Society* are examples of these efforts to uncover the nature and development of society through analyzing the actual lives of people--not just of their rulers.

Marxism provides the tools for a similar kind of analysis with re-

gard to Africa. Historians who understand that the modern day progress of African societies toward true economic development and national liberation constitutes a corollary to their own struggles for liberation have won half the battle. Indeed, *all* who teach or study history must be constantly made aware of the implications (political and social) that particular views of history have for their own attitudes toward present realities. Thus, human liberation demands that we see and understand the political and social connections between African liberation and contemporary American struggles against oppression and alienation; it imposes upon the historian the necessity of consciously throwing off the Imperialist-racist historiography of the past (3) and applying new models of historical understanding. Such models will, I believe, be Marxist in nature.

It will be immediately objected that Marx--being European and unfamiliar with African societies--could hardly be expected to escape from the Eurocentric bias that characterizes European approaches to African history. To an extent this is true. Yet, Marx never proposed that there was only *one* way in which we could understand society in development. On the contrary, he proposed at least four different evolutionary schemes (the Germanic, the Asian, the Ancient, and the Slavonic), and suggested that there could be others (4). It is not Marx's own conclusions, in any case, but rather his method--historical materialism--that we must rely on for the analysis of African societies.

The best known Marxist attempt to treat African history as a whole is Endre Sik's *History of Black Africa* (5), an often inaccurate and sometimes narrow treatment of Africa both before and after the development of Imperialism. Sik is rightfully criticized for his looseness with the facts and for his Eurocentric approach.

Sik's Eurocentrism shows most clearly in his treatment of African societies as merely victims of imperialist aggression, victims who resisted and revolted, but were subjected. Further, Sik's naive zeal results in some astonishing statements:

Prior to their encounter with Europeans, the majority of African peoples still led a primitive, barbaric life, many of them even on the lowest level of barbarism. Some of them lived in complete, or almost complete, isolation; the contacts if any, of others were but scattered skirmishes with neighboring peoples. (6)

Leaving aside the usage of terms "primitive" and "barbaric", which, apart from their popular derogatory usage, also have a technical and scientific meaning (7), it remains true that Sik's approach clearly indicates a lack of understanding of African realities. Whether this is a result of ideological refusal to use bourgeois sources or an inability to get them, I do not know.

African social development is not treated at all. What Sik wrote was not a "History of Black Africa", but rather a history of Imperialism as it worked itself out in Africa. This is made clear by his choice of "periods": (a) Black Africa Prior to the European Intrusion; (b) Black Africa in the Age of Primitive Accumulation; (c) Black Africa in the Period of Industrial Capitalism; and (d) Black Africa in the Period of the Transition of Capitalism into Imperialism. Only in a rudimentary way, and without the aid of ethnographic data, does Sik deal with African societies at all.

A Marxist view of history contains within it the concept of dialectical change, occurring in two primary ways. There are, first of all, internal contradictions to be dealt with: the interaction of contrasting economic, social and political forces within a given society. Second, and equally important, are the external contradictions: the interaction of contrasting forces between societies. Sik has chosen to emphasize the second and not the first. His primary error consists in the application of Marxian models too strictly, a holdover from the Stalinist past. (8)

But Sik is also saying something that needs to be said. His approach is calculated to demonstrate the impact of Imperialism on Africa. No amount of cute academic rhetoric (e.g. D.H. Jones' review in the *Journal of African History* (9)) can change the fact that Imperialism has been the prime determining factor in the development of Africa since the nineteenth century. The activist-scholar must confront the academic, demanding that those who have the data put them to work. Imperialism is Imperialism - a fact of African history that involves murder, theft, aggression, and cultural and physical genocide. We must argue, demand and insure that the qualitative reality of Imperialism is not submerged in discussion and in historical nit-picking, but rather is exposed, in class and out, for what it was and continues to be.

The worst that can be said of Sik is that he did not emphasize indigenous African development. There have been numerous attempts to point out this problem - "The Argument about African Initiative". We must, it has been said, get away from the "absolutist" view of Imperialism as being equally effective in all areas of Africa. Agreed. We must, it has been added, emphasize that development of African societies has been different in different areas, reacting to specific conditions, as well as to the power of the Europeans. Agreed. But surely there is a hierarchy of forces to be dealt with.

Both internal factors (e.g. the ways in which African societies survived and resisted Colonialism) and external factors (e.g. the overbearing power of Europe) must be considered at the same time. The emphasis on African initiative can easily become an attempt to evade responsibility for the really destructive affects of Colonialism.

Ben Magubane has argued this point well in a series of articles. (10)

Magubane emphasizes the all-pervasive nature of colonial rule, the total control that colonial powers held over Africans, not only politically and economically, but also in more subtle ways: psychologically and culturally. The genocide that was part of Colonialism killed not only the body, but mangled the spirit, attempting to force men to conform to wholly foreign modes of thought and feeling.

To speak of African initiative in such a context is to neglect the overbearing influence of European rule over Africans. But the emphasis is not wholly without logic. It is perfectly understandable that Europeans should wish (consciously or unconsciously) to give the impression that Colonialism "wasn't really all that bad". And the emphasis on African initiative, valuable within itself as the story of African survival and resistance, leads us away from more pressing problems: the continued control of Europe and the United States over most of "independent" Africa.

Herbert Marcuse, in his *One-Dimensional Man*, gives us a modern (if sometimes cloudy) interpretation of Marxism that contributes directly to Magubane's argument. He argues, as Magubane has quoted him, that:

No matter how much...needs may have become the individual's own, no matter how much he identifies himself with them and finds himself in their satisfaction, they continue to be what they were from the beginning - products of a society whose dominant intellectual interest demands repression. (11)

It is in the very nature of a dominant technology to force people to think in certain patterned ways, ways which tend toward support for the prevailing technological-economic system.

The overtly Marxist Sik is joined in approaches to the analysis of African society by Basil Davidson. I am hard pressed to find any overt declaration by Davidson that he considers himself a Marxist. Nonetheless, it is clear from his writings that Davidson uses distinctly Marxist models. He sees African development in terms of socio-economic evolution: the development of African societies in response to changes in the basic methods of material production.

Two examples should serve to give a general feeling for Davidson's historical priorities. The first example demonstrates the emphasis Davidson places on the production of wealth as a major factor in human history. In his *History of West Africa*, Davidson outlines the "three major factors [which] dominate the movement of [West African] society in the centuries between AD 1000 and 1500":

They are the spread and great expansion of metal working, especially in iron weapons and tools; secondly, the steady growth of trade and of production for trade in certain staple items, both inside West Africa and between West and North Africa across the Sahara; thirdly

the parallel foundation of large market-centres and trading cities in the plains of the Western Sudan, along the banks of West Africa's principal rivers, and in the forests and coastland of Guinea.

Such developments, and some others of less influence, were of course, linked together. Iron tools and weapons helped to expand production, whether of crops or minerals or other goods and to provide new sources of military power. These in turn promoted growth of trade, and the growth of trade went hand-in-hand with the rise of markets, towns, and cities. (12)

This is the basic Marxist argument: that history is the record of our technological-economic development and that society in all of its manifestations (political, religious, intellectual, etc.) is derived by natural process from that technological-economic basis. Both aspects of society (Marx labelled them the Economic Basis and the Superstructure) are constantly interacting with each other and within themselves. As technology develops as a response to the practical, everyday activities of working men and women, man must form new ways of organizing society - in all its myriad aspects - in order to maximize their ability to better their own lives.

This latter emphasis - on the lives of people and their day-to-day activities - is also crucial to Marxist theory. Development does not take place because there is a law which says it does. Progress and human betterment take place because individual men and their collective societies are striving to better their own lives. Davidson speaks to this same interest in his *History of East and Central Africa*:

Political history, however varied and exciting, can give only a part of the picture of the past. The formation of great communities such as those of the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and Luo; the steady expansion in the power of chiefs and the founding of states such as those of the Lubamba and Ugueno, Unyamwezi and Uhehe; the emergence of centralized imperial systems such as Kilwa and Bunyoro and Buganda, Swamutapa and Urozwi, Kazembe and Bulozzi and Malawi: all these and similar developments tell us about the directions of growth, the lines of expansion, the patterns of change: in a phrase, about the movement of history...

But it must be remembered that these events were always the fruit of a multitude of small events in the everyday life of ordinary people... We have to observe, if we can, how ordinary people lived and worked and organized their lives... [It is] the farmers and their wives, the miners and the traders and the seamen, who were the true makers of history and the real creators of wealth and power. (13)

It is the masses of the people who make history - in the course of their everyday lives. It is we who have built systems and renovated them. We can do it again.

Davidson, then, approaches African history from a decidedly materialist point of view. In all his works, his main concern has been to establish some basic guidelines for understanding how African societies have developed. In addition, certain of his books, especially *Which Way Africa?: The Search for a New Society* and *The Revolution in Guinea*, project new directions for African development. In the former, Davidson suggests an economic direction; in the latter, he describes the formation of a new society through the process of common struggle for national liberation.

This brief review of Sik and Davidson has, I hope, illustrated some of the basic tenets that a Marxist brings to the study of African history. Sik has introduced us to the impact of Imperialism and Davidson has studied African societies themselves. It is the interconnection of these two factors - the "external" forces and the "internal" African realities - the fact of European-African involvement from some five centuries ago - that has presented historians with most of the problems, political and analytical, that we now face.

Most of the work done on African history, as we have seen, tends to divide people along political and racial lines. There is much of the actor in this, for the European pretends to be able to separate himself out from the whole Imperialist-racist underpinning of western society and its economics, and to stand - scholarly and free - before the data. Conversely, many Africans, largely trained in European schools and colleges, tend not to act freely, but rather to react against European racism and power, thereby losing the potential clarity of their own experience. Discussions of questions about African development are clouded by attitudes and emotions from the past (an unavoidable happening) and end up in pure speculation.

An example of this phenomenon is the historical argument about the slave trade and its implications for African development. For many Africans and American slave descendents of African origin, no discussion of slavery is possible without the assignment of moral responsibility. This is as it should be. All of us - blacks and whites - are responsible for the choices that we make and no amount of "explanation" alters the fact that Europeans chose to enslave African peoples, knowing full well the life they were destined for across the water.

For whites, on the other hand, the tendency is to make the trade morally neutral, as if it were a chance proposition - an aberration that our ancestors took part in but we would never consider condoning. I cannot help but sense that this is the reason why many whites would prefer history to neglect morals and simply state the facts.

The moral case must be stated clearly with all the feelings that we have, for present-day social realities simply underline the fact that the effects of slavery continue and - if confronted openly - reveal the

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roots of present day racism and racial exploitation as simply new forms of the old institution.

Involved with the "moral argument" (as if one could be, on the one hand, moral, and on the other, intellectual; for the two are inextricably one) is the whole problem of the slave trade itself and our need to understand just why it took place. A Marxist analysis gives us the tools to achieve this aim and to draw us closer to an understanding of "racial" as well as other forms of exploitation.

Again, it is Basil Davidson who sets the stage for us, who gives us a model by which we can define the kind of European-African relationships that led not only to the trade in slaves, but to later forms of European exploitation - Imperialism and Colonialism.

The essential argument that Davidson presents deals with external contradictions: the conflict between the interests of the trading states of Africa and the demands placed upon them by European traders, with their own interests to serve in the New World as well as at home in Liverpool; and internal contradictions: between ruling and subjected groups or classes in Africa. It is a dialectical development in all respects. Other Marxists have also dealt with this question, principally Walter Rodney (14), attempting to dig out the actual relationships that existed between Europeans and Africans in the trade. It is all too easy, as has been the tendency, for whites to revel in the fact that Africans took part in the trade. We need to know to what extent they did, whether or not it was under direct or indirect coercion, and how to explain - through social analysis - what interests men would have in selling other men into bondage.

Marxist historians have been active in many areas of African history. This is a new development, since the Soviet Union and the East European Socialist states have only been in real contact with Africa since the early 1960's. West European Marxists have been few in the African field and the most prominent of these - Suret-Canale - has not yet been translated into English. Only Davidson, who writes in a distinctly non-ideological style, has found any measure of popularity.

The growing volume of Marxist historical interest in Africa is a measure of socialist political involvement in African affairs. It also attests to the adoption by African leaders themselves of varieties of socialist doctrine and rhetoric for home consumption. The decolonized world tends logically to move away from her former rulers and toward the East.

One of the primary areas of interest - both for Marxist scholars and socialist governments - is the struggle for liberation of Africans from European rule. Resistance to European intervention, rebellion against colonial rule and present-day guerilla struggles against the remaining white rulers of Black Africa constitute a major area of study.

This is partly true because, as A.B. Davidson has put it, "African peoples have a right to demand that the most forgotten and sometimes deliberately counterfeited pages of their history be re-established".(15) Few topics in African history have been less fully dealt with by European historians. And quite logically so; why should the ruler document the struggles of his captive peoples against him?

But Marxist historians should also be interested in resistance and rebellion because of its very nature. At no time in history are the forces of historical change more obvious than when they express themselves in open resistance.

Conflict is the natural outgrowth of social and economic tension. It develops out of concrete social and economic conditions that clearly reveal the conflict of interests between groups. Far from being a result of some vague "nationalism" or of religious inspiration, conflict in Africa has taken on the tone of a constant and recurring liberation struggle between African peoples on the one hand, and Europeans and their African allies on the other.

It is a favorite past-time of historians to find the cause of conflicts. Voluminous works seek out the causes of world wars and petty conflicts. But many such studies look in the wrong place for cause. In African history, historians have "explained" such risings as Maji-Maji as being primarily religious movements. In Somali and Sudan, the explanation put forward is a combination of Muslim messianism and "nationalism".

But all of these explanations are creations of the intellect, not underlying causes. The mistake is understandable. Clearly, those who took the Maji or joined the Ndebele-Shona rebellion of 1896-97 did so with certain concepts in their minds. Can one imagine a Puritan New Englander expressing himself in other than Calvinist terms?; or a Shona tribesman not reacting to the message of cult leaders? We cannot deny that, within the event, people acted out their parts in allegiance to their own conceptions of reality.

If there is an "inside" to events: the subjective views of individuals and groups; there is also an "outside": the objective conditions that cause events to occur. If tension had not existed, the Mahdi or the "Mad Mullah" could not have gathered forces around him and led them into battle.

In the case of African resistance and rebellion, then, we must first look to these objective conditions. We must understand what the loss of land and cattle, of forced labor and high taxes means to a people. Such conditions must maximize tension within the social group, testing its traditional ways and demanding of them new responses to new problems. If we look at African societies and the resistance (armed and otherwise) that they offered to Imperialism, we will find that resistance has been

an important stimulus to African historical development. In the course of resistance, states were built (Lesotho, Samori Toure's Mande) and new social ties created. These are objective historical developments, without which we cannot hope to understand what follows from resistance.

It is just this sort of problem that faces the PAIGC, FRELIMO and other revolutionary groups in Portuguese-controlled areas of Africa. Their task is only partly one of military victory. The really hard part of the struggle involves the renovation of society in the midst of conflict, using the opportunity of military confrontation to forge new bonds among people and to prepare the ground for economic development.

Resistance to colonial rule and to neo-colonial domination has been and remains the key to the liberation of African peoples. On the field of battle, they laid the foundations of a wider unity and performed the first essential of liberation: to force the intruder out. But the struggle was wider than even this. In many forms - some deluded and others more realistic - Africans laid (and are laying) the foundations for their own entrance into modern modes of production and social organization. The resistance experience, whether of the Zulus, of Afro-Americans or Vietnamese, must not be "explained away" as due to accident or circumstances. A "religious rebellion" is, in reality, a social rebellion cloaked in religious rhetoric.

It is just this kind of understanding that Marxism offers the historian. As a philosophy of knowledge and action, it gives us the tools to describe accurately the history of Africa - objectively - and to make some concrete future projections on which action can be based. No other philosophy offers as much and most others in fact play into the hands of those who wish Africa ill.

Amilcar Cabral (16) is perhaps the best example of Marxism's practicality. His plans and actions are based upon the kind of social analysis that understands the past, yet strives for a new future. Not for him the outworn phraseology of "proletarian revolution". If he had waited for the "proletariat", no progress would have been made.

There are Cabrals, Davidsons, and Siks among us, men and women who, through their own life's experience, feel the tensions and struggles of our age and the American experience acutely. But the university stifles these feelings and leads us down side alleys - down the road of detached reflection and abstract analysis. Beyond the fact that such a direction is counter-revolutionary, it also leads to boredom and the feeling that the knowledge we receive is itself so totally unsure as to be irrelevant.

What is needed only the individual can provide: a lively awareness of realities ("telling it like it is") and the willingness to confront those who want to keep the discussion polite and controlled. We need

to develop the political awareness that what we learn and how we express our knowledge relates directly to political issues. The cause of human liberation will best be served by activism - activism of the gun, the picket line, the pen and the vocal cords. The classroom must be turned into a riot, subdued and controlled perhaps, but a riot nonetheless of feeling, emotion, and analysis united towards the search for reality. Only by such a process can the dry data of history (or any other subject) contribute to the development in each of us of a true consciousness of ourselves and of other people, the first step toward liberation. Only from such an articulated self-consciousness does political and social action follow.

Footnotes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (Indianapolis: 1957).
2. See especially the argument between Eugene Genovese and Herbert Aptheker in *Studies on the Left*, Vol. 6 (1966) for a good example of severe argument between two Marxists.
3. Kathleen Gough Aberle, *Anthropology and Imperialism* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Radical Education Project, 1967).
4. For Marx's views on the development of non-Western societies, see his *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formation* (New York: 1965, edited by Eric J. Hobsbawm and T.B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (New York: 1964). A Trotskyite view is given in George Novack, *Uneven and Combined Development in History* (New York: 1966).
5. Endre Sik, *The History of Black Africa* (Rudapest: 1966); only volume one of this three-volume set was available to me.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
7. See the usage of these terms in archaeology in W. Gordon Childe's *What Happened in History*.
8. See Ivan Hrbek, "Towards a Periodisation of African History", in T. O. Ranger [ed.], *Emerging Themes of African History* (Nairobi: 1968) for a criticism of Sik.
9. D. H. Jones, "Africa Through the Looking Glass", *Journal of African History*, Vol. IV, 1 (1963), pp. 129-130.
10. Bernard Magubane, "Pluralism and Conflict Situations in Africa: A New Look", *African Social Research*, Vol. 7 (1969); "Crisis in African Sociology", *East Africa Journal*, Vol. 5, 12 (1968); "Some Methodological and Ideological Problems in the Study of Social Change in Africa, as Reflected in the Studies of 'Migrant Labor'", Social Sciences Council Conference, Kampala, Uganda, (December, 1968-January, 1969).
11. Magubane, "Some Methodological...", p. 7.
12. Basil Davidson, *A History of West Africa* (Garden City, New York: 1966) p. 27
13. Davidson, *A History of East and Central Africa* (Garden City, New York: 1969), pp. 288-289.
14. Walter Rodney, "European Activity and African Reaction in Angola",

- in T.O. Ranger [ed.] *Aspects of Central African History* (London: 1968); and Rodney, "West Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade", Historical Association of Tanzania *Paper #2*.
15. A.B. Davidson, "African Resistance and Rebellion Against the Imposition of Colonial Rule", in T.O. Ranger [ed.], *Emerging Themes of African History* (Nairobi: 1968), p. 176.
16. Amilcar Cabral, *The Struggle in Guinea* (Reprint #1), Africa Research Group (Cambridge, Mass.).

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