

An analysis of Marxist notion of exploitation in relation to today's Kenyan media functions

Rajendran John Britto

Lecturer, St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, Mwanza, Tanzania.

ABSTRACT: “Surely Marxism isn’t relevant anymore? We have moved on since Marx was writing” this is one of the common questions people tend to ask when reflecting on the relevance of Marxism. The real questions one needs to ask is whether the broad outlines of Marx’s ideas fit for the society today. In this paper, I argue that Marxian thoughts are still valid and useful even more than in Marx’s own times. This argument is explored with the analysis of Marxian notion of exploitation in relation to current Kenyan media functions. This analysis explores Marxism, the relevance of Marxism, the media climate in Kenya and finally Marx’s notion of exploitation and Kenyan media

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Exploitation, Media system, Media ownership

Date of Submission: 24-06-2018

Date of acceptance: 09-07-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

“Marx is dead, long live capitalism”, “Marx is dead and gone and his philosophies too”, “surely Marxism isn’t relevant anymore? We’ve moved on since Marx was writing” or “why do you still defend a man who was writing about the conditions of a couple of centuries ago?”, “Marx wrote in the different context and in difficult times thus it is not relevant and applicable now”, “Marx is definitely dead for humankind”. These are the questions or ideas very often Marxists are challenged with in the contemporary society. On the contrary during the global financial crisis the Time Magazine having Marx on the front page asked: What would Marx think? (Time Magazine, 2 February 2009). This triggers our mind to realize the relevance of Marxism today. The real questions one needs to ask is whether the broad outlines of Marx’s ideas fit for the society today. In this paper, I argue that Marxian thoughts are still valid and useful even more than in Marx’s own times. This argument is explored with the analysis of Marxian notion of exploitation in relation to current Kenyan media functions. Thus, in this paper I discuss Marxism, the relevance of Marxism, the media climate in Kenya and finally Marx’s notion of exploitation and Kenyan media.

II. MARXISM

Karl Marx was born in 1818, and he is commonly known as “one of the greatest economists of all time” and “one of the truly great thinkers”. His philosophy and ideology consists of theory of economics and of history. According to Karl Marx, this history consists of conflicts between various classes mainly the upper/middle class (bourgeois) was exploiting working class (proletariat). Bourgeoisie: in the Marxist vocabulary, simply means capitalist, or management who control the means of production. Proletariat means the industrial working class -wage labor. Nevertheless, Marxists look very carefully, at who belongs here - no artisans, no peasants, and no farm laborers. The Proletariat is the factory workers, “Those who have nothing but their hands.”

In Marx’s point of view at all times the societies are always divided up between people who own the means of production and those who do not have. Marx theorized that the key to understanding any society lies in an understanding of its mode of production and the interaction between the owners of the means of production and those who keep this production running - the workers. According to Marx’s ideology, there is class struggle between those who own the means of production and the workers. Society engaged in this unending struggle borne out of conflict between the owners of the means of production who control the modes of production pitted historically against those who actually work to produce the product. Marx saw the conflict between them as inevitable and definitive of the nature of social relations. However, Marx always believed that the workers would win the class struggle. People who own the means of production create a capitalist society. The Marxist ideology posits that capitalism is evil because the workers produce all the value of goods through their labor while the owners get most of the money.

2.1 Classical Marxism

Scholars identify three types of Marxism such as classical, academic and political. In classical Marxism, there are nine main points of thought for consideration and resolution. They are alienation; the separation of a person from his humanity; base and structure; class consciousness, the awareness of the classes of society; exploitation, where some are taking the advantage of the another for selfish motives; historical materialism the way human being were affected and struggled to attain wealth; the means of production; ideology; mode of production and political economy which peruses the manner of production, and how it interfaces with the economy.

2.2 Relevance of Marxism in today's context

In order to understand the relevance of Marxism, we must first establish what Marxism is all about. This paper argues the relevance of Marxism not in the sense of application of communism but Marx's classical theories, which explains the realities of the society and finding application in improving the existing society. One cannot thoughtlessly make a crude statement that Marxism is irrelevant to the contemporary society. There are number of studies going on in and around Marxist philosophy, ideology and relevance. They are Marxist Paradigm and Academic Freedom (Shalin), Karl Marx and the Study of Media and Culture Today (Fuchs, 2014); On Research of "Western Marxism" in China (Xue-ming, 2010); Marx and organization studies today (Adler, 2008); Missing Marx: The place of Marx in current communication research and the place of communication in Marx's work (Erdogan, 2012); Feminism, Marxism, method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory (MacKinnon, 1982); Some theoretical foundations of critical media studies: Reflections on Karl Marx and the media (Fuchs, 2009) to mention few.

This is a clear evidence that Marxism still has potential power and significance over the theories and ideas in the current society as they contribute to a fairer and more just society. Levin (2000) introduced four sets of ideas where Marxism could contribute to the society. According Levin (2000), Marxism can help in the understanding of the classes and its relations to demonstrate society's functionality as one single unit. The theories can help us to understand the dynamics of a society as a whole and not only their functionality as separate units. It can provide theory of a society in accordance with the highest human ideals to a very high extent and as well as serve as a mode of analysis examining the relationship between ownership, power and social change and thus illuminate a wider variety of social transformation than whatever is currently dominant. Fuchs (2009) and Fuchs and Dyer-Witthof identified six aspects of Marx's works which are more relevant to the contemporary capitalist society. This also helps to analyze the society we live in.

1. The globalization of capitalism, highlighted by many contemporary social theorists, is an important aspect in the works of Marx and Engels (e.g. Callinicos, 2003). Connected to this topic is also the Marxian theme of international solidarity as a form of resistance that seems to be practiced today by the altermondialiste movement and the Occupy movement.
2. The importance of technology, knowledge and the media in contemporary society was anticipated by the Marxian focus on machinery, means of communication and the general intellect (see, for example, Dyer-Witthof, 1999; Fuchs, 2008, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2005; McChesney, 2007).
3. The immiserization caused by neoliberal capitalism suggests a renewed interest in the Marxian category of class (see, for example, Harvey, 2005).
4. The global war against terror after 9/11 and its violent and repressive results, such as human casualties and intensified surveillance, suggest a renewed interest in Marxian theories of imperialism (see, for example, Fuchs, 2011: ch. 5; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Harvey, 2003).
5. The ecological crisis re-actualizes a theme that runs throughout Marxian works: that there is an antagonism between modern industrialism and nature that results in ecological destruction (see, for example, O'Connor, 1998).
6. The new global economic crisis that started in 2008 has shown that Marxist crisis theory is still important today (Foster and Magdoff, 2009). Capitalism seems to be inherently crisis-ridden. (Fuchs & Dyer-Witthof, p. 3)

Thus, Marxist ideology helps us to read the contemporary issues of the society such as globalization, importance of technology, knowledge and media. In addition, Marx's point of view helps us to study the realities such as terror, violence, and human causalities that happen day by day in our context. Zizek (2010) is of the opinion that, "the antagonisms of contemporary capitalism in the context of the ecological crisis, intellectual property, biogenetics, new forms of apartheid and slums show that we still need the Marxian notion of class" (Fuchs & Dyer-Witthof, p. 4).

In his article Marx's contributions and their relevance today, Gurley (1984) identified seven major contributions of Marx to political economy. Such as establishment of a framework-the materialist conception of history-for analyzing economic, social, and political changes over long periods of time; formulation of a labor theory of value for analyzing the exploitation of workers by the capital-owning class; the processes of capital

accumulation; identification of economic theory of the state. Apart from this, Marx also explained how workers are mystified by the system of capitalism, alienated within its production sphere, and misled by false solutions to their problems; investigation into the future course of global capitalist and socialist development and finally Marx sketched outlines of the future socialist and communist societies.

The reviewed literature on the relevance of Marxism explains the ideology and philosophy of Marx is still relevant in different aspects of current society. These ideologies help us to understand and to interpret the society in Marx's point of view. The rest of the paper concentrates on the notion of exploitation in relation to Kenyan media functions.

2.3 The notion of exploitation according to Marx

The concept of "exploitation" has been at the core of the Marxist tradition of class analysis and it is one of the nine aspects of classical Marxism. From the work of laborer, the owner drives profit. The worker is manipulated in the work place. One can work for eight hours but at the end of the day one is paid less or paid for the small percentage of the time the worker worked. The rest of the time is unpaid- labor surplus labor- and it is from this that the owner gains extra or surplus value (Bowens, et al., 2013). The owner always reaps from the benefits. The owners do all the necessary things so as to increase the flow of the profit. They fire workers, while expecting those who remain to increase productivity; they decrease benefits; they set workers in competition with one another, a process which drives down wages. All these things cause misery for the workers but are designed to increase profit" (Bowens, et al., 2013, p. 7). In other words, the profit is split between the owners and the high-end managers, but none goes to the workers who create it.

Sorensen explains what might be called the root meaning of exploitation in Marx:

"Exploitation, for Marx and here, means that there is a causal connection between the advantages and disadvantage of two classes. This causal connection creates latent antagonistic interests which, when acted upon as a result of the development of class consciousness, creates class conflict" (Sørensen, 2000). The axis of this definition is the idea of antagonistic interests. It is antagonistic because according to Sorensen (2000) when the gain of one actor, or a set of actors, excludes others from gaining the same advantage.

In the work place the laborers are alienated and through the process of alienation, they are also exploited by the capitalist mode of production, which Marx states is the basic source of alienation and exploitation (Marx, 2000 cited in (Champi, 2012). The workers don't own anything they don't feel any belonging in the work place or in the process of production. Capitalist ideologies in the superstructure are the result of the capitalist mode of production (the base). Marx argues that the act of reducing the laborer to the same level as a commodity is the origin of alienation (Marx, 2000 cited in Champi, 1987). Thus, the role of workers in the working place is just production through which the owners benefit the profit at high level. Workers are alienated in different ways in their work places. (Steinbeck, 1994)

Steinbeck (1994) identifies four features of alienation (estranged labor) maintained by Marx: Alienation from the product of the workers' labor, alienation from the process of producing, alienation from species being and finally alienation of the worker by other workers.

Once the worker is alienated in different forms he is also exploited. The labor produces the means of life but he or she is alienated from the work. One becomes mere servant of his object. "Being alienated from the product that is produced, the laborer is inevitably alienated from the act of producing; labor becomes external. Since labor is privatized by the capitalist, the worker cannot associate with it and becomes alien to him/her" (Champi, 2012, p. 17). Thus one cannot identify oneself with the product one produces. There is no job satisfaction of the laborer for one owns nothing in the process of production except being an object of production.

Marx concept of alienation and exploitation continues to prevail to date in different forms in the current society. Having seen the variable of alienation and exploitation in the following section I would argue the way media functions in Kenya.

III. MASS MEDIA AS MEANS OF PRODUCTION

Speaking on Marxist media theory Chandler argues that the mass media are in classical Marxist terms, a means of production, because in the capitalist society the owners of the media are ruling class. In Marx point of view mass media simply disseminate the ideas and world views of the ruling class, and deny or defuse alternative ideas. This is very much true and we could confirm as we watch the news. The news channels that we watch always server its master. Here it is very true that one who pays the piper calls the tune. This is witnessed both local and national channels. This is what Marx argued that: "The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx & Engels: *The German Ideology*, cited in Curran et al. 1982. p. 22).

This position explores that mass media most often functions to create and produce false consciousness in the working class. This portrayal leads us to arrive at a conclusion that media serves as a handmaid of the ruling class. As a result, the media forgets and ignores the diverse values of the society. According to Marx, the media institutions are regarded as being locked into a power structure and consequently as acting largely in tandem with the dominant institutions in society. Therefore, the media always reproduces the voices and viewpoints of the ruling and dominant institutions. They seldom represent the working and marginal class.

The media always avoids the unpopular and unconventional and draws on 'values and assumptions which are most valuable and most widely legitimated' (Murdock & Golding 1977 cited in Chandler). The media always legitimizes the forces of law and order, build consent for the extension of coercive state regulation and de-legitimate outsiders and dissidents. The power of the media is thus portrayed as that of renewing, amplifying and extending the existing predispositions that constitute the dominant culture, not in creating them' (Curran et al. 1982). This informs us that the media is serving the elite, it amplifies what the ruling, and power holders have to say or inform. Hence, one can conclude that the media serves as the voice of the elite and the ruling and it can amplify what the ruling class has to tell to the society. As Marx said, the elite control the market including the information what the people should know and should not. This analysis of media as means of production can provide a platform to study how the Kenyan media functions.

IV. KENYAN MEDIA SYSTEM

Kenyan media system both print and broadcasting can be traced back to 19th and 20th century. In 19th century, missionaries started modern Kenyan press (Ochilo, 1993 cited in Ileri, 2015). Based on development of the Kenyan media it could be grouped in to three phases: the colonial era (1895-1962), the post-independence era (1963-1990) and the multiparty era (1991- present) (Ileri, 2015). Faringer (1991) grouped colonial period into three-tier system. They are, while the European press, which was providing information for the missionaries and settlers, from England the Indian press contributed in ending the colonial rule in East Africa. On the other hand, African press was focusing on the independence agenda of the country. Kenyan press has gone through different changes and development from post-independence.

According to Mbeke and Mshindi (2008) Kenya's newspaper industry is relatively small and urban based (Ileri, 2015). The Nation Media Group and the Standard Group dominate the print media. There are six daily newspapers namely The Standard, The Daily Nation, The People, The Star, Taifa Leo, and Business Daily. The Standard was established in 1902 and the oldest in the country the Nation Media Group owns it. Taifa Leo was founded in 1958 while Daily Nation 1960. Daily Nation was most influential in the newspaper in the region (Ileri, 2015). The People was established in 1993 and positioned as the voice of the opposition parties to report materials that daily nation and the standard feared (Obonyo, 2003 cited in Ileri, 2015). Business Daily and The Star are youngest in the country and were launched in 2006 and 2007.

In Kenya, there are 20 television stations. Most of the programs in the televisions are locally produced program and news, having 48.8 per cent viewership (Ileri, 2015). Major television stations are Kenya Broadcasting Cooperation television (KBC TV), Kenya Television Network (KTN) Citizen TV and Nation Television (NTV). Kenyan media is dominated by the commercial media-a reflection of the profit motive behind their establishment and existence (Ileri, 2015).

4.1 Media ownership

The trend of media ownership in Kenya over the last five years has been cross-media ownership, a practice that has seriously affected media diversity (Nyabuga & Booker 2013). The cross-media ownership gives loopholes to the media ownership thus have taken advantage of the situation. The ownership can be classified into five broad categories: state-owned, private owned, community-owned, religious organization-owned and educational institution owned. The government controls the majority of the content in state-owned media. Private people own major media groups in Kenya. Though private media are known for the balanced coverage of the news, politicians hold a major part of share in the media, which can possibly affect the media content or the news coverage. The involvement of the politicians in media ownership has put into question the norms of news objectivity in the Kenyan journalism (Ileri, 2015). Thus, media owners influence the work of the journalists and the contents on the media. According to Nyamnjoh (2010), politicians for their political reasons take advantage of media liberalization to acquire media interests with which to secure their place in politics.

4.2 Exploitation in Kenyan media

Exploitation in Kenya media cannot be studied completely on the same note of Marxian ideology of the worker and the owner. However, there are dimensions and variables that are found in the media that can be easily associated with Marxian notion of exploitation. The key variables such as worker is manipulated, the owner drives profit at high level, the worker is alienated in the work place, the high profit motivation in the minds of the capitalists.

4.3 Cross media ownership

Primarily, the cross media ownership favors the media owners through which they take advantage of the situation. The trend over the last five years has been cross-media ownership, a practice that has seriously affected media diversity. Article 34 of Kenya's constitution guarantees freedom and independence of electronic, print, and all other types of media in the country. Eventually, the media owners make use of their media for their own benefits. "There is no direct legislation on media ownership in Kenya. Consequently, a number of established media houses have taken advantage of this loophole to engage in cross-media ownership. A number of media companies, for example, the Nation Media Group, the Standard Group, and Radio Africa media group, have print, radio, and television establishments. Media concentration is deleterious to plurality and diversity of opinion" (Nyabuga & Booker 2013, p. 66).

In addition to ownership concentration of the mass media industry, content provision, packaging and distribution have also 'become a standardized production and marketing process in which the messages communicated are constrained and directed in both quantity and quality to meet the economic imperatives of that process' (Melody 1978, p. 219). What Ileri (2015) said is confirmed that the involvement of the politicians in media ownership has put into question the norms of news objectivity in the Kenyan journalism (Ileri, 2015). Henceforth, media owners influence the work of the journalists and the contents on the media. Hence, the media owners create a situation where no one can get different opinions or analysis of the reality than what is being said by the media, which is holding the cross media ownership. Thus, the owners of the media are democratizing the democracy (Giddens. 1999).

The problem of media ownership and concentration affects the society in many ways, which consequently creates and maintains the inequality in the society. According to Werner A. Meier, media industry legitimizes inequalities in wealth, power and privilege. "When the control of the flow of information, knowledge, values and images is concentrated in the hands of those who share the power of the dominant class, the ruling class will establish what is circulated through the mass media in order to reproduce the structure of class inequalities from which they benefit" (Meier, n/d). Media owners appoint the personnel who can serve the master's interest so that they continue to provide and control media content in favor of them. In the United Kingdom, Curran and Seaton (1997) conclude that the national press generally endorses the basic tenets of the capitalist system - private enterprise, profit, the free market and the rights of property ownership. This reality is not different from Kenya. The owner of media controls what the public should know, read and what should not be made known to the public, which is another form of exploitation. In general, cross media ownership creates a powerful cartel, which spared values like consumerism, shareholder value, individualism egoism (Meier); hence, it created and maintained the notion of exploitation. The media owners want the profits because they consider the media industry to be a business like any other that exists to make profit (Lando, 2013).

The commercial infotainment, reality shows and trivialized news programs are made in a manner that interests the media owners. From the commercial point of view, the media is making money. The media owners take advantage of the cross media ownership and they make business out of it. Contrary to profit making motives, the media owners are less concerned about the decent salary to their journalists. Most of the media houses in Kenya have employed practitioners on part time basis with poor pay (Lando, 2013). This trend is in confirmation with Marxian notion of exploitation. It is antagonistic because when the gain of one actor, or a set of actors, excludes others from gaining the same advantage Sorensen (2000).

Apart from the owners, the advertisers are another section of people who control the media and exploit it. Advertisers are the lifeline of the media. Since advertisers bring in a major portion of revenue to run the media they too control in terms of agenda, interest and political affiliation. Advertisers dictate the media to tell or write in favor of them.

4.4 Sexual favors and exploitation

A study done by Lando (2013) reveals that 70 per cent of the employees in the media firm agree that money and sexual favors present big challenge among journalists. "Every person tries various means to get in, and once in s/he tries to be promoted. It happens that many a time, job seekers either engage in sex or bribe in order to get these opportunities" (Lando, 2013). This is a clear sign how the media is treating the job seekers and the employees. If one is hired because they could bribe or have sex in the media house, they have to keep doing that in order to maintain their job or be promoted. This is another example how the media is exploiting its employees in terms sexual favors.

Apart from sexual favors and exploitation, there is emerging trend in the newsroom especially in television where anchors are forced to dress in a particular way. There are assigned companies who take care how the news anchors are supposed to appear while reading news. This is another type of exploitation of the media, for the employees lose their identity or freedom to be of their own.

V. CONCLUSION

This work has tried to show the relevance of Marxist notion of exploitation towards Kenyan media function. Marxist theory makes sense all times. Marxism could be used to analyses and study the society with different variables and context. Hence, Marxist notion of exploitation is still relevant in terms of media operation in Kenya. As Bowens and others (2013) claim the owner always reaps from the benefits. The owners do all the necessary things to increase the flow of the profit. They fire workers, while expecting those who remain to increase productivity; they decrease benefits; they set workers in competition with one another, a process that drives down wages (Bowens, et al., 2013).

As Marx said, the workers do not own anything they do not feel any belonging in the work place or in the process of production. This is what happens in the media houses too. They are mere laborers for they do not own anything. What should be written, how should be written, what should go air, when and for how long are controlled by people who are hired by the media owners. For this reason, the media is always at the interest of the media owners. It is worth noting John Dewey who said 'Talk of democracy has little content when big business rules the life of the country through its control of the means of production, exchange, the press and other means of publicity, propaganda and communication' (cited in Meier, n/d). I argue that Marx's ideas fit the world today. It is more important now more than during the time of Marx. The relevance of Marxism depends not only on the set of ideas but also on whether it helps us to understand and organize the struggle to change it. As Marx himself said, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point, however, is to change it".

REFERENCE

- [1]. Bowens, T., Carroll, B., Dowell, L., Everett, E., Fry, J., Hales, L., et al. (2013). What Is Marxism All About? New York: World View Forum.
- [2]. Champi, M. G. (2012). The Marxist concept of alienation and exploitation in of Mice and Men. University of Gothenburg, 1-27.
- [3]. Fuchs, C. (2009). Some Theoretical Foundations of Critical Media Studies: Reflections on Karl Marx and the Media. International Journal of Communication, 369-402.
- [4]. Fuchs, C., & Dyer-Witthof, N. (n.d.). Karl Marx @ Internet Studies. Communication and Media Research Institute, 1-15.
- [5]. Gurley, J. G. (1984). Marx's contributions and their relevance today. The American Economic Review, 110-115.
- [6]. Ileri, K. (2015). A national survey of demographics composition of Kenyan journalists. Journalism, 1-21.
- [7]. Lando, L. (2013). Media ethics in the Kenyan media: Understanding the disconnect between the classroom and practice. African Journal of Communication, 15-42.
- [8]. Levin, D. (2000). The litvaks: A short history of the Jerusalem in Lithuania. Jesusalam: Yad Vashem.
- [9]. Sørensen, A. (2000). Toward a Sounder Basis for Class Analysis . American Journal of Sociology .
- [10]. Steinbeck, J. (1994). Of mice and men. New York: Penguin Books.
- [11]. Zizek, S. (2010). Living in the End Times. London: Verso.

Rajendran John Britto "An analysis of Marxist notion of exploitation in relation to today's Kenyan media functions "IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 23 no. 07, 2018, pp. 07-12