THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Humanism and Marxism: The Nexus

Dennis E. Igwe

Senior Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, University of Uyo, Nigeria

Abstract:

This work attempts to bare the themes humanism and Marxism share in common. As significant philosophical subjects, humanism and Marxism have impacted greatly on humanity, and this majorly owes to their stance on the well-being and fulfillment of man as the focal point of existence. Alienation, exploitation, freedom, atheism and human well-being constitute the main theses they share in common. In this regard, one can rightly affirm that Marxism is humanistic and humanism, Marxist. The paper, while upholding the humanist and Marxist quest for man's well-being, fulfillment and happiness, however, contends that disavowal of religion and the existence of God spell doom for man. Man's well-being, fulfillment, and happiness, the paper concludes, cannot be realized without the recognition of the Supernatural Intelligence that created man.

Keywords: Humanism, Marxism, alienation, exploitation, freedom, atheism, human Well-being, God

1. Introduction

Humanism as a non-religious philosophy that centers on man has had huge influence on humanity. Its secularism and scientific inclination against supernatural agency make it more amenable to those who either do not believe in or care less about supernatural existence and those who held science as the ultimate authority with regard to the explanation and understanding of our universe. Like other ideas, movements or terms with divergent conceptions, humanism has links with numerous theories and movements, among which is Marxism which has also impacted hugely on humanity. Marxism permeates various life endeavours such as sociology, economics, political science, history, and archaeology, among others. It aims at a society where mankind is fulfilled and free from alienation, exploitation, oppression and other adversity capitalism has subjected him.

Our aim basically, in this work, is to demonstrate that humanism and Marxism share some themes in common. In doing this, we shall first, treat humanism; second, we consider Marxism, after which we deal with humanism and Marxism. While dealing with our subject-matter, we shall (where necessary) undertake a critical analysis of some of the views expressed.

2. Humanism

Humanism in the modern and contemporary sense 'signifies an ideological doctrine that places human beings, as opposed to God, at the center of the universe' (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006, p. 477). It emphasizes the unrestricted power of human reason in all issues of life and the view that human destiny is in human hands against any supernatural control. It designates a chain of interconnected ideas concerning the nature, authority, education, capabilities, and values of human beings.

Between the fourteenth century and twentieth century, humanism denotes: (1) an educational programme founded on the classical authors and concentrating on the study of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry and moral philosophy; (2) a commitment to the perspective, interests and centrality of human persons; (3) a belief in reason and autonomy as foundational aspects of human existence; (4) a belief that reason, skepticism and the scientific method are the only appropriate instruments for discovering truth and structuring the human community; (5) a belief that the foundations for ethics and society are to be found in autonomy and moral equality. (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1998, p. 3672)

As a philosophical term with numerous definitions, humanism can be defined from historical perspective – Classical humanism, Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment humanism; it can also be defined from philosophical movement or specific philosopher perspective, for instance, Marxist humanism, Existential humanism and Heideggerian humanism. Notwithstanding the various definitions and conceptions of the term, there are certain tenets that are pivotal to the humanist stance as presented by Etuk (1999, p. 8-9):

- The belief in a naturalistic metaphysics or attitude toward the universe that considers all forms of the supernatural as myth.
- The belief that man is an evolutionary product of Nature of which he is a part; and that as an inseparable unity of body and personality, man can have no conscious survival after death.
- The reposing of ultimate faith in man in the belief that human beings possess the power to solve their own problems without reliance on any other power to help them.

- The belief that human beings possess genuine freedom of choice and action, in opposition to any theories of universal determinism, fatalism or predestination. Humanism clearly maintains that man is the master of his own destiny.
- The belief in a moral system which bases all human values on the pursuit of this worldly happiness, freedom and progress.
- The belief in a social programme that stands for the establishment throughout the world of democracy, peace and a high standard of living founded on a flourishing economic order.
- The belief in the complete social implementation of reason and scientific method; that is to say, reason and scientific method shall be the sole determinants of what man may rightly claim to know.

Humanism as presently conceived has its roots largely in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The period had the prevailing view that the molding of human life and society in accordance with reason is the principal concern of human existence and not the discovery of God's will. The traditional view that a Supernatural Intelligence – God created and directs the affairs of the world and the view that the universe has a purpose are repudiated. The power of human reason is highly extolled. Human reason is believed to have the capacity to discover truth about the universe as well as directs its affairs. It is also believed to ensure the good life for man. As such, man is free and not under the control, guidance or direction of any transcendental being. Man is believed to possess a distinctive capacity for moral choice. He is a moral agent who consciously acts for the satisfaction of his needs and improvement of his well-being. Humanism thus, places much value on the human person and consequently, advocates and promotes respect for the dignity of the human person. Any act or treatment, therefore, that mars the dignity and integrity of persons are condemned.

3. Marxism

Marxism is the philosophy, social and political views and practices based on the ideas of Karl Marx. Marx in his works, examines the economic activities and the material conditions of men in their bid to satisfy their basic needs. Accordingly, he writes:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or- this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms- with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859, p. 3-4)

The battle with nature and the ways employed by man to deal with nature for the satisfaction of his needs marks the beginning of human history, according to Marx. Marx offers a materialist theory of history, otherwise called historical materialism which describes the 'central developments of human history, the series of stages of social development through which human societies have passed, and an account of the key dynamics determining the development of any given social formation' (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006, p. 731-732).

Marx and Engels, his life-long friend, consider the materialist theory of history a science: 'where speculation ends – in real life – there real, positive science begins' (*The German Ideology*, 2001, p. 6). This view rests on the conviction that their method is not based on philosophical abstractions or dogmas, instead, on observation and accurate real-life conditions which can be verified in a purely empirical way (2001, p. 6).

The materialist theory of history avers that the way people produce their life necessities (mode of production) determines the type of societies they live:

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production. (*The German Ideology*, 2001, p. 3)

The mode of production encompasses everything that goes into the production of the necessities of life and includes the forces of production and the relations of production. The mode of production influences the nature of the modes of distribution, circulation and consumption which collectively make up the economic realm. Marx contends that the economic structure of society is the actual foundation of society. Both the legal and political structure originate from this foundation. Thus, the social, political and intellectual life process generally, are determined by the mode of production of material life. As the forces of production develop, they clash with the dominant relations of production leading to a new epoch of social revolution. The existing mode of production is replaced by a new superior one. All modes of production consist of a prevailing and a servile class where in the former exploits the labour of the later. Every society, except the

primitive, produces a surplus beyond its immediate consumption. And the way this surplus is appropriated shapes the class structure of that particular society.

Marx recognizes different modes of production corresponding to different epochs in human history. They include: the primitive society, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society and predictively, communist society. Primitive society was the earliest society which 'corresponds to the undeveloped stage of production at which a people live by hunting and fishing, by the rearing of beasts or, in the highest stage, agriculture' (*The German Ideology*, 2001, p. 4). In it, the means of production were communally owned. The society was devoid of class and exploitation for there was no surplus value to be appropriated. After the primitive society came the slave society typified by a system of slave ownership. The means of production and the slaves are owned by the slave-owner. Crisis in the slave-owning system led to a new antagonistic system – feudalism. In feudal society, the exploiters – feudal lords – exploit the serfs (labourers) who are bound to the soil and pay rent to the feudal lords. The serf in feudal society, unlike the slave, is not owned by the feudal lord, however, is not free as he is bound to the soil which he neither owns nor can quit and must work for his master.

After the feudal society came the capitalist society which Marx devoted much of his time to describe and criticize. According to Marx, the capitalist mode of production 'rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hand of nonworkers in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of the personal condition of production of labour power' (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1938, p. 12).

Capitalism depicts two major classes – The Bourgeoisie (Capitalists) and the Proletariat (workers). The capitalist owns the means of production and the worker is completely separated from the means of production and therefore, forced to sell his labour power for wages to the capitalist. The worker in a capitalist society is exploited to the extent that the value he creates which exceeds the labour time necessary for whatever he may purchase with the wages paid to him is absolutely appropriated by the capitalist. Marx predicts the downfall of capitalism in view of the internal contradictions embedded in it and the emergence of a new desirable mode of production – Communism.

Communist society is a free society devoid of alienation, division and class where man is free from exploitation, oppression, suppression and scarcity. Distribution of life material necessities will be based on need. The abolition of private property is among its distinctive characteristics as Marx remarks: 'The theory of Communism, in this sense, may be summed up in the specific sentence: Abolition of private property' (*The Communist Manifesto*, 2008, p. 18). Marx foresees two phases of communism: first phase and higher phase. The first phase is the initial stage with the stains of capitalism. The reward system will be based on merit guided by the principle: 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his contribution (famously called 'Contribution Principle')' (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1938, p. 4). The higher phase (communism proper) will ensure the execution of the need's principle: 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need' (1938, p. 5). In it there will be superabundance of material wealth made possible by the developed productive forces. People will be rewarded based on their needs. Marx was convinced that the society will offer man the needed freedom and also bring to an end, all the ills found in capitalism – class distinction, alienation, exploitation, oppression, suppression, religion, and so on.

Marxist Humanism

So far, we have treated Humanism and Marxism as separate philosophies. Here, the attempt is to reveal some humanistic themes in Marxism; in other words, some ideas both share in common. It is our conviction that Marxism has some humanistic departments that need to be discussed.

3.1. Alienation

Marx's idea of alienation depicts the estrangement (a kind of separation) humans experience as a result of living in a capitalist society. The conjectural core of alienation in a capitalist society is that the worker loses his creativity and capacity to think for himself and determine his actions and life; cannot own what he produces with his labour; and cannot characterize his relationship with other men. His economic life is dictated by the capitalist who owns the means of production and appropriate the surplus value produced by the worker's labour power.

Marx identifies four forms of alienation suffered by the worker – alienation from the product of labour, alienation from the activity of laboring, alienation from other human beings, and alienation from species being. Concerning the first – alienation from the product of labour, the worker is estranged from the object he produced. The object produced by his labour power is owned by the capitalist. For the second – alienation from the activity of laboring, labour becomes external to the worker; he neither expresses nor fulfills himself in the work he does. Labour which is the essence of man (for in it, humans show themselves as species being) as expressed by Marx, becomes alien and a burden to him, no more voluntary but forced. The third alienation – alienation from other human beings, reveals the worker's estrangement from other men as he is to the product of his work and himself. Same way he confronts himself he confronts others. In fact, every man egoistically acts indifferently toward others. The relationships that exist between people become aggressive, exploitative and unhealthy. Finally, the worker is alienated from his species being; in other words, he is estranged from his essential nature – the capacity for free conscious activity.

The humanistic charm of Marxism is borne here as alienation suffered by man is reviled. It undermines human potentials and stalls human development. The workers as dejected beings feel annihilated in alienation and sees their powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence (*The Holy Family*, 2000, p. 28). Alienation induces misery. Both Marxism and humanism are antagonistic to a pathetic state such as this experienced by man. Man needs to be fulfilled as a creative being. His labour should be duly compensated. This way, he will work and live happily.

3.2. Exploitation

The relationship between the capitalist and the worker in a capitalist society is that of exploitation. Marx is of the view that the worker is robbed by the capitalist as the surplus value he produced is appropriated by the capitalist. Marx was convinced that capitalist profit and capitalism as an economic system are based on robbery of another's labour time. On this premise, the capitalist exploitation of the worker is unjust.

But for Wood, the transaction between the capitalist and the worker is just because the transactions conform to the capitalist mode of production. Wood in his *Karl Marx*, argues that capitalist's exploitation of the worker by Marx's analysis is just. He remarks that 'The justice of transactions in capitalist production rests on their adequacy and correspondence to the capitalist mode of production. The exploitation of labor by capital not only harmonizes with the capitalist mode of production, but without it, capitalism would not even be possible. Consequently, capitalist exploitation is just' (2004, p. 138).

Tucker reached a similar conclusion as he argued that the notion of distributive justice was not upheld by Marx. He contended that Marx's view is 'a system of exploitation of labour power for the amassing of surplus value ad infinitum' (*The Marxian Revolutionary Idea*, p. 44). He further affirms that capitalism is fundamentally exploitative and the proletariat revolution aims to perpetually abolish exploitation.

The arguments of Wood and Tucker seem valid; however, it must be noted that Marx's use of such morally laden words as 'robbery', 'embezzlement', 'theft', 'trick', and 'plunder' to describe capitalist exploitation is significant. In his *Grundrisse*, for instance, Marx talks about the theft of the surplus value on which the wealth of the capitalist is based (1859, p. 705). Also, in *Capital I*, he describes the trick employed by the capitalist to appropriate the surplus value (1968, p. 94). These and other instances show that Marx abhors exploitation as found in capitalism. And if he abhors it, it means that it is condemnable; and if it is condemnable, it follows that it is unjust.

Marxism's humanistic deportment with regard to capitalist exploitation is quite evident. Man should not be exploited. As a free, rational and conscious being, he should be treated with utmost dignity and not dehumanized. He should be treated as an end and not a means to an end.

3.3. Freedom

Marxism avers that capitalism undercuts human freedom. According to Marx, human freedom is the capacity of people to decide their own actions in a community which has the ability to ensure the full development or growth of human potentiality (*Collected Works*, 1976, p.78). Capitalism emasculates man's creative abilities and self-realization. He becomes a victim of economic circumstances, lacking self-determination and compelled to do specific monotonous tasks against his wish but which he must do in order to survive. Capitalism mars man's 'conscious life activity which makes him a species being and which is overturned by estranged labour under the capitalist mode of production' (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscript*, 1959, p. 31). Capitalism compels man to act like *homo economicus* (economic man) which contradicts his essence. Man's entire life activity is commodified and hence, obliterates his freedom. Freedom from Marxian perspective holds when man, through the conscious, rational control and direction of his existence, develops his talents, gifts and capacities so as to act as he desires.

Contrary to the affirmed humanistic stance in Marxism with regard to human freedom, some thinkers are of the view that Marx acceded to economic determinism; in other words, the economic constituent of society is what determines the structure of society. Humans are mere personification of these social forces. So, Marx's emphasis is basically determinism and not freedom. Rader, Poulantza and Luxemburg are in this school of thought. It is crucial to state, in line with Etuk (1999, p. 143), that Marx's struggle was meant to throw off economic determinism. The revolution Marx advocated was aimed at freeing man and his labour from being economically determined.

One might rightly argue that there's a kind of contradiction in Marx with regard to freedom and determinism given that in his early writings, man as a conscious creative individual is placed at the center of the dialectical process but in his later writings, he emphasized the economic order as the driving force of all activities (including human) in the society. However, as valid as this claim may be, it remains true that Marx expressed ideas in common with humanistic stance, namely, the freedom of man.

3.4. Atheism

Inexistence of a supernatural being or force that created and governs the affairs of the universe is another idea Marxism and humanism share in common. Marx's repudiation of the idea of God is in tandem with his notion of ideology which constitutes mental creations adopted to legitimize or de-legitimize the social relations of production. Marx's basic claim is that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; and the class which is the ruling material force in society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force' (*The German Ideology*, 2001, p. 21). Ideology which is functional serves to maintain the class relations and basically serves the interests of the ruling class. It is evident in subjects such as religion, morality and philosophy. On this premise, Marx renounces and denounces religion: 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people' (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* 1970, p. 1). Elsewhere, he affirms that religion, law and morality are 'bourgeoisie prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests' (*The Communist Manifesto*, 2008, p. 24). God, for Marx, is an illusion and religion is nothing but an instrument in the hands of the ruling class to oppress and suppress the masses and prevent them from protesting and revolting against the status quo. It is used to offer them hope in hopeless conditions. This Marxist view about religion is shared by humanism where in man is his own God who governs and directs his life and determines what kind of world to fashion.

While we cherish Marxist humanism's agitation for non-oppression and non-suppression of man, we do not consider it right to disparage religion and God on grounds of heinous acts carried out by people in the name of religion. That people use scientific inventions to harm or destroy others does not make science evil. Also, the fact that people use music as a medium of spreading hate and racism does not make music evil. What ought to be condemned is the debauched acts carried out and not the enterprise (in the case of science), or art (in the case of music) which in themselves are not evil. Similarly, the awful acts done in the name of religion are what ought to be condemned and not religion itself which strives to reconcile man with God, his creator and has offered good moral life, hope, peace and joy to many. More so, God has revealed himself to people in diverse ways and these ones testify of his reality and have served as instruments of happiness and blessings to many. The denial of God's existence thus, is rejected. Humanism so conceived, is faulty and unacceptable. We share Etuk's view 'that for the brotherhood of man to make sense, it must be predicated on the Fatherhood of God' (1999, p. 167). God the creator has placed much value and dignity on man his creature that he loves and cherishes and therefore, should be revered and accorded due recognition.

3.5. Human Well-being

Underlying the humanists and Marxists' agitations is the idea of human well-being. Well-being is essentially 'used to depict what is ultimately good for a person, what makes them better-off'. It is a sort of value and also called 'welfare', 'utility' and 'happiness' by some thinkers (Igwe, 2018, p. 95). Humanists believe that man as a being in the universe must have a good life and ultimately, be happy. Every act, idea or belief, therefore, that runs contrary to this ideal is vehemently opposed. In the same light, Marxism strives against all oppositions to man's freedom and fulfillment of his potentials and realization of a better livelihood. Marxist's conviction is that the desired life for man will be best achieved in a communist society governed by the need's principle. In this connection, Marx writes:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly - only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs! (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1938, p. 5).

Marxism believes that every need of man will be met in the envisioned communist society. All woes experienced in capitalism will exist no more. Man, ultimately, will experience a life of happiness and fulfillment.

However, Marxist communism has been met with criticisms. Critics argue that the desired communism will lead to totalitarianism. Hayek (2001, p. 43) argued that the nationalization of the means of production will entail loss of human rights. Similarly, Self (2001, p. 18) contended that centrally planned economy requires coercion and does not reasonably recognize diverse individual needs and talent. The import of these criticisms, among others, is that Marxist communism will engender inhumanity to man. However, as compelling as these arguments may seem, the truth remains that Marxist communism is fundamentally aimed at realizing a better life for man, and to the extent this truth holds, Marxism has the carriage of humanism. Whether it will ultimately realize this basic aim is another thing altogether.

4. Conclusion

As an ideological creed that makes man the focal point of existence, humanism shares some demeanor in common with Marxism. Consequently, one could rightly affirm that humanism is Marxist and Marxism, humanistic. Their quest for the freedom of man from alienation, exploitation, oppression and suppression and his fulfillment and happiness is remarkable. As the most rational being in the universe, man must harness his full potentials and optimally exercise his freedom for the satisfaction of his needs. While we uphold man's fulfillment and happiness and his freedom from exploitation, oppression and other vicious treatments in line with humanism and Marxism, we are of the view that disavowal of religion and existence of God spell doom for man. Man's fulfillment and happiness cannot be achieved without the recognition of his creator in whom he has his being.

5. References

- i. Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2nded. New York: Thompson Gale, 2006.
- ii. Etuk, Udo. The New Humanism. Uyo: Afahaide & Bros., 1999.
- iii. Hayek, Friedrich. The Road to Serfdom. Chicago: Routledge, 2001.
- iv. Igwe, Dennis E. 'On Well-being: Assessing the Utilitarian Subjective State Theory'. The Leajon: An Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies 9. 1 (2018): 95-104.
- v. Marx, Karl. A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859.
- vi. ---. Capital. Vol. 1. New York: International Publishers, 1968.
- vii. ---. Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. Critique of the Gotha Programme. New York: International Publishers, 1938. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959.
- viii. ---. Grundrisse. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859. Print.
- ix. ---. The Communist Manifesto. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. The German Ideology. New York: International Publishers, 2001.
- x. Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. Collected Works. Vol. 5. New York: International Publishers, 1976.

- xi. ---. The Holy Family. 23 August, 2000. Marxists.org.
- xii. Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy. London: Routledge, 1998. Self, Peter. Socialism. London: Blackwell Publishing, 1995. Tucker, Robert. The Marxian Revolutionary Idea. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc, 1969.
- xiii. Wood, Allen. Karl Marx. London: Routledge, 2004.