# Humanity's cursed blessing: The confusion and contradictions of Enlightenment/modernity – a Marxist perspective

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Marxist literary theory affirms and protests the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity. The argument is made here that the road from tradition to modernity is not a single strait road, that in fact, it is a path littered with contradictions, ambivalences and discontents. When it came, the Enlightenment was heralded and lauded as a breakthrough; it ushered in a new spirit of interrogating everything. Ironically, that spirit has come back to haunt the Enlightenment itself. Indeed, it has proved to be its very nemesis such that modernity/Enlightenment cannot be taken as "givens" which are out there and immune to questioning. It is thus imperative that this discussion begins by defining the "spirit of Enlightenment/modernity." The next step will be to outline the tenets of Marxist literary theory. The third and final part will illustrate how the said theory affirms and/protests Enlightenment and modernity. To this end, George Orwell's Animal Farm and The Trial of Dedan Kimathi by Thiong'o Ngugi wa and Micere Mugo will be used.

#### **Keywords:**

enlightenment, modernity, Marxism, capitalism, progress, ambivalence

# Enlightenment and modernity: The interface

The dawn of the Enlightenment is generally believed to be the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the time when scientific discoveries gained prominence. Prior to the Enlightenment, society thought of itself generally in collective terms, but the advent of the Enlightenment shifted the focus to the individual. So, in a way, "Enlightenment" denotes autonomy and freedom from certain constraints created by different systems. This freedom is scientific, political, socio-economic as well as aesthetic. Part of this freedom expresses itself in the rejection of ideas, beliefs and norms hitherto held as sacrosanct. Both religion and the feudal system were criticised for being too rigid, draconian and perniciously stultifying to the imagination. The Enlightenment thus unleashed an enterprising spirit, one that refused to be confined, controlled or repressed. No longer was society going to be enmeshed in

and bogged down by mysticism and superstition, as reason took centre stage. Parochial beliefs were ditched as people increasingly began to look for all-encompassing, universal truths and values. That was the birth of such high-sounding ideals as democracy, equality, justice, legitimacy, human rights, rule of law, unity, freedom, nation-state and progress. The Enlightenment is thus the sum total of all these, that consciousness of our ability to create not just scientific tools, but history itself. It is what Shakespeare's Cassius meant when he said: "Men at some time are masters of their fates. / The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves that we are underlings" (Shakespeare 1959: 19).

Having thus stripped Enlightenment to its essentials, we must now hasten to establish its interface with modernity. According to Eagleton (1976), modernity is the awareness of being enlightened at the level of thinking. It reveals the capacity by humanity to reflect on its previous achievements in order to improve itself. It is, in other words, the awareness of being aware of our capabilities. That awareness energises humanity to create new political and socio-economic organisations. It is precisely that awareness which gave birth to the set of theories that is known today as Marxism, which was born out of the ideas of two German friends, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Mclellan 1971). Modernity sums up the steady movement of societies from primitive civilisations, which movement involved distinct stages leading to the modern age characterised by industrialisation and capitalism, arriving at the current state of globalisation (Key 1998). This takes the discussion to the next stage, where focus now shifts to Marxist tenets.

# Tenets of Marxist literary theory

In essence, Marxism is a philosophy that is predicated on the idea that conflict is endemic to society, and that such conflict emanates from the very fact that human history is a product of interaction of human beings, whom Marx refers to as productive forces. From that interaction emerges the unequal distribution of resources, which in turn leads to the stratification of society. Inevitably, therefore, two distinct groups emerge, the upper class and the working class, so-called the proletariat. The upper class owns the means of production (capital), controls the processes of production, controls the produce plus the surplus, and eventually owns and controls labour itself, since workers are rendered powerless and are constantly beholden to the employer by virtue of the fact that all they own is the labour with which to be exploited (Blunden 1976). This mode of production is called capitalism, and it is this system that Marxism fights.

In the process of producing their material life, and as they organise social relations with each other, humans enter into definite relations of production, which in turn shape the economic basis of society. Gradually, this leads to the commodification of social relations. As a result, humans live alienated from each other. An example from Devil on the Cross (Thiong'o Ngugi wa 1982) will help illustrate this point. On the eve of his son's wedding to Wariinga, Gatuurira's father sends invitation cards that demand special dress and specify the shops from which the guests should buy the presents. This way of organising feasts is out of keeping with the spirit of community and sharing that is the hallmark of the African society. Thiong'o Ngugi wa satirises this elitism, viewing it as a form of social segregation very much inimical to the Marxist ideal of a classless society.

Another major tenet of Marxism says that stable relations of production that reproduce themselves automatically, constitute modes of production. The world, as Marx saw it, was dominated by the capitalist mode of production. But a dominant mode of social production is progressive to the extent that it gives a major impetus to the development of the social productive forces (Blunden 1976). This is to say that it should help to save labour and reduce the physical effort required for human survival and subsistence. Conversely, a dominant mode of production becomes regressive once the existing relations of production become a hindrance to the further progressive development of the productive forces. Marx's observation is that under the capitalist mode of production, relations of production tend to increasingly get skewed in favour of the owners of property. That in itself is a weakness that inheres in the capitalist system.

Marxism believes in workers' agency. In other words, women and men can make history, though not in conditions of their own choosing. If workers stopped working, capitalism would perish. So, in effect, capitalism is sustained by workers who take up their places and perform their functions within a capitalist economy. Workers must thus organise in order to transform society, not through reform, but through revolution. However, they should guard against following a clique that gains power through coup, because such a path only leads backwards.

Also central to Marxist thinking, is belief in the need for organisation, training, education, and mobilisation. These are prerequisites for a successful revolution. Failure to organise exposes the revolution to hijack by selfish individuals. This partly explains the failure of the animals' revolution in *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1983). The few pigs that have acquired an education take advantage of the majority's ignorance and position themselves at the centre; they manipulate public opinion at every turn until authority becomes totally centralised, marking the beginning of the downward spiral toward totalitarianism.

According to Marx, class struggle is not time specific; it continues everywhere at all times throughout a class society regardless of the degree of consciousness of this struggle (Blunden 1976). Ideology either directs or distorts this struggle. Marxism recognises what are known as everyday forms of resistance. Although Benjamin, in *Animal Farm*, remains sceptical of the revolution to the end, his little acts of resistance before and after the revolution qualify as forms of critical consciousness. The old, cynical donkey refuses to be bullied; he does his work in a "slow obstinate way" (Orwell 1983: 18). Similar recognition may be accorded to some of the characters in *Bones* (Hove 1988) who exhibit this nascent consciousness. Chisaga spits onto his white boss' food and Muringi and Chatora give human faeces to Manyepo's dog. These little acts help to demystify the oppressor's power, at least in the psyche of those who perform them. Thus, Chatora and Muringi appear to be possessed by something akin to a triumphant spirit when they go around the compound telling everyone that "a dog is a dog, give it shit it will eat and ask for more" (Hove 1988: 41). Perhaps the next stage would be to demystify the godlike white man himself and to believe that he can be challenged after all.

Another very important tenet of Marxism is its insistence that the state is neither neutral nor eternal. Marxism is highly sceptical about the state and at the same time optimistic that it can be done away with. This scepticism feeds on the belief that the state serves the interests of the ruling class, since the dominant ideas in any state are those of the ruling class. These ideas are propagated through both persuasive and coercive means. The principal job of the capitalist state is to preserve law and order to facilitate the flow of business as usual. But such business is business that produces optimal profit for the capitalist class. That explains why Thiong'o Ngugi wa and Mugo (1976) have scant regard for such laws. Dedan Kimathi flatly refuses to recognise the laws of the colonial government and makes a joke of the courts. Refusal to recognise repressive laws helps to undermine those laws as well as the system itself. Because the state only serves the interests of the ruling class, the ultimate goal of a socialist revolution is to eliminate it altogether.

Finally, Marx believes in what has come to be known as the base-superstructure model, where the economy is the base and everything that happens in a society is determined by economic factors. It follows then that the dominant ideas in any epoch are the ideas of those who control the economy. As such, literature, which is part of the superstructure, can be used as a tool for domination by the ruling elite. It is because of this that Marx believes art should play a social role. In this regard, Marxist literary theory is affirmative of the Enlightenment slogan which says all man's activities should be tested by the measure of utility (Tonsor 2006). Marx rejected both the aesthetic idealism of Romanticism and the moral absolutism of the feudal age. As far as Marx was concerned, art should be seen to be responsive to the perceived needs of humanity. It should not just explain the world or seek merely to reform it; it should be revolutionary. Art for art's sake is elitist and serves the needs of capitalists. The artist's role should be akin to that of the pre-Enlightenment priesthood, that is, to provide social vision. Certainly, Thiongo'o Ngugi wa consciously assumes that role, for he declares:

We cannot stand on the fence. We are either on the side of the people or on the side of imperialism ...so the challenge [is] truly to depict the masses...in the only historically correct perspective: positively, heroically (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo 1976: iv--v).

This sentiment is shared by George Orwell, who admitted that he wrote Animal Farm with full consciousness of what he was doing "to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole" (Orwell 1986: xxviii).

However, Marxism also holds that social classes are not permanent and eternal, that history is always in motion and change is as ineluctable as death because the capitalist system will always develop internal contradictions that are sure to seal its fate. This tenet of historical inevitability has been subject to much criticism, not least because it contradicts Marx's key message of human agency in the creation of history. One asks: if change will occur anyway, so why act? Moreover, Marx's atheism and disregard for mysticism do not help build his inevitability thesis either. Inevitability is untenable in a universe where reason (rather than religious faith and mysticism) rules.

#### 44

Marxism has also been accused of being deterministic, prescriptive and regimented; indeed, too authoritarian and fundamentalist for a supposedly progressive movement. This aspect of Marxism is at odds with the spirit of Enlightenment. As Key (1998) notes, contrary to Marx's configuration of human history, some histories in the world are known to have taken a diametrically different trajectory.

Another criticism of Marxism is that it is context specific and very silent on the issue of race. The theory was promulgated in the context of industrial capitalism, which renders its universal applicability problematic. In the same vein, Marx had a disturbingly condescending attitude toward the peasants whose idiocy he contrasted sharply with the supposed wisdom of the proletariat. In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo 1976) it is, in fact, the peasants who are politically conscious and at the centre of making history. In the same play, race, rather than class, is the primary source of conflict.

Finally, Marx's dream of an egalitarian society forced him to postulate a highly unlikely scenario. He never clearly explained how "the dictatorship of the proletariat" would work. The chaos that reins on Animal Farm after the overthrow of Mr Jones, or its historical equivalent – the dramatic slide back into authoritarianism that happened after the 1917 Soviet revolution, bears testimony to the idealistic nature of Marx's claim.

This paper has prepared the ground for a discussion on how Marxism affirms and protests the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity, whereon focus now turns.

# Going forward to the past: the ambivalences and discontents of Enlightenment/modernity

There are so many ways in which Marxism affirms the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity. One such way is its unequivocal demand for human equality and social justice. This is why Marxism talks of the history of human society as the history of class struggle. The ultimate objective of this struggle is to create an egalitarian society where the dignity of all human beings is inviolable. Indeed, Marxism is affirmative of Enlightenment in its rejection of mysticism and all tranquilising beliefs that dismiss the human being as agent for change. Like Karl Marx, George Orwell is a firm believer in the capacity of the oppressed to end their exploitation, and he demonstrates this belief most clearly in *Animal Farm*. Explaining why he wrote *Animal Farm*, Orwell once said:

...I saw a little boy, perhaps ten years old, driving a huge cart-horse along a narrow path, whipping it whenever it tried to turn. It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat (Orwell 1983: xix).

Yet Orwell is more aligned with Antonio Gramsci than with Marx. Indeed, *Animal Farm* affirms the key tenet of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which sees power as a combination of persuasion and coercion. The story refutes orthodox Marxism's suggestion that the oppressed will rise against the oppressive system just like that; instead, it demonstrates

that any action the oppressed may take against the oppressor is born out of ideas. According to Orwell, the proletariat's awareness of their being exploited is as important as their realisation that they can liberate themselves. That is why Old Major's speech is so crucial; it sets the tone for the revolution. It gives "the more intelligent animals a completely new outlook on life" (Orwell 1983: 9). The song, "Beasts of England" is key to maintaining that tone. From a Marxist perspective, the fact that Orwell gives the animals agency and lets them take the initiative to depose their oppressor, makes him progressive rather than conservative. A more conservative writer would have kept the animals hoping for intervention by some divine power. In other words, if Orwell were otherwise than affirmative of the proactive spirit of the Enlightenment, he would have allowed the animals to be lulled into perennial hoping and waiting by Moses' "Sugarcandy Mountain" gospel.

Marxism strongly supports the Enlightenment ideal of democracy. Likewise, George Orwell makes a compelling case for democracy in *Animal Farm*. He does this by contrasting Snowball and Napoleon who respectively represent democracy and authoritarianism. It is Snowball who devolves power by setting up animal committees, and it is him again who believes in meetings to deliberate on issues. Napoleon, on the other hand, is interested in neither the committees nor the meetings. Upon his assumption of full control of the farm, the first thing Napoleon does is to abolish both. Further to that, Snowball courts public opinion purely through persuasion whereas Napoleon relies more on coercive means. The reader is bound to share the admiration that the animals have for Snowball while, conversely, Napoleon remains detestable. By making Snowball respectable and endearing, the author is affirming the democratic values that Snowball represents.

The Enlightenment also lauded the advancement in technology as a giant leap forward. Marxism hails modern industrial technology as progressive insofar as it reduces manual labour, which is why Orwell's Snowball argues so passionately for the need to build a windmill. The electricity produced by the windmill would "operate threshing machines, ploughs, harrows, rollers and reapers and binders" (Orwell 1983: 33). But if Orwell does portray technology as a source of progress, he also makes it clear that it is useless if it is not in workers' hands. The animals' windmill barely benefits them because it is exclusively controlled by the dictatorial Napoleon. It does not supply electricity to the animals' stalls as originally envisaged; instead, it is used for milling corn.

As much as the Enlightenment hailed education as the gateway from the dark ages, Marxism accepts it with a pinch of salt; it sees it as a convenient weapon of both selfliberation and oppression. It is because of their education that the pigs are able to organise other animals before and immediately after the revolution. To Orwell, as to all Marxists generally, education is a double-edged sword; he demonstrates how it can also be used as a tool of oppression. It is not difficult to see how, right from the beginning, education plays a stratifying role. Owing to their superior education, the pigs are held as the cleverest of the animals and hence the natural leaders. That marks the beginning of the end of equality, and Marxism protests this aspect of Enlightenment. The pigs' intelligence and education degenerate from tools of Enlightenment into implements of oppression. They (the pigs) use their intelligence to appropriate milk while denying other animals the same.

As Blunden (1976) correctly observes, once the pigs cement their position as the educated elite, they employ their mental head start to manipulate the other animals. Thus, mindful of other animals' inability to read and interpret, the pigs, whenever they so please, tamper with the commandments to align them with their selfish interests. Alienation of labour also begins to manifest when the pigs abandon manual labour in favour of bookkeeping and organising.

Education is also linked with propaganda, and again Orwell presents this aspect of Enlightenment as both positive and negative. When the conditions on the farm get ever so tough, with food rations being drastically reduced, the animals are sustained by Squealer's deceptively optimistic statistics, the "spontaneous" demonstrations and the freedom songs. The illusion that they are free gives the animals comfort; "they were able to forget that their bellies were empty, at least part of the time" (Orwell 1983: 72). However, Orwell presents propaganda in a negative light for the most part. Perhaps the most outrageous instance of propaganda is Napoleon's manipulation of the spirit of "Beasts of England" to assume the diametric opposite of its original meaning; it is changed from being a prorebellion force into being a disavowal of rebellious inclinations. The acceptance by the animals of the mathematically nonsensical maxim "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others" exemplifies the unbelievably pernicious effects of propaganda. In this book, Orwell ably demonstrates how, like fire, education can be both a blessing and a curse, depending on how it is used.

In its pursuit of social justice, the Enlightenment strongly forwarded the notion of the law as a key instrument of state control. Marxism firmly opposes the very idea of the state and protests that the law is there to serve the interests of the ruling class. The manner in which the commandments are subverted to serve the pigs' selfish interests in *Animal Farm* vindicates this Marxist claim.

Cliu (2003) argues quite convincingly that modernity, as currently constituted in the West, is a metamorphosis of civilisation into barbarism. This argument is predicated on the fact that instead of using technology to advance the quality of human life, the world, especially the West, is increasingly using it to control and dominate weaker, less advanced nations. This is contrary to the avowed Enlightenment spirit of equality, justice and fairness which Marxism also advocates. Liu (2003: 23) describes imperialism and neo-imperialism as the cancer whose invasive growth "will kill the world as a living organism." It would seem that modernity has been redefined or, to borrow Liu's (2003) term, "abducted" to mean the subordination by the West of the rest of the world. This is the major issue that Thiong'o Ngugi wa and Mugo (1976) tackle in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

In the preface to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Thiong'o Ngugi wa states that the play is:

...an imaginative recreation and interpretation of the collective will of the Kenyan peasants and workers in their refusal to break under sixty years of colonial torture and ruthless oppression by the British ruling classes and their continued determination to resist exploitation, oppression and new forms of enslavement (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo 1976: v).

In terms of his ideological positioning, Thiong'o Ngugi wa is unequivocal; he believes

that good literature "is that which is on the side of the people, that which...gives people courage and urges them to higher resolve in their struggle for total liberation" (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo 1976: v).

It is thus not extraneous to describe Thiongo Ngugi wa as a writer who harnesses the spirit of Enlightenment to interrogate the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity. By so doing, Thiong'o Ngugi wa demonstrates how Marxism, of which he is a professed disciple, affirms and protests the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity.

To begin with, Thiongo Ngugi wa and Mugo (1976) have deep faith in the capacity of the oppressed to change their circumstances. Typical of Marxists, the two playwrights believe that the ordinary people are not mere objects of (or footnotes in) history; rather, they are the true makers of that history. The duo's aim, therefore, is to re-humanise the dehumanised, to give voice and agency to the "injured" or "submerged", and that in itself is an affirmation of the spirit of Enlightenment. Unlike Marx, who believed that the peasants were irredeemably idiotic, Thiong'o Ngugi wa and Mugo (1976) do see this class just as capable as the proletariat to make and change history. Thus, at the centre of the plot of *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* are nameless ordinary characters (woman, girl, boy) whose heroic effort to rescue Dedan Kimathi makes intriguing reading.

The farcical trial of Dedan Kimathi puts to the fore the issue of justice, one of the major themes of Enlightenment and modernity. Thiong'o Ngugi wa and Mugo (1976) are highlighting the contradictions, even absurdity, of the system that purports to dispense justice with equity when its own legitimacy is subject to contestation. The fact that the black majority of the population plays no part in the creation of the country's laws lends a crisis of legitimacy to those laws. As such, the so-called trial of Dedan Kimathi is, in fact, a trial of the colonial system itself rather than of Kimathi. It is, by extension, a trial of Enlightenment and modernity in whose spirit imperialism is carried out.

Reacting to Kimathi's refusal to plead "to a law in which [blacks] had no part in the making" (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo: 25) the judge says: "Law is law. The rule of law is the basis of every civilised community. Justice is justice" (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo: 25). The justice that the judge alludes to here is dismissed by Marxism as skewed justice, or – to appropriate Kimathi's term – "moneyed" justice. It is skewed in favour of property owners, industrialists and bankers, or the group that is collectively referred to in the play as "the business community". Marxism protests this kind of justice and redefines justice to mean common ownership. Freedom, for Marxism, means class emancipation, and democracy is economic and participatory. This explains why the Marxist-minded Kimathi scoffs at the freedom brokered by members of the business community. Clearly, Kimathi sees political freedom divorced from economic freedom as just another form of colonialism. It is as if Kimathi is already foreseeing the new state of affairs in the postindependence state.

In this regard, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi is a precursor to Devil on the Cross. The African businessman we see in the play is the initial, elementary version of the self-centred, absolutely corrupt elite we see in the likes of Gitutu wa Gatanguru and company in Devil on the Cross, the class Fanon (1952) sees as wearing black skins and white masks. Kimathi dismisses them as "Black skins, colonial settlers' hearts" (Fanon 1952: 46). Democracy, as far as Marxism is concerned, is not the exclusive tool of the bourgeoisie (Liu 2003). The struggles of the colonised and the downtrodden peasants that we see in the play represent a Marxist version of democracy. So, Marxism is supportive of the modern spirit of democracy but decidedly opposed to its capitalist version.

The words "progress" and "civilisation" constitute part of the mantra of the settler government and its agents in the play. These too are buzz words in the modern world. Representatives of the business community want the war to end because it is holding back progress in the form of investment. Thiong'o Ngugi wa and Mugo (1976) make it clear that any form of progress that is defined by the bourgeoisie and which excludes the peasants (or co-opts them as junior partners) is sham progress, and must be rejected.

The Enlightenment created a secular lens with which to view economic, political, social and religious issues. This way of looking at reality was linked with progress. The rationale was that objectivity was only achievable subject to dislodging all subjectivity. Marxism is firmly supportive of this approach as it believes that man is master of his own destiny. Karl Marx even described religion as the opium of the people, implying that it gives people a false sense of comfort and hope. According to him: "Man makes religion, religion does not make man" (Marx 1843, cited in Liu 2003: 48). Marxists also see religion as another instrument used by the ruling classes to achieve effective domination. This is demonstrated in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* where the priest is sent along with business community representatives to persuade Kimathi to plead guilty and dissuade the Mau Mau from continuing with the armed struggle. The priest urges Kimathi to abandon "things of the world," suggesting that the poor must just accept their wretched existence as a mere passing phase. Says the priest: "Things of the world. Why in my father's house are many mansions...The world passeth away and the lust thereof, but the word of God abideth forever" (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo 1976: 48). Kimathi's response is typical Marxist; he guips that he has "always been suspicious of those who would preach cold peace in the face of violence" (Thiong'o Ngugi wa & Mugo 1976: 49).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has looked at how the tenets of Marxism both affirm and protest the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity. In particular, it has endeavoured to establish how the Enlightenment project was adulterated by the West in its capitalist quest for social, political and economic domination of the rest of the world. Modernity has been redefined to mean Westernisation, and victimisation of weaker nations has been rationalised as the price for resistance to modernity. The colonisation of weaker nations was done in the name of civilisation and modernisation, and the sophisticated tools of the Enlightenment were used to advance this project. Marxism, itself a product of the Enlightenment, is supportive of the spirit of Enlightenment and modernity insofar as it is in keeping with the ideals of social justice and the advancement of human liberty. Yet the Enlightenment is

a double-faced beast; it is inextricably linked with capitalism, and Marxism has made it its calling to unmask and dismantle capitalism in all its manifestations. Hence, as part of this crusade, Marxist literary works aim to awaken, empower and exhort the downtrodden to stand up and fight oppression.

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