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Ways out of the maze in Nigeria?

A Review of: "Naija Marxisms: Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria" by Adam Mayer[1][2]

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From a Hungarian vantage point, Nigeria is "on the map" again since the reopening of Hungary's Embassy in Abuja in 2013, after a brief interlude. These connections are not new. The then extant Hungarian People's Republic had established its own representation in Lagos as early as 1964 in the country (barely a year after Nigeria established its own republican form of government), and Nigeria reciprocated by opening its Embassy right after Hungary's transition to democracy in 1989/1990. Nigeria, West Africa's giant, as well as its biggest economy since 2018, is an obvious choice for Africa watchers to study in detail.

This is exactly what Adam Mayer, a Hungarian Africanist did, with his *Naija Marxisms: Revolutionary Thought in Nigeria* that came out with Pluto Press in London in 2016. The book is a history of African social science, political thought, trade union agitation, feminist thought, and socialist movements in the country. The tome has received excellent reviews in the British and American Africanist and Leftist press, as well as the Hungarian one.

Nigeria in the late 1940s, the 1950s (still under the British) and then after decolonization in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, according to Mayer, produced a magnificent and robust school, or rather, a multiplicity of schools of African Marxist thought, philosophy, agitation and propaganda, and art (including novels that put 1950s Soviet 'socialist realism' to shame with their faithful towing of the party line). Nigeria, easily the most capitalist country North of South Africa on the continent, produced its pro-Soviet Marxist-Leninist union personalities, writers, historians, Trotskyite mavericks of every possible conviction, economists that drew from Mao Zedong thought, and feminist radicals of the Marxist leaning variety.

The fact that Nigeria has never elected a single politician on a socialist platform does not appear to bother Mayer. Nigerian socialists also paid (and some still pay) lip service to concepts of a Bolshevik style Communist 'vanguard party' (in the same vein as Hungary's ruling

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Communist party between 1948 and 1990), but they never managed to put together anything resembling a unified Leftist political force, let alone a Communist Party of any consequence. (The Socialist Workers and Farmers Party of the early 1960s was a case in the point even according to Mayer who chronicles their multiple splits) (Mayer, 2016).

Instead, Mayer is similar to Gáspár Miklós Tamás (the doyen of Hungarian Marxists since the early 2000s) in his ethereal understanding of social and political movements as they shape history, with a preference for the role of university professors, intellectuals, artists, and other creatives.

This is a problem despite the attempts by Mayer to provide the grassroots background to the intellectuals' work (including their rural and other working-class involvements). Paradoxically, we are confronted here with an elite social history of university professors and other top strata, some of whom, understandably, drop in and out of what Mayer calls 'bourgeois parties', throughout these decades.

If Mayer is as post-Leninist as he claims (and Lenin, as we are very aware in Hungary, was quite the rabble rouser who managed to mobilize the peasant millions of Russia through a civil war), then where are the socialist masses, people's parties and grand historical significance demonstrated through his socialist minded historical account in Nigeria? Mayer bashes post-1989 Nigerian (as well as Hungarian, and other Eastern European) socialist parties as neoliberal in their economic and social policy, especially in the 1990s and beyond. But does the Nigerian scenario (which practically, according to his own narrative, meant the near-total collapse of socialist parties and formations in the 1990s) fare any better than the democratic Leftism that we have observed in socialist, liberal, and other human rights conscious, democratic sectors of the Central Eastern European public life?

The other problem with Mayer's thesis is the concept of economic delinking that Mayer, following up on Nigerian thinkers Eskor Toyo, Edwin Madunagu, and others, seems to advocate. Did any African Marxist regime manage to actually delink their respective countries from the international capitalist economy at any time? This was not even true of Angola and Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Benin, Congo Brazzaville, Mali, Sudan, or Madagascar, during their one-party rule phases... These countries were forced to keep vital economic connections with Western multinational companies as well as, in most cases, their former colonial powers, in order to keep functioning economically. This is true even if a thinker as important as Samir Amin propagated delinking and autarchy in his books. Autarchy produces famines.

Mayer, in his book as well as subsequent articles of his (Besenyő and Mayer, 2015) links the capitalist nature of the country to the emergence of security threats, including, but not limited to Boko Haram. Quite apart from the theoretical merits of Marxism in tackling inter-ethnic differences in Africa and elsewhere, the real political workings of Communist and Marxist parties in past decades in Africa more often than not included ethnicist, and even ethnocentric political behaviour. Nigeria, where the SWAFP had a Yoruba and Tiv ethnic character even

according to Mayer's account, is no exception to this rule.

That said, Naija Marxisms is a good historical work, pathbreaking in its effort to expose the history of political theory and social science in Nigeria, more turbulent than we would assume. In that sense, the author's attention to detail, and encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject at hand, are noteworthy. As well as, of course, exposing an extremely understudied subjects of African social science and scientists in opposition to Nigeria's civil and dictatorial military governments. Despite the author's reluctance to condemn the anti-democratic content of certain socialist tendencies, Mayer does provide space to the history of pro-democratic labour and student militancy especially in the 1990s in Nigeria, by Baba Aye, Omoyele Sowore, and others. From 2019 onwards, when the same Omoyele Sowore was a (failed) presidential candidate in Nigeria's elections, the politician has been active in EndSARS and other demonstrations in Nigeria, heading a grassroots opposition movement in the country, despite the emblematic leader's questionable calls also for „revolution now".

With West Africa's recent sharp turns in a number of countries in 2021 and 2022, Nigeria finds itself in a regional foreign policy context that is ever more complex in terms of its security, as well as economic implications. More than robbing socialist and leftist movements of their democratic credentials (which some Marxists are wont to do), democratic openness shall ensure a more equitable future for Nigeria, as well as West Africa in general. I conclude by expressing a hope that this volume will continue to strengthen the democratic tendencies that characterize at least the segment of the Nigerian Left, and to support the country's general openness.