

EXISTENTIALISM: A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION FOR POVERTY ERADICATION

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Abstract

Against the background of various national measures against poverty, it is evident that we speak of "Poverty Alleviation" or "Poverty Eradication", without tackling capitalism either as an economic system; or an ideology. Capitalism breeds two classes; the "poor" and the "rich" or the "HAVE" and "HAVE NOT". In an ideal democracy the government must address the economic and social conditions of the people; and link it with the educational system. But unfortunately, we have confused economic development with economic growth; and human development with material well-being i.e. The contradiction and dichotomy between :BEING" and :HAVING" i.e. existential having and characterological having. Human development must be predicated on a philosophy of man; and authentic definition of his basic needs of existence; and a guarantee of other life sustaining services. With "existentialist education", the poor will be gainfully employed; raise productivity and income; acquire skills; and able to access these existential basis needs; and enjoy the dividends of democracy. Introduction

No serious analysis of society can neglect the dialectical connection between the economy and society. In this paper, the political economy approach is adopted in explaining the phenomenon of poverty.

The political economy approach is important because it focuses on the primacy of the material conditions of the people. But, in terms of orientation, two major factors make it very important. First, political economy approach to the analysis of the society emphasizes the dynamic character of social reality. Second, it assumes the relatedness of the different and complex elements of society. It therefore, encourages the researcher to view the society as a complex unit whose elements are characterized by movement and dynamism. This is explained in terms of the contradictions which characterize social existence; including especially the relationship and interactions between social classes, which it is assumed constitute the basic building block of the society (Sabine, 1973). In addition this approach enables the analyst to take account systematically of the interactions of different elements of social life. It takes as relevant not only the political structure but also the social structure, the belief system, and above all, the economic structure as a basis for understanding society.

Our presentation reflects the continuing intimacy between economics and other facets of our existence in the search of a more meaningful definition of life. The problem of poverty and the need for its eradication as a means of improving the standard of living of Nigerians has led to the establishment of various institutions and programmes in the past. For example, in the year 2000, we had "Poverty Alleviation Programme¹" (PAP), in the year 2001 we have "Poverty Eradication Programme"(PEP). Poverty eradication is a broad spectrum activity, and therefore must cover the totality of human existence. Some of the popular approaches adopted for poverty eradication are (a) the basic needs approach and (b) the integrated rural development approach. The focus of this work is on the basic needs of the people with special reference to education. This is to highlight the general consensus reached by educationists, curriculum experts, philosophers and economists all over the world that the general purpose and objectives of education must be dependent on the purposes of human life and human existence. This is however further anchored upon a philosophy of man. What is the purpose of man in this world? What must he strive for? Therefore, a proper understanding of man, and his destiny, is imperative since the needs of every being is the direct out growth of the nature of that particular being (Ogunusi,2000). Although the specific needs of individuals may differ, but some are basic to all human beings which are essential for them to function properly well within their society and the world. These needs include food, shelter, water, health, education. Love etc. This argument is further pursued in the philosophy of Existentialism and Existentialist Education Programme and conditionalities for Poverty Eradication in Nigeria.

A Philosophical Analysis of the concept of Poverty

Poverty is an existential condition of involuntary deprivation by a person, household, community, or nation. The word existential is important because it shows that poverty is rooted in man's nature and conditions of human existence. Thus philosophy is most helpful here than economics in understanding human nature; for it alone more than any other discipline has answers to

these questions of human existence. Human nature and existential conditions are categorized into two (a) man's essence and (b) existence; or again classified into the modes of human existence as (a) Being and (b) Having (Fromm, 1976).

The objective of this part is to introduce the vocabulary and concepts of poverty definition and measurement as it fleets the problem of its eradication in Nigeria. Poverty is usually defined in two broad senses (a) the absolute and (b) the relative sense (World Bank, 1996).

a) Absolute Poverty:-

This is a situation where a population or section of the people is unable to meet its bare subsistence essentials of food, water, housing, clothing, Medicare etc in order lo maintain minimum standard of living. But in order to understand this concept and appreciate its import we must have a yard stick to assess living standards so as to determine who is *POOR* and who is *NOT*. This effort led to the theory of poverty line based on the level of per capita income or consumption of individuals or households in a region or country (Balogun, 1999). This is usually defined as the cut off living standard level below which a person is classified as *POOR* i.e. counting the people whose income is below the line. But many economists and philosophers argued that income and consumption alone are insufficient to explain The totality of human conditions of existence. Today, poverty is defined to include other variables such as access to clean water, education, life expectancy, social welfare, social justice etc. (Oladunni, 1999).

A condition of poverty can be recognized as so described as absolute if the consumption of an individual or house-hold is below' an acceptable minimum fixed overtime as a global standard for meaningful human existence, known as the poverty line (Balogun, (999). And the condition can be described as poor if per capital income and consumption of the individual is below US\$370; or very poor if it is below US\$275.

- b) Relative Poverty: This refers to a person or household whose provision with goods is lower than that of other persons or households (Ukpong, 1999).
- c) The Poverty Line: This means the value of income or consumption necessary for (a) the minimum standard of nutrition and (b) other necessities of existence. The poverty line is then the cut-off living standard and level below which a person is classified as poor. i.e. those whose income is below the line (World Bank, 1993). Consequently, the simplest definition of poverty means "not having enough" to eat, poor drinking water, poor sanitation, nutrition, high infant mortality rates, low educational opportunities, and many others (Oladunni, 1999).

Apart from absolute and relative poverty the United Nations in 1999, introduced the Human Development Index (HDI) to measure a country's socio-economic conditions such as life expectancy, access to education, shelter, electricity, potable water etc. Based on these indicators the HDI is computed for a specific welfare and expressed as a value of between 0 and 1. Thus a country with Human Development Index below 0.5 have low HDI. A country with between 0.5 and 0.8 have medium HDI, while a country with HDI above 0.8 have high level HDI.

The Human Development Index approach (HDI) is a simple average of three relative deprivation indices, viz, longevity, represented by life expectancy; knowledge, which is a weighted average of literacy rates and mean years of schooling index; and income; which is computed using per capita income data. In the education sector poverty indicators are net primary school enrolment including literacy rates, completion rates, student -- teacher ratio, drop-out rates, student per school, public expenditure and trend for education. In the Nigerian context, those classified as "poor" include the households below income poverty-line; those lacking access to basic economic and social services; the rural dwellers; the unemployed amongst others. Today, Nigeria is ranked among the "poorest" nations in the world. Our national minimum wage is seven thousand five hundred (N7,500.00) Naira per month, a wage certainly below poverty line. Also available data show that 47.5% of our population are illiterate, the bulk of this percentage is made up of women (Human Development Report for Nigeria, 1999). The general objective of

poverty eradication through education is to empower the poor because "education reduces the chances of being poor" and lack of education on the other hand increases the chances of being poor (FOS. 1999).

Theories of Poverty

Different theories may be used to explain poverty, but for our purposes the relevant ones are (a) the power theory of poverty, which maintains the political economy view point that the structure of political power in a given society accounts for the extent and distribution of poverty. If the ruling class establishes and legitimizes an exploitative poverty system through which it determines the allocation of opportunities, incomes and wealth, relying on the use of state power to its advantage (Akeredolu 'Ale 1975. Mackenzie, 1978). (b) The next is the capitalist entrepreneurial theory, which insist that the crude exploitation of workers, through low wages and poor conditions of service is the cause for the pauperization of the working class, (c) Following this is the individual attributes theory of poverty which emphasizes that the individual's low position in the nations hierarchy of income and wealth is due to his motivation, abilities, and attitudes, (d) Finally, we have !o add the corruption theory of poverty to explain its consequences in Nigeria (Tambiyi, 1998, Momoh, n.d).

Cause of Poverty

In this part we shall deal essentially with economics or political economy as the study of human and social relationship in Nigeria, and how this "relationship" has helped to aggravate poverty, dependence and misery. The world over, social relationship is determined by two main factors (a) those who "have" wealth, resources, power, position, education etc, and (b) those without or with insufficient wealth, power, position, education etc. those who "have" are the "rich", capitalists, bourgeoisie and those "without" the "poor" the proletariat (Marx 1974, Okolo, 1999). Therefore, people are poor in society because they don't have power as explained in our theory. So poverty is a social relationship in which the poor are deprived of the essential needs for their minimum existence. Therefore it is true that poverty is created by the economic system of capitalism. But what is capitalism'.¹ Capitalism as an economic system means a private ownership of the means of production and allocation of the resources, goods and services of the society through the medium of prices set by competitive markets. But capitalism is more than a descriptive term. It is an ideology, a network of assumptions about man, about ways to reach goals (Dolbeare and Dolbeare, 1976;Marx, 1974; Brand, 1995; Harry, 1986; Mackenzia, 1978).

Capitalism is based first, on the premise that human needs for existence - food, shelter health, education etc are primarily individual; rather than community needs. The individual is the unit of assumption and analyses. Second, that people are acquisitive and consumptive by nature; they first try to fulfill their basic minimum current needs and aspire to assure themselves against future hardship or privation. The driving force of social life is profit motive. Other principles of capitalism concern the competitive and nature of man; and the principle of regulating the supply and demand of these basic-goods that satisfy human needs through the market.

It is the latter version of capitalism, i.e. the prescriptive and justifying ideology of a slate that we analyze as the root cause of *POVERTY* in Nigeria. Therefore, there is need to look for an alternative economic ideology to change the course of history in the name of "*EXJSCAPLISM*".

What is Existentialism

Existentialism is the philosophy of existence i.e. the philosophy of human freedom. By existence we mean the striving of a person to fulfill himself at the highest level of development. More technically it is "possibility". It speaks out against all forms of dehumanization of man, which leads to alienation, pauperization , oppression of man which leads to poverty and denial of nobility; and seeks to reestablish "authentic values" of human existence. When used broadly existentialism means a type of thinking that emphasizes human existence and the qualities peculiar to it. It is anthropocentric and emphasizes human existence as the beginning of its definition and understanding of man. Existentialism is also an attitude; a reflection on the .existentialist experience directed toward human existence. Thus, the starting point of philosophy is the concrete situation of man in the world; (Sartre. 1976; 1959). The basic concepts and the various modes of human existence that form the foundational concepts of existentialism arc:

- a. Existence and Essence;
- b. The contingency of human life;
- c. The concept of human freedom; an

d. Being and Having modes of human existence

(a) **Existence and Essence**

Existence precedes Essence. And it was Plato who said that the surrounding world is a work! of essences. This means ideas, and that the purpose of life is to discover these essences. Essences are already there and they precede existence. Even existence is an embodiment of an essence the self, which is a part of an universal essence the self (Seetharamu, 1989). In this connection we need to speak of the essential nature of man and of separating his essences from his accidents (Hollis, 1977). This means that there is anthropology and metaphysics in basic assumptions about human nature and behaviour. Man's existence came first; then he defines himself.

(b) **The Concept of Human Freedom**

Freedom is a basic condition of human existence (FRN,1999). Freedom is a condition of self determination; and self realization. Man is not determined but he is caused to be free. A freeman is an autonomous man. He is not determined. In principle, all human beings defined in terms of naturalism and determinism are rejected. The language of human action is freedom (Hollis, 1977).

(c) **The Contingency of Human Existence**

Another important concept of existentialism is the teaching that everything in this world is cotangential the contingency of human life. This emphasizes "death and nothingness" of this life (Sartre, 1976, 1956, Desau, 1974).

(d) **Being and Having**

The "having"¹ mode of human existence concentrates on material possession; acquisitiveness, power etc. and is the basis of all evils as greed; selfishness; oppression and other causes of poverty. The "Being" mode of human existence is based on altruism, sharing, caring; contentment; etc (Fromm, 1976). But why should "having" be a problem? Existential having is not in conflict with being; characterological having necessarily is. Existential having refers to basic needs of life; we need to survive and is in contrast to characterological having which is an inordinate drive to retain and keep (Fromm, 1976).

In existentialism, we find a new calculus of potentiality; rather than one of probability; a dialectic of polarity; one in which the rich and the poor are re-defined as simultaneous and co-equally necessary poles of the same essence.

A Philosophy of Education Against Poverty

The question of the relevance of our education to national objectives is always being discussed and different solutions suggested. The argument here is that poverty is an "existential" condition, and that existentialist, education or education for living which emphasizes the basic needs of human existence is best suited to fight poverty in Nigeria. Again because studies have shown that the inability of the poor to satisfy these basic needs is due largely to low education: education reduces the chances of being poor; lack of education on the other hand deprives (FOS, 1992, 1999; CBN World Bank 1999). Education must be based on a philosophy of man; and his needs in society. Therefore a proper understanding of man, and his purpose in this world is very necessary in order to know what education can do for him. Man's purpose is to be "happy" and the basic needs of man include food, clean water, housing, education, love, and other basic life sustaining social services (Balogun, 1999). This in other words means the educational programme that will actualize our basic rights and freedoms enshrined in our national documents, But first some of the indices of educational poverty will throw more light on the proposed existential education

There are three ways to classify "educational poverty" the school, the society, the individual (Odunusi, 2000). (a) The School

- Generally lack of adequate philosophy and objectives for school curriculum,
- Poor infrastructure, poor environment,
- Inadequate and or unqualified teachers; unmotivated with negative attitudes,

- Insufficient or incessant crises in the school,
- Emphasis on book learning, tests and others

The Society

- Consequently lack of productivity due to inadequate preparation and training,
- High unemployment rate among all levels,
- Very weak and dependent economy,
- Poor social and infrastructural facilities necessary to sustain life.
- Absolute poverty in society.

The Individual

General mass educational poverty, and when education or "schooled" unable to perform optimally,

- Lack of skill, motivation, positive philosophy and attitudes,
- Low productivity, poverty and diseases,
- Poor standard of living, poor world view etc. Using Education as our poverty indicator we are interested in education that can liberate the poor and then put a smile on the faces of Nigerians. A poor man is an unhappy man. And that is why corruption is endemic today.

Poverty corrupts. And absolute poverty corrupts absolutely. We must fight poverty to fight

corruption. Existentialist education emphasizes food first; then housing; water to drink; and functional education, and other basic needs of human existence; before we start "*HAVING*" and going to the moon.

Education is a human right, and that right must be guaranteed for all. Democracy means government of the people by the people and for the people. But our understanding of democracy is often limited to political and legal right to the neglect of other rights. A true democracy must address the "existential conditions" of the people. This is because as already argued; poverty disfranchises and disempowers the poor; and subverts democracy; prevents the poor from enjoying a "decent" standard of living; and living a life of self actualization. This situation must change. For the task of philosophy, is not to interpret the world but the purpose is to change it (Marx, 1974). We must humanize our present economic system of capitalism and restructure of our democracy. Democracy is all about equality; freedom; fairness; justice of which are the authentic values emphasized in existentialist education. For in existentialism man precedes essence man is there before his material well-being. Nigerians need food, education, housing, etc they do not need to go to the moon now. Once the people are "empowered" poverty will be eradicated.

For education to function adequately and meet our existential needs it must incorporate the positive functions of education such as;

- Education for life and hying,
- Education for self-actualization,
- Education for employment and productivity,
- Education for literacy, science and technology,
- Education for skills, values, and attitudes,
- Education for citizenship and social efficiency,
- Education for social justice, democracy, and national unity, among others.

In this context, the existential function of education is to prepare individuals to be able to access these existential basic needs because education develops human capital needed to function in the various sectors of the economy and society.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom from want, inhuman treatment; oppression etc. Therefore in existentialism, a new kind of education is recommended, i.e. "existentialist education" with a new "existentialist curriculum" to enable the poor live a life of dignity. Also, a new economic system

called "EXISCAPLISM" is recommended to humaninc society based on a consistent purpose and scale of values for education based on a sound philosophy of man as a "BEING", not determined by "HAVING". In other words, an uncompromising affirmation of "EXISTENCE". In conclusion, therefore; if education is to increase knowvledge, skills, productivity, and income; and uplift the social status of the poor and thereby eradicate poverty; adequate funding of education as well as provision of educational infrastructure - books, desks, classrooms, adequate number of teachers in the right quality and ratios; that are well motivated should be given to priority. In addition, policies aimed at moderating the effects of capitalism on the poor supported by goods social welfare programmes will go a long way in making the poor access the basic needs of existence; live a life of meaning; and enjoy the dividends of democracy.

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