LET THEM EAT RHETORIC:
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON MARTIN'S OBSERVATIONS
ON THE ROLE OF THE INTELLIGENTSIA IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

by

Otwin Marenin

One can only read with dismay Martin's article on "Class Analysis and Politics: Some Observations on the Role of the Bourgeoisie in the Political Process in West Africa," published in your Vol. VII, No.1 1976 issue, for the intellectual's arrogance it reveals; and can only hope that the stance of the author is not symptomatic of the editors' beliefs who chose to run this particular piece. For pity the poor masses then. But, maybe the article was meant mainly to spur reactions - here then is one of them.

Let us start with the article's theoretical contributions. Martin proposes some methodological observations and refinements of the concept class in the African context but only gives us Dos Santo's version unelaborated in all the crucial aspects which would make it relevant. The defining phrase identifies class "primarily by the relations or modes of relations conditioning the possibilities of interaction among men" (and women, one hopes). This phrase is not developed in any way and in a number of crucial aspects remains wholly ambiguous or merely assertive. First, Marx is cited as defining classes as "expressions of the antagonistic relations of the components of the modes of production," a somewhat deterministic viewpoint, yet on the next page Martin argues that "given social formations associated with specific modes of production are historically determined," which seems to imply that the same modes of production may produce different class structures under different historical conditions. Why else this qualification. Maybe this is what the qualifier "primarily" in the definition of class cited above means. What are the secondary determinants, in general or in the African context, we are not told. Having concluded this "analysis", Martin then determines that a) African societies could not have been class-less (whether they were, whether all were, to what degree class structures existed and what was their articulation, or what the African mode or modes of production were - all these need to be determined historically not specified a priori) and b) that the distinction between national and comprador bourgeoisie is "largely irrelevant" because it so seems to him, given the interpenetration and internationalization of capital. Again, whether this statement is what it seems would

require some concrete work.[1]

Secondly, he ineptly adapts Poulantzas' suggestion that classes are not homogeneous, leading him to such misnomers as that the fraction called "modern petty bourgeoisie" consists partly of wage-earning workers - who could just as easily have been called a stratum (the differentiation to other workers being "wage differentials") of the working class. Social categories, in turn, are defined by their dominant political role and include, "for instance, the intelligentsia" (which in the light of the distinction he tries to draw later between intellectuals and intelligentsia seems a strange inclusion here) who are not to be confused with the intellectuals who are part of the petty bourgeois fraction. At the end, one has learned litt about what makes a class, what the relationships of various seg ments of each class are to other segments (do they overlap or are they distinct? are their relations antagonistic or not? can an individual be part of a fraction, stratum and category at th same time? if that is true, why the distinctions?) or to other classes; and there is no presented evidence for his empirical statements. The typology creates confusion.

Third, the two "most politically significant groups in West Africa today," he calmly asserts, are the bureaucratic bou geoisie and the intellectuals/intelligentsia. Speaking about Nigeria today this proposition clearly needs a lot of qualifica tions. Even if we include the military in the category of bureaucratic bourgeoisie (he makes no mention of this stratum, fraction, category?), still two other equally important groups are the national bourgeoisie (not the comprador bourgeoisie in its two incarnations as appendage to international firms (agent middlemen) or to the state apparatus (contractors, suppliers) and professionals. Witness the inability of the military gover ment to deal with strikes by the professional, e.g. doctors, or the demands and interests of the national bourgeoisie embodied in the draft constitution. Recent events in Ghana may invalidate Martin's assertion as well.

What we have then for the theoretical parts of the arti cle is an exercise in the best tradition of petty bourgeois scholarship, running events and date through a conceptual meat-grinder to make them fit pre-given categories. The best examp of this procedure is Martin's lumping of Amin with bourgeois scholars, of Toure with Senghor, or Keita with Houphouet-Boigny into the same category of the bourgeoisie, who by using simila thoughts and methods serve similar interests. This is revisio ist typology without thought - it means nothing and obscures what is important. It is true that neither Toure or Nkrumah a or were totally socialist in their policies (socialist using t "scientific Marxist" conception of the term), yet to equate th policies and ideologies to those of Senghor or Houphouet-Boign

makes hash of any pretensions to a historically concrete analysis; and makes sense only and fits only within pre-established categories drawn in an extreme fashion. If you are not absolutely for the "most oppressed classes" then you are just a petty bourgeois like any other. In Habermas' phrase (I think), a "cheap inevitability" pervades this sort of sloganeering.

It is also intellectually arrogant, and this is clearly brought out in the discussion of the intelligentsia. Two conceptual flaws may be pointed out quickly. What distinguishes intellectuals from the intelligentsia is that intellectuals are part of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and make a living as secondary and university teachers or bureaucrats, while the intelligentsia, which makes its living in a similar way, takes the interests of the oppressed to heart and joins "the ranks of the exploited and oppressed masses," thereby taking on the characteristics of the intelligentsia which are a dedication "to radical change" and identification "with the oppressed majority." What Martin must mean by this is not that the intelligentsia forsake their university and administrative jobs and join the workgang in the fields or the proletariat drudging to the factory gates (for he would be hard pressed to find examples), but that they think differently from intellectuals though they may live just like them. This is indeed a very curious conception of committing suicide as a class (stratum, faction, category?) which allows the luxury of wine with dinner and a car allowance as long as the conscience is radical. How nice it is to be for the oppressed. It is just a matter of thinking and saying the right things. (Lest I be misunderstood, I am not arguing that there are no differences between various forms of social analysis and the actions which they entail and the interests which they serve - only that Martin resorts here to an argument which is un-Marxist in its theory and empirically suspect.) The second flaw is this. If there are different groups of intellectuals (however we may label them) and if they are thought to be important in the revolutionary process then one needs to know why it is that some betray their class (which would seem to be a hard thing to do) and others do not. Martin's exhortation that it is "incumbant" on intellectuals to become intelligentsia is not even an attempt at doing this, nor has it anything to do with class analysis. It is wishful thinking and it is pernicious in that it converts a social process into individual moral choice - a very bourgeois conception of why people think and decide as they do.

Lastly, and most importantly, there is the question of the relations of the intellectuals/intelligentsia to the oppressed. That this is a problematic relationship was quite clear to Marx, to other Marxist thinkers, e.g. it is a central worrystone for Gramsci, and various commentators.[2] To Martin the relationship is clear, one-sided and, objectively, in his

interest. The intelligentsia have a "monopoly with respect to knowledge and know-how," "the responsibility for revolutionary change rests with this group *alone* (my italics)" and its historic mission is to explain to the oppressed "in simple terms" (for they might not understand regular discourse) the nature of their condition. This is the rule of the intellectual class (be they stratum, fraction or category) with a vengeance. If we couple this claimed superiority over the thinking capacity of the oppressed with the inadequacies of the 'analysis' he presents one can only tremble for the fate of the masses. In the end, all we have is the intellectual's disdain for the masses, with an attempt to make it palatable by appropriate rhetoric, conventionalized categories and acceptable self-identification ("in the Marxist tradition"), and served up as the recipe for a full stomach for all. Marx wrote the epitaph to this line of thinking when he noted that university graduates believe that the working class is "of itself incapable of its own emancipation" and "must be freed from above." Engels added that in freeing the oppressed they are concerned all the while with "making their own leadership secure, the leadership by the 'eddicated'."[3] Intellectuals now might still swallow these pretensions. The masses would choke.

Footnotes:

1. It can be done right. For example, see Richard Sklar's carefully reasoned attempt to delineate the nature of the emergin bourgeoisie in "Post-Imperialism: A Class Analysis of Multi-National Corporate Expansion," *Comparative Politics*, Vol.9, No.1, October 1976, 75-92.

2. E.g., see Karabel, Jerome. "Revolutionary Contradictions Antònio Gramsci and the Problem of Intellectuals," *Politics and Society*, vol.6, no.2, 1976, 123-72; and Lewis S. Feuer, *Marx and Intellectuals*, Doubleday and Company, 1969.

3. Cited in L.S. Feuer, "Marxism and the Hegemony of the Intellectual Class," in L.S. Feuer, *Marx ...*, op. cit., 55.

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