



Hermeneutical Dialectics: Reconnecting Text and Social Struggle

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Introduction

My experience of teaching Hermeneutics to 400 level (final year undergraduate students) studying for B.A. (Hons.) degree in philosophy has exposed me to a few challenges that hermeneutics encounters in the post-Marxism era – namely, the dead of the “under-text”. I often use the construct “under-text” with my students in a stipulative sense to refer to the underlying social condition under which the author writes a text and that determinately influences the weighing of facts, opinions, and perspectives as well as the choice of dictions/words that the writer rely on to drive home the main points in a text. I often begin my class by giving my students a text to develop some “interpretative entry points” – what I mean by this is the preliminary interpretations that come before one’s awareness of the interpretive angles taken by other interpreters. I also employ this approach in bible classes where I have been teaching young, adult, and leaders’ sections since 2002 in a local church. My experience with this approach is the discovery of the fact that the social condition that undergirded the text or challenged the author are usually neglected during interpretive phases of the text. Interpreters often approach the text as an independent entity existing objectively distinct from its author, society, and history.

In this article, my aim is to reconnect the text and society within the Hegelian-Marxist dialectical methodology. Further, I will rely more on Marx’s philosophy of history – the historical materialism – to situate most of my analysis and show how the text (or literature in general) reflects the social condition of society. The argument advanced in this work is that every text is conditioned by the socioeconomic characteristics of its author. The author writes to either promote and help strengthens the existing social, economic, and political structure of society or to rebel against it with the text. This is facilitated via the positioning of facts, interpretation of opinions, development of perspectives, etc. The text is designed to elevate the issues, perspectives, and facts that the author endorses while deflating others. In a sense, one can say that an author is active participant in the political process of its society, and that it always takes sides with either the protagonists or antagonists. The side the author supports with its writing depends primarily on its place in the social and economic structure of society as may be historically referenced. The author does not write independently of the social and economic influences.

The author’s choice of words, facts, issues, and perspectives are tied to his/her source of living. Generally, human being make choices in such a way that it would not undermine their means of survival. Majority of authors follow the “survival instinct” rule in the choice of words and phrases, the presentation of facts and perspectives. The general assumption among readers (even among writers) is that the author is free in the mind. Liberal political analysts attribute more freedom to the pen in a democracy and/or capitalist society than they do in others. In a way, the political analysts are right. For the writer, freedom means “being free to think”. This type of freedom is facilitated better in a democratic society. Indeed, true freedom comes when the mind is free. But then the mind of a poor or under-paid writer is not free even in a democratic society. Freedom from poverty is crucial for freedom of the mind to take place. True freedom comes when your mind is free and not when stomach is free. However, the mind sits on the stomach. If the stomach is not free, then the mind is not free. The freedom of the mind and that of the stomach go hand in hand (Nyerere: 1968, 107). Yet, freedom of the stomach depends on



one's place in society in terms of being favoured or disfavoured by the socioeconomic profiles of society. The social condition of society puts one author in a favourable group and puts the other in a disfavourable group. We are born into these opposing groups in society and our identities are formed by our belonging (passive and active participations) to these groups (Ake: 1981, 78-79). We struggle to protect our "community of belonging" while degrading the favoured group as the source of deflated standing in society/life in general. In this direction, this research investigates how the social conditions of society affect the author vis-à-vis the text on the one hand and the reader vis-à-vis interpretation on the other hand.

Society and the Text

The text is a product of the mode of production within which it is written. The purpose or meaning of the text is rooted in the ideological leaning of the author. The text is directly connected with the prevalent economic system. It is connected with society and develops under its influence. The text reflects the state of knowledge of society as well as the ideological convergence and divergence of society.

Mode of production determines the direction and speed of scientific progress as well as the application of scientific knowledge. A primitive mode of production, such as communalism, would not engender rapid growth in scientific knowledge because the demand and requirement for technical (scientific) knowledge would be quite low (Ibanga: 2021, 190).

The level of scientific knowledge – the epistemic progress – of society is reflected in the text. The knowledge of the author is limited to the intelligibility level of society – and sometimes even lower than the epistemic baseline of society if the author lacks the means or passion to expand/enrich his thinking. Despite this, society is largely divided between the haves (upper class) and have-nots (lower class). This social division has effect on societal intelligibility. On the one hand, those in the upper class, with their better wherewithal, have access to information and ideas even beyond the reach of the community. They send their wards to the best educational institutions or place them under the tutorship of the best teachers. For instance, Aristotle (a highly prized philosophic sage) was employed by King Phillip II of Macedon to tutor his son who later became Alexander the Great. Instances like this are replicated throughout history – whereby the families of the upper class pay a fortune to educate their wards in the best learning available. On the other hand, those in the lower class, with their meagre income, can only afford low grade schools for their wards or in some cases none. Only occasionally do a few members of the lower class save up to send their wards to the schools attended by the children of the upper class. Yet, in some societies – for example, the pre-civil rights United States of America and apartheid South Africa – children of the segregated were excluded by law and prevented from obtaining the same education as the children of privileged class (Eyo – Ibanga: 2017, 147). In other societies, the tuition is so exorbitant such that members of the lower class cannot keep up with it leading to withdrawal or drop-out.

The point I am making here is that knowledge is stratified in society based on class structure of society. Authors and their ideas are situated in the different strata. Hence, within a society, there arise conflicts between the texts written by members of the same society. There may be conflict in assumptions, facts, and/or perspectives. This is reflected at the macro-level, at the level of the globe or civilization. Thus, one finds that the text written by authors in the global north tend to be richer (in terms of the currency and complexity of information) than those of the global south. Yet, the texts themselves



are limited to the exclusivity of their settings. Only a few texts allow for interculturality in their formation and development.

Texts are written from the limited perspectives of the authors. Authors perspectives vis-à-vis the texts are limited to the intelligibility level of their societies, which in turn are products of mode of production. According to Karl Marx (1904, 11), it is mode of production that conditions history and society, that is, “social, political and intellectual life processes in general”. Marxist philosophy reveals the logical development of beliefs, thoughts, and events. It demonstrates that «people’s thoughts, characters and actions are shaped by the condition in the world around them, the material world» (Bowen et al.: 2013, 16). On the one hand, the thoughts and characters of the authors are shaped by the social conditions of the material world based on the class they occupy within the system of economic relations of production. This makes the documented thoughts of the writer to assume class character. On the other hand, the text is a “multi-ramificationary” documentary of the beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, events, and changes whose underlining causes are traceable to changes in the mode of production in society. This does not imply that the text is a product of economic determinism strictly. In identifying economic material condition of society as the underpinning attributes of the intellectual and scientific development, it does not neglect the effects of other factors (Engels: 1934).

Economic forces act on intellectual development of individuals and society in general. However, the economic factor that drives intellectual development is not abstract and independent or distinct from the human person. The text is a product of human activity and thought. When we document our thoughts in the form of text, we do so within the economic relations we were born into, also in consternation of social, political, etc. life process of society in general. The world with its social system was already in place before we came into the scene, therefore, our activities are presupposed and conditioned by the existing social system. Yet, the dialectical principle that governs everything in the world shows that the social system, which pre-empted our existence, would not endure without change. Hegelian-Marxian dialectics implies that at a certain stage of development of the existing social system, contradictions would arise within it, contradictions of which its resolution would qualitatively transform it into something new and better (Ibanga: 2021, 88-89). When this happens, there would be qualitative change to intellectual and scientific content of the text in general.

The new texts represent new facts and social conditions or that it re-presents the old facts with new perspectives that are afforded by the new economic condition. The new texts present qualitative higher and better perspectives than those previously developed in the older economic system. Hence, we see that capitalism throws up richer scientific knowledge than communalism. Scientific development depends largely on the social system, that is, the prevailing economic system (Afanasyev: 1968, 343). The change of the system of economic relations implies that there would be simultaneous change in the beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours of human beings. This qualitative change in thought and attitude also affect the writer and in turn the quality of the text he/she develops. So, over the course of time we see qualitative improvement in the context of the text, the constant changes in fact presentation or perspectives employ to present the facts, and sometimes a complete rejection of previous thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, etc.

In general, literature continues to grow, not only qualitatively but quantitatively, with the later developments in literature considered as presenting more accurate facts or perspectives to phenomena (Ekwealo: 2013, 38). In the development of newer texts, the older texts that embody weaker dataset or perspectives are not set aside. The writer takes these older perspectives into account for various reasons to forge a new, richer and better perspective. One of the reasons the writer takes the older perspectives



into account is to avoid a repetition of the error of the past and not to reinvent the wheel. So, while the author is ultimately influenced by the prevailing mode of production under which he writes, she is simultaneously influenced by the thoughts that were developed in the previous mode of production as well as the perspectives of other current texts. There is unity of thought. Yet, the ideas one documents in the text and even the interpretation one gives to the previous texts are ultimately determined by the economic relations of present society in reciprocal relations with other factors such as religion, culture, law, ethos, philosophy. Even where the writer borrows ideas from the past epochs, the interpretation it gives to them necessarily reflects the perspectives thrown up by the present economic condition and the latest stage of epistemological evolution of society.

Interpretation as a Class Struggle

Fredric Jameson is celebrated for pioneering a new insight into Marxist studies, namely, Marxist hermeneutics. In his first major work, *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson attempted to tie hermeneutics to Marxist political philosophy – precisely to the notions of freedom, dialectics, history and form (mediated). In fact, for him, political interpretation of the text underpins all readings. That is, the meaning of text is given in the light of the social, economic and political condition that prevailed in society at the given time. As the political structure of society changes the meaning of text is transformed. Jameson spent a lot of resources to analyse the way capitalist mode of production affect the text and its interpretation. According to him, capitalism «paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself» (Jameson: 1981, 4). In other words, capitalism does not only render our thinking ineffectual and incapable of discovering the forces of history (society) in a given historical time but equally distorts our speech itself and disconnect it from its social contexts – for example, priming “I” as against “we”.

Capitalism itself can transform our thinking, our notions, beyond recognition. Hence, the need to radically historicize all texts and concepts. It is for this reason that Jameson (1981: 2) argued that it is «only a genuine philosophy of history» that can enable a radical interpretation of texts to fit into the specificity of time and change. This means that interpretation is not a trans-historical activity rather it is rooted in the specificity of time. To appropriate meaning of a text will require to mediate it through appropriate model – namely, Marxism. Jameson placed less emphasis on the text itself but focuses on what he calls «interpretive master code», which enables the reader to “confront” and to “appropriate” the text. This is important because we do not have direct access to experience, but it only mediated to us. He defined interpretation as consisting of in «rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code» (Jameson: 1981, x). The form with which meaning of a text is mediated and appropriated is crucial in all interpretation. However, the form with which a text is mediated is dialectical confluence of past interpretive modes.

We never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions (Jameson: 1981, ix-x).

At all times, the reader always has before him/her multiple interpretive entry points to a text already present. These previous interpretation are diverse and differing, and they tend to present a conflictual



situation for the reader who must take sides depending on the class he/she belong in society. Our sympathies are always coloured by the sentiments of our social classes. As Jameson again told us:

Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict... only another stronger interpretation can overthrow and practically refute an interpretation already in place (Jameson: 1981: xiii).

Interpretation is largely a dialectical struggle of one perspective against the other – a class struggle of perspectives within text – only a newer and stronger interpretation negates the older and weaker one but only to be outmoded by a much newer and stronger interpretation. The dialectical struggle of interpretive perspectives takes place in our mind. The mind is the open field where battles of ideas take place.

What does it mean to say interpretation is “a dialectical struggle” or “a class struggle” of perspectives within text?

Interpretation is a dialectical negation of one perspective by the other – by a newer and stronger perspective of interpretation. In dialectical negation, the old is overcome by the new or one stage of development gives way to another. This dialectical process is present in every sphere of the material world, including the sphere of knowledge, whereby an old theory is replaced by a new and higher one. Epistemic progress is a dialectical movement, of replacement of one stage of development by another, of the overcoming of the old by the new. To interpret is to negate old perspectives of interpretation available to the text. To interpret is to engage in a struggle, in a class struggle, with other interpretive perspectives. To read a text is to interpret it. It is impossible to read a text without simultaneously interpreting it. Reading is the act of interpretation. But when we read or interpret a text, we do so from a class position.

The text is a product of human labour in society. However, like any other literary form, the text is rooted in the orientation of one class or the other. In writing the text, the author is taking a class position. In a class society, there is no such thing as “pure text” – a text written presuppositionlessly. Texts bear the character of class consciousness. It expresses the consciousness of one class against the other, and it is highly partisan. Classes exploit the text to advance their class interests, reflected in political, moral, and philosophical views. Each class develops the text to correspond to its interests. Text is an ideological weapon. Conversely, interpretation of the text is rooted in the orientation of one class or the other. In reading the text, the interpreter is taking a class position. That is why there is no such thing as “pure interpretation”. Interpretation is highly partisan – it bears the character of class consciousness. Interpretation is a device employed by classes to exploit the text to advance their class interest.

In interpretation, two things happen. One, the reader confronts the text as an alien, and interpret it from a class position. Interpretation is first and foremost a confrontation of the class position assumed by the text. Two, the reader confronts other interpretive perspectives of the text. As Jameson (1981, ix) noted, «We never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read». There are already interpretive perspectives of the text, which we may be aware of. There are also old reading habits imparted in mind by the previous texts we read that have created a delta of perspectives we adopt to a text. These are the perspectives we confront in interpreting the text. Those other interpretive perspectives are class positions, and our confrontation with them is also from a class position. In interpreting, we seek to negate these various perspectives and



replace it with our own to reflect our class interests. That is why Jameson says, «interpretation consists in rewriting a given text», and then this is done from a class consciousness.

Connecting Traditionality and Modernity

Interpretation is the class struggle of opposing views to a text, and it is also the class struggle to negate the text itself. Dialectical negation is inherent in this struggle, and it is the principle of its resolution. The struggle of interpretative perspectives is resolved by the overcoming of the old perspective by the new and higher one. The dialectical struggle and negation are a phenomenon of the internal contradictions that arise in the older interpretive version of the text. On the one hand, contradictions arise within the text itself when it is no longer consistent with the fact in a specific historical time, and a new perspective rises to challenge its view and present a clearer and a more precise description/explanation of phenomena. On the other hand, contradictions arise in interpretive version of a text when the interpretation no longer correspond with the reality of the text, the textness of the text, and a new interpretive version arises that better explains the text. In the text itself and its interpretive version, it is the weakness of its logic of explanation and its imprecise representation of reality in the light of recent profiling of phenomena via its *ad hoc* and auxiliary profiling that account for the contradictions that arise in text. It is these contradictions that set the stage for new and higher interpretation of phenomenon and the text, thus, set up the stage to be replaced by it. In other words, the newer interpretation of text and phenomenon is conditioned by the text itself and its old interpretive versions, and arises out of their internal contradictions, and thus, set the stage to be replaced by it.

However, the new interpretation of text and phenomenon does not completely obliterate the old interpretation but retains the best in it and assimilates it while raising it to a higher level of consciousness. In assimilating the positive aspects of the old interpretation in the new, it does so by critically transforming them to conform to its own nature. This means that the new interpretation only negates what has become obsolete in the old interpretation. The new interpretation does not retain its newness forever; it definitely develops internal contradictions, thus, setting it up to be negated by even a newer interpretation. This negation of the negation continues *ad infinitum*. The retention of the positive aspects of the old in the new interpretation amount to continuity in thought – a dialectical connection between the old and the new. This means that interpretation of the text does not begin from the scratch – it does take past interpretations of the text into account in order to arrive at a higher version of the interpretation of the text. Dialectical interpretation of text is not linear but a spiral process involving repetition of phases of interpretation already passed even though it does so in a qualitatively new and higher basis. Nevertheless, this spiral movement does not mean a complete return to the past interpretative version but that the new interpretation appears as only an outward semblance of the old version in a certain sense yet differ radically from the old in its internal logic.

Conclusion

The work investigated textual interpretation within the framework of dialectics – especially within Marxism. It argued that interpretation is a tool for securing political interests by different classes in society. Since the text has been weaponized by the different classes who appropriate it for their differing interests, the interpretation of it becomes a form of class struggle. The writer itself is not free because his/her mind is tied to apron strings of the class that he/she belongs and whose interests it tries to secure with the text. This affects the manner the writer presents facts and perspectives in the text. The



implication of this for our study is that the text is not a neutral phenomenon as often presumed by lay readers – who themselves are victims of their own ignorance.

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