

AMERICAN PRAGMATISM VERSUS DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN AFRICA

Ozor, E.

Department of Public Administration and Local Government, University of
Nigeria, Nsukka

ABSTRACT

Driven by the life experience of competition for survival, three American scholars – Peirce, James, and Dewey – sought a theory that could best explain that natural instinct in man i.e. the instinct of self-preservation. They argued that, faced with the alternatives of idealism and practicalism, man in his bid to survive, would naturally opt for the latter. They baptized this natural tendency “pragmatism”. This philosophy has influenced American foreign policy and relationship with the rest of the world. It has virtually blurred all “moralisms” including those affecting the democratization process in Africa. Even when crass materialism has compelled America to prefer pragmatism to democratization in the continent, it is suggested that Nigeria should be guided, in its relations with sister African countries, not entirely by the unbridled philosophy of pragmatism.

“The art of politics consists in hiding one’s purposes and motives; the science of politics and society consists of laying them bare.”

E. Conzé

The Scientific Method of Thinking

INTRODUCTION

Since after the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, the rather dramatic events in Moscow of August 1991, and their subsequent snowballing effects leading to the breakup of the Soviet bloc, it has now become rare to speak of a bipolar world in international politics. The power and influence of the United States of America (USA) have now pitched at such a pinnacle of world politics that it appears that the United Nations General Assembly is now

remodelled as follows, in order to incorporate these two salient elements pointed out above:

*"modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens acting indirectly through the competition and co-operation of their elected representatives."*²

By being "accountable for their actions in the public realm", actions of rulers while in public office should be scrutinizable by their citizens. Rulers thus realize that ultimately, they are responsible for their actions to the general citizenry of their respective polities, through the instrumentality of regular, free and fair elections among the majority indigenous population. For want of space, we cannot discuss such ingredients that should make for true democracy, as the various systems of government and the categorization of their rulers; different forms of accountability; various citizenship qualifications; the various methods of elections, especially what makes them free and fair etc; that exist in various countries today. However, suffice it to say that the essence of any genuine democracy is the amount of leverage it affords the majority of its indigenous population to influence the actions or inactions of their rulers and/or public officeholders.

Democratization, therefore, reflects the process of turning an erstwhile autocratic and totalitarian regime into a popular, generally acceptable, and accountable democracy by the generality of its citizens through the instrumentality, albeit indirectly, of the ballot box. As already shown above, the current wave of democratization or transitions to democracy began in early 1970s with the downfall of dictatorial regimes in the Iberian Peninsular of Spain and Portugal and culminating in the breakup of the Soviet Union and its satellite countries in 1990 and thereafter. "Between 1974 and 1990, at least 30 countries made transitions to democracy, just doubling the number of democratic governments in the world."³

Three major factors can be held accountable for the new wave of democratization, the world over. One is the role of the Catholic Church, especially since after the Second Vatican Council of 1963 - 65. The Catholic Church has since then shifted its doctrines away from defending the *status quo ante* to that of being the guardian of the victims of oppression by dictators. Before the 1970s, predominantly Protestant countries of the world had become democratic, thus leaving their Catholic counterparts as the main authoritarian regimes in the world. After the Council, the "wind of change" started blowing across such erstwhile Catholic dictatorships as Spain, Portugal, South and Central American countries, the Philippines, Poland etc. This impetus to change in these Catholic countries was fuelled by the pastoral visits of the 'itinerant pope', Pope John Paul II, who, out of the 27 years of

Malawi, and even South Africa, where the "upheaval in Eastern Europe" gave domestic opposition added fillip to agitate for democratic changes.

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"Pragmatism is a philosophical theory of dealing with things which are real. It is a reaction against intellectual speculation" According to this philosophy, "ideas that, when adopted, make no difference in action [sic] considered meaningless. Genuine meaningfulness, for the pragmatist, requires that the idea must have at least some conceivable consequences... the pragmatic method means the attitude of looking away from first things: principles, categories, supposed necessities; and looking towards last things: fruits, consequences, facts."⁵ In other words, intellectualism which does not influence actions or which influences actions that have no real consequences, is meaningless. Like the apostle James would say in his epistle, "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."⁶ The pragmatist also holds that truth, or what one may call long-held belief or principle, does not only change but is relative, being "merely the functioning of ideas in human experience."

Pragmatism is essentially an American philosophical concept which was influenced by three major factors. Firstly, there was by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, an intellectual revolt brewing against the idealist and rationalist orthodoxy in the whole continent of Europe, and beyond. Thus, coming much later after the Lutherite Reformation in Europe, the Great Rebellion in England, the American War of Independence (1775 - 1781), and the French Revolution of 1789, scholars and philosophers reacted against such idealistic abstractions as those of Hegel which overeulogised the virtues of Christian piety, monarchism etc, in favour of more practical and experimental approach to issues of life. Pragmatism as a philosophic and republican (or personal) way of life quickly came in to fill this lacuna. Secondly, was the influence of the publication in 1859, of the Darwinian theory of evolution which "suggested that man was himself a part of nature, deeply involved in it, and facing risk and danger in his own efforts for survival". Thus, man was no longer to be viewed as a mere angelic spectator only to be influenced by what was going on around him, but as part of nature, man could in turn influence what goes on around him. If it is thus realized that man has interests, strong needs and felt dangers, and given that he can influence his environment, it then follows that as an intelligent rational being, the Darwinian theory of evolution or change should propel him to seek to bring about positive favourable changes to himself, rather than remaining the static, dormant, disinterested spectator. Finally, before that time, American cities were burgeoning as a result of population shift from the farmlands to the cities. Railroads were expanding westwards, and technological development was rapid. Old theories and strongly-held ideas started giving

'Doctrine' Versus 'Practical': A Synthesis: From our discussions so far about democracy and pragmatism, some of their salient points of differences are summarised below:

1. Democracy is a system of governance, which insists on, and adheres to, some laid-down and institutionalized norms, principles, rules of conduct, generally and habitually known patterns of accepted behaviour etc. Therefore, democracy is an intrinsic concept, which possesses basic universal, 'truths', 'ideas', 'principles' etc. that nourish it.
2. Democracy is 'pluralistic', by which is meant that it involves the aggregation of the interests of many within a polity or within polities. This means that democracy is like a game which cannot be played without the active "competition and co-operation" of other citizens who have rights and interests - associational as well as partisan, collective as well as territorial etc. - to protect and defend. Democracy, therefore, seeks to give power (and greatest benefits) to the greatest number of the people.
3. Democracy as a form of government is normative in character. That means that democracy is not essentially 'profit-oriented' at all costs, hence it does not pretend to be more efficient, economically and administratively. Nor does it claim to lend itself to easy governability or consensus in practice. Where there accrue these political attributes in any democracy, they are more incidental and mere coincidental than mainly fundamental.
4. Since democracy seeks to accommodate the interests of all, or at least the majority, it often 'buys' what it did not bargain for. In seeking to create order and good governance, it often promotes chaos especially at its baby age. As Schmitter *et al* put it, "groups and individuals with recently acquired autonomy will test certain rules, protest against the actions of certain institutions, and insist on renegotiating their part of the bargain".⁸ Thus, the compromise and co-operation inherent in the practice of democracy are internalised only gradually when actors learn how to use them. This means that democracy does not claim to offer an instant panacea to 'governability or contingent consent'.
5. Democracy as a theory (and more recently as a practice) is ancient in age. During its infancy in the old Greek City States, there was direct participation of all citizens in legislation (Thucydides 3, 37). Even today, direct participation is still an essential feature of democracy in the Swiss Cantons, in New England (US) town meetings, and in community meetings in most parts of Eastern Nigeria. Though ancient in concept and age, democracy has survived and spanned across centuries of knocks and cracks from

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American foreign policy towards African countries since the 1960s seems to have been tainted by the above inherent divergences and contradictions because it has not been governed by rational principles, but rather by fluctuating self-interests, guided by equally fluid experiences, which have become the hallmark of pragmatism. Pragmatism as a philosophy of life usually seeks personal interests and selfish benefits and, therefore, clashes with democracy which extols group or humanistic interests. It is rare for the selfish interests of a 'colonizing' power to coincide with the group (democratic) interests of a colonized people. That is why, out of the five principal pivots of American foreign policy towards Africa, only one is altruistic, the rest predatory, and none has any democratic concept or content. Hear, Donald Rothchild *et al.*: "American interests in Africa are real but limited, to promote human rights and racial justice, to secure African diplomatic support at the United Nations and other multilateral bodies, to gain strategic advantage, to obtain raw materials and to promote trade and investments".¹⁰ We should note that a foreign policy whose aim is to promote racial justice is not the same as one that seeks to ensure racial equality. Racial justice here can be interpreted to mean justice within the context of the laws of the individual country. For example, justice within the framework of the laws passed to prop up the erstwhile apartheid regime in South Africa, was, in the context of American foreign policy, social justice! In essence, therefore, none of the five principal prongs of American foreign policy in Africa, before the mid-1990s, was considerate to the interests of the majority indigenous black population in any African country.

In the following two groups of case studies we shall examine areas where the United States' policies towards African countries have coincided with the tenets of democracy and democratization; and where such policies and practices have aligned with the exigencies of the philosophy of pragmatism.

Case Study I: US Support for Democracy and Democratization Process in Africa: American foreign policy in Africa, seems to have favoured the promotion of democracy and the democratization process, (including the encouragement of racial justice and majority rule in white ruled territories) in a number of African countries.

- (i) Seeing that majority of independent African countries (especially after the fusion of the former Monrovia Group with the Casablanca Group of African countries to form the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), in 1963), were resolutely united against racism and racist minority rule in South Africa, Henry Kissinger, the Nixon

Republic of Congo, Kaunda's Zambia, Siaka Stephen's Sierra Leone and a host of others. No matter their different political textures and colours, their constant 'elections' still permitted them to wear the toga of democracy.

Case Study II: Pragmatism as an American Foreign Policy Tool in Africa: However, there exist several instances where American pragmatism or sheer national self-interest beclouded any sense of rationalism in shaping American policy towards democracy and democratization in African countries. As extensively discussed elsewhere in this article, pragmatism and democracy are two opponents. It would appear from the ensuing discussions that end results or practical personal benefits as espoused by the fathers of pragmatism, rather than principled policy or 'truths' such as democracy, was the major, if not the only consideration in fashioning American foreign policy towards Africa.

- (i) From the start, America did not seem to hide her contempt for the decolonization struggles of dependent African peoples. That was why, during the 1960 vote on the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples at the United Nations, known as Resolution 1514 (XV), or Declaration on Decolonization,¹³ the Eisenhower administration of the US abstained! Here pragmatism or national self-interest was the paramount denominator for this abstention. At that time the cold war was just gathering speed and the competition between the superpowers, the US and the USSR, for other countries' support at international fora was intense. America was not quite sure which way newly independent African countries would pitch their friendship - Washington or Moscow. If the latter, vital American interests would be jeopardized, and evidence on the ground at that time showed that some early independent African countries such as Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Algeria and Mali tended to be too radical for America's comfort. This meant that if new independent African countries were to embrace the path trod by their older brothers, the trade in raw materials, among other things, between America and Africa would be lost. "The continent is a major source of vital raw materials - platinum, asbestos, ferromanganese, fluorine, antimony and vanadium from South Africa; mica from Malagasy; cobalt from Zaire; tantalum from Nigeria, and Zaire, manganese from Gabon, South Africa and Zaire; chrome from South Africa and Zimbabwe; and petroleum from Angola, Nigeria, Gabon, Libya and Cameroun".¹⁴ Naturally, following the philosophy of pragmatism the 'practical' end benefits would far outweigh the rhetorics and theories of decolonization, black majority rule or democracy for the

colonial monarch, in repayment for his country's plunder of the mineral-rich Congo, when the latter (King) came to hand over the baton of independence to his country. Also in 1963 Sylvanus Olympio, the first democratically elected President of Togo was said to have been murdered inside the American Embassy in Lome, where he ran to take refuge during the process of a military *coup d'etat* in his country. Allegations were then rife in Africa that that successful *coup d'etat* was CIA-inspired. The violent overthrow of the democratically elected government of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, late advocate of socialism as a political ideology in Africa, was said to have the CIA blessing and backing. Again, but for the timely military intervention of Nigerian troops, Julius Nyerere, the first democratically elected Head of State of Tanzania was to have been forcibly eliminated in 1963 just because he embarked upon a policy of original and authentic socialist philosophy based on the Soviet-style village collectivization of land, as a strategy for the rural development of his country. Much of the problems of Augustino Neto's MPLA government in the mineral-rich Angola stemmed from its former close ties with such socialist countries as USSR, Cuba and North Korea. The list of such victims is endless but the source is single - American pragmatism seeking to maximize national end benefits and to exert a monopoly control over African vital raw materials, among others. One common feature of all the above litany of victims of American pragmatism is that they were all democratically elected and patriotic nationalists of their countries.

- (iv) Since the overthrow in 1952 of the regime of King Farouk by Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt has ever remained a full-blown democracy. Between 1960 and 1969, Anwar el Sadat was the democratically elected President of Egypt's National Assembly. He was constitutionally elevated to the office of the President of the Republic following the sudden death of Nasser. To all intents and purposes, therefore, Sadat was not a "born-again", but a *bona fide* "son of the soil" democrat. Because of his active involvement in the four Arab-Israeli wars (and Israel being the brainchild and protégé of America), Sadat was vilified as a villain in American political circles despite all his democratic credentials. However, as soon as Sadat broke all ties with his log-standing ally, the former Soviet Union, in 1976, as a result of persistent Egypt's military humiliations in the hands of Israel, and after his signing the Washington Peace Accord, Anwar Sadat was quickly hailed for his 'valour' in capitulation, and rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1978, thanks to American pragmatism!

advocated an accelerated but evolutionary change to black majority rule in Southern Africa.

(vi)

Historically and in principle, America has been against military dictatorships and in favour of democratically elected governments – its long support for Augusto Pinochet of Chile, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, and General Suharto of Indonesia, notwithstanding. Of the 40 years of independent Nigeria, only eleven years were spent under democratically elected governments, the rest being under military dictatorships of various colours and textures. One would then have expected that America would have thrown its full weight in support of the revalidation of the military-annulled June 12, 1993 presidential election in that country. That election was adjudged the freest and fairest since Nigeria's nationhood. At first, America came out in support of that election and in fact did slam an arms-supplies embargo and a US visa-freeze on the face of the Nigerian military and their agents as sanctions to force the then Nigerian military government to revalidate the result of that election. It was also openly hostile to the plans of the former dictator, Sani Abacha, to manipulate the subsequent elections and thereby succeed himself as the civilian president of Nigeria. However, with subsequent events in Liberia, and later Sierra Leone, where the Nigerian-led West African peace-keeping troops (ECOMOG) succeeded in restoring some semblance of order in the two West African countries, America, inspired by its pragmatism, started equivocating on the legitimacy of Abacha's self-succession bid. A statement of the US State Department on Nigeria, early in 1998, was to the effect that the US government would co-operate with any Nigerian ruler who could restore order in the midst of chaos in the (West African) sub-region. This was clearly a veiled encouragement and support to Abacha's self-succession bid. That means that any ruler who could violently suppress genuine democratic opposition and commit human rights atrocities in the name of "restoring order in midst of chaos", so that American big business and international trade could continue uninterrupted, was acceptable to Washington. What a pragmatic approach!

That explains why, despite Britain's consistency in saying that it would not recognize an Abacha presidency in Nigeria, and the strong opposition of the European Union (EU) and the African-Caribbean-Pacific (EU-ACP) group, to Abacha's military dictatorship,¹⁶ President Bill Clinton of America (in spite of all the intelligence reports before him which unequivocally x-rayed Abacha's rabid penchant for corruption, indiscriminate arrests, torture, and subsequent deaths of supposed or would-be rivals, state-sponsored murders and disappearances, organized sexual

their youths' sabotage activities against oil production in the region or face stern military actions,¹⁹ Odi-style,²⁰ most probably. Is this not a clear example of hostage-taking, on international plane, of the democratically elected government of a leading African country by the forces of American pragmatism seeking to maximize national end benefits by trying to restore order amidst "chaotic situations" so that America's big business might thrive?

A second pragmatic harvest bumpered home to America by Clinton's August 2000 visit to Nigeria was his signing with his Nigerian counterpart, a defence pact, ostensibly for the US troops to defend the recently won democracy in Nigeria in any event of a military *coup d'etat* against the present democratic administration in that country. According to that pact, the US military will train about seven battalions of the Nigeria Army for this purpose and for peace-keeping operations.²¹ On this issue, Omo Omoruyi, one of Nigeria's frontline political scientist and who now teaches in one of America's ivy league universities, had this to say:

*"... human rights issues are usually in the back burner and when they are concerning the African countries, the US never commits its nationals to defending them. The US involvement in Nigeria is part of the US defence of her national interest and not for the good of Nigeria."*²²

So all the recent American interest (or rather noises) in favour of the nascent democracy in Nigeria is but mere smokescreen. The real pie or the expected end benefits is Nigeria's oil and not such principles or doctrines or intrinsic concepts as "democracy" "racial equality" "human rights," or equitable distribution of the nation's wealth etc.

A subset of that Nigeria - US military pact was that the US would be "providing 8 patrol vessels for the Nigeria Navy to police the oil - producing areas."²³ On this issue also, let us hear again from professor Omoruyi:

*"A very disturbing issue is the decision of the US to provide patrol vessels for the Nigeria Navy to be used in the oil - producing areas. The history of military activity in the oil-producing areas and the part played by the oil companies should have been taken into account in the Niger - Delta before introducing more instruments of violence ... Will the US also be involved in killing the youths and leaders of the oil - producing areas? Does the President of the US know that the US is becoming part, if not the major problems of those who are demanding their rights in the oil - producing areas of the Niger - Delta?"*²⁴

The learned and respected professor of political science is in a better position to know that the pragmatic method which has influenced and still

Africa", "the Uncle Tom to unpopular regimes" etc. The major policy rationale of such interventions should be woven around such universally accepted altruistic truths and principles as democracy, humanitarianism, national disasters and natural emergencies, external aggression, forestalling imperialistic designs etc.

Secondly, in order not to violate the AU charter such interventions should mainly be at the request of a duly constituted authority, having no problems of legitimacy, or that of its surrogate. However, on very clear and genuine cases, such requests coming from popular opposition could be considered both on their own merits and on compassionate grounds.

However, realising that 'there is no free lunch in America' or indeed anywhere in the world, pragmatism should also be a factor for such interventions, but unlike America's, it should not be an unbridled, self-indulgent pragmatism. For instance, pragmatism should come in when, after spilling Nigerians' blood and material resources in a foreign soil, the country should naturally demand 'reparations'. This means that the benefiting authority or party should make pledges, *a priori*, to replenish the lavished Nigerian human and material resources. Nigeria should not be seen as a Father Christmas doling out from her military and economic largesse at the flimsiest behest of any African country. Therefore, the stakes of success in such adventurism should be very high at the outset, otherwise humiliation might cause disillusionment and domestic repercussions.

Finally, such a benefiting authority or party should be 'credit-worthy', by which is meant that it should be potentially viable to be able to 'repay' her debts/pledges to Nigeria. Otherwise, the game should be considered not worth the candle!

CONCLUSION

Driven by the actual life experience of competition for survival among mortals in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, especially in a fast-growing and ever-expanding world, three American scholars, Peirce, James, and Dewey, sought a theory that would best explain that natural instinct in man, i.e. the instinct of self-preservation. They argued that man, faced with the two alternatives of idealism and practicalism, would naturally adopt the latter in order to survive. These American scholars baptized this natural choice as pragmatism (instead of practicalism) and used all academic empiricism at their disposal to espouse it as an authentic philosophy for, or method of, procedure in life.

This philosophy has, for a long time, influenced American foreign policy in its relationships with the rest of the world especially in its foreign policy towards emergent African nations. True to type, this philosophy has virtually blurred all 'moralistic' reasoning and behaviour, including those

16. On March 21, 1997, a joint assembly of the European Union and the African – Caribbean – Pacific (EU-ACP) group held in Brussels, passed a stinging 16-point resolution demanding, among other things, that Mr. M. K. O. Abiola, the supposed winner of the military-annulled June 12, 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria, but who had ever since been detained by the Abacha military junta, should be released to lead an Interim National Government. The cover – story of *Tell Magazine* (Nigeria) of April 7, 1997, noted that the support for that resolution among the EU-ACP member countries was so strong that more than two-thirds of them voted in its favour.
17. E. Ugwu, "US President Clinton Ends Historic 12 – Day Visit to Six African Countries," in *Newswatch Magazine*, (Lagos: Newswatch Communications Ltd; April 13, 1998), pp. 30 –31. See also, Victor Omuabor, "President Clinton's Second Visit Marks A Dramatic Change in US/African. Relations," *News Africa. Magazine*, (London: Moflat Ekoriko, September 11, 2000), p. 13.
18. Bornabey Phillips (BBC Correspondent in Lagos), "Behind President Clinton's Recent Visit to Nigeria," British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio Newsreel Programme, *From Our Own Correspondents*, (Aired on Sunday, September 03, 2000 and monitored at Nsukka, Nigeria) from 8.07 GMT.
19. Josiah Emerole, "FG Threatens Military Action Against Niger Delta" *The Post Express*, (Apapa, Lagos: The Post Express Publishing Company Ltd; No 1518, Wednesday September 06, 2000), p. 1.
20. Odi is a small town in the Rivers State of Nigeria, which is one of the states in the long-neglected Niger Delta region and which produces most of Nigeria's crude oil. Because of the insurgent activities of Odi youths against security operatives sent into the town to guard against the vandalization of oil installations in the region, a detachment of the Nigeria army subsequently sent into the town to apprehend the restive Odi youths, rather sacked, razed, and flattened the entire town in October 1999. Up till now, Ordi, which has not been rebuilt ever since, remains a Nigerian Hiroshima!
21. *The Guardian* (Nigerian), Online, August 29, 2000, Guardian Newspapers Ltd. Rutam House, Lagos Nigeria.
22. Omo Omoruyi, "Nigeria – US Military Pact: Recipe for Danger," in *The News*, (Ikeja Lagos: Independent Communications Network Ltd., October 2, 2000) p. 62.
23. *Ibid.*, p.60.
24. *Ibid.*, p.65.