



Review Paper

Democratic Participation in Industrial Organisation: A Review of British Colonial Influence on Nigeria Industrial Relations

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Abstract

The paper deals with democratic participation in industrial organisation. The focus of such participation was on the workers and their associations. Two dimensions of democratic participation were examined in terms of participation in decision making and workers elective representation. The paper also presented a brief highlight of Nigeria Industrial Relations as a product of British colonial heritage. The Marxist analysis of industrial unionism was reviewed to provide a theoretical standpoint. The paper considers democratic participation as the very basis of industrial democracy, and recommended that modern organisation should embrace industrial democracy to ginger employee responsiveness and increased workers' productivity.

Keywords: Democracy, participation, industry, organisation, industrial relations, and colonial influence.

Introduction

Democracy in its broadest usage denotes the provision of structures for revealing and the preponderance of the general will on fundamental issues of social direction and policy. According to Appadorai, democracy includes such areas as economic equality, fraternal feeling and liberty¹. The notion of liberty specifically focused on the rights of everybody bound by public decision to contribute to the making and remaking of such decisions; right of speech, publication and association. Democracy is based on the belief in the value of individual personality.

The concept of democracy as defined above is more common and prevalent in political science and government. Democratic participation may look a little strange as a major subject of discussion in sociology, but its analysis in terms of industrial dynamics in the sub-field of industrial sociology, raised democratic analysis to a prominent position in sociology. Yesufu defined Industrial Relations as “a discipline that evolved the study of an economic class conflict between employers on the one hand, and increasingly organized workers on the other hand, as well as the process by which the conflict is resolved and harmony attained in the work place².”

The definition of Industrial Relations by Yesufu connotes conflict as a function of the interaction between workers and employers². How this relationship is patterned and controlled and its consequences on the society becomes the focus of Democratic Participation in the industry.

The Sociology of Democratic Organization

The sociology of democratic organization is all concerned with the interaction at work place. It tells about those elements of organization which ensure harmony in the organization and success of the organization. Such issues as fair conditions of work, leisure, and some voice in determining the conditions of work to guard against economic slavery are considered ingredient of industrial democracy. The sociology of democratic organization demands from the ordinary citizen a certain level of strength and character; reasonable conduct and active contribution to organization decision making; sound understanding of issues; personal judgment; tolerance and broad-based devotion to organizational goal. The sociology of democratic organization centers round the concept of industrial democracy.

Industrial democracy entails the process of collective bargaining in an organization. Fashoyin defined collective bargaining as “a machinery for discussion and negotiation, whether formal or informal, between employer(s) and workers' representative, aimed at reaching mutual agreement or understanding on the general employment relationship between the employer(s) and workers”³. Collective bargaining is considered to be more of a political than a socio-economic process, it involved rule making and power relationships as well as making social contribution to the dignity of the workers.

The major points to highlight about collective bargaining which makes it the center of the sociology of democratic organization are: i. with collective bargaining, the right of workers to organize to protect and promote their interest is recognized. ii.

Flowing from this, the right of workers and their representatives to challenge some management decisions/actions would also be recognized and iii. Workers and their representatives can actually be involved in negotiations to determine remuneration and other conditions of employment.

These are some of the reasons why many now regards collective bargaining as synonymous with industrial democracy. It has similarities with political democracy as earlier defined except for the fact that trade unions are oppositions that could never replace the government. Collective bargaining is collective in the sense of group and general involvement in forms of decision-making concerning a broad range of issues that affect all stakeholders in industry. In turn, the kind of issues subject to multi-party attention at any given time would depend on peculiarities of industry involved, a function of dominant norms and social expectations and the relative distribution of power.

The organization democracy according to Marsh, in Otobo, is concerned with the role and status of workers in industrial society and all implying to a greater or lesser extent, the participation of those who work in industry in determining the conditions of their working lives⁴. Industrial democracy as the main element of sociology of democratic organization consider such issues like: industrial unionism; syndicalism; guild socialism; joint-consultation; co ownership/ co-partnership; and co-determination⁴.

Union Democracy in Britain and Nigeria

The concept of Union Democracy presents itself in two major perspective namely: first, union leadership succession process, and second, union ability to influence policies. Union leadership succession process may be democratic or undemocratic. Democratic leadership succession in trade unions occurs when all members of the union have equal rights of liberty, and there is election at specified interval to the leadership positions in the union. The Undemocratic Unions exists in situations where leadership of unions are appointed by employer or the state as against the popular votes of union members.

The undemocratic union occurs where and when the employer or the state appoint trade union leaders. In this regard the activities of the union is influenced and controlled by whoever appointed union leaders, and the union becomes instrument of achieving employer/state goal. The Nigerian Trade Union has been relatively democratic, except when government decided to appoint Union leaders like the Abacha government in Nigeria which appointed a sole administrator for the Nigerian Labour Congress.

The second perception of trade unions in terms of democratization is the union ability to achieved democratic ideals such as influencing public policy and direction to create a democratic environment for workers to achieve their individual goals. This was achieved in Britain when Union successfully

agitated for "War Bonus" of 30 percent of basic salaries to African².

British Industrial Relations system is marked by high degree of Union democracy. Nigerian being a British Colony inherits the democratic industrial culture, which was itself limited by the colonial labour policy, which demarcates between the British Industrial policy to Britain, and the British Colonial policy to non-British in the colony. Another point of departure in Nigeria industrial relations system from the democratic union pattern is the long period of Military rule that de-democratized all facet of the Nigerian State, including industrial relations.

Union Organisation in Former British Colonies

According to Fashoyin, the rise in unionism was aided and promoted by the nationalist struggle for independence from Colonial tutelage³. In British West African Colonies, trade unions and associations provided a strategic component of anti-colonial sentiment. It is this point that distinguishes third-world unions from those in the advanced capitalist economies which emphasize a pre-occupation with economic business unionism. This was based on the assumption that political independence would automatically bring about the economic upliftment of the working class.

Yesufu noted the development of industrial relations in three phases². First was an attempt by Colonial Government in different British Colonies to organized wage earning workers. Phase two which commenced in 1920's marked the rise of trade unions, and phase three is the development of labour policies to regulate the activities of trade unions which took place from the late 1920's to 1930's. As explained by Yesufu, when Lord Passfield was appointed Colonial Secretary in 1929 by the first British Labour Government, he pioneer moves which continued throughout the 1930's to compel the Colonial governments to provide long-term labour and industrial relations regulations, laws and practice, on the lines of those available in Britain². In view of Passfield's initiative the Colonial administration in Nigeria passed the Trade Union ordinance in 1938, which formally legalized trade unions and made provisions for their internal administration and external regulations. As it happened in Nigeria, other British Colonial administration also enacted labour related laws, which was to take care of the inevitable trade disputes which would naturally accompany industrialization.

The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action

This section focuses on the extent a trade union can go in order to achieve its objective. This cardinal issue will easily lead us to the possibilities of trade union action, and the limitations of such actions. Trade Union action arises from trade dispute, which Ubeku defined as contained in Trade Union Decree 1973 as "any dispute between employers and workers or between workers and workers, which is connected with the employment

or unemployment or the terms of employment, or conditions of work of any person”⁵. Where dispute is not resolved between employer and employee group, the employee group (union) can embark on various actions in order to drive home their demand(s). These activities carried out by unions are collectively termed “Industrial Action”. There are: strikes; work-to-rule; overtime ban; the lock-in/out; and intimidation³.

These various forms of industrial actions highlighted above may have devastating effect on the productivity of the organisation and the development of the state as a whole. In this regard, such actions are limited to ensure harmony and survival of the system. The workers bargaining power through industrial actions is weakened by government laws and activities of law enforcement agencies hedging the right to organise and go on strike; and that the constant threat of unemployment (through sack, rationalizations, victimization, lay-offs, redundancy, etc.) shows up workers power as largely a mirage. It is this condition and limitations of Union actions that contradicted the very connotation of the concept of “Industrial Democracy”.

Industrial Democracy: The Institutionalized Suppression of Industrial Conflict

Industrial conflict arises from unresolved trade dispute. There are many sources of such conflict as explained below. Structural organizational conflict refers to attempt by one party to change either the structure of bargaining or the contents of the negotiable or non-negotiable list, inadequate decision-making power may also result in conflict as per the limitations of negotiators in committing their respective constituencies to an agreement³. Diversity of interest in the Union can also cause conflict, likewise management policies. The institutional approach to industrial relations attempt a diagnostic of both internal and external causes of conflict in organizations, and how such conflicts can be resolved. This notion was championed by Webb and Webb, who are considered as founders of British Industrial relations⁶. By defining trade Union as “a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives”. Webbs and Webbs, believe that union could transform society through collective action which they considered as the main machinery for protecting the employment conditions of their members⁶. This helps by providing to them services that helped raise their job consciousness and by working toward the creation of a conducive legal environment which legitimize their unions and their functions³.

Webbs emphasized the inevitability of conflict at work, as each side of the industry supports opposing interests⁴. The conflict thus arising cannot lead to total fracas or disorder. But, the joint efforts of both sides should be able to accommodate the inbuilt conflict in labour relations. By relying on orderly process of relations in a pluralistic

environment in which there are conflicting interests and the utilization of the collective action of workers and employers to resolved conflict, the idea of institutionalized suppression of industrial conflict under industrial democracy emerge. What then is obtainable under the Marxist view regarding trade unionism?

Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism

Karl Marx (1818-83), German by birth is the father of modern Marxism whose ideas on labour are on his three major books: Communist Manifesto (1848) in collaboration with Friedrich Engels; the Critique of Political Economy (1859); and “Capital” (1867-96)¹. In Marxian analysis, conflict is associated with continuous struggle between worker and their employers over the control of various components of work. Disparity in the allocation of proceeds of industry, job-insecurity of the worker, and inadequate management control systems breed grievances which lead to conflict. Marx was of the views that the ideas of classical economists (Adams Smith, and David Ricardo) did not recognized the agonizing and traumatic experience of the labouring class which they argued could be ameliorated or eliminated by the institution of trade unionism. Marx strongly explained that improvement in the conditions of the labouring class could be achieved through the antagonizing role of trade unions, while the ultimate goal would be the displacement or overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the subsequent installation of the proletariat leadership. In other words, Marx saw trade unions as a revolutionary agents for changing the social order¹. The point of departure between Webbs and Marx is that, Webbs did not agree with Marx on the method of bringing about improvement in the conditions of the workers through revolutionary change. The weakness of Marxian approach according to Fashoyin (1999:188) is that Marxist sees the employer always as a villain³.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt to explain the concept of industrial democracy by analysing democracy in the industry using the political democratic parameter of liberty was made. Here the liberty of workers was the focus. The linkage between industrial organizations in third world countries that emerges from British Colonial control was also seen, and could be inferred that their industrial relation system were shaped by their political history of colonialism.

The actions of trade unions were considered in line with their organization *pattern*, as well as the *limits of trade union actions*. Consequently, industrial democracy was seen as the *institutional suppression of industrial conflict*, when viewed from the standpoint of perspective of the sociology of Trade Unionism.

Every organisation in contemporary times should be employee centered. Workers should be given opportunity to participate in

decision and choose the representative to bargain for them. This will foster industrial harmony and ginger responsiveness, which will promote workers' productivity in terms of contribution to the achievement of organizational goals.

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