STUDY SESSION 10

SOCIO-POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

10.1 Introduction

In some of the previous study session you were taught what philosophy is. Also, you now have the knowledge of how philosophy relates to various other disciplines and spheres of life. You can now clearly establish a link between philosophers and the world they live in which they aspire to unravel and change. In this session, our concern would be to learn about the link between philosophy and socio-political philosophy. As such, our concern here would be to understand the nature and meaning of socio-political philosophy as well as to have in-depth understanding of the individual and the society. In this session, you will be able to have a basic understanding of what African Political Philosophy is, as well as weigh arguments for the need of a new political order in Africa.

10.1.1 Learning Outcomes for Study Session 10

When you have studied this session, you should be able to

1. State what socio-political philosophy is:

2. List and explain the central issues in socio-political philosophy:

3. Give a historical account of the development of socio-political philosophy:

4. State what African Philosophy is: and

5. Give your account of the need for a new political order in Africa.

10.2   The Meaning and Nature of Socio-Political Philosophy

Socio-political philosophy is an important branch of philosophy. Oftentimes, students assume that *political philosophy, political science and political theory* address the same theme and employ identical methodology. The truth, however, is that the socio-political philosopher is concerned with more fundamental issues other related disciplines take for granted.

The political philosopher employs the tools of epistemology, ethics, ontology and logic in his attempt to understand the *nature of society and how an ideal state ought to be organized*. In some ways, political philosophy "describes past and existing social organizations, in which respect, it appears to encroach on the domain of economics, political science, anthropology and sociology".

While it is true that socio-political philosophy has close connections with social sciences and with ethics, it would be erroneous to conclude that it does not have distinctive problems of its own. It deals, for example, with such issues as: "What are (or ought to be) the proper limits of governmental power over members of society?" "How should an ideal state be organized?" "Is it possible to have rigid control over the economic affairs of people without curtailing their political freedom?" "Should elected representatives to a legislature be allowed to vote as they see fit, or should they merely reflect the majority opinion of their constituency?" etc. The central task of socio-political philosophy, therefore, is *to prescribe how an ideal state ought to be organized*.

The basic point to note is that socio-political philosophy, in spite of its seeming autonomy, is a branch of philosophy. Employing the standard methods of philosophy, it investigates the principles of a proper social system. In general, it studies the nature of human communities, in order to evaluate their aims and modes of cooperation. In particular, *it is concerned with*

government or the state, i.e., the institution that possesses the exclusive power to enforce rules of conduct in a particular geographical area.

The central issues of socio-political philosophy may be divided into the following areas:

(i)   What is the relationship between the individual and the society?

(ii)   Can the existence of government or state be justified?

(iii)   What abstract principles should guide the operation of government, regarding its aims and limits of its authority?

(iv)   What sort of constitution, political institutions and legal system should a given government have?

(v)   What practical public policies should apply to specialized areas such as the police, defence and international relations, economics, public finance and welfare?

In order to proffer answers to these questions, socio-political philosophy derives its strength from three other more fundamental philosophical disciplines. They are *metaphysics* (the study of existence and man's relation to reality), *epistemology* (the study of knowledge), and *ethics* (the study of the code of values of guide man's choices and actions). It is important to note that the three fundamental philosophical disciplines mentioned above require stable polities for effective philosophizing. This can only be provided by the ideas of a "socio-political philosopher". To further understand and appreciate the importance of socio-political philosophy, one must have some knowledge of the history of political theory.

Socio-Political Philosophy: A Historical Perspective

Socio-political philosophy, like its mother-discipline, philosophy, has its origin in ancient Greece. In fact, the word "political" is derived from the Greek *'polis'* or *city-state*. The Sophists in the 5th Century B.C. challenged the legitimacy of the *polis* with its laws and

institutions. To this, Socrates (470 – 399 B.C.), Plato (427 – 347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384 – 322 B.C.) responded with philosophical arguments. The political theories of Plato and Aristotle were inextricably connected with their philosophical systems; Plato, by appealing to his *doctrine of forms* and Aristotle by appealing to a theory of biological naturalism. The Stoics and St. Augustine (A.D. 354 – 430) in later antiquity, as well as the scholastics – most notably Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) – in the Middle Ages, sought to justify political authority by basing it on belief in God and divinely instituted natural laws.

With the rise of modern science and the secular state, following the decline of medieval social and religious institutions, the traditional arguments for political authority were called into question. In the Renaissance, Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527) eschewed religion and classical philosophy. Instead, Machiavelli drew on historical examples to offer practical advice to rulers. The Modern era from the 17th to 19th centuries witnessed a series of attempts to provide a defensible moral account of the State and its purpose.

In England, Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) and John Locke (1632 – 1704) sought the basis for the State in a *"social contract"* among individuals who possessed *"natural rights"* in a prior "state of nature". Hobbes argued that men must enter into a *social contract* and surrender their *natural liberties* to an *absolute sovereign*. Locke concluded that the political State must have *limited powers* and the citizens retain the *right to revolution*. Sceptical conservatives like David Hume (1711 – 1776) and Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797), who saw tradition as the only basis for government and law, criticized both Hobbes and Locke. Later British thinkers like Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873) invoked the utilitarian principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number". They advocated political reforms that tended to be increasingly *democratic, egalitarian and welfarist*.

Meanwhile, in continental Europe, there was a steady drift towards *altruism and statism* in the theories of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778), Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), G.W.F. Hegel (1770 – 1831), and Karl Marx as the inevitable result of historical processes. They regarded collectives as of greater reality and value than their individual members. Resisting the generally collectivist trend, Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903) defended *capitalism* against *socialism* by appealling to the *evolutionary theory of history*. In addition, various *anarchists* criticized the State as an inherently oppressive institution and advocated its abolition. These included libertarians such as William Godwin (1756 – 1836) and Lysander Spooner (1808 – 1886), and the leftists like Pierre Joseph Proudhon (1809 – 1865), Michail Bakunin (1814 – 1876) and Peter Kropotkin (1842 – 1921).

Throughout most of the 20th century, political philosophy was neglected because of the rise of *logical positivism* and *linguistic analysis*, which were sceptical about the capacity of reason to apprehend objective moral truths of any sort. However, in the early 1970s, two philosophers employing the techniques of analytical philosophy to defend opposing political theories inaugurated a revival of political theorizing. John Rawls, a neo-Kantian form of liberalism and Robert Nozick a neo-Lockean version of libertarianism.

The literature of socio-political philosophy is vast. The following are some of the most influential works: Plato (*Crito, Republic, Statesman* and *Laws*); Aristotle (*Politics*); St. Augustine (*The City of God*); Thomas Aquinas - (*Summa Theologiae I-II, Questions 90-97*); Niccolo Machiavelli (*The Prince*); Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*); John Locke (*Two Treaties of Government*); John Stuart Mill (*On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*); Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*First* and *Second Discourses* and *The Social Contract*); G.W.F. Hegel (*The Philosophy of Right*); Karl Marx (with Friedrich Engels) (*The Manifesto of the Communist Party*); Herbert Spencer

(*The Man Versus the State*); Lysander Spooner (*No Treason*); John Rawls (*A Theory of State*); Robert Nozick (*Anarchy, State and Utopia*); etc.

10.2.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Employing the standard methods of philosophy, what does socio-political studies investigates?
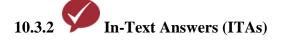
10.2.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

It investigates the principles of a proper social system. It studies human communities, in order to evaluate their aims and modes of cooperation.

10.3 The Individual and Society

The fundamental issue in political philosophy concerns the relationship between the individual to society. Most political theorists hold that the individual is prior to society, because the mind belongs to the individual as such, and individuals must perform acts of thought. Although men learn from their predecessors and are interdependent in various ways, they still have to exercise their rational capacities as individuals. This position, known as individualism, is opposed to collectivism, which treats society as if it were a super organism existing over and above its individual members, and which takes the collective in some form (e.g. tribe, race or state) to be the primary unit of reality and standard of value. We are therefore led to the questions: "What is the purpose of the state?' "Is the state an end-in itself or a means to an end?"

10.3.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

Why do most political theorists hold that the individual is prior to society?

10.3.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

The mind belongs to the individual as such, and individuals must perform acts of thought.
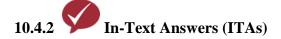
10.4 What Is African Political Philosophy?

African political philosophy is a sub-set of political philosophy. It shares a lot with what we have ascribed to political philosophy except its African-ness. But are the problems of political philosophy not of universal character? If they are, why then an African political philosophy? All races have not been created into the same environment. Some races are so suited that their struggle for survival is relatively easier than those of others. Each race has had to respond differently to the circumstances and conditions of its own environment. The problems encountered in the African environment for example, are different from those experienced, say, in the Asian, European or the American environment. Therefore, it will be absurd to expect all races and cultures to pose the same questions or offer similar solutions to the problems encountered in their different environments. The answers offered to problems encountered in race "A" might be totally different from those offered in race "B". Even when such problems are similar, solutions are known to vary, if not different outright. African political philosophy is a response to the different experiences of the African, and his interpretation of such experiences. The peculiar experience of slavery, colonialism, racialism and neo-colonialism has made the African ready and capable of evolving a peculiar political philosophy. Such a political philosophy is intended to capture the African-ness of his thought system and experience. African socialism is one of the earliest political theories proffered by

thinkers at the outset of independence. Various grounds were adduced for this. Let us consider a few political theories by African thinkers.

10.4.1 In-Text Questions (ITQs)

What is African political philosophy a subset of?

10.4.2 In-Text Answers (ITAs)

African political philosophy is a sub-set of political philosophy

10.5   Socialism

'*Ujamaa*,' which literally means familyhood, was first articulated by the ***Nwalimu, Julius Nyerere*** (1922-1999) at Arusha on the 5th of February 1967. Ujamaa as Nyerere perceives it is to be the basis of socialism in Tanzania. Nyerere came to the conclusion that socialism was the solution to the socio-political problems Tanzania faced shortly after independence. Having been convinced that traditional African society was harmonious and communal he agrees that the new States of Africa are at one and the same time faced with the task of rapid economic development and the creation of new values. How to achieve these objectives is, to Nyerere, the greatest challenge confronting contemporary African leaders – a challenge perhaps greater that the struggle for independence itself.

Nyerere concludes that because conditions in each society differ, there can be no 'sacred book' from which all can draw inspiration. Still, whatever the objective conditions of a given society may be, an ideal society must always be based on three essentials that he identifies as, *freedom*, *equality* and *unity*. These three essentials are not new in Africa. They have always been a part of African traditional life. What is new to Africa and which most certainly came

with colonial contact is the phenomenon of classes. Nyerere says that African languages do not have the vocabulary to embrace the concept of class. According to Nyerere, the African society was a poor one before colonialism. As such, there were no rich people. Wealth in possession or non-possession of wealth has nothing to do with socialism. The millionaire and the beggar are both capable of being socialist or capitalist. Mere physical possession of wealth is therefore not the deciding factor. What is important is the use to which the wealth is put.

Nyerere goes on to assert that no country can afford to be anything else but socialist. Socialism, he claims, is the road to happiness. The African needs neither education in socialism nor in democracy, as both are familiar ways of life. The socialization in the family has helped the African acquire the attitude of mind that pre-disposes him towards socialism.

In Nyerere's ideal state, ownership of land and other means of production are communal. They are not subject to private ownership. The only forms of private ownership allowed did for example, the farmer own his hoe, the carpenter, his saw, a family, their house.

Nyerere sees man as essentially equal. Socialism is built on such equality. He says, 'without the acceptance of equality of all men, there can be no socialism'. The purpose of socialism is *service to mankind* regardless of colour, size, shape, skill, ability and everything else. An important basis of Nyerere's socialism therefore, is equality of all people. This also extends to their participation in government. Everyone must be an equal participant in government. He opposes vehemently the capitalist form of government that seeks to build happiness on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man. Exploitation, as Nyerere sees it, is a man with money making profit from a man without money. The source of this kind of exploitation is private ownership of the means of production.

Leopold Senghor (1906-2001) is very popular for his *Negritude*. With Leon Demas and Aimie Cessaire, he formulated the term *Negritude* to describe the cultural and political movement of French speaking Africans in Africa and the French speaking Negroes of West Indies against the colonial policy of assimilation. Senghor sees *Negritude* as the total cultural, social and political values of African civilization, and of the black race as a whole. One cannot therefore deny that Senghor's Negritude was purely an ideology for decolonization. After independence, Senghor knew *Negritude* had run its course. He thereafter developed his idea of *African socialism*.

To show the difference in African traditional experience, Senghor, like Nyerere rejects western capitalism and orthodox socialism. He pitched with an adaptation he calls African socialism. He considers his African socialism, a true reflection of African experience. He also agrees that in the working out of his African mode of socialism, the problem is not how to put an end to the' exploitation of man by man, but how to prevent it ever happening by bringing political and economic democracy back to life.

Generally, the difference in attitude towards socialism between Nyerere and Senghor is not of kind but of degree. While Nyerere talks about a total breakaway from Euro-philosophical tradition, Senghor advocates the adoption of some essential things that are useful to African development. Nevertheless, they both see African socialism as having its roots largely in the traditional past. They see traditional African societies as classless. They both reject capitalism and orthodox socialism.

Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972) is one of the first recent African political thinkers to emphasize the need to adopt an innovative approach in the European philosophical heritage for a better understanding of it, so it can aid development needs of the continent. He is of the

view that the formulation of an ideology would speed up the rate of progress amongst emergent African states.

According to Nkrumah, capitalism, being an offshoot of colonialism and an identified culprit of exploitation and oppression, cannot be used as a platform or basis for freeing the African people from bondage. Consequently, he rejected capitalism and any other philosophical system that may tend to support it. In its place, he advocates for socialism. The crux of Nkrumah's argument is that African needs a better understanding of the Euro-philosophical tradition as an intellectual basis for the struggle against poverty and the general backwardness of the continent.

With his background experience in America and Britain, coupled with his experience of colonialism at home, he sought for a solution to the problems he identified not in the capitalism of the west, but in the socialism of the east. He is convinced that in order to achieve the goal or a better life within the shortest possible time, socialism would be the key. Nkrumah's socialism takes due cognizance of the production of goods and services to lay a proper foundation for socialism. Nkrumah believes that complete *industrialization* is the key. It is in pursuance of this that Nkrumah explains that all talks of economic and social reconstruction are just empty words if they are not accompanied by *industrial* and agrarian *revolution*.

Nkrumah therefore sees sound economic planning as the basis of development and progress. To redress the dislocation caused by colonialism, he argues that Africa has to meet up the challenges of the new era by being self-sufficient and egalitarian. Nkrumah's socialism has therefore been shown to be different in kind and degree from those of Nyerere and Senghor. Nkrumah appears to continue in the tradition of Karl Marx and Lenin. His socialism shows, like all modern Marxists, that socialism and industrialization go together. Again, unlike

Senghor' and Nyerere, Nkrumah is of the view that socialism cannot be built in a single country in Africa. For him, the building of socialism in Ghana must be accompanied by the building of socialism throughout the continent. As a matter of fact, he once stated that Ghana's independence was meaningless if vast territories in Africa remained under colonial rule. The Africa of his dream would be happy only if it adopts a socialist system. We should note that Nkrumah does not agree with Nyerere that socialism can only be built by returning to 'our glorious past.' He opines that the traditional Africa no longer exists. In his view, this has been corrupted by Afro-Islamic and Euro-Christian traditions.

Sokou Toure's (1922-1984) view on socialism, which he calls communaucratique, takes virtually the same line as Senghor's. Like Senghor, Toure wants to adopt Marxism to African conditions while at the same time denying some of the key elements of Marxism. The intention of both Toure and Senghor is to blend the socialist value of traditional Africa with more recent and modern Marxist ideas. Toure advocates a rejection of both capitalism and communism. In its place, he advocates the adaptation of their economies to concrete African realities. Toure explains:

> Thus, when people ask us if we are for capitalism or for;
> socialism, for the East or for the West, we invariably answer
> that what we consider first and above all are the Africa we
> intend to liberate from foreign domination, sickness, misery
> and ignorance.[1]

Toure rejects capitalism because it imposes the value of individualism and egotism that in his view are alien to Africa. He also rejects communism that he equates with collective or state capitalism. He therefore concluded that neither communism nor capitalism is applicable to

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[1] S. Toure, *La Panificaiion Econamiqite*, (Conakry: Impprimerie National, 1960), p. 292

Africa because as he puts it, 'the Soviet Union, as well as Europe and America, are far more highly developed than Africa.'[2] In Africa, Toure explains, the struggle is not between classes but between the colonized people and the colonizing powers. Toure calls his socialism in Africa 'communaucratique' because he feels adopting the term 'socialism' would portray his country (Guinea) as importing a foreign ideology. On this issue, he says, "We use the expression 'communauucratique" precisely in order to avoid all equivocation and all false analogies."[3] The reality of Toure's socialism shows a strong attachment to Lenin, rather than to Marx. It also shows his strong commitment to liberating himself from colonial legacy.

Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1986) calls his brand of socialism 'Democratic'. He disagrees with classical socialists and some of his contemporaries. First he rejects the orthodox idea of African Socialism. In his view, there is no justification for such a label because he sees socialism as a normative science that should not bear the mark of any region of the globe. Awolowo therefore does not concern himself with a supposedly peculiar African socialism, but with attaining socialism not by any revolutionary process, but by a democratic reformation of the existing order, in his *Voice of Reason*, Awolowo presents his thesis on democratic socialism. He declares:

> …In my considered and settled opinion, the best political ideal
> for mankind is democratic socialism which is founded among
> others on the principles of wellbeing of individual and
> brotherhood and among all men, irrespective of creed, colour,
> and race.[4]

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[2] Ibid., p. ix

[3] O. Awolowo, *Voice of Reason,* (Akure: Fagbamigbe Press, 1981), p. 182.

[4] O. Awolowo, *The Path to Nigerian Greatness,* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Pub. 1981), p. 54

His kind of socialism is reformative for it admits the existence of private and public ownership of properties side by side. It takes individual welfare as it focus of attention and guarantees the fundamental rights of individuals including the right to religion and worship. Citizens are also to be seen as equal before the law, irrespective of their status in the society. The installation and change of government under this system is only through the electoral process. In the same vein, in changing from any existing political ideology to democratic socialism, only the democratic process is permissible. It is therefore immoral for any powerful radicals to impose or force their rule on the people of a state without the latter's consent under the guise of socialist revolution.

Awolowo says that the socialists of the Marxist persuasion have instilled fear in the minds of the people by creating the impression that the word 'socialism' is synonymous with violence. This, he observes, has contributed to the people's negative attitude to socialism as a political ideology. But as a Christina, who is very much conscious of the Biblical injunction against killing, Awolowo could not hide his disagreement with Chairman Mao of China who once said that power flows from the barrel of the gun. Awolowo argues, "I do not share this great man's view. In my own opinion, power flows form a leadership that is sustained by the will and approval of the people freely articulated and given."[5] The choice of socialism should therefore be a way of life expressed through electoral process for the political party that champions the socialist objectives. Awolowo speaks extensively of the role of the universal mind or God as a mind is capable of bringing about his ideal state. In doing this, "...the universal mind may or may not necessarily bring about the use of force or violence."[6]Awolowo says, "The universal mind can be absolutely trusted to play its part. It

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[5]O. Awolowo, *The People's Republic,* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press), p. 199
[6]Ibid,

will be by a process that no human mind can possibly conceive, fruitify all good plans and actualize evil ones for the discomfiture or ruin of their actors."[7]

Unlike many other African socialists, Awolowo argues in the *People's Republic* that socialism is not culture bound. He claims it is a normative science and therefore of universal application to all nations of the world. Therefore, the question of African socialism does not arise.

10.7.2 References / Suggestions for Further Reading

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[7]Ibid,