

*Socialism and Civilization:
The Revolutionary Traditionalism of
Ngugi wa Thiong'o*

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READERS OF NGUGI'S novels must be familiar with the passage in *Petals of Blood* in which Karega objects to Wanja's retention of Nyakinyua's hut and her things exactly as these had been in the past — the same bed, the same sheets, the same lamp and furniture — like "a moment trapped in frozen space." When Wanja reminds Karega that at one time he himself used to argue about the importance of the past, Karega replies: "True . . . but only as a living lesson to the present. I mean we must not preserve our past as a museum: rather we must study it critically, without illusions, and see what lessons we can draw from it in today's battle-field of the future and the present. But to worship it — no. Maybe I used to do it: but I don't want to continue worshipping in the temples of a past without tarmac roads, without electric cookers, a world dominated by slavery to nature."¹

David Cook and Michael Okenimkpe see in this passage Ngugi's own radical rejection of his earlier idea of a great African past when all Africa controlled its own earth.² If the Cook-Okenimkpe assessment is correct, might one ask how long did this rejection last? In *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Devil on the Cross* we find Ngugi dividing African history into two distinct eras — the first before and the second since the advent of imperialism. And we are left in little doubt that the first one was the better of the two and should act as the inspiration and the guide in our reordering of the present and building of the future. In 1973 James Olney commented on Ngugi's "paradoxical politics of reactionary revolution" and expressed his view that most other African novelists would disagree with him. He quoted Achebe and Soyinka in support of his contention and said:

“Ngugi seems to want to make his past his future: he would revive social and cultural structures of the past as a reality of the future, and what he calls for to accomplish this is a present revolution not to achieve something new but to restore an ideal pre-colonial state that he, at least, takes to have been of original peace, harmony, justice, and goodness.”³ Olney, obviously, was referring to the two parallel and simultaneous movements visible in Ngugi’s thought: while socially and politically he was moving in a more radical and revolutionary direction, morally and culturally he was moving in the direction of a more pronounced traditionalism. Marxist socialism was the decisive influence on his political and social thought while Christianity and African tradition were the leading influences on its moral and cultural aspects. But whereas his commitment to Marxist socialism remains as firm as ever, there has been an increasing tendency to look to the African past even as a guide in the social and political spheres. I think, however, that “revolutionary traditionalism” rather than “reactionary revolution” would be a more appropriate term for characterizing Ngugi’s peculiar blend of socialism and his reverence for the past civilization of Africa.

“In a capitalistic society,” Ngugi wrote in 1968, “the past has a romantic glamour: gazing at it, as witness Wordsworth and D. H. Lawrence, or more recently Yukio Mishima of Japan, is often a means of escaping the present. It is only in ‘a socialist’ context that a look at yesterday can be meaningful in illuminating today and tomorrow.”⁴ Ngugi’s generalization about capitalistic society is too sweeping, for all non-socialist writers do not treat the past as a means of escape. To liberal thinkers such as Bentham, James and John Stuart Mill, and Macaulay, the past is hardly of any greater significance than it is for radicals and revolutionaries such as Marx. Among the false book-backs with which Dickens decorated his study at Gad’s Hill was a set called “The Wisdom of our Ancestors — I. Ignorance. II. Superstition. III. The Block. IV. The Stake. V. The Rack. VI. Dirt. VII. Disease.”⁵ The tone is the same as that of Bentham, who had called “Our Wise Ancestors,” “The Wisdom of our Ancestors,” “The Wisdom of Ages” mischievous and absurd fallacies springing from the grossest perversion of the meaning of words. It is con-

servative thinkers like Burke, Arnold, and Butler who look at the past as the repository of the accumulated experience of mankind. "We owe past generations," said Samuel Butler, "not only the master discoveries of music, science, literature, and art — few of which brought profit to those to whom they were revealed — but also for our organism itself which is the inheritance gathered and garnered by those who have gone before us."⁶ The fundamental conservative reason for their reliance on the past is their distrust of the naked reason of the individual as a guide to moral and social behaviour. From this distrust stem their scepticism and their belief in experience and history, which tell them that the individual is foolish but the species is wise.

Ngugi is a committed Marxist and could not be said to display any lack of trust in ideology,⁷ but at the same time he attaches considerable weight to the experience of the community. There is a whole series of characters in his novels — from Mugo wa Kibiro and Waiyaki's father Chege in *The River Between* to Mwathi and Nyakinyua in *Petals of Blood* — who represent the wisdom of the community. Even the name Waiyaki given to the main character in the former novel is to suggest the tradition of leadership represented by the famous Kikuyu chief and warrior who put up stout resistance to British colonialism in the 1890s. His piercing contemplative eyes suggest comparison with Jomo Kenyatta who, like Waiyaki, was descended from a family of seers. Micere Mugo is correct in asserting on the basis of a personal interview that "Ngugi reviews the past in Okot p'Bitek's Lawino's militant, assertive, progressive and creative sense" and that "to him everything within the traditional setting had significance, symbolism and deep religious meaning."⁸

The objection could be raised that Micere Mugo's observations are based on a study of Ngugi's earlier novels, that by the time he wrote *Petals of Blood* there had been a marked change in his attitude to the past as revealed in Karega's remarks quoted at the beginning. This is true to some extent. However, since the writing of *Petals* Ngugi has experienced another change in his attitude to the past, which has led him to an equally deep, perhaps even deeper, attachment to it than before. I propose to examine the indications, both in his art and his thought, which

support this conclusion and the factors which have contributed to this change.

While Ngugi's commitment to Marxism is a recognized fact, his deviations from the orthodox Marxist position have hardly ever been noticed. For instance, Marx and Engels, in spite of their condemnation of the bourgeoisie for its insatiable lust for power and money and its ruthlessness in pursuing these ends, still regarded it as a revolutionary force. It had, says the famous passage in *The Communist Manifesto*, "during its rule of scarce one hundred years, created more massive and more colossal productive forces than [had] all preceding generations together."⁹ It was responsible for the subjection of nature's forces to man, for the application of machinery to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalization of rivers, for making entire deserts bloom like the rose. Through its breaking up of the stagnation of feudal society it has been the most important agent in the social dynamics which will ultimately lead to the triumph of the proletariat. Ngugi, as far as I know, never acknowledges this revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie and from his pen we never see anything but condemnation of this class. The peasantry, on the contrary, is always praised and glorified. Ngugi, it is obvious, is not following Marx and Engels but Fanon, who made a distinction between the Western bourgeoisie and the colonial bourgeoisie and regarded the poor peasantry as the most genuinely revolutionary class in the Third World.

The peasants alone are revolutionary in these countries for three reasons. First, because "they have nothing to lose and everything to gain" by any change in the existing set-up as imposed by colonialism. Second, because the country people are the only people who have "more or less kept their individuality free from colonial impositions." This achievement of theirs is marvellous, "reminiscent of a conjuror's most successful sleight of hand." Third, because they are the only ones who are prepared to take recourse to violence to claim their birthright: "The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms. . . ."¹⁰ Ngugi faithfully echoes

these views of Fanon in the interview given by him to his fellow radicals at Leeds: "He [Fanon] believes that the peasants must control the state, must be involved in the work of social and economic reconstruction. He sees the peasantry as the real revolutionary force in the Third World — if you take the example of China, you can see how relevant Fanon is to the African experience."¹¹

Ngugi also shares Fanon's contempt for the national middle class and "their shocking ways — shocking because anti-national — of a traditional bourgeoisie, of a bourgeoisie which is stupidly, cynically bourgeois" (Fanon 120-21). The entire chapter, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," is devoted to excoriating this unprincipled and shameless class in Asia and Africa which would have no qualms about setting up its country as the brothel of Europe (123). Fanon defines the historical mission of this class of being the intermediary, "the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of colonialism" (122). In *Detained* Ngugi describes this "comprador bourgeoisie" as "by its very economic base, a dependent class, a parasitic class in the *kupe* (tick) sense . . . in essence, a *mnyapala* (overseer) class, a handsomely paid supervisor for the smooth operation of foreign economic interests." He comments on "its imitative culture" and quotes Fanon to explain his point. "For this class, as Franz Fanon once put it, has an extreme, incurable wish for permanent identification with the culture of the imperialist bourgeoisie."¹² But the contempt and detestation go deeper. Ngugi first quotes with approval President Nyerere's comparison of the African regimes who dote on their neo-colonial status to a prostitute who walks with proud display of the fur coat given to her by her moneyed lover. And then he expresses his own opinion: "Actually the situation of a comprador neo-colonial ruling class is more appropriately comparable to that of a pimp who would proudly hold down his mother to be brutally raped by foreigners, and then shout in glee: look at the shining handful of dollars I have received for my efficiency and integrity, in carrying out my part of the bargain" (13).

This is very clearly not the Marxist view of the bourgeoisie,

according to which it has to fulfil its historic role of breaking the stranglehold of feudalism and unleash the productive forces in society. It is in the course of this process that the proletariat with its historic mission to bring about revolution and establish socialism is to come into existence. But it may not be possible to achieve this objective immediately: a transition period may be necessary. Ngugi is not clear on this point, or one could say that he refuses to concede that any role is to be played by the bourgeoisie. When asked by his interviewer Alan Marcuson in the same Leeds interview in 1966, "...do you think that in the classical Marxist sense, there has to be a period of education under a bourgeois regime or is this only going to inculcate bourgeois values and perhaps stop the revolution?" Ngugi's reply was, "I am not too sure about the answer to this question. I think Africa is ripe for revolution. The conditions of the peasants and workers are very bad, and they are disillusioned with their independence. Also they have experienced revolt — as I said, they were the key factor in the colonial revolt. But when, and where a revolution takes place will be determined by conditions I can't predict."¹³

Ngugi is thus relying not on Marx but on Fanon. However, Fanon himself has been criticized for mistaking a temporary social deformation for a permanent sociological one.¹⁴ He provides few examples to substantiate his theory, relying almost exclusively on his Algerian experience. But he does refer to the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya and comments on the refusal of any well-known nationalist to declare his affiliation with the movement or even trying to defend the men involved in it (Fanon 93).

Fanon's praise of the Mau Mau must have pleased Ngugi, for to him it is the epitome of a revolutionary movement by the peasantry as well as a conclusive proof of the peasantry's being a revolutionary class. His emphasis on certain aspects of the movement has, however, been questioned by some authorities during recent years. Ngugi has characterized the movement as revolutionary as well as socialistic. But scholars such as Frank Furedi have pointed out that though the peasants formed the rank and file of the movement, the majority of the activists came from the ranks of the more skilled farm labourers, artisans, and

petty traders. The latter provided the link with Kikuyuland and the Kikuyu living in Nairobi and played the central role in spreading the movement and giving it a radical perspective. But these people were neither revolutionary nor socialist. They were, as Furedi emphasizes, talented and ambitious and resented the marginal status conferred on them by the colonial system. But if they should themselves come to power, they would not want to establish an egalitarian society.¹⁵ We get an indication of their social philosophy in the structure and organization of the Land and Freedom Army in which there was a distinct tendency towards the imitation of British models. Kimathi, for instance, according to Karari Njama, a Mau Mau fighter who fought under his leadership, assumed the rank of "Field Marshall" and liked to style himself as "Sir Dedan Kimathi, Knight Commander of the African Empire."¹⁶ Also, some of the religious symbolism used by the Mau Mau and as reflected in the oath-taking ceremonies has raised doubts in the minds of a few observers about its progressive character.

Ngugi does not seem to be disturbed by these facets of the Mau Mau movement and continues to look up to it as an authentic revolutionary force, the only hope for any worthwhile change in Kenyan society in the future. We have to treat Ngugi's views with great respect because his faith is based on his personal experience. Ngugi was born in Kikuyuland, the so-called White Highlands, which felt most intensely the impact of white settlement in Kenya. It is well known that he hails from a family which took an active part in the Mau Mau struggle and suffered grievously.¹⁷ Though he attended later the famous Alliance High School at Kikuyu, founded by Protestant Christian missions in alliance, his early schooling was in the Kikuyu Karing'a School at Maanguuu, which represented the more extreme wing of the Independent Schools Movement started by the Kikuyu nationalists. And in spite of his Western education in institutions such as Makerere and Leeds, his frequent visits to and prolonged stays in Western countries such as Britain, the United States, the Soviet Union, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark, he has remained a peasant in his habits and style of living.¹⁸ He told me in downtown Nairobi that he feels lost in a city like Nairobi, and even

when he was at the commanding heights of academic life in Kenya as chairman of the Department of Literature at Nairobi University, he continued to reside in his ancestral village of Gitogoothi near Limuru, about eighteen miles from the university. Ngugi's arrest on 31 December 1977, detention for a year in the Maximum Security Prison at Kamiti, and being deprived of his prestigious position at Nairobi University was, I think, a traumatic experience. It has left him bitter and disillusioned, not only with the government and the power group in Kenya but even more with those he describes in the Preface to *Detained* as "petty-bourgeois intellectuals at the University who hide ethnic chauvinism and their mortal terror of progressive class politics behind masks of abstract super-nationalism and bury their own inaction behind mugs of beer and empty intellectualism about conditions being not yet ripe for action" (xxi). "These petty-bourgeois academics," according to him, "fit into the category of intellectuals once described by Karl Marx as geniuses in the ways of bourgeois stupidity" (xxviii).

Ngugi's disgust with his leftist colleagues has led him to look up more and more to his peasant brethren. In his *Prison Diary* he identifies "two dialectically opposed traditions of Kenyan history, culture and aesthetics." One is the tradition of submissive trust, of revelling in slavery, fostered by the foreign missionary churches through their dissemination of colonial religions and cultures and adopted by the Kenyan bourgeoisie. The other is the tradition of determined and stout resistance to colonialism followed by the Kenyan peasants, which formed its most glorious expression in the Mau Mau movement. Through snapping of its links with the past, the first tradition has been the chief agent in bringing about the African's alienation, so graphically portrayed in *Petals* by the picture of Karega's elder brother Nding-uri adrift on a raft (237). This homelessness of the African will be ended when he is able to bring about a proletarian revolution, but psychologically, morally, and spiritually, it will come to an end only when he overcomes his self-contempt and embraces his own culture and tradition by a return to the ways of the ancestors as represented by characters like Nyakinyua. The past is now increasingly being looked up to (a) as an inspiration for political

and social action; (b) as a guide to social organization; (c) as a life-style model.

In the course of a discussion "On Civilization" in the BBC Africa programme in July 1979, Ngugi made a distinction between physical nature and social nature and said: "Some African civilizations had not developed the conquest of nature to a very high degree; but they had developed to a high degree their control of social nature." His reply to my question in October 1980 in Nairobi was on the same lines. From it we can see that by the above "social nature" he means "human relations," "human values," in which African civilization of the past was far superior to modern European and American civilization which "is still in a state of social cannibalism," "a man-eats-man society."¹⁹ The splitting among themselves of a bean that falls to the ground is used in *I Will Marry When I Want* as a symbol of the feeling of brotherliness and mutual help that existed in African society.²⁰ Only a few years ago, Ngugi presented in the Opera of Eros and the Theng'eta ceremony organized by Nyakinyua an image of the organic, happy community that existed in Africa at one time, a community in which land was held in common and there was mutual sharing of goods; in which courage, heroism, and self-sacrifice were greatly valued; and people realized their potential for creative life in games and sports, music, song, and dance, uninhibited by the bourgeois morality of European Christianity.²¹ But Ngugi's tone, then, was easy and relaxed. In *I Will Marry When I Want* and *Devil on the Cross*, it is bitter, tense, and contemptuous whenever he refers to the destructive work of the White Man and his Black running dogs. In *Petals* there was at least one character from the bourgeoisie — the lawyer — who could feel for the country and the common man. In *Devil on the Cross* there is none. Gatuiria, the American-educated cultural nationalist who falls in love with Wariinga, is confused and indecisive and is unable to choose between right and wrong — his father and Wariinga. And it is a measure of Ngugi's commitment to the African tradition that in *Devil on the Cross* he bids good-bye to the novel, a Western literary form, and returns to the narrative folk-tradition of Africa, putting on the garb of the Gicaandi Player, the Prophet of Justice.

NOTES

- 1 *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1977) 322-23. All subsequent references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
- 2 *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Exploration of His Writings* (London: Heinemann, 1983) 113.
- 3 James Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 284.
- 4 *Homecoming* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1982) 46.
- 5 See Humphrey House, *The Dickens World* (London: Oxford UP, 1950) 35.
- 6 *Note-Books*, in the Shrewsbury Edition, XX, 159-60.
- 7 I am not using the word "ideology" in the Marxist sense of "a sum of conceptions of a social group to systematize the *values* in which the mystified consciousness and the activity of this group are expressed." My use is in the sense in which ideology is an objective interpretation or explanation of reality without any distortion brought into it by self-interest. For the above definition of ideology, see Leszek Kolakowski, "Ideology and Theory," in Tom Bottomore, ed., *Karl Marx* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973; 1979) 119.
- 8 Micere Githae-Mugo, *Visions of Africa* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978) 51-52, 56.
- 9 Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1974) 339.
- 10 See *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1967) 47, 110, 98. All subsequent references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
- 11 *Union News* (Leeds University) 18 Nov. 1966: 7.
- 12 *Detained* (London: Heinemann, 1981) 56. All subsequent references are to this edition and given parenthetically in the text.
- 13 *Union News*: 7.
- 14 See, for instance, David Caute, *Fanon* (London: Fontana, 1970) 71.
- 15 Frank Furedi, "The Social Composition of the Mau Mau Movement in the White Highlands," in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 1.4 (July 1974): 495.
- 16 See Donald L. Barnett and Karari Njama, *Mau Mau from Within* (New York and London: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1966) 239.
- 17 Ngugi's elder brother Mwangi joined the Mau Mau movement and went into the forests and his mother was kept under detention and questioned by the police.
- 18 The term "peasant" is not used in an uncomplimentary sense. Micere Mugo, Ngugi's friend and colleague, was the first one to use it for him and she explains that she means by it "a genuine African Personality" as distinguished from the "Afro-Saxon" type which affects Western ways and is prevalent in today's "intellectual" African circles. See her *Visions of Africa* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978) 21.
- 19 *Writers in Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1981) 67.
- 20 *I Will Marry When I Want* (London: Heinemann, 1982) 71.
- 21 See *Petals*, 205 ff.