

**EXISTENTIAL INTERROGATION OF MAX WEBER’S CULTURAL DETERMINISM AND
ITS IMPLICATION ON AFRICA’S DEVELOPMENT**

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Abstract: Culture is a critical factor in the development of a people; it is without doubt the foundation upon which a formidable socio-economic structure necessary for development can be built. However, since the time of Weber, culture has taken a deterministic nomenclature, asserting that a given set of cultural factors will give rise to a given pattern of socio-economic life. Thus, in Weber’s and other cultural determinists’ view, certain traditional cultures in most Third World countries are negative and, as such, contribute to economic backwardness and poverty. His work rejects this view and argues for cultural possibilism in the existential tradition. We state that culture, though an intentional tool of development, is not static but rather dynamic through man’s existential powers, who has the ability to recreate or reconstitute the world as he deems fit. Using the existential analysis native to the phenomenological method, we anchor our search for an alternative theory to redress the problem of challenges of development in many African states on the theme of freedom espoused by existentialists. The kernel of this paper is that humans everywhere have the capacity to transform the society and not succumb to any form of cultural “givens”.

Keywords: existentialism, culture, determinism, possibilism, development.

Introduction

Development, without doubt, is central to human existence. It involves transcendence from one level of life to another leading to a stage-by-stage evolution to a more advanced and sophisticated personality. It is, therefore, safe to say that culture is the soul of a nation; it is what distinguishes a people. Culture drives development as it is the hallmark of authenticity whose loss leads to inauthentic living or a life controlled by the anonymous. Development, like culture, cannot be borrowed but cultivated and inculcated.

Max Weber, in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in 1904, followed by *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (1951), argued that Confucianism created an environment hostile to capitalist development by emphasising kinship as the primary source of social relatedness and thereby promoted economically inefficient nepotism.

The cultural and religious determinism of Weber was in many ways reminiscent of the environmental determinism of Hippocrates and Aristotle, both of whom had in their various works invariably argued that the natural environment determined not only the physical appearances of human groups but also their social consciousness and psychological predispositions (Tatham 1951). Hence, according to Hippocrates, Asians were generally easygoing because they lived in very favourable regions. They stood in stark contrast to the penurious Europeans, who had to work harder to ameliorate their suffering, be-

cause they lived in a harsh environment (Tatham 1951). Aristotle held more or less the same views on environmental and social life.

However, the spectacular economic performance of Japan, China, and other Confucian societies since the 1950s has overturned Weber's thesis, and it would appear to be an underestimation of man's existential capacities at challenging the "givens" or the facticity of existence. Thus, we reject this view and see humanity everywhere, surrounded by possibilities.

Philosophy and Culture

The role of philosophy in the cultural development of any society cannot be overemphasised. It is, in fact, the base and the apex, the foundation, the ceiling and the roof of any civilization, any religion and science, indeed any discipline (Momoh 2000, 2).

Philosophy, it must be noted, is rooted in the problems philosophers attempt to resolve (Fadahunsi 2002). It is thus not just a theoretical armchair ability to analyse and understand reality (Oguejiofor 2001,13). Philosophy, therefore cannot be divorced from the environment; this reinforces Balogun's (2014) position that philosophy could not have occurred in isolation of events in the environment that have great influence on the cultural mainstay of various peoples and races. A classic example is the response of the Milesians to the mythological explanation given by the Ionian culture on the origin of the cosmos, rejecting the myths and offering a more scientific explanation of the original stuff.

This tradition was to characterize the history of philosophy through the ages as an existential reflection on the activities in society. Hence, Sodipo (1973) conceives philosophy as a:

Reflective and critical thinking about the concepts and principles we use to organize our experience in morals, in religion, in social and political life, in law, in psychology, in history, and in the natural sciences (p. 3).

Similarly, Plato's idealism is rooted in the social expression of Greek society that unjustly condemned Socrates to death. Thus, Plato's idealistic metaphysics can only be appreciated in the light of the decadent political period of Greece. Therefore, philosophy cannot be separated from the environment; each philosophy is culturally founded and rooted in the problems philosophers attempt to resolve (Fadahunsi 2002).

Again, in the mediaeval period, or a period otherwise known as the Dark Ages, attention was shifted to the relation between faith and reason. The early Christian theologian, Tertullian, gave classical expression to the view with the rhetorical question, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" Consequently, the prevalent culture in mediaeval thought was the Church with its creeds and practices; as such, philosophical thoughts and reflections during this period hovered around the predominant cultural indexes (Balogun 2014, p. 12).

Immediately following the Middle Ages was the period of Enlightenment, when efforts were made to separate religious theses from reason. Notable thinkers in this period include, but are not limited to, Francis Bacon, David Hume, and other scientific-minded thinkers who sought empirical explanations, thereby rejecting a priori notions that eventually paved the way for the development of science, which blossomed in the industrial revolution and the consequent capitalism.

From the foregoing, philosophies are not devoid of the prevailing intellectual, socio-cultural, and economic conditions at the time. This fact is captured by Fredrick Hegel (1973), when he writes:

Whatever happens, every individual is a child of time; so, philosophy is also its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overlap his own age and jump over Rhodes (Hegel 1873, 11).

Examples of the nexus between philosophical reflections and the history surrounding them are endless. Existentialist philosophy (with which we intend to interrogate cultural determinism and the African predicament) is a response to the challenges of ruins and penury following the Second World War, when humanity was faced with the possibility of extinction (Fadahunsi 2002). Expectedly, existentialist thinkers were averse to the prevailing abstract rationalism, which tends to put God at the centre of its woes. By contrast, existentialists rose against this thought, placing man in charge of his destiny. Hence, it is regarded as a movement of protest.

Thus, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, both leading lights in the existentialist movement, agree that the system, the impersonal public, is suffocating. They agree that abstract thought leads to a continuous suicide of reason (Unah & Osegenwune 2010, 131). This is the true condition in Africa; consequently, all the philosophies of development are founded on abstract terms and not on the individual person that drives development, whose authentic selfhood is lost to their experiences of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Thus, development not only remains elusive to most African states, but also “the recitations of Africa’s economic woes and political failings have become truisms” (Silivio 2021).

It is thus clear that all philosophies are epochal, having their source in time. They are directed at addressing the challenges of the time while offering solutions. This is aptly captured by Ogundowole (2004):

The emphasis made by each philosopher depends on the major problems prevalent at a given historical period of the development of mankind. That is why a good grasp of what philosophy is demands that we approach and view philosophy epochally (Ogundowole 2004, p. 23).

To establish this truism, Ogundowole further states that:

Epochal comprehension of the essence of philosophy enables one to realize that philosophies differ in content depending on the nature of problems tackled by the given philosopher at a given time and space, as well as the overall level of comprehensive awareness of society and mankind in general and the ability to relate such special awareness to the development of philosophy bid.

The point of emphasis is that although philosophical language is crafted in abstract terms, which implies that pure thoughts are the raw material for philosophizing, philosophy transcends the bounds of pure thought to be socially relevant; hence, social milieu affects the content of philosophy, and the content of philosophy seeks to affect social milieu, either by confirming or opposing it (Nkrumah 1970, p. 14).

It is logical to say that no philosophy can exist in a vacuum, as philosophies of all cultures and epochs attest to this fact. Philosophy is a response to the socio-political exigencies of the various epochs. Therefore, it cannot be divorced from the socio-political realities of a particular time. Nicolitio Gianan (2009) writes on the relationship between culture and philosophy as follows:

Philosophy and culture are interdependent entities. The latter is said to be the cradle of the former; the former analyses, refines, and appreciates the latter. Culture in this view needs to cultivate and nurture philosophy, and philosophy functions as an evaluator and studies culture in order to further develop and enrich it (Gianan 2009, 118).

Accordingly, Gianan conceives cultures as the ideas, customs, skills, arts, attitudes, sciences, modes of perception, and habits of thought and activity of a people or group that are transferred, communicated, or passed along as in or to succeeding generations (Gianan 2009, 119). For this reason, Gianan concedes that all philosophy is culturally shaped and socially determined. He was of the opinion that:

No one can deny that most cultures have changed, and philosophising also has evolved in the process. Philosophy has transformed itself into something that is already in dialogue with culture itself not in opposition to or away from it (Gianan, 2009, 118).

Human cultures as a mode of existence are therefore not static but rather dynamic through the ingenuity of philosophy, which continues to probe the foundations of beliefs and knowledge to refine them for the betterment of man and society. Hence, the function of philosophy everywhere, according to Wiredu (1980), is to examine the intellectual foundations of life, using the best available modes of knowledge and reflection for human well-being (Wiredu 1980, 62). It can be deduced that culture is subject to philosophical examination (Balogun 2014, 17). This explains why Olusegun Oaldipo, in his essay *Philosophy and Culture* (1999), opines that philosophy has a crucial role to play in the production, clarification, and propagation of the ideas and values that guide the thought and life of a people. Philosophy serves to challenge a people’s established views of themselves and their condition as a precondition for defining or redefining who they are and what they can be (Oaldipo 1999, 20–21).

The nexus between philosophy and culture shows that culture needs philosophical reflections, since these reflections are rooted in the social milieu or cultural heritage of the people. Every society has benefitted immensely from this relationship, laying the foundation of development as it did to the prevailing myth in ancient Greece. The African situation cannot be exempted from this revolutionary

character of philosophy. What is needed, however, is to engage African culture in the existentialist tradition of possibilities. Man, the creator of culture, is a bundle of possibilities, an unfinished product. This is captured by Unah (1996), when he writes:

Genuine human existence demands that the self shall assume true responsibility for itself and its deeds and that the genuine individual create new possibilities for themselves or seek to realize his historical possibilities (Unah 1996, 107).

We agree with Godwin Sogolo that an emerging African philosophical tradition needs to be rooted in and also nourished within the context of the African culture, history, and the experience of the people (Oyeshile 1998, 186). In the same vein, developmental crises in Africa can only be remedied genuinely through the existential values of the people; the sole requirement is that the African person needs to be rehabilitated existentially.

More important is the crucial role of philosophy in the production, clarification, and propagation of the ideas and values that guide the thought and life of a people (Oladipo 1999, 20). Again, there is the critical aspect of philosophy, where it serves to challenge a people's established views of themselves and their condition as a precondition for defining or redefining who they are and what they can be (Ibid., 20–21). Thus, through man's existential activities, cultures assume a dynamic trait as opposed to a rigid status, of which cultural determinists are guilty.

Existentialism and Development

The existentialist's approach of emphasising the capacity of man to recreate his world as he deems fit is more pragmatic than the various blame-game theories on the crisis of development in most African states. The point is that the existential conception of human existence captures the metaphysical and ontological powers of man in making meaning out of meaninglessness and order out of chaos; hence, our position is that it is an appropriate philosophical foundation in redressing the problem of underdevelopment in many African states. Using the existential analysis native to the phenomenological method, we anchor our search for an alternative theory to redress the problem of development in Africa on the theme of freedom in Sartre's existentialism.

According to Sartre, human existence denotes the act of being responsible for making authentic choices. Sartre's position is anchored on the fact that humans are naturally free to re-make the world as they deem fit. These possibilities of man will result in development which in our view is the ability to use what is materially available to continuously improve the quality of life. This implies that man's ability to make meaning out of his meaningless existence is the vantage point of existential thought system.

Consequently, an understanding of the fact of human existence as propagated by the existentialists is germane to repositioning the individuals to the possibilities of attaining the desired objectives of development. It is on this ground that this research avers that another way of looking at the problem of underdevelopment in Africa is to examine the link between the notion of freedom and development in Sartre's existentialism.

Africa, without doubt, is bedevilled by underdevelopment characterised by political instability, corruption and embezzlement of public funds, leading to the collapse of the public sector and an ailing economy. Several attempts were made through various theories to remedy the African condition; however, all seem to have followed the path of determinism and do not address man, who is at the centre of the development crisis. This research believes that authentic development must be founded on man's existential abilities to make meaning out of meaninglessness; hence, our choice of existentialism with particular attention to Sartre's notion of freedom.

In existentialism, the word "existence" becomes prominent and assumes a different usage, where only human beings are said to exist whereas all other kinds of beings "are", but do not "exist". As a philosophy of human existence, it is seen as a protest against human degradation. Okolo rightly informs us that:

Existentialism is viewed as an expression of the moods and experiences of the modern man. To a large extent it is seen as protest. It speaks out against various forms of de-humanization that it believes result from high technology, nationalism, neo-colonialism, militarism, globalization, capitalism, underdevelopment and poverty (Okolo 2006, 55).

Existentialism is therefore a man-centred and individualistic response to the human condition, a philosophy of freedom, a rejection of determinism. This work argues the thesis that the adoption of J.P. Sartre's notion of freedom is germane to Africa's development crisis. This is because authentic development is man-centred, as such development is existentially founded. Man, according to the existentialist, first appears and then creates his essence; freedom precedes essence, Sartre posits, and in a unique way, man's essence is not fixed. Unah (2002) makes the following submission:

Human being is a unique and privileged entity. Unique and privileged in the sense that of all entities it is the only one without fixed essence of some sort. Its being is characterized by existence. It is the only being that exists (Unah 2002, 60).

The point of note is that post-colonial theories of development are guilty of the same errors of traditional philosophy, where aspects or profiles of man were presented as the entire reality.

Thus, having lost his authentic selfhood to the experiences of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, the African man becomes "fallen" in Heidegger's word, or "inauthentic", or a "life of helpless imitation which is determined from without by "Das Man", the impersonal "one", the "they" (Unah 1996, 87). This, without gainsaying, is the true picture of African people or what their experience has reduced them to.

An African person is a disowned or an unowned self, and their essences are no longer theirs; therefore, to rehabilitate them, they must be aware of themselves and take responsibility for themselves and create new possibilities or seek their historical possibilities (Unah 1996, 87).

Hence, we turn to existentialism, which is a man-centred and individualistic response of a person to the human condition, by reversing the Platonic thesis that the world is a world of essences, values, ideas, and thoughts and that the purpose of life is to discover these essences, which are already there and precede existence. This is deterministic, and almost all the theories of development re-echo this determinism through their various blame-game theories. However, Sartre, in a radical manner, rejected this by insisting that "existence precedes essence".

Again, as a philosophical theory or approach that emphasises the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of will, Africa can be remedied through individual free acts aimed at the collective good of all, which is the thrust of Sartre's notion of freedom, where man realises they are free only when they realise their complete responsibility for their own actions. If, on the contrary, man allows external factors to determine their own future, then they are rejecting their own "authenticity". Hence, the question of human existence is the fundamental question of philosophy (Omogbe 1990, 196). This, of course, is a recall to the Socratic call to make the human person the focal point of philosophy. Man is and remains the key to the understanding of the whole of reality. Human beings transcend the infra-human world. Humans possess an inviolable dignity, an inalienable liberty, and an inescapable moral responsibility.

Cultural Determinism

Max Weber, in his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), maintains that the emergence of modern economic development (in Europe) depended on a prior shift in cultural values generated by Protestantism. Weber argued that discipline, austerity, frugality, and individualism—all traits of those Protestant sects—were key ingredients in the development of capitalism. Buttressing his point, he argued that areas of Germany and Switzerland that were Protestant were on the whole more economically developed than those that were Catholic.

In 1951, Weber published another book, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, in which he argued that Confucianism created an environment hostile to capitalist development by emphasising kinship as the primary source of social relatedness and thereby promoted economically inefficient nepotism. The cultural and religious determinism of Weber was in many ways reminiscent of the environmental determinism of Hippocrates and Aristotle, both of whom had in their various works invariably argued that the natural environment determined not only the physical appearances of human groups but also their social consciousness and psychological predispositions (Taylor 1872). Hence, according to Hippocrates, Asians were generally easygoing because they lived in very favourable regions. They stood in stark con-

trast to the penurious Europeans, who, living in a harsh environment, had to work harder to ameliorate their suffering (ibid.). Aristotle held more or less the same views on environmental and social life.

However, the spectacular economic performance of Japan, China, and other Confucian societies since the 1950s has overturned Weber's thesis, and it would appear to be an underestimation of man's existential potentialities at challenging the givens or the facility of existence. Thus, we reject this view and see humanity everywhere, surrounded by possibilities.

Francis Fukuyama's *Trust: The Social Virtues and Creation of "Prosperity"* (1995) added a new dimension to the cultural determinist theory when he argues that societies with higher levels of trust are inclined to be more developed when compared to societies in which there are lower levels of trust. He writes:

A nation's well-being as well as its ability to complete is conditioned by a single pervasive cultural characteristic: the level of trust inherent in society (Hamilton 1996, 24).

To prove his point, Fukuyama argues that low-trust societies such as China, France, and Italy, where close relations between people do not extend much beyond the family, are poor at larger social institutions like multinational corporations. Therefore, as Fukuyama observes, they are at a comparative disadvantage. In contrast, countries like Japan, Germany, and the USA are bound to do much better at generally multinational corporations, which, in turn, will lead to improved conditions of life and economically vibrant economies (ibid.).

Fukuyama's position has been criticised by scholars who have tried to show that, contrary to his central thesis, some societies, which Fukuyama categorises as low trust, actually have been able to facilitate the development of large-scale corporations. Then, China, which according to Fukuyama is a low-trust society, has not only actually been able to create large corporations but also is developing very rapidly.

Further, in advancing his theory of social trust as an all-pervasive factor, Fukuyama ignored the role of government control and direction. In the case of both South Korea and China, the role of government is an important factor in evolving socio-economic policies. In such a situation, development may take a given direction, whether the society in question has low trust or high trust. Another major criticism against Fukuyama's social trust theory is the seemingly biased platform. Instead of a global outlook, he concentrated on the Euro-Asia-cum-American social and economic experiences and completely ignored the African realities.

In Africa, there is a higher degree of social cohesion and trust than perhaps in any other part of the world. Certainly, if social closeness and social trust were the keys to corporate development, then Africa could be a cradle of multinational corporations.

Cultural Alienation and Adaptionism

Obi Oguejiofor, in his work, *Philosophy and the African Predicament* (2001), painted graphic pictures of the African condition historically. Apart from being the cradle of the human race, Africa was also the cradle of the technological evolution of humanity, from the invention of wooden and bone tools to the momentous advance into the Stone Age (p. 24). In addition, the continent was host to ancient civilisations such as Egypt, Kush, Napata, Meroe, Nubia, and Axiam (Oguejiofor 2001). However, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the darkest blight in African history. Thus, the experience of slave trade alters the progress and advancement of the continent, not only in terms of the exploitation of physical resources but also of the mental effects on the people:

The effect of slavery on African societies was thus not limited to visible factors; even of greater consequences are the invisible political, psychological, and social effects (Oguejiofor 2001, 29).

Consequently, the legacy of the slave trade on the continent was that of fear, social insecurity, violence, and political instability (Olaniyan 1985). At the very least, colonialism left Africans persistently stigmatised as inferior, hence the loss of authentic selfhood and the utter dependence on "others". Ayittey makes these comments on the devastation colonialism caused on the psyche of Africans, to the effect that although it ended in 1840, Africans are yet to recover from the psychological trauma:

It was probably this, rather than the physical and economic damage of the slave trade, that wrenched the heart from the inner psyche of blacks and assailed the very cultural soul of their existence (Ayttey 1992, 5).

According to him, colonialism compounded the problem since colonial subjugation was a cultural and emotional humiliation suffered on top of the pervasive denigration of Africans as inferior (Ayttey 1992).

The assault on Africa's dignity through history was not sufficiently looked into by the subsequent philosophies of development; hence, a neglect of man's existence at the expense of the exploitation of his physical environment emerged. However, in the existentialist tradition, we state that man is not a product of history, but rather, history is the product of human activities. Even in an economic situation, man is free to decide what to do and how to react to the situation.

Ndubuisi's *Freedom and Determination: An Inquiry into Man's Moral Responsibility* (2006) is basically a critical evaluation of J. P. Sartre's notion of freedom. Man makes himself, the author declares. Man's freedom to recreate his world is not negotiable. Failure to accept freedom on the level of practical reason and refusal to live according to the reality of the human condition are the evidence of bad faith. Acceptance of any deterministic forces outside man is an illusion. Hence, the facticity of a human being can be seen as a particular set of contingent facts that are true of them strictly. There is no compelling factor outside oneself to value something as high or low. One's decision in regard to the value of things is entirely one's own (Ndubuisi 2006.).

However, human reality or freedom encounters limitation on account of the given which is surpassed or annihilated. But when obstacles cease to exist, then freedom becomes nonexistent. We constitute freedom that chooses, but we do not choose to be free. We are condemned to freedom. Freedom is germane to authentic nation-building; it is the human capacity of self-determination, self-orientation, and self-detachment.

Muyiwa Falaiye, in his work, *Theoretical Black Activism and Social Change: Beyond Rodney and George Ayttey* (2005), where he chronicles the African woes as adumbrated by the internalist and externalist perspectives, calls for an end to the blame game, which generated more heat than the needed energy. Falaiye, in an existential language, calls for a development that is rooted in the people's environment; as such, the people must recognise that development must be a true reflection of the needs of the environment in which they live (p. 50). Characteristically, Falaiye makes the case for cultural adaptationism, where we adopt what is useful from other cultures for the development of our environment. Africa must consider the appropriateness of adapting elements of external cultures, especially as they relate to its own existential needs. (Falaiye 2005, 51).

On the whole, Falaiye's philosophy of cultural adaptationism is central to this work by demonstrating that the lamentations of the externalists and internalists are impartial but a close circle. In the process of development, cultures need not lose their essential consciousness that makes for the uniqueness of a people. They can still maintain their linguistic, socio-cultural, legal, economic, and political heritage (Falaiye 2005).

As we have shown in this work, the bane of development in Africa is the total loss of our cultural roots and wholesale acceptance of everything Western—a characteristic of an unauthentic being. Thus, cultural adaptationism is the hallmark of an authentic people; the unauthentic, who have already lost what it means to exist, will automatically adopt all that is available.

Having shown the weaknesses of Weber's cultural determinism, we subscribe to cultural possibilism, showing that it is within the people's existential power to alter culture and eventually the superstructures erected upon it. Through the existential possibilities, we see humans as ultimately responsible for charting a course for their own development and for humankind.

To achieve these tasks of social reconstruction, we agree with Wamala (1999) that Africa needs a Marshall Plan, not in terms of finance but in its cultural, intellectual, and conceptual frameworks; a close examination of issues like cultural laxity towards work, leaders' proneness to corruption, and a sober view concerning money and management along with a check on such cultural traits as lack of accountability and an instinctive desire to become rich quickly.

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