Revisiting Marx on Alienation: A Philosophical Framework for Understanding Political Disempowerment in Contemporary Nigeria

Chukwuma Okafor[1], Chukwuemeka Iloanya, PhD[2] & Prof. Sylvanus Nnoruka[3]

[1][2]&[3]Department of Philosophy, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State.
joelmarychukwuma@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Even though Nigeria has formally embraced democracy, the vast majority of its citizens still live in a state of political disempowerment. A society where political structures exist without true political empowerment is revealed by voter apathy, pervasive mistrust of institutions, elite dominance, and the marginalization of common voices. Traditional approaches that focus on electoral reform or institutional capacity have failed to explain why citizens feel disconnected from the political process. This article identifies the deeper philosophical roots of this crisis through a critical engagement with Karl Marx's theory of alienation. The central argument here is that political disempowerment in Nigeria cannot be fully understood without addressing the alienating conditions that distort people and collective political life. Drawing particularly on Marx's early work, the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, this article explores how Nigerians have become estranged not only from political institutions but from their own capacity for political agency. This article proposes a philosophical framework grounded in Marxist thought that highlights the role of ideology, economic marginalisation, and social disconnection in sustaining political alienation. It further suggests pathways toward political inclusion through critical awareness, participatory engagement, and the cultivation of a more human centred political culture. By reframing disempowerment as a form of alienation, the article opens new space for understanding and responding to Nigeria's democratic deficit in ways that restore dignity, agency, and collective responsibility.*

Keywords: *Political disempowerment, Alienation, Marxism, Democracy, Political Agency, Inclusion*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Nigeria, the promise of democracy has not yielded the expected sense of empowerment or belonging for the vast majority of its citizens. Although elections are regularly conducted and formal democratic institutions remain in place, ordinary Nigerians often feel estranged from political processes and disconnected from decision-making structures. This condition cannot be explained merely by institutional inefficiencies or leadership failures. Instead, it reflects a more fundamental crisis of political meaning and human disengagement, one that calls for philosophical interpretation. This situation cannot be explained away in terms of inefficacies of institutions or leadership failures. This is a deeper crisis of political signification and human disaffection that requires explanation on philosophical grounds. Alienation, as Karl Marx first used the term, provides one of the theoretical resources to understand such disempowering. Alienation addresses not merely economic exploitation of work but the broader estrangement of human beings from themselves, from each other, and from the social and political framework that is supposed to enrich their agency and dignity.

230

The alienation, in Nigeria, manifests itself as somebody's disappointment, cynicism, and silence when faced with political disintegration. It describes not only the economic exploitation of workers but also the broader estrangement of individuals from themselves, from others, and from the social and political structures that ought to sustain their agency and dignity. In Nigeria, this alienation manifests in the form of disillusionment, cynicism, and silence in the face of systemic political dysfunction. Political structures in Nigeria, Iloanya observes, "have become largely symbolic. Though democratic institutions exist, they operate in ways that marginalise the people. The average citizen sees no meaningful link between these structures and their personal or communal wellbeing."[1]

This article draws upon Marx's theory of alienation to investigate the philosophical foundations of political disempowerment in Nigeria. It argues that meaningful political inclusion requires more than legal reforms or electoral participation, it demands the recovery of political agency, rooted in self-awareness, critical consciousness, and a shared sense of belonging in the political community.

Marx on Alienation.

Karl Marx's theory of alienation stands as one of the most profound philosophical critiques of the human condition within capitalist societies. In his early writings, particularly in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx develops a nuanced understanding of alienation that goes beyond material exploitation. For Marx, alienation arises when human beings become estranged from the essential aspects of their nature due to the organisation of social and economic life. This condition is not merely economic; it penetrates deeply into one's consciousness, severing the connection between individuals and the social world they help to produce.

Marx outlines four key dimensions of alienation: alienation from the product of labour, from the process of labour, from one's species-being, and from other human beings. These aspects reflect how capitalist production reduces the worker to a passive instrument, estranged from both the material world and their own creative essence. The labourer, Marx argues, no longer recognises themselves in the object they produce, nor do they control the activity of production. Their creative capacities are surrendered to external forces, transforming them into strangers within their own existence. "The more he works the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates against himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself."[2] This alienation, whilst rooted in the capitalist economic system, has broad consequences. It dehumanises people and dissociates them from active existence in the world, including the political world. In societies such as Nigeria, where political and economic systems take after the capitalist hierarchies, alienation appears not only in work but in the general feeling of political helplessness. Understanding Marx's alienation is therefore essential to grasping why individuals may turn away from politics, not as a choice, but as a reflection of their disconnection from structures that appear distant, unresponsive, and imposed.

Political Alienation in Nigeria

Political alienation, in its philosophical essence, delineates a condition in which citizens are estranged from political life, institutions, and agency. This alienation is not merely the absence of political participation or interest, but the presence of a more profound fissure between the individual and the political community. In the Nigerian case, political alienation is a highly entrenched phenomenon, bred by a long record of exclusion, authoritarianism, and elite monopoly of political and economic resources. It expresses itself not only in low electoral turnout or mass political apathy, but in the strong sense of disillusionment that many citizens level at politics as a whole.

---

[1] Chukwuemeka Peter Iloanya, *Human Person and Social Contract Experience in Nigeria: Lessons from John Locke*, *Evaia: International Journal of Ethics and Values* 1, no. 1 (2020): 21.

[2] Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), 30.

Behind this phenomenon lies a structural contradiction. The democratic institutions formally exist, complete with a constitution, periodic elections, and political parties. Yet the institutions themselves function largely to ensure the hegemony of a privileged elite class. Political processes would appear to many Nigerians as acts, devoid of relevance and sincerity. There is little belief that voting changes anything or that engagement with the state yields justice or recognition. Thus, political participation becomes a hollow ritual, disconnected from real influence or agency. This experience mirrors Marx's notion of alienation, particularly his claim that individuals can become estranged from the institutions that should reflect their collective will. In Nigeria, citizens often view the state not as a product of their shared political engagement, but as an external apparatus that governs without listening. The consequence is a deep-seated withdrawal from political life, not because Nigerians are indifferent, but because the political sphere no longer appears to belong to them. In a real democracy, Marx writes, "the political state disappears into civil society. But in the state as it exists, man lives a double life, a heavenly and an earthly life, and the political life is but a semblance."[3] This duality is apparent in Nigeria, where political discourse is dominated by slogans, promises, and ideologies that rarely reflect lived realities. Campaign periods are brief spectacles of attention, followed by years of disengagement, neglect, and marginalisation. The absence of genuine accountability reinforces alienation. Institutions are seen not as instruments of public service, but as tools for accumulation, patronage, and repression.

Moreover, the structure of governance itself contributes to alienation. Layers of bureaucracy, excessive centralisation, and the disconnect between rural populations and federal power centres foster a sense of powerlessness. Citizens, particularly in underrepresented areas such as Ayamelum Local Government, feel invisible within national political arrangements. Political appointments, budget allocations, and developmental priorities are decided with little reference to the needs or voices of the people. The result is a widespread sense of abandonment and non-belonging within the political system. As Chukwuemeka Peter Iloanya rightly notes, "Democratic structures in Nigeria have failed to promote effective participation because the people are not integrated into the process as thinking, feeling, and willing agents. They are politically sidelined, not by accident, but by the very design of the system."[4]

The consequence of such alienation is not only passivity, but a dangerous normalisation of disengagement. When political involvement is seen as futile, the space is left open for manipulation, violence, and disillusionment. The population may grow cynical, seeking personal survival strategies in place of collective engagement. In such a context, political apathy is not a defect of the citizen, but a rational response to persistent structural exclusion. To confront this condition, it is necessary to see political alienation not as a behavioural failure, but as a consequence of systemic disconnection. Nigerian politics must move beyond formality and embrace substance. It must become rooted in practices that restore a sense of ownership, dignity, and responsiveness to ordinary citizens. Political structures must be re-imagined as platforms for dialogue, participation, and recognition, rather than tools of domination and spectacle.

---

[3] Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, in *Early Writings*, ed. Lucio Colletti (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 236.
[4] Chukwuemeka Peter Iloanya, *Human Person and Social Contract Experience in Nigeria: Lessons from John Locke*, Evaia: *International Journal of Ethics and Values* 1, no. 1 (2020): 24.

Understanding Political Disempowerment in Contemporary Nigeria

Political disempowerment in Nigeria cannot be adequately explained by referencing poor leadership or institutional corruption alone. Rather, it represents a complex interplay of historical, structural, psychological, and ideological conditions that alienate the citizen from the political system. Disempowerment is not merely the absence of political power, but a state of being in which individuals no longer see themselves as agents within the political order. They experience politics as something distant, imposed, and ultimately indifferent to their needs, aspirations, or voice.

At the heart of this disempowerment lies the legacy of colonial governance, which imposed political structures that did not emerge organically from within Nigerian communities. The colonial state, built on hierarchy and control, replaced indigenous systems of consultation and communal decision making with centralised authority and bureaucratic detachment. This legacy persists in contemporary governance, where authority is often perceived as external and punitive, rather than participatory or responsive. Citizens are required to obey, but seldom invited to co-create. As Claude Ake writes, "The state in Africa was not created by society, and has therefore remained an alien force, representing domination rather than a means of self-expression. It is more feared than respected, more endured than embraced."[5] This historical alienation has been compounded by decades of military rule, which institutionalised authoritarianism and weakened civil society. Although Nigeria formally returned to civilian rule in 1999, democratic practices remain fragile and largely procedural. Elections are conducted, but the structures that sustain democratic culture, such as freedom of expression, accountability, and inclusion, are often undermined. The people are spectators in a system that is managed by political elites for their own continuity. Public policies are made with little public consultation, and governance is often reduced to symbolic gestures that bear little relevance to the lived experience of ordinary Nigerians.

Political disempowerment is further reinforced by socio-economic inequalities that restrict access to participation. When basic needs like food, shelter, security are not met, politics appears as a luxury, remote from daily survival. Millions of Nigerians live below the poverty line, and this economic marginalisation deepens their sense of exclusion. Those without resources, education, or social connections find themselves outside the circles of influence. The political arena becomes a closed space, reserved for a privileged few. Disempowerment thus arises from both material conditions and structural arrangements that suppress political will. Meagher observes that "political disempowerment cannot be addressed solely by creating formal structures; it demands deeper transformation of social, economic, and cultural conditions that shape political capacity."[6] An equally critical factor in the perpetuation of disempowerment is the manipulation of ideology. Through religious rhetoric, ethnic politics, and populist propaganda, political actors distract and divide the populace, preventing the formation of a unified political consciousness. The electorate is mobilised along fault lines rather than interests, making solidarity and collective action difficult. Political discourse is often dominated by short-term promises and personality cults, obscuring the structural issues that fuel disempowerment. Rather than providing a space for public reasoning and shared purpose, politics becomes a spectacle, a contest over positions, not over ideas or visions for society.

[5] Claude Ake, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2000), 2.
[6] Kate Meagher, *Identity Economics: Social Networks and the Informal Economy in Nigeria* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010), 158.

This ideological disorientation is not accidental. It is actively sustained through institutions, media, and patronage networks that benefit from public disengagement. Disempowerment thus becomes cyclical: citizens withdraw from politics due to alienation and distrust, while political elites exploit this absence to consolidate power without accountability. This condition mirrors what Marx described as false consciousness, where individuals fail to perceive the real structures of power and domination, and instead internalise narratives that justify their subordination. As Iloanya notes, "Political awareness in Nigeria is suppressed not only by fear or force, but by the construction of political culture itself. The ordinary citizen is conditioned to see the state as untouchable, politics as dirty, and disengagement as wise."[7] Addressing political disempowerment therefore requires more than institutional reform. It demands a reconfiguration of political culture, one that restores trust, builds inclusive systems, and affirms the dignity of every citizen. Education must play a central role in this transformation, not merely as the transfer of knowledge, but as a process of empowerment. Civic education should cultivate critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and democratic values that enable individuals to see themselves as co-creators of their political world. Additionally, platforms for participation must be broadened beyond the ballot box. Town hall meetings, community dialogues, participatory budgeting, and accessible digital spaces can serve as avenues for engagement, especially among youth. These spaces must be inclusive and transparent, enabling marginalised voices to shape public priorities and influence decisions that affect their lives. Technology can also be harnessed to foster greater connectivity and responsiveness, allowing citizens to monitor government actions and express concerns in real time.

However, no solution will succeed without confronting the power structures that benefit from disempowerment. Elites must be challenged to democratise both access and accountability. Political parties must become vehicles for inclusion, not machines of exclusion. Governance must be de-centred, bringing decision making closer to communities and enabling local governments to address local realities. In all these, the emphasis must be on restoring the broken relationship between the people and politics, making the political once again a space of shared responsibility, meaning, and hope.

From Alienation to Inclusion

If political alienation in Nigeria is to be addressed in a meaningful way, the solution must go beyond surface-level reforms and penetrate the core of what it means to be a political subject. Alienation, as a condition of detachment and powerlessness, cannot be healed by simply expanding formal rights or organising periodic elections. Rather, it demands a fundamental transformation of the structures, processes, and values that currently govern political life. The aim is not only to draw people back into politics but to reconfigure politics itself as a space of shared humanity, participation, and empowerment. The first step in this transformation is recognising that inclusion must be substantive, not symbolic. In many democratic contexts, including Nigeria, inclusion has been interpreted narrowly, allowing people to vote, granting limited access to public offices, or offering occasional public consultations. These mechanisms, while important, do not necessarily foster a sense of belonging or influence. True inclusion must begin with recognition. Citizens must be seen and treated not merely as voters or subjects of state policy, but as thinking, feeling, and capable agents of political meaning. As Nancy Fraser argues, "Misrecognition is not just a cultural or psychological matter. It can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being."[8]

---

[7] Chukwuemeka Peter Iloanya, *Human Person and Social Contract Experience in Nigeria: Lessons from John Locke*, *Evaia: International Journal of Ethics and Values* 1, no. 1 (2020): 26.

[8] Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York:Routledge,1997),11.

Political inclusion, therefore, requires more than institutional access, it requires the dismantling of attitudes, narratives, and practices that render some citizens invisible or irrelevant. This includes addressing social stigma, gender marginalisation, ethnic stereotyping, and generational exclusion. When large segments of the population are denied the space to express their political identity or to act with agency, they are effectively silenced, and democracy is diminished.

Secondly, the cultivation of critical consciousness is central to any movement from alienation to inclusion. Alienation thrives in environments where individuals have little understanding of the systems that disempower them or lack the vocabulary to question their political and social realities. Critical consciousness, as Paulo Freire articulates, involves awakening individuals to the socio-political structures that shape their lives and equipping them to transform these structures through reflection and action. This form of awareness resists fatalism and passive acceptance, and instead nurtures the belief that change is possible and desirable. Critical consciousness, Freire writes, "is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence. It is the ability to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."[9] Education, then, must be re-envisioned as a tool for liberation. Civic education in Nigeria should go beyond the memorisation of rights and duties; it should challenge learners to interrogate power, examine inequality, and develop democratic dispositions. Teachers, community leaders, and media practitioners must be involved in building this culture of awareness. Rather than disseminating fixed truths, they should facilitate open inquiry and shared reflection. The classroom and community must become spaces where political ideas are tested, ethical reasoning is cultivated, and imagination is nourished.

Furthermore, for inclusion to be sustained, political structures must be decentralised and made more accessible. One of the most alienating features of Nigerian politics is the distance between the state and the citizen. Power is heavily concentrated in federal institutions, while local governments remain weak, underfunded, and often captured by political patronage. Reversing this dynamic requires a deliberate strengthening of local governance as a site for participatory democracy. It is at the local level that citizens are most familiar with their needs and most capable of shaping practical solutions. According to Ibrahim Jibrin, "The failure of local governance in Nigeria is not merely administrative but philosophical, it reflects a broader refusal to entrust communities with the power to govern themselves."[10] By empowering communities through local councils, participatory budgeting, and inclusive planning processes, the political system can begin to reflect the lived realities of ordinary Nigerians. Local forums can provide opportunities for dialogue across lines of difference, where trust and cooperation are built not through coercion, but through mutual engagement and deliberation.

Another avenue for inclusion lies in reimagining political communication. Political discourse in Nigeria is often monologic, dominated by elites and disconnected from public reasoning. This reinforces alienation by making political language obscure, elitist, or inaccessible. Creating platforms for inclusive political dialogue, especially using local languages and community based media, can foster a more horizontal communication model. When people see their concerns reflected in public debates and hear their voices acknowledged, the boundaries between the governors and the governed begin to collapse.

Inclusion also demands institutional change that places a priority on transparency and accountability. Political alienation flourishes in environments where the state is perceived as either unresponsive or corrupt. Citizens require information access and avenues for holding leaders accountable. Digital technologies, public auditing, and independent civil society monitoring are necessary to restore public trust. Yet these tools can be of any value only if citizens are well-empowered with confidence, knowledge, and freedom to utilize them. Empowerment and accountability thus have to go hand in hand.

[9] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin Books,1996),35.
[10] Jibrin Ibrahim, "Democratic Transition in Anglophone West Africa," *Centre for Democracy and Development Monograph Series* 5 (2003): 18.

Most importantly, there has to be a shift in the philosophy of leadership. The culture of leadership in Nigeria emphasizes control, privilege, and rank more than it does service and humility. Leaders need to command rather than cooperate; dominate rather than hear. This orientation resonates with hierarchy and exclusion. Moving beyond alienation to inclusion involves a different ethics of leadership, one that is relational, dialogical, and founded on solidarity. Leaders must see themselves as promoters of shared prosperity, not monarchs of discrete subjects.

In summary, political engagement in Nigeria must be rooted in recognition of shared humanity, cultivation of critical consciousness, devolution of power, and promotion of moral leadership. Such changes require sustained effort within schooling, politics, and culture. Alienation cannot be resolved by fiat; it must be faced through the building of an active public sphere in which every citizen can see themselves, speak freely, and act with dignity. The shift from alienation to participation is fundamentally a philosophical one, a rediscovery of the human person as political actor with voice, worth, and influence.

CONCLUSION

Political disempowerment in Nigeria reflects more than the failure of institutions or the absence of good leadership. It reveals a deeper condition of alienation in which citizens are estranged from the political structures meant to represent them. Addressing this crisis requires a shift from procedural fixes to substantive transformation, one that restores political life as a space of belonging, dignity, and shared agency. Alienation, as Marx understood it, is not merely economic but existential, and it demands an equally profound response rooted in education, recognition, and ethical governance. Restoring inclusion must begin with cultivating critical awareness and reimagining politics as a collaborative endeavour, not an elite performance. It calls for leadership that listens, institutions that reflect public will, and a citizenry that is empowered to act and reflect. This transition is neither easy nor immediate, but it is essential for the future of democracy in Nigeria. "Democracy is not only the right to vote but the right to live in dignity,"[11] as Amartya Sen reminds us. To overcome alienation is to affirm the human being as a subject of history and politics, not as a passive observer. Inclusion is not a gift granted from above but a right reclaimed from below.

---

[11] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ake, Claude. The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa. Dakar: CODESRIA, 2000.

Fraser, Nancy. Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition.   New York: Routledge, 1997.

Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos.   London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Ibrahim, Jibrin. "Democratic Transition in Anglophone West Africa." Centre for   Democracy and Development Monograph Series 5 (2003): 1–30.

Iloanya, Chukwuemeka Peter. "Human Person and Social Contract Experience in Nigeria: Lessons from John Locke." Evaia: International Journal of Ethics and   Values 1, no. 1 (2020): 21–30.

Marx, Karl. Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. Translated by Martin   Milligan. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959.

———. "On the Jewish Question." In Early Writings, edited by Lucio Colletti, 211–241.   London: Penguin Books, 1975.

Meagher, Kate. Identity Economics: Social Networks and the Informal Economy in   Nigeria. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010.

Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.