



# Out of America or How I became a Marxist

By Sitawa Namwalie



I went to study in the United States in the 1980s in the time of what was to me the inexplicable presidency of Ronald Reagan. It was an enigmatic presidency for me for two reasons. First, at my university and amongst the mostly left-leaning circles that I hang out with, I never came across anybody who had voted for him. The second reason was that, for me, Reagan was clearly challenged on the intellectual front. I could not believe that a nation with all that *maendeleo*, all that development we in Africa so covet, would tolerate some folksy guy who might have come from a darker and more ignorant century. Certainly, the cool left-leaning students at C University had no time for Reagan.

In my two years in the US the only person I came across who would publicly admit to having voted for Reagan was a 65-year-old black man in Albany, Georgia, my cousin's father-in-law. Pops, as his children called him in that quintessential African American manner, would routinely loudly proclaim his love for President Reagan to people in the presence of his children. He showed me his Republican Party membership card, much to the mortification of his children who muttered that the old man was finally going senile. When he whipped out the letter from Reagan, they teased him saying that he had only received it because he was special, being the only black Republican on the planet.

Pops challenged two beliefs I had had held about voting patterns in America. First, that black people were not members of the Republican Party and, second, that they always voted for the Democratic

Party.

## War and America's presidents

Eight months into America, I had imbibed the paranoid conspiracy theories of my Marxist circle and lost my African ease. Late one night I turned on the television to find President Reagan ranting and raving in the most alarming manner about the "evil empire". He was referring to the former Soviet Union, America's mortal enemy of the Cold War days. And you thought "Axis of evil" was original? Do you see a pattern here? This is clearly the language of America's dumb dumb presidents.

There is a moment in the deep night when reality becomes suspended and we become susceptible to our original lurking primeval selves. In this night moment, assorted distorted demons and night creatures with names like *Linani*, banshees, ghosts and ghouls rule as reality twists and turns, changing shape and resonance. The howl of a dog conjures up a werewolf. On the Kenyan coast, that night moment brings with it all manner of djins and mermaids, prowling in their woman-shape to steal the souls of victim men. Mating cats evoke the screams of damned souls burning in a Christian hell. It is easy to believe the bizarre. (I am setting up my excuse for what happened next.)

It was at such a moment in the night that I found Reagan's ranting so aggressive that as I listened I became convinced that I had only missed the first part of his speech, in which he had finally gone over the edge and declared war on the Soviet Union. That night I went to bed terrified, in the grip of my imaginary world war. Before I fell into erratic sleep, I obsessed about how I would not be able to get out of the US before the actual war started and that I would die alone in a foreign land. The next morning I was relieved and abashed to find that all was normal and there was no sign of impending war.

Twenty years later, as I watched the elections that brought another dumb dumb, unfathomable US president to power, George W. Bush, I realised that my vantage point, with its emphasis on linear "development" or *maendeleo*, had warped my thinking. Until that instant, I had thought development also brings with it highly enlightened people who would not lie about the presence of weapons of mass destruction to bring pain and destruction to innocent women and children many miles away in another country. For what? For oil (I can't believe that), to get revenge for daddy (that's too weird), to get their way (what way, the American way in Baghdad?), to be right about a perspective? (Probably the only right answer, outrageous as it may seem).

For us in this part of the world, things like technological advancement, elimination of hunger, industrial development, foreign vacations, microwaves, one doctor per 100 people, four-lane highways, \$30,000 per capita income, a new car every two years, pensions, social security, all of which come with development, also lead to progress, to *maendeleo*. And ultimately to enlightenment, the cherry on top of the development cake. We think, surely in America or Europe there must be such enlightenment that people, ordinary people everywhere, must have become immune to the baser human urgings like fear, malice, jealousy, racism, intolerance, corruption, violence, the need to declare war for dubious reasons, religious fanaticism?

It is easy to believe that if we were to invent a machine that would test our level of enlightenment we would find that those with more development have more enlightenment. This would render them immune from making decisions driven by those unenlightened aspects of being human like uncertainty and fear of tomorrow, fear of the other, the dictates of their religion, what the Bible says, what the Koran says, what the mullahs say, what the priest says. But finally I understand that this is not the case; just because you have more stuff doesn't mean you are more enlightened.

I now realise of course that although human beings may have made huge technological advances

such that they can send men to the moon or invent the Internet, they will still rely on some form of magic, *juju* or alchemy to manage their lives. The advances have not created certainty. In fact, they create even more uncertainty which can drive people deeper into the bosom of their *juju* side.

## **From Nairobi to America**

Before I went to America, I was a student of the biological sciences at the University of Nairobi. Someone had put the University of Nairobi on the then outskirts of town. But this had not been far enough. By the 1970s, the outskirts were already part of the central business district and students would make their grievances felt by literally pelting the central business district with sticks and stones. It was a rioting student's paradise. During my time, there were numerous riots, demonstrations and campaigns, many with echoes of Marxism or some left-leaning ideology with students shouting slogans like "Down with the bourgeoisie! The proletariat rules!!!" as they battled the police in the streets.

Somehow, throughout these riots I was able to remain largely free of any ideological infection. Which is incredibly surprising because we were sent home on at least four occasions over three years because of some issue with ideological overtones. In total, we spent about seven months at home. The male students had to report to their local chief every week but the women were not perceived to be a threat so we did not have to.

The only time I was absolutely certain about what we were striking for was the time we went on strike over food. We were all tired of the strange cuisine. The final provocation came when even the minced meat had weevils in it. Weevils will infest beans, legumes, rice, maize, but none feed on meat. So I could never get it; how did the weevils get into the minced meat? We half-joked that they must have used them as seasoning.

## **Rioting students**

It was always those unserious arts students at main campus who started the riots. With our 36 hours a week schedule, we science students had no time for such frivolous pursuits. Also, we had no ideology to spur us to action and were so out of touch with current issues that we had no idea that our politicians were up to no good and that we should care. No science lecturer was ever caught in the political crosshairs, at least not during my time.

With their 8 hours a week lecture schedule which we sneered at, the arts students had plenty of time for ideologies such as Marxism and for the political issues they cared about, and they had lecturers with a death wish to egg them on. To get us to join their strike the arts students had to use threat and force; when a strike started we would be the first target and rather than face the wrath of our fellow students we joined in. Soon we were caught up in the excitement of the moment and forgot our original reluctance.

We ran around town in our jeans and sneakers being chased by the police, stoning unsuspecting motorists in an orgy of anarchy that was surprisingly heady even when the consequences could be a beating or rape by the police and the paramilitary (at the time they did not use live ammunition) and expulsion from university. I took part in the running around town but I didn't want to take part in the stoning of motorists in case one of those motorists was my mother or father or one of their friends.

Twenty years later, I almost became one of the nameless motorists we used to talk so casually about, the one who lost her eye, ("Oh, how sad"), the one who died (uncomfortable silence), the one whose car was set ablaze and had her leg broken when she tried to jump over a six-foot fence hotly pursued by angry students shouting "down with the bourgeoisie, workers unite!" (loud laughter at the image

of the heavysset woman trying to jump a six-foot fence).

That scene from a long time ago came to me as I came face to face with a young man about to hurl a stone at my windscreen. Time stood still. I had driven into the midst of rioting university students. Have you ever had one of those moments of danger when your life hangs in the balance under the specter of deadly violence? I live in Africa so I have had several. For me these moments always come with a loud metallic screeching/whistling sound. A sound that crystallises danger itself.



Photo. Unsplash / Pawel Janiak

From nowhere the moment was interrupted; a student stepped in and stopped the young man at the last possible moment, for no reason that I can fathom, except that my day had not yet come. "Drive away!" he shouted urgently at me. I reversed and drove like the devil escaping my moment.

### **Being cold in America**

I arrived in America in the dead of winter never having experienced winter in my life. I also went to a Marxist university only having been vaguely aware of this ideology or the concept of ideologies for that matter, so I was green on many fronts. If my father had known, and then been able to believe, that he was sending me to America to a Marxist university, would he have so happily taken me to the airport with such pride, giving me one of his gems to take with me? I repeated it later to my new boyfriend, starry-eyed, in a "behold the wisdom of my father, I want to share it with you" moment, only to find that it was Confucius who originated it. You can guess the one: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step". I remember laughing and not being embarrassed by the busting of my father's "original" gem. You must understand that I had once believed that my father could speak Russian.



It was the cold that almost got me first. It was February, the dead of winter. On my sixth day there, I looked out of the window and the sun was shining off the pristine snow. I felt joyful at the prospect of warm sunshine on my skin. I dressed and walked the one kilometre to the university campus. Only I got colder and colder. Sunshine did not equal warmth here. The light coat and sweater I had put on were no defense against the bitter winter cold. Twenty minutes later I was sitting in the reception room of the University admission block, feeling sorry for myself, trying not to cry as my ears, toes and fingers painfully thawed. I would have gone back home that second if my ticket had not been one-way.

### **A party in America**

I eventually settled in, made some friends and was soon invited to my first party. The word “party” should mean the same thing wherever you are, right? For me at that time it meant dressing up in something sexy and provocative, make-up, jewelry (I still secretly believe that it was I who introduced the whole bling concept to the US), high heels and looking forward to dancing and meeting gorgeous and dateable guys. I marvel today at how many eligible men there were to choose from back then at any party, I was always spoilt for choice.

So of course I arrive at the party Kenyan style, dressed to the nines and fashionably late, to make my entrance and to envelope myself in the “whose that girl” factor. The cachet in being remembered translated directly into the attention of at least three of the hottest guys at the party. And then the routine. Open the door of the crowded room, stop, framed by the door, hold pose as if looking for someone while what you are actually doing is allowing them to look at you, and then step into the room sure of the impression you have created.



Photo. Unsplash / Jonathan Simcoe

I went into routine mode and nearly gagged as I realised just what an overdressed spectacle I was. One woman was still in the droopy old t-shirt that she had used when we went jogging that morning. The only difference now was that the widening sweat marks under her armpits were not because of the jogging but because of the heat in the room. I couldn't believe it! The other students were similarly dressed in old jeans, t-shirts, sweats and ill-fitting sweaters. I was now embarrassed as all eyes turned on me just as I had intended but retreat would only have made me even more conspicuous. I held my head up and, deciding to brazen it, walked into the room. This was only the beginning of my introduction to party etiquette in America.

Did I mention that I was a geek from University of Nairobi? I soon learned a new definition of geek because a Nairobi University geek took time out to party and one of our rules was that you never talked about anything remotely related to the courses you were taking during party time. I don't remember what we talked about but what we did at parties was dance like mad, and tune and be tuned. But here at university in the US life was one continuous seminar without end.

I joined a group of friends and my face lit up in a smile anticipating delicious banter with that cute guy I had the hots for. As I stood there awhile, I realised that I needed to quickly disappear the smile; it was clearly inappropriate during a discussion about historical materialism, Hegel, Marx, Gramsci... After 15 minutes looking for an opportunity to make an impression I gave up. I knew the language. English. But if you had held a gun to my head and asked, "Tell me what they are talking about or I shoot," I would have had to let you shoot my brains out. I had no idea. I moved to another group of my friends and found them similarly engaged in what can only be referred to as deep intellectual discourse and again I could not understand them. My frustration was growing; you can understand what this was like for a loud and voluble person. This is my only point in mitigation for what happened next. The third group held some promise. There was a word I found familiar, and as I write what I said, my toes still curl up in embarrassment twenty years on. The word was "reactionary". I had to seize the moment and make my intellectual mark. "Oh!" I said, "President Moi is a reactionary, he always reacts to everything." I looked around at the upturned faces with pride at this insight.

And then I launched into a story about President Moi and his reactions, by way of illustration you understand. "One time when we were at the university, President Moi had gone to India on a state visit. By the time he returned it was a week before JM Day, the day on which a populist member of parliament called J.M. Kariuki had been assassinated 10 years before. The students always marked the day with demonstrations which soon deteriorated into riots and running battles with the police. The university was always closed after the fracas. This year though, we students had gone against the grain and decided that we would mark the day by doing good in the community. We had decided to establish a J.M. Kariuki Foundation and to clean up slum areas and donate to poor people. So when we heard the president's declaration even before he set foot on Kenyan soil that all third-year students would be expelled and 'the nation would feel nothing if we dared riot on this year's J.M. Kariuki Day', we were so outraged that we were simply provoked into action. We rioted. And funnily enough, for the first time he did not react for the first week. We then decided that we would riot until he sent us all home. So we did."

Many years down the road, I am still grateful that they did not burst out laughing. Instead, someone politely said one word "yes, that's an interesting perspective to the word reactionary, you are quite right President Moi is a reactionary", and the conversation continued seamlessly.

### **Going home a feminist**

I soon got used to the American party style, so much so that when I came back home I had a hard time adjusting to the Kenyan approach. More so because I had come back with a head full of

ideologies that did not mix well with the oglefest that is the Kenyan party. I took years to get back on track, spending time at parties skulking in corners with one or two other like-minded people, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, both habits picked up in America and now used to camouflage my despair at the lack of opportunity for rigorous intellectual discourse at these Kenyan affairs.

Of all the ideologies I picked up abroad, the most incompatible with my country was my hardcore feminism. It was not just any ordinary feminism, but one that looked for converts with the fanaticism of a born-again Christian from the American Bible Belt out to capture souls in Africa. And I never missed a chance to advance my mission. I was a one-woman missionary determined to be martyred at the altar of feminism.



Photo. Unsplash / Marcus Winkler

Like red flags to a bull, statements that would spur me into action were endless. “Oh you know women are like that” or “Oh you know women are their own worst enemy.” Back then my country was still so innocent that it did not know that it should hide its chauvinism from view, at least in public. There were many sexist and misogynist statements made in my hearing by men and women on a daily basis.

Just so that there would be no room for speculation, I would declare my feminism openly on introduction. It wasn't quite, “Hi my name is Sitawa and I am a rabid feminist who is vigilant and looking for opportunities to spring into action in defense of women everywhere by lecturing you into submission for any anti-woman statement that I may detect”. But it might as well have been. How I actually introduced myself was “Hello my name is Sitawa and I am a feminist”, I said, looking them straight in the eye, daring them to make a joke of my declaration.

Just in case you might be misled into thinking that there was any irony here and maybe laugh out loud because you found the introduction funny, the clothing and demeanor completed the picture. I wore a uniform of black jeans, shapeless t-shirts and sneakers, the drab universal uniform of feminists — in the US at least. “Appreciate my mind not my behind” is what I meant to say with my whole presentation to protect myself from another little trait I had picked up in the US, an aversion for unsolicited male attention.

All my friends were innocents. After I had lectured three or four of them for half an hour each on separate occasions I soon found myself alone. I wore my aloneness like a badge of honour, seeing it as the inevitable price paid by any champion of a cause who sticks their neck out. Thank goodness I had seen the film “The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner”; I could use the image conjured by the title to console myself when I felt like giving up.

In an act of rebellion against my society, I smoked openly even in front of my father. This particular statement was especially effective in establishing my rebel credentials to no one in particular. When my friends gasped and questioned this particular act as going too far, I had another lecture prepared for them. “My aunts,” I would say from my imaginary soapbox. “Upcountry, in the rural areas, women smoke and drink so why shouldn’t I?” In the western part of Kenya women can smoke cigarettes. Some of my aunts smoke cigarettes but with the lit end inside their mouths. I have never seen a man smoke in this fashion and I don’t know why. I have one particular aunt who is hard-smoking and hard-drinking, who has always gone drinking with her husband, so I just don’t understand the sanctions levied against the so-called modern African woman, the city woman.

I have long since quit all those habits I picked up in America. I gave up picking on everybody around me because I realised that I had mistaken being constantly angry and fighting with people who did not agree with my opinion with championing a cause. Besides, it was alienating and exhausting and no one wanted to hang out with me because I was so intense. When my friends could talk to me again they told me that they had run away from me because I was just plain boring.

### **Impressions of the American South**

I went to visit my cousin’s in-laws in the American south in Albany, Georgia for a week and discovered I could not hear so I took to endless grinning and nodding my head. I left those people thinking I was simple in the head. But I couldn’t understand them and I soon got tired of asking them to repeat themselves so I withdrew into an African grin of protection and lost my reputation in the process. They speak English in the south so it wasn’t the language, but there was still a language barrier. The long dragged out words that go on seemingly forever lost my short attention span. I found that my mind had wandered before the end so I never heard the finish. “Caaaahhnn aaaaah speeeek to Eyyyyd Cooooook” is what I thought I overheard a woman in a bank asking. It was shocking to hear, like somebody caricaturing an American. I tried not to laugh and asked my cousin-in-law what the woman was saying. And she translated, “Can I speak to Ed Cook?”

I visited my first flea market during that visit to the south. A large African-like market selling what we call *mitumba* in Kenya; old clothes and shoes, kitchenware, furniture, as well as more specialised things like vintage clothing (read very old *mitumba*) and stuff that was ordinary people’s artistic expressions of themselves. My cousin-in-law introduced me to a little old black woman at a stall selling miscellaneous *mitumba* as her cousin from Africa.

“What!” proclaimed the little old black woman, “But you real pretty, I thought Africans were dark black with kinky hair and big fat noses and mouths but you real fine,” she declared in amazement.

I was equally astonished at the casual black-on-black racist stereotype that she spewed, blithely



unaware that she should hide it or at least not say it straight to my face. But she was simply the first of many to air such views. During my two-week sojourn in the south, I soon grew accustomed to hearing from black people similar guileless declarations about some African stereotype that I didn't fit. From questions about where I learnt to dance like that (I can dance!), to where I had learnt to speak "so proper", to my dress sense and on and on.

### **Virtual segregation in the American South**

The other big thing that I experienced for the first time in the US was hardwired virtual segregation. There were no signs designating white and black zones anywhere in Albany that I saw. Indeed, on the surface all seemed well in terms of race relations. But even my cousin's Republican father-in-law made sure he hid his de-segregated business to keep up appearances. He was in business with a white person because the partnership allowed him to get white business. But to keep that lucrative white business he had to keep his partnership hidden and so he passed himself off as a worker in the business. I realise the logic is challenging.

The two groups occupied the same physical spaces, they ate at the same restaurants, entered all buildings and transport from the same entrance, sat anywhere on buses. And yet my foreigner's eyes quickly saw through this façade and identified the fault lines of virtual segregation. The new apartheid still did not allow the twain to commune freely even as they congregated. I could feel the barriers as soon as I stepped into those spaces. There was a sense of forced togetherness. If the gap between the two races could speak it would say, "Ok, we have to share this same physical space but we are not giving up our right to be separate. They can take away our right to segregation but they can't take segregation out of our hearts". It was in what was missing in the interaction between black and white. There was no ease, peacefulness, insignificance, silence, freedom, love.

What existed in that gap was tension, a hateful watchfulness and worst of all an embryonic violence that was always ready to grow into fully-fledged adulthood. You could feel it. This violence ebbed and flowed and hung around like a dark threat. When I was amongst black people everyone was relaxed, very laid back, but in the presence of a group of white people in the segregated spaces there was an all round tensing alertness, an expectation of something unpleasant.

Black and white people occupied those common public spaces differently too. White people seemed to strut and begrudge black people's presence. It was white people who still seemed to be the *bona fide* owners of the space. Black people were the interlopers, but they had no choice, they had to occupy the spaces, otherwise they risked recreating segregation by their absence. But the sense of threat in those spaces implied that black people occupied those spaces at their peril. Desegregation had been about pulling down the limits placed on the existence of black people. It was not white people who were fighting to sit in the seats reserved for black people on buses or to use the blacks-only entrances. Desegregation demands that white people cede the space and privileges that define their superior place in society.

### **Race in the north**

My experience of race in the American north was not one of absence but rather that the north was racially clandestine, a state I much preferred. It gave me freedom to spend many more hours in a day being just another human being. The colour of my skin was not a constant conscious presence foisted on me by open racial hostility. Thank you but I am not black, I really am just a person. I am an African living in Africa so although I have many identities, being black is not my premier identity. That is the advantage of growing up black in Africa.

When I brought this to the attention of my southern black relatives-in-law they made that claim that

always bemuses me. "I like the south," they said, "the boundaries are clear, people here are not hypocrites like in the north. I know where I stand with them here".

"I know where I stand?" What the hell is that? What I understand from that telling statement is an admission on the part of black people that it's OK for there to be limits on a black person's existence. I never heard a white person say things like that, only black people. For a person to know where he or she could go and what he or she could expect from their world simply because of the hue of their skin. In other words there was a limit of possibility which means that there was no possibility at all. And it was fine for white people to have veto powers over the dreams, the scope of existence of black people. You can dream so much and no more. You can aspire so far and no further, these are the limits on your movement. And black people accepted this proscribed world and were happy that they knew their place in this controlled world. That world was a banned dream which they passed on to their children and this was done with the active connivance of black people.

I understand how dangerous the world in which black people live in the south is. I imbibed a small part of that fear many thousands of miles away from movies and media reports of the Ku Klux Klan. So much so that I arrived in America terrified. For four days I refused to leave my sister's apartment because I was sure the Ku Klux Klan were going to gun me down. Living with that dreadful history can skew anyone and the wonder is that black people have lived to step out of the shadow of such terrors and nightmares. The journey has had its negative impact such that sometimes their ability to see beyond the boundaries of their terror has been compromised.

This is where Africans can lend their sight when dreams have been extinguished. We have the same racial reality because our existence in the world gives us the same reference points. Yet we live in our own homes largely amongst our own people. We are not vested only in a racial reality. Our human reality predominates. We can fly above "black person negatives" and separate fact from damaging fiction.

A person exposed to these negatives on a daily basis for most of their life will lose their perspective. Such an environment can beat down the most thick-skinned, sanguine, optimist man and woman and create an oversensitive "defensive human" who can no longer see the forest for the trees and perceives racism under every bush. Such an environment can leave people severely embattled and debilitated. The centuries of actual and virtual lynching that black people have been subjected to in the US will do that.

Psychologically I am rather sensitive. I found the race issue to be intrusive enough in the north where it was not so in-your-face.. I found myself engaged from time to time in what manifested as flash-back-filled bouts of mother-less-child weeping. The kind of crying that was inconsolable, with heaving and copious tears. The kind that is only done in hiding. The first time it happened I did not understand what was going on. From nowhere came floods of tears. At first they were quite frequent, every three months or so. Soon the stretch between one bout and another grew and they finally stopped. I had stopped expecting more out of this country.

What were they? They were silent tears of rage and despair at the seemingly unseen-with-the-naked-eye accumulation of incidents of racism that I encountered on a daily basis. My mother has always told me that I am too thin-skinned, I let things get too easily under my skin. And it's true. I just let the incidents seep into my subconscious. I never could speak out at them. I had no skills to deal with them in the moment. The moment of action would be long past before I recognised what had happened. And some were subtle, only discernable in the pattern my subconscious registered as I remained preoccupied with the hunt for that cut price designer shoe that I desired and could afford on my student stipend only if I bought it in a bargain basement-type store. It wasn't until it had long happened, again and again, from store to store, in a single day, that I finally recognised what had

been going on. The only black person in the group of friends being singled out for kindly help, again and again.

### **So what about the Marxism?**

So what about the Marxism itself? I know that many people will find it surprising that I became a Marxist in America but it was common knowledge back then that you were likely to become Marxist, or at the very least end up leaning way to the left, if you did your studies in the US. The reverse held true if you went to study in the USSR, you turned irrevocably capitalist and probably ended up holding some extreme rightwing perspectives. Certainly, I found many of my friends and relatives who went to study in the USSR ideologically bereft. For both groups it was shopping that did it. According to my friends who went to the USSR, the empty shelves turned them to the right.

In the US the shopping experience couldn't have been more different. Walk into a supermarket, any old supermarket, not even some hypermarket, and there were shelves and shelves of different brands of detergents. Twenty different brands of dog food. Try buying toothpaste and you had to choose from a row of thirty brands. I was confused about what parameters to base my choice on, and offended at the waste. As a consumer, I had to ask myself why would I need thirty varieties of toothpaste to choose from? What's funny is that back home the thought of such a long list of western goodies had always sounded delicious. Back then, western goodies were in short supply and some were not available in real time. You did not expect to keep up with trends in music or fashion in real time for example. There was a genuine difference between the third and first worlds largely based on time.

This time difference meant that at home there was a premium to being ahead of the pack. I still remember the cachet of being one of the first to own those skin-tight Jordache jeans that were not going to hit the Nairobi streets for another two years at least, the first to wear the latest lip gloss, the really glossy kind. This particular trend might become extinguished before it's existence is even heard of in Nairobi, and there I was wearing it because I had made a trip to New York city. With some of these more transient trends there was always the danger that no one ever got to even hear about them and decide that they were a "must have" fashion item. The extreme third world trendoid ran the risk of simply looking strange and eccentric rather than enviably trendy. Sometimes I thought that it would have been useful to wear a T-shirt reading, "This thing that I am wearing really is the latest trend in London, New York, Milan."

The road to my becoming a Marxist was littered with hardship though, and I almost didn't make it. First, it was clear that I had a problem, I was the problem. When I stepped into the graduate class at C University, I was the first African for over ten years. And I was the first African woman in more years than that. I am Kenyan, which back then had a baffling specialness. I still remember the whispers as I walked past fellow students during the first few weeks. Later, when I made friends, I found out that my arrival had been announced and was anticipated, "Class we will have a real Kenyan woman". I was used to being taken for granted much more at home. For a while I basked in this adulation. Soon enough it was rudely interrupted. Apparently it had come to everyone's attention that I was bourgeois. This according to the Marxists made me a criminal. It was my political class in Africa that kept the peasants downtrodden while my economic class exploited the workers. I was held personally culpable for the ills of the continent. I kid you not; when the lecturers talked about the problem the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie presented in Africa, my fellow classmates turned round and looked at me with accusing eyes.

And it gets worse; I had servants. This particular thing was treated like some sort of character flaw. A friend of mine captures the dangers of being found out as an employer of servants by left-leaning elements in the US at that time. She was doing the bleeding-heart liberal thing, working in one of

those poorly paid jobs while learning at the feet of some feminist guru. One day she was called into the boardroom where the head feminists were meeting. The interrogation revolved around questions of whether she had servants at home. She turned red (she is a Kenyan of a hue that can blush) and fidgeted violently, giving her discomfort away. She realised she was on the horns of a dilemma. What was she to do? If she admitted that she had servants she could be fired. But she realised her behaviour had given her away so an outright lie was out of the question. She chose to limit the potential damage by making a partial admission.

“Yes we have servants”, she admitted with her fingers crossed, “But only part-time.” Many years later we roared with laughter at how much we lay down at the feet of little tyrants just because they were supposed to be ideologically sound.

To be honest, although I would have chewed razorblades before I admitted this back then, the logic of my fellow students escaped me, but I was still intimidated into silence. This is what I would have told them had I been able to speak up. “Any African attending university is by definition no longer a peasant, a worker or a proletariat even if they are a direct descendent of any of these preferred classes. A real worker is out there being just that, a worker, not attending graduate school in the USA. Not all Africans are guilty of oppressing their brothers and sisters back home. Heck, Africans have the right to not be poor, peasants or workers. We can be anything.” This is what has always been so intriguing for me. The attitudes of my fellow students were not strange. Africans are allowed only to be poor. It seems to me that the logic that follows is that then they can be saved or rescued from their conditions by kindly Westerners. There is no place for Africans who can look after themselves in the psyche of the West. And interestingly, there appears to be no scenario for what happens when the “helping” has worked. The logic seems to suggest that for Africans there must be no rainbow.

### **News of a coup**

In 1982 news of a coup in my country was met with all round gloating. A fellow student whom I considered a friend broke the news of the coup with words to this effect:

“You Kenyans have been the darlings of the West and now finally you have fallen!” he announced with glee.

He was not simply being mean, he was just being a Marxist. Others joined in, expressing joy at the collapse of this false citadel that was often touted as a capitalist success story by the West much to the chagrin of the leftist elements in the same West. Today that Kenya seems too good to be true. A few years earlier, in 1975, a World Bank report had noted that “Kenya is now in the second year of its second decade as an independent nation. Behind it lies a record of sustained growth in production and income that has rarely been surpassed by countries in Kenya’s stage of development”. These are some of the statistics that offended people: In 1975 27 per cent of Kenya’s population was living below the poverty line. GDP grew at a rate of 6.6 per cent. It is true that by 1982 things were beginning to collapse as the post-Kenyatta regime that we like to call the “Moi error” began to slash at the progress made in the first decade of the country’s independence.

Today Kenya is very different; World Bank statistics reveal a country deeply mired in poverty. Poverty levels are at 57 per cent and, between 1997 and 2002 GDP has reached a low of 1.1 per cent. Although it is doing much better now, it is literally digging itself out from a deep hole. Is Kenya today a Marxist’s wet dream? I don’t know, all I can say that it is uncomfortable to live in the midst of all this poverty. And now, many years later, we know that extreme poverty does not a revolution make. From examples everywhere, it can lead to a total implosion as a country sinks into civil war or worse.



## **My response to the coup**

Whilst my fellow students celebrated back then, all I could think of was the safety and security of my family and friends. Beyond that I didn't know what else to think. We Kenyans had grown used to the idea that we were special, not like other African countries which we saw as prone to coups and other forms of violent unrest and crazy despotic leaders. Our leaders were mild in comparison. With this mindset, I was simply unprepared. Over the next four days, my alarm grew when I was unable to get through to my parents when I tried to reach them by phone. I eventually got through and confirmed that all my family were safe. One of the symbols of our success was an efficient telephone system. I could always get through. What is amazing is the accuracy of some of the stories I heard about what happened to people I knew thousands of miles away. I heard about a guy whom I knew getting shot while looking at the unfolding coup through the window of a second-floor apartment and I came home to find this story to be true; he had indeed died in exactly the way it had been described to me.

This meanness notwithstanding, Marxism gave me a huge measure of freedom by giving my mind options to go beyond. It gave me alternatives to understanding how life works. I came to appreciate that the conditions that I found myself in as a woman or as an African were historical and that there was a wider context for my existence. As for Ronald Reagan, he unwittingly played his part in expanding my mind and making sure that I had to step out of the shadow of ideas of America as the land of salvation for myself or my continent. For two years, I watched this man behave as if he had come from a village in the dark ages and I gave up all my notions of the West as the source of wisdom, hope and help for my continent.

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

**THE  
ELEPHANT**