

Social Rationality and Class Analysis of National Conflict in Nigeria: A Historiographical Critique

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Résumé: Depuis son accession à l'indépendance en 1960, voire avant, le Nigéria a connu plusieurs épisodes de conflits nationaux. L'analyse des classes sociales sur la base d'une critique du modèle de conflit ethnique pré-dominant, s'attache à démontrer que le Nigéria est capitaliste, et que le conflit national, est donc un conflit de classes. Le présent essai constitue une critique du modèle de conflit de classes appliqué au contexte nigérian. L'essai soutient que l'analyse de classes, non-structurale, a été une appropriation du modèle de pluralisme culturel. En définitive, la question n'est pas une question théorique de savoir si tous les conflits dans une société capitaliste sont des conflits de classes ou pas, mais une question historique de savoir si les conflits nationaux au Nigéria ont des conflits de classes.

The Nigerian Situation

In the early years of independence, the prognosis for Nigerian politics and society was highly optimistic: 'The prospects for democracy in Nigeria are probably as favourable as in any of the developing countries and indeed more promising than in most'. The basis for this optimism lay in what was perceived to be a reasonable population growth, the availability and mobilization of resources, the existence of a newly-formed and therefore non-political army (Bretton 1962:105-6), and the receipt of 'a heritage from Great Britain that points the way to parliamentary government' (Herring 1962:242-4). That Nigeria in 1992 was still 'a conflict and suspicion-ridden agglomeration of disparate groups' (*Guardian* 6 February 1992) showed how differently things turned out.

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Three tendencies characterise the Nigerian situation in the late twentieth century: the emergence of a parasitic, hegemonic and inefficient public sector, a distorted mobilisation of resources (Alokan 1994:233) and an unstable political order. Discussing Africa in general, O'Kane (1993) has suggested that these elements are not isolated, but form a causally interrelated complex. It is argued that political instability, either in the form of democratic dysfunction or of a coup d'état, is the consequence of economic instability, the result of a lack of control over demand or the price-fixing mechanism for exported primary goods. The loss or the absence of the ability to earn foreign currency, and the debt problem are also connected to the failure of development (Taylor 1989; IBRD 1990:126).

Applying the argument that there is a link between economic performance/poverty and instability to Africa as a whole introduces a paradox into the link between democracy and development (Owolabi 1994). It is argued at the same time that democracy is the 'foundation for the elimination of poverty', but that real material poverty is an impediment to its growth (African Leadership Forum, 1991:2-6). The argument by Kieh, Jr. and Agbese (1993:423) that the 'only obstacle' to political instability is 'a vivid commitment, on the part of politicians, to improve the lot of ordinary Nigerians', or a 'real commitment to democratic values among political leaders' (Huntington 1991:22) must be a superficial one, in the light of the constraints of the global economic order. It would follow from the above, therefore, that African states can never generate stable democracy¹.

1 The growth stability problem could be conceived of as a vicious circle: 'political instability reduces the incentives to save and invest and therefore reduces the growth'. On the other hand, poverty leads to zero growth which generates instability, hence 'poor countries are sociopolitically unstable' (Alesina and Perotti 1994:359). In short, as Huntington (1991:31) concludes, 'The future of democracy depends on the future of economic development'.

Political instability in Nigeria cannot be attributed to mass poverty² or to the failure of growth, even though the Nigerian economy is largely based on a single export, crude oil, over whose demand Nigeria has no control and little say in fixing its price. The breakdown of civil-political regimes have brought about national conflicts which nearly undermined the integrity of the Nigerian state. These national conflicts, which ranged from the 1953 crisis over the 'self-government in 1956' motion to the 1993-1994 crisis episode, have been explained in terms of the sectional configuration of Nigeria (Post and Vickers 1973). How valid can such an explanation be?

Critique of Ethnicity as Explanation for Conflict

Every society is heterogeneous, and conflict is a feature of interaction among its components. This assumption has yielded two apparently opposing interpretations of the relationship between pluralism and statehood: the first that social heterogeneity is a condition for democratic breakdown (Lijphart 1977:1) and the second that it is the source of 'stable democratic government' (Kuper 1971:7) and civil statehood (Aristotle 1962:II.2).

The existence of these two traditions can be explained by the different assessments of the relationship between sub-national identities and social conflict. Such identities are usually built around sex, kinship, culture, language, religion, occupation, spatial location and race. For every conflict, therefore, there is a dominant identity factor. Because of the aggregated character of the states that were produced by colonialism in Africa, the identity symbols usually considered relevant are kinship, language, culture and spatial location, conveniently referred to as ethnic identity.

2 To say, like Huntington (1996:7), that third wave democratisation broke down because Nigeria is 'extremely poor' is to place too much emphasis on statistical correlations.

The basic elements of an ethnic conflict model include:

1. the coexistence and interaction of at least two distinct (and mobilized) ethnic groups or coalitions within a state;
2. the identification of the ethnic groups or coalitions (or their elites) with particular territories or collective interests within the state;³
3. access to or exclusion from and therefore competition for the resources of the state by its components⁴.

The application of this model to the study of conflict in Nigeria has been heavily criticized from the materialistic, functional and methodological standpoints. Dudley (1978:82-3) identifies as the 'crucial weakness' of this model the necessary linkage between ethnic identity and conflict behaviour — 'periods of uncertainty' — and the implication that ethnicity-based explanations of conflict 'subsume all under uncertainty'. Adebisi (1989:330-1), on the other hand, characterises 'ethnic man' or 'ethnic community' as an imprecise category, denies the existence of ethnic interest and argues that the interests of any group can 'best be defined in materialistic terms'. For Ekweke (1986:v), the application of the model has not led to 'any significant improvement' in Nigeria's political and economic process. Above all, it has led to an 'intellectual cul-de-sac' (Ibid. p.2).

Arguments of greater theoretical significance are based on the idea of a dying ethnicity, or of ethnicity as a dependent variable, either an objective one, or a manipulated one. The modernisation component of

3 The question of elite manipulation of ethnic symbols is beside the point if it is not suggested that ethnic interests are necessarily mass interests, or reify the distinction between the elite and the masses.

4 Although absolute equality of access to resources is not presupposed, neither is a condition of 'domination and subordination' that erodes the basis for competition (Kuper 1971:14). A maximal condition of conflict is defined by the principle: the more equal the access, the more intense the competition and conflict potential.

Marxian class theory posits that the crystallisation of the critical classes is contingent upon the disappearance of organic or traditional structures and relations. And for Nigeria, Adebisi (1989:333) insists:

The dependent capitalist mode of production introduced in the colonial situation and vigorously promoted by the post-colonial ruling class has led to the maturation of social classes across Nigerian ethnic communities. Therefore, in its vital sectors, the original ethnic community is dead. What goes by that name today is in fact a 'community' of antagonistic social classes with distinct class interests, with or without class consciousness.

An early angle of attack on the interpretation of conflict in Africa in terms of ethnicity is that class relations had developed more recently, that class and ethnic identities were incompatible, and that because colonialism had introduced capitalist relations, ethnicity had necessarily weakened or disappeared or would soon do so (Skinner 1969:153; Cohen 1974a:95).

Relying on the Marxian notion of the material determination of the superstructural social, political and other relations, some appraisals recognise ethnicity only at the level of consciousness. Post characterises the study, *Structure and Conflict in Nigeria* (1973:10, no.10; see comparatively Nnoli 1989:14 and 1995:31), as directed at 'the super-structural level of institutions and consciousness, and therefore tends to be epiphenomenal in character'. Nwala (1981:164, n.4) insists on the predominance of capitalist over feudal and communal social formations; and Nnoli (1978:11-2) limits ethnicity to the level of 'mere empirical observation' incapable of 'explaining or changing society'. In short, Nnoli concludes:

Ethnic contradictions have an objective basis in the social structure of society. As an element of the ideological superstructure of society, ethnicity rests on, is functional for, and is determined by the infrastructure of society, the mode of production (1978:11).

For the manipulation theory, ethnicity retains the status of a dependent variable which calls for explanation, but not as an objective dependent variable. It performs only an instrumental function, being 'created or maintained as a basis for collective action when there are clear competitive advantages attached to an ethnic identity' (Carment 1993:138). Whether merely as 'the new men of power' (Sklar 1976:151), 'dominant social classes' (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985), 'emerging bourgeoisie' (Randall and Theobald 1985:50), or the non-class 'political class' (Haruna 1994:71), the purpose of manipulation is argued to be the realisation of the political interests of the dominant class however defined.

National Conflict in Nigeria: Patterns of Class Analysis

The identification and definition of the groups in conflict, with the mode of their formation and sustenance, and their motivations for conflict provide a logical basis for defining a conflict situation or describing conflict relations. Relating this to the pattern of a class analysis of conflict in Nigeria, certain features stand out:

1. the general non-uniformity of identified classes and their composition;
2. the multiplicity and centrality of bourgeois factions as the inevitable conflicting classes; and
3. the attribution of a non-material basis for the classes identified, and their motives for conflict.

That Nigeria is capitalist is a basic assumption of class analysis. Two broad categories have been identified: 'dominant social classes' (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985:238) or 'privileged classes' (Nnoli 1981:129), and 'oppressed classes' (Nwankwo 1987:143) or 'underprivileged classes' (Onimode 1982a:91). These categories go beyond the classical Marxian classes. The former includes the 'Hausa-Fulani aristocracy' (Randall and Theobald 1985:50) or 'feudal masters of the NPC' (Lawal 1972:267). Everyone includes the peasantry in the latter, while some

add 'the youths, particularly the students' (Nzimiro 1985:7), jobless primary school leavers' (Onimode 1981b:170) and 'catechists' (Nwankwo 1987:143).

Although the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, in one form or the other, constitute the most significant elements of these categories, their definition, composition and mode of formation and sustenance vary, particularly in the case of the bourgeoisie. The petty bourgeoisie, for example, is considered the most dominant class or bourgeois sub-class, or technically governing class, since the ruling class is associated with the agents in Nigeria of multi-national capitalism (Ekweke 1986:89; Nwankwo 1987:132-5). Its composition, however, is not only an *omnium gatherum*, but the basis for its existence is not really the private ownership of production factors but statutory control, and in the last analysis, visibly pretentious social behaviour. Hence the prominence of higher bureaucratic and military elements, in addition to the usual petty traders, contractors, big farmers, and independent artisans (Agbese 1990:26). To include students in this class is baffling (Onimode 1981b:170).

The exclusion of Nigeria's small productive bourgeoisie by the distinction made between an international ruling class and a dependent governing class has the effect of further strengthening the superstructural basis of the definition of the bourgeoisie. This is so since the ruling class owns all the means of production, which the governing class only administers on behalf of an international clique. The criteria for inclusion have been identified simply as 'high-status occupation, high income, control of wealth-producing enterprises, and superior education' (Sklar 1976:153).

With traditional Marxism, the discernment of factions of the bourgeoisie is based on antagonisms rooted in the process of production itself (Marx and Engels 1967:90), and according to Therborn (1980:175), 'in the differential position occupied by certain of its

sections within the relations of production'. Hence Marx and Engels (1976:83) had identified intra-class conflict as an inevitable impediment to class crystallisation, action and unity. Yet, inter-factional conflict could not surmount the fundamental class conflict, or be made contingent on the social roles of individuals. Class position and membership are necessary and constant, hence the reproduction of capitalist relations. This precludes the possibility of belonging to one class today and its opposite the next.

But with the Nigerian petty bourgeoisie, the factions defined are based on :

1. sector: 'economic, political and military segments' (Nwankwo 1987:135), 'civilian and military factions' (Ihonvbere and Shaw 1988:135), state servants, 'independent professionals and intellectuals', and 'chiefs, obas and emirs' (Ekweke 1986:8), bureaucratic, comprador, and the 'middle and lower-salaried sectors' incorporating primary school teachers and students (Onimode 1981b:172-3); and

2. level of urbanisation, party and ethno-region: 'Eastern Nigerian commercial and bureaucratic bourgeoisie' of the NCNC, 'Western Nigerian rural bourgeoisie', 'Western urban bourgeoisie' and 'feudal masters of the NPC' (Lawal 1972:267-70)⁵.

Although Agbese (1990:26-7) divides this class into 'industrial, compradorial, military-bureaucratic, financial and technocratic factions', a classification that is more mythical than historical, he admits that these groupings are also factionalised along ethnic, religious and regional lines. While the interests of these factions do not appear to be materially antagonistic, intra-bourgeois conflict has been made to surmount the crucial class conflict.

5 Although not consistently used as the basis of analysis, Dibua's (1988) identification of factions of the domestic bourgeoisie along the line of productive/non-productive capitalism is an exception to this trend.

There has been a tendency in radical historiography to narrow the gap between Marxian class analysis and the liberal theory of social stratification. This follows when the identification of specific classes and their relations is not derived from analyses of particular modes of production, or when the concept of class analysis is defined without reference to a material base. Kitching (1980:440-2) has observed, in relation to this sociology of class, the adoption of such criteria as monetary income, wealth, both liquid and illiquid⁶. Thus class conflict, as Boulding (1963:206) characterised it, becomes merely 'the conflict of the poor and the rich, of the privileged and the unprivileged, or of the dominant and the dominated'.

It must be conceded that the identified groupings in Nigeria could be analytical or descriptive units, but they are not capitalist classes. Not even Lubeck's (1987:6) addition of technocratic management to commodity production in the definition of the African capitalist problematic affects this. The description of the process of class formation and sustenance is superstructural. Williams and Turner (1978:132), for example, define classes 'by their place in the process of production', but for the Nigerian bourgeoisie, they insist that 'politics was the means of class formation, financing the accumulation of money' (p. 139). In accounting for the perceived bourgeoisification of 'upper middle-class elements and bureaucrats', Ihonvbere and Shaw (1988:11) had recourse to such explanation as exploitation of 'connections with established bourgeois elements'.

For Onimode (1983:199-200), the military has a two-member class structure: the officer corps, which is a 'component of Nigeria's bureaucratic bourgeois class', and the rank-and-file, who are objectively part of the working class, but are also psychologically

6 In describing the military as a faction of the bourgeoisie in uniform, Ihonvbere and Shaw (1988:135), for example, resorted to the criteria of 'status and income'.

'aspiring members of the lower strata of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie'. In determining the 'group interests of the military dictatorship', however, Onimode proposed to identify 'their leaders' position in the social hierarchy' (p. 198), and demonstrate 'the class character of the military regimes' by references to the following parameters: the 'parental, social and residential background' of Nigeria's military officers, and their 'class affiliation... in terms of contacts between civil and military spheres' (p. 199).

By being rooted in the political control of state resources (Hettne 1990:95), Fernando Cardoso's 'state bourgeoisie' parallels not only the bureaucratic bourgeoisie or the 'state sector capitalists' (Turner and Badru 1985:19) in the Nigerian historiographical context, but also the broader general category of bourgeoisie. This analysis, because of its tenuous basis for class definition, totally ignores the important question of the reproduction of the existing pattern of social relations. The use of income level, monetary worth, position within the machinery of state, profession, occupation, social status or position in an organizational hierarchy to group population or fix classes belongs properly to liberal social stratification theory (Kitching 1980:442), and is an expression of Connell's (1977:4) categorical theory of class⁷.

Proceeding from the Marxian argument that under capitalism, the conflict of the classes is inevitable, because of their irreconcilably antagonistic interests, it has been argued that to identify classes is to allude to this historic conflict (Bozzoli 1981:6). Sklar (1976:153) suggests however that class formation rather than class conflict is 'more significant' as an expression of class action in Africa. This would minimize the significance of colonialism in bringing Africa into the world capitalist system. But, of course, Sklar (1991:206-7) distinguished two

7 The categorical theory defines the mere ordering of people, as against the generative, which starts with fundamental processes and ends with structures or social groupings.

models of class analysis: one limited to the industrial West based on economic determination, and the other based on 'political' determinants, which was limited to the non-industrial world. For the latter, 'class domination on an economic basis, primarily, is not a credible idea'. If capitalism has been implanted in Africa, why not capitalist classes?⁸

Although the radical literature has identified the existence of the two polar classes and alluded theoretically to their antagonistic interests and inevitable conflict, the description of class conflict in Nigeria, however, has been of intra-bourgeois conflict. In spite of the identification of 'antagonistic' bourgeois factions, whose conflicting interests are unconnected to the process of production, national conflict in Nigeria from the perspective of class analysis has been explained in terms of inter-regional conflict.

Nnoli (1978:28) accounts for the regional character of class conflict in Nigeria in terms of the organisation of the colonial economy 'around regional enclaves isolated from each other', and reduces class analysis to the description of the politics of exclusion.

In their search for the crumbs from colonial production, contending factions of these parasitic classes emphasised the exclusion of their counterpart from other regions. And when they got into positions of political power they used the government to exclude them.

Applying this model to the 1966 crisis, Nnoli (1978) concludes that when, as in 1953, the 'privileged classes of the North again felt politically insecure they threatened secession and organised rioting against southerners' (p. 162).

8 Sanggmpam (1995:39, 49-50) contends that African pre-colonial non-capitalist core relations abridged capitalism. What Africa has is 'pseudocapitalism'; for Ake (1991:324), Africa's unproductive variety of capitalism is the consequence of 'accumulation by state power'.

For Lawal (1972:267; see also Sklar 1971:50), the contending factions have been the Eastern Nigerian commercial and bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the feudals of the North and the Western urban bourgeoisie. In the early years of independence, the commercial and bureaucratic bourgeoisie of the East allied with the feudals of the North against the rural and urban bourgeoisie of the West. The 1966 crisis with its violent aftermath was, however, caused by the Eastern bourgeoisie which, 'hating competition from the Western bourgeoisie and resenting domination from the Northern feudal', wanted an exclusive arena to dominate (p. 270).

Even if such explanations are classified as applications of manipulation theory, explicit reference must be made not only to the ethno-regional elite, but also to the mechanism and symbols of mobilization. To conclude simply that 'ethnicity in Africa has a class character' (Nnoli 1978:30) and to proceed to give a class analysis of ethnic conflict is illogical. Manipulation theory is not an element of class analysis.

An explanation for this difficulty is the apparent ethnic coalitional and regional character of conflict in Nigeria, and the consequent appropriation by class analysis of the structure of the cultural pluralism model. Compare, for example, a variant of the latter model, applied by Bamishaiye (1976:89-90) to the early 1960s.

In Nigeria, the struggle was between the East and the West on the one hand, that is for posts, and economic advantages, and on the other hand between the East and the North for political power. On another level, it was between the South (East and West) and the North. Then there was friction between the Hausa-Fulani and the Ibo, and between the Ibo and the Yoruba.

If as Adebisi (1989:333) has argued, 'the original ethnic community is dead' and has given way to 'a "community" of

antagonistic social classes', why then does class analyses of national conflict in Nigeria tend toward the ethnic conflict model? It is the contention of this essay that class crystallisation is dysfunctional in a non-rational and culturally plural system, where individuated material interests are not predominant in determining social and political action, or in ordering social and political relations.

Social Rationality, Class Formation and Conflict Relations

For Marxian theory, the emergence of the bourgeoisie not only represents a modern and advanced stage of social development but presupposes the termination of primordial relations. Just as Marx and Engels (1967:102) emphasised the vanishing of 'national differences and antagonisms between peoples', because of the 'development of the bourgeoisie', in the African context, this phenomenon has led to the destruction of the 'old community... as a socially monolithic unit' (Adebisi 1989:331-2). Abner Cohen (1974b:xxii) has charted the mechanism of 'detrribalization' and class identification for a multi-ethnic environment:

The poor from one ethnic group will cooperate with the poor from the other ethnic group against the wealthy from both ethnic groups, who will, on their part, also cooperate in the course of the struggle to maintain their privileges.

Such theoretical optimism is not borne out by empirical studies. In spite of the existence of what appear to be class relationships, non-class relations are still prominent. Just as Hannerz (1974:37) realized that in a multi-ethnic setting, 'a Yoruba is a Yoruba regardless of whether he is a politician or a streetsweeper', and Crawford Young (1976:40) observed the 'persistent failure' of poor whites and poor blacks in the United States to form class alliances.

Gordon's (1978:136) derivation of the ethclass gives even more insight into defining the arena for the proper and effective operation of class relations. Using the criteria of cultural behaviour and 'sense of

peoplehood', he sees the only possible group to occupy the intersect as 'people of the same ethnic group and same social class'. In drawing attention to the critical nature of the conflict sourced in race, language or culture, Geertz (1963:111) confined the effective operation of loyalties and relations based on 'ties to class, party, business, union, profession' to a 'terminal community'. Lijphart (1977:144) further clarifies the relationship by limiting class societies to 'the essentially homogenous societies of the West, in which social class is the major source of political identification...'

What these suggest is that social class distinctions do not 'effectively transcend ethnic barriers' (Ojo 1981:56), and have prominence only in a mono-ethnic environment; and that two different types of intercourse underpin non-class and class societies: affective and rational, respectively. The theory of social rationality presents a class society as that in which affective relations are less prominent than material exchange relations, where social relations are rationally determined, i.e., determined by the material needs of individuals.

The class society is a socially rational unit and the ideal definition of the capitalist society. This is a basic assumption of Marx and Engels (1967:82).

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitifully torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors', and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment'. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.

Capitalism not only destroyed 'ideology, religion, morality', and 'the natural character, ... with regard to labour, and resolved all natural relations into money relations', but also 'the peculiar features of the

various nationalities' (Marx and Engels 1976:81-2). The emergence of the bourgeoisie meant the death of the old society and of community. It 'built upon its ruins the capitalist order of society, the kingdom of free competition, of personal liberty, of the equality before the law...' (Engels 1947:324). Under such a rational regime and such 'estrangement' (Marx and Engels 1967:54), social identity is built around the different positions occupied in the process of material production and exchange.

The assumption of the bourgeois-proletarian dichotomy considered as 'a fixed framework' has been confined to categorical theory, implying that the classes do not exhaust the classes under capitalism (Connell 1977:4). It must be stressed, however, that the Marxian dyad represents the logical classes of ideal capitalism, of a socially rational society. In spite of the historicity claimed for the classes and their conflict, the analysis of capitalism by Marx is logical and theoretical.

Even the perception of a negative correlation between revolutionary Marxism and western capitalist industrialism (Lipset 1983:468) does not undermine the validity of this model. In an ideal capitalist setting, defined as capitalism unregulated by the state, and determined respectively by the interests and needs of the owners of capital and labour, only two logically antagonistic classes are possible: bourgeoisie and proletariat, and this in spite of the possibility of intermediate and transitional classes (McLennan 1989:103). Where only rational material relations exists, the conflict of these classes is inevitable. It is a different question altogether whether such unregulated and unmediated capitalism has historical correlates.

Conclusion

Nigeria certainly does not have the kind of rational capitalist society suggested by theoretical Marxism. It is not difficult to observe the importance of place of origin, language and religion in determining

social, political and even economic relations. Of course, Nigeria is 'capitalist' and presumably has classes and class relations. But from the perspective of national conflict in Nigeria, what factor was crucial in defining identity? Individual relationship to the production process or ethno-regionalism? In fact, national conflict in Nigeria is defined in terms of the ethno-regional struggle for the control of the state, the associated heightening of ethnic and regional identities, a high expectation or actual incidence of inter-ethnic violence and the emergence or strengthening of the consciousness of territorial separation or autonomy.

Classes, in spite of their inchoate state of development, are more crystallized within ethnic and regional enclaves. Even then, patterns of relations within these enclaves are more rooted in language and patron-client ties, and tradition. The class factor is weakest at the national level because of the strength of ethnic and regional competition for the control of the state and its resources. The error of interpreting national conflict in Nigeria as an intra-bourgeois conflict derives from the structure of this competition.

Insistence on the regional factionalisation of the bourgeoisie has ignored the fact that the historic standard-bearer of socialist revolution, the working class, is equally factionalised along ethnic and regional lines. Sil (1993:371) has observed that Nigerian workers do not have 'a deep-rooted feeling of antagonism against the managerial or entrepreneurial classes'.

Class analysis has been treated as a formula, the details of which have been worked out theoretically. The formula only need be applied, whatever the level of material development, national configuration and the predominant basis of social relations. However, the ultimate question is not the theoretical one of whether all conflicts in a capitalist society are class-motivated, but the empirical and historical one of whether national conflicts in Nigeria have been class conflicts.

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