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# **'If I have no money for travel, I have no need'**

## *Migration and imagination*

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**ABSTRACT** This article seeks to respond to the theoretical suggestion that the rise of 21st-century migration reveals the new social importance of the work of the imagination. Beginning with material from a qualitative survey of Nigerian expatriates in Scotland, and deploying the theoretical models of Pierre Bourdieu, it suggests something of the limited constituency for whom such a claim is realistic. It concludes with a contrasting examination of these themes as they appear in Marx's early writing.

**KEYWORDS** *Bourdieu, imagination, Marx, migration, Nigeria*

## **Introduction**

The discussion that is presented in this article is, primarily and admittedly, theoretical. However, the issue addressed here was first raised, for me, in the course of qualitative interview research conducted among Nigerian expatriates in Scotland. Hence I want to begin by recounting fairly briefly, and without a long methodological excursus, the way in which the autobiographical narratives offered by interviewees highlight an extremely complex question: what role does the individual's imagination (or, equally, their intent or desire) play in deciding the course of their life or, more particularly, their migration? It is my argument that we need to be alert to a potentially problematic account of migration which places emphasis on these subjective factors while downplaying the question of economics. To say so is not to suggest that we should accept the reductive idea that human behaviour is decided somehow by economic or class status, but it does mean the recognition that the effective power of an attribute such as imagination is necessarily entangled with, and reliant upon, a control over the power of capital.

## Complicated and uncomplicated histories

In the late 1700s the manumitted West African slave Olaudah Equiano famously published, by subscription, a story of his life. At the very outset of this book he writes:

I believe there are a few events in my life which have not happened to many; it is true the incidents of it are numerous; and, did I consider myself European, I might say that my sufferings were great; but, when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life. (Equiano, 1792: 2; emphasis in original)

This opening statement, as Paul Edwards points out, very much sets the tone for Equiano's 'Interesting Narrative' which, even in the most precarious of circumstances, registers the author's sense of providential assurance. Edwards describes it as the assumption 'of a special destiny in his life, leading him on to fortune' (1994: 36). Equiano's rejection of the Church of England in favour of Protestant congregationalism offers one of the most obvious expressions of this sensibility.

Over 200 years after Equiano, another Igbo migrant to Britain looks back and traces the route by which he came to live in Scotland in order to study science:

*I don't really have a complicated history myself* . . . I was born as Nigeria was already in its political trouble because the first coup that started it all had just ended . . . So, then [I was] the last of eight children born to a peasant farmer and a trader mother and I think my position in the family made me slightly lucky in the sense that my first brother, who'd done up to primary eight education, was interested in training the younger ones, and so I started school quite early at just about six . . . [I] went to catholic primary school, went to a catholic college and 1982, I got into university . . . [I] graduated in 1986 . . . So, broadly speaking this is my life history. (Male, 21–35, doctoral student (sciences), M: trader, F: farmer)<sup>1</sup>

In fact, as we shall see, this interviewee's history is extremely complicated. Yet what is striking is that in the telling, and notwithstanding his own admission of his good fortune, it appears as if nothing could be more straightforward, more certain or more self-explanatory, than the trajectory of his life. It is not just modesty or self-effacement that leads this man to describe his biography as a simple history. Rather, and like Equiano's sense of election, it demonstrates something of the aura of inevitability that accrues, *retrospectively*, to journeys that are absolutely unavoidable in sociological terms. As the interview progresses two things become clearer.

48 The first is how often this interviewee's life had pivoted on events that



were beyond his prediction or control. The second is how reliant he was on the interventions of others:

R: I lost my father when I was two and then basically the job of bringing me up fell to my big brothers and my mother, who had to double as mother and father.

Interviewer: Which could not have been easy?

R: It wasn't easy but because my brothers were grown then, like my first brother was active in the Nigerian civil war, so basically he had to play the role of father of some sort, you know, well then life is hardly easy for a peasant farmer in Nigeria. So, but the proximity to the university [helped me, because] the university nearby, actually about 20% of the land mass occupied by that university was my parental land . . . so at a time when most secondary schools are boarding schools I went to school from home and to university from home . . . I mean, of course the federal universities are tuition-free in Nigeria but if you have to live in school then it becomes an entirely different business.

In other words, this man's access to a tertiary-level education and all that follows from that was made possible by the fact that his parents' land had been among that on which a new federal university was built in Nigeria. Having explained this, he proceeded to talk for some time about the instrumental role played by his elder brother and his mother, who was a market trader, in providing him with financial support. What all of this confers upon him, finally, is a status that is extraordinary: 'I'm the only one of the eight of us [i.e. his siblings] to have travelled outside Nigeria.'

To be absolutely clear, there is nothing covert about the way in which this story is told. The interviewee is open and explicit about the role played in his life by the sacrifices of his family and by sheer luck. Yet what was startling, and what opens the door to the questions with which this article is concerned, was the fact that when he came to summarize how it was that he had become an expatriate, the conjunction of events that he described was explained in terms of, or perhaps more accurately, was sublated into, a statement of his own volition:

R: It's funny you know, because as a child I had always thought of . . . unfortunately I'm not in London, but as a child I had this desire to study in London, somehow. You know, but it's [i.e. Glasgow] as close to London as a Nigerian can come anyway.

Interviewer: Why, why did you have this . . .

R: I don't know. In fact even now my family uses it to pull my leg occasionally.

An awareness of the chances and intercessions that have been formative for him, therefore, does not prevent the implication that it was his own

unusual ambition that marked him out. Reading backwards, it is the fulfilment of his own 'desire' that he takes as the principle of his story. Events that were pivotal but outside of his control are seen as the clinching evidence of an exceptional status that was immanent from the start. He has always been, after all, the one that the family teased about having determined to study in London. The fact that *he is* the one, from eight, who has made it to Britain (at least) vindicates this claim of election. My point in making the parallel with Equiano here is not to suggest some transhistorical experience of Igbo expatriates, but only to draw attention to the way in which destinations (both social and geographical) are often narrated as pre-destinations. In such narrations, furthermore, the successful negotiation of economic problems appear as proof positive of the subject's irresistible strength of purpose.

### **The inevitability of the uninevitable**

No doubt it would be possible to construe this material in other ways. Yet this example is indicative of the terms in which many of those migrants interviewed in Glasgow expressed themselves. Thus another man, whose father had driven trucks for a livestock firm and whose mother was a trader, listed the reasons for his being 'so fortunate' to have come to Europe. This itinerary included a teacher who took him into school a year early, a tip off from a friend about a forthcoming federal travel grant and, most importantly, a 'personal scholarship' paid by his father's employer to meet the costs of his university education. Yet in explaining all of this he distinguished, quite deliberately, between these eventualities and his own unwavering ambition: 'I had the desire for a long time to go overseas . . . I've always had the desire . . . I had the intention, but not the funding.' Again, the very precipitousness of his path, seen in the relative comfort of the rear-view mirror, allowed him to understand it as the playing out of a determination that was wholly his own. Given the real and continuing effort that his education required from him, this reading of his life was wholly understandable. The motive factor of the story as he tells it is his 'desire', his subjective 'intention'. Problems such as the securing of 'funding' are adduced, with the kind of inversion that hindsight makes possible, in demonstration of the efficacy of that desire.

Of course, human beings do make conscious decisions about their lives and we are more than the passive playthings of circumstance. Because the intention here is not to offer an extended analysis of this research material itself, I have not added to these brief examples. Nevertheless, many of the interviewees had faced and overcome real difficulties in securing access to education or work overseas. It is precisely because such stories are of an *unlikely* triumph over adversity that they require us to ask why it is that they are told with such a marked, retrospective self-certainty? And in asking this question, we may be able also to broach others concerning that



most fashionable of critical conjunctions between imagination and migration. Because there is, to contextualize, a theoretical response to increasing migration, most influentially exemplified perhaps by Arjun Appadurai, that finds in a world of mobile populations and pervasive mass media 'a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities' (1996: 4). One of the results of this instability, Appadurai argues, is the freeing of the imagination from those forms of social control which previously had it corralled, either in the name of patriotic fervour, or in adherence to some form of charismatic leadership. In this respect, he suggests, 'the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order' (1996: 31). It is not just that migration is the phenomenon that unchains this Promethean energy, but that the force of the imagination itself then becomes, in a rather circular fashion, 'the wellspring of the increased rates of migration' (1996: 6).

In essence such an argument follows that of Homi Bhabha, and particularly his well-known article 'DissemiNation' (Bhabha, 1994a), in that it takes from Benedict Anderson a concern with the subjective and cultural parameters of social life, while rejecting what is seen as Anderson's excessively neat model of national allegiance (Bhabha, 1994b; see Anderson, 1991). So two things come together here: on the one hand, an increased scepticism over the sufficiency of concepts of home or belonging; on the other, the suggestion that identity has no objective or material guarantors (no fundamental roots, foundations, sites, etc.). What results is an increased concern with the formative (rather than mimetic) role of representations including, notably, self-representations. As Rapport and Dawson put it in their introductory article to a volume entitled *Migrants of Identity*, men and women are 'at home in personal narratives that move away from any notion of fixity within a common idiom, and their identities derive from telling moving stories of themselves and their world-views' (1998: 31). Thus there is, it seems, a kind of *amor fati* that connects narration and migration:

Exile, emigration, banishment, labour migrancy, tourism, urbanization and counter-urbanization are the central motifs of modern culture, while being rootless, displaced between worlds, living between a lost past and a fluid present, are perhaps the most fitting metaphors for the journeying, modern consciousness. (1998: 23)

Hence the diminished hold of tradition and the alleged retraction of the control facilities of the state, together with an awareness of the mediated rather than self-enclosed nature of identity, appear to give to the 'work of the imagination' a new importance. In a world of increasing cultural admixture, human life no longer finds itself explained in terms of certain 'given' labels, but rather it appears to be directed increasingly by qualities

that are fundamentally subjective and imaginative. In a poem presented towards the end of her much-cited discussion of *la conciencia de la mestiza*, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa, addressing 'Raza/father mother church', writes:

I remain who I am, multiple and one of the herd, yet not of it. I walk on the ground of my own being ... my own hands whittle the final work: me. (1987: 173)

The point is, of course, that the middle-class migrants who were the participants in this interview research, and who saw their own desire and intent as the primary volitional force of their lives, repeat in a straightforward way the tacit claim that is being made by this school of thought. Like Anzaldúa, they were certain that their own hands whittled their future. Or, more accurately, that their present lives substantiated a dream that they had always held. In this respect, they clearly *did* consider the economic or institutional coordinates of their migration subsidiary or incidental to their own will and desire. The interventions of others were acknowledged openly and gratefully, as were all kinds of contingent events, but these subjects finally situated agency with themselves and with their own longstanding and prophetic imagining of their future selves. In so doing they appear to confirm the model that a writer such as Appadurai proposes.

What is at issue here is the presence of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the retrospective illusion', which

credits exceptional individuals with divine foresight, tacitly assum[ing] that life is organised like a story, that it moves from an origin, understood as a point of departure and also as a first cause, or better yet, as a generative principle, and that the term of a life is also its goal. (Bourdieu, 1993: 193)

For Bourdieu, of course, all is not as transparent as this 'ideology of predestination' presumes. And so in what follows, by seeking to disclose how it is that such an ideology becomes a plausible conviction, I intend to throw a critical light back on to this particular contemporary theory of migration. Bourdieu will continue to be the figure to which I turn for answers, because his work always remains scrupulously aware of how the subjective parameters of our selves (how we think about ourselves, identify ourselves, describe the course of our lives) are interrelated with questions of economics. This relationship, to reiterate, cannot be understood in crudely deterministic terms, but only by recognizing the enduring and complicated questions of access, opportunity, possibility and authority that play out in the trajectories of individuals and across generations.



## Broken and self-made trajectories

To begin with, we might place these stories in their historical context. An initial step in this direction is to recognize that in a real sense the successful migrant *is* exceptional. The youthful assurance of the first interviewee that he would study in London is not unique. Any number of the young men that can be met in bars in Nigeria, at the taxi ranks or at the stalls selling *suya*, volunteer an equal certainty that they are bound for America or Europe. Most of them, it hardly needs saying, will be proved wrong. But bolstered on the one hand by the inflated stories of returnees and their acts of largesse, and on the other by its glamorous media portrayal, the northern hemisphere does have a very obvious allure for those that live outside of its well-patrolled borders. Here, by way of example, are the words of working-class questionnaire respondents in Nigeria, none of whom had ever left Africa, when asked whether they think of Europe and America as 'lands of opportunity':

R1: Yes, I think and know that is true because it is a developed part of the world full of opportunities, e.g. jobs, advanced schools. (Male, 21–35, messenger, M: baker, F: electrician)

R2: Well, it may be true because in the UK everything is [within] the common man[*s*] reaches. The common man can get everything at his disposal. (Male, 21–35, cleaner, M: farmer, F: farmer)

R3: It is true, because there in [the] UK you don't have to struggle for job opportunities. If you want education it is there free and in fact everything is at your disposal. So the UK could be seen as a promised land where everything is available. (Female, 21–35, housewife/student, M: petty trader, F: farmer/preacher)

It is important to understand that those young people who dream of gaining entrance to the perceived 'promised land', where everything is at the 'common man's disposal', are not simply millenarian dreamers. They are aspiring to a trajectory which they have seen obtained, even if only rarely, by the generation that preceded them. There *was* a moment in post-independence Nigerian history, running into the oil-boom period, when rural farmers, petty urban traders, drivers, clerks and others could cherish genuine hopes for where their children might 'arrive'. Of course, to recognize that this ambition existed is not to imply that it was widely attained, or to underestimate the number of disappointments. The tragedy of the post-Second Republic generations, however – i.e. the subsequent generations, those of recession and structural adjustment – is the absolute mismatch between their dispositions and the objective conditions which surround them. For many in the lower and lower-middle ranks of Nigerian urban society, to have a projection of oneself as the future migrant, the



future returnee, is not utopian given the available examples of the 1960s and 1970s. What it comes up hard against, however, is a national economic situation that has punctured those faint but genuine conditions of possibility which differentiate an 'in-game' sense of a conceivable future from the alienated dreams of 'dead time'. Bourdieu's famous discussion in *Distinction* (1984) of the 'cheating of a generation' is concerned with a different historical situation, but his poignant description of the 'misfirings of the dialectic of aspirations and probabilities' applies very aptly to the case in hand:

When this 'broken trajectory' occurs . . . the agent's aspirations, flying on above his real trajectory like a projectile carried by its own inertia, describe an ideal trajectory that is no less real, or is at any rate in no way imaginary in the ordinary sense of the word. (1984: 150)

There is at least a generation in Nigeria for whom the dreams of social (and actual) flying invested in educational capital, which were precarious even under more auspicious historical conditions, have become detached from surrounding material conditions.<sup>2</sup>

There are two reasons for saying all of this: one simple, and one more complicated. First, the simple reason is to remind us that imagination is a social quality. Notice Bourdieu's wording in the preceding quote: 'in no way imaginary in the ordinary sense of the word'. In other words, the way in which an individual can conceive of themselves and what they might imagine as their possible future are acts which are themselves socially and historically determinate. Our imaginations are not placeless: even the most utopian dream is dreamed contextually. Moreover, and more importantly, the ability to *realise* a particular idea of oneself is reliant on access to economic resources and powers of symbolic legitimation, neither of which are distributed equitably. In that respect certain individuals are much better placed to be successful 'authors' of their lives than others. An historically rich and well-documented example in this regard is offered by Abdulmalek Sayad's wonderful account of Algerian emigration to France. As his work makes absolutely clear, the discourses on integration, naturalization and allegiance that greet the immigrant, and the stories of themselves with which they respond, do not meet on a level playing field. Those with the least social authority (which very often means the working-class immigrant) are the most vulnerable to the symbolic violence by which institutions of the state perform their dialectical role. In this respect we have to recognize that in the context of migration, instead of demonstrating a liberated human agency, the way in which identity is imagined may make clear only the 'unequal balance of power' (Sayad, 2004: 217) at play in battles to control the definition of an individual. Furthermore, no imagining of ourselves has any social reality outside of our corporeal existence, our bodily life. The migrant,



and most especially the female working-class migrant, is often the most subject to stigma or racism, and is certainly among the least well-positioned to challenge the stories that are told *of them* and of their bodies. As one of Sayad's contributions to *The Weight of the World* (1999) makes very clear, the working-class immigrant's sense of themselves as 'cursed' is related, in part at least, to the puzzling feeling that their lives have followed a course over which they had no control and in which they can find, retrospectively, no trace of their own volition. In effect, they find themselves *imagined* rather than imagining, and that their relative lack of social power prevents them from disputing this disempowering position (Sayad, 1999).

Second, the more complicated point is that, precisely for these reasons, those that are socially successful are always liable to understand their success *as if* it were the realization of their own individual dream, their will. Bourdieu's conception of time – that is, 'human time' – is carefully differentiated from the naturalized idea of ongoing linear time. It is differentiated also, therefore, from readings of social process in which the relationship between past, present and future can be made comprehensible only in terms of the recovery or tracing out of a first intention. His point is that human activity, human practice, occurs 'not *in* time but *makes* time (human time, as opposed to biological or astronomical time)' (Bourdieu, 2000: 206; emphasis in original). To say, for example, that the long-term unemployed are denied a future is to say that they are without access to any meaningful sense of what might be forthcoming. Without a stake in the social game they are outside of time invested with value by virtue of being related to future returns and future involvement in social life. Therefore, they are alienated from a *present* sense of the future. What is left to them is imagination 'in the ordinary sense of the word', imagination no longer tethered to social context, mere imagination. As with those young Nigerian men and women referred to previously, their imagined future selves become, for all but the most miraculous exceptions, something no longer related to reality.

Conversely, for Bourdieu – and this is where we approach an answer to our question – the past is always with us. At the level of the individual habitus, of the subjective dispositions that are slowly and deeply learned over time, the past is never past but always present. Indeed, inasmuch as it determines an individual's sense of the imminent shape of the world, and therefore their positionings and investments relative to that world, this immanent past is part of the future. This gives us the complex but extremely powerful formula: 'Habitus is that presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forthcoming' (2000: 210). What this suggests, then, is that the habitus, which is the means by which a position (geographically and socially) is reconciled to a history and disposition arising from that history, *always* tends to present the socially-successful subject's position as the result of a

coherent, self-defined trajectory. The destination of the socially dominant looks and feels like a destiny, or as the culmination of a narrative over which they held authorial control. The fact that those Nigerians who have arrived in Britain represent (as the interviewee already cited had it) the 'one out of eight' who made it, at least to themselves, reinforces this sense of their trajectory as something extraordinary. Furthermore, the privileged practical access to sources of material and educational capital associated with time abroad further confirms the middle-class migrant's sense of assurance, which is understood and expressed as *self-assurance*: an assurance of which they themselves are the cause and guarantor.

For the successful, therefore, nothing is more natural than to assume that their success, including their success in getting overseas, proves their control over their life. As this final example suggests, that which is achieved (in the sense of having come to pass), easily appears as that which is an achievement (a manifestation of a given individual's foresight and determination):

R: I realise[d] over time that those that I was actually looking up to in society, that I actually admired in society, were those that had some form of foreign training at the time, you know, uncles, relatives, and all that. So time immemorial I've always been having it, *reinforcing in my subconscious that I have to have something foreign* . . . Some people would wonder why somebody that had an MBA by 11 years ago, I had my MBA 11 years ago, would be coming to school, an assistant vice-president in my company, some people would feel there's no point, what are you looking for? *You know, that fire has always been in my belly. That ambition has always been there. The drive has always been there* . . .

Interviewer: . . .what, even since you were quite young?

R: Yes, since I was quite young, *I've always fired myself*. The passion's always been there to have something foreign, foreign in the sense that it's international, not a particular place . . . I said, look, if I want to [be] different, if I'm actually going to make myself very happy, because you see there's a difference between just earning a wage and actually being happy, doing what you're doing. (Male, 36–50, postgraduate student/company vice-president, M: teacher, F: teacher)

What matters to this respondent is not that he comes from a background that allows him to imagine beyond 'just earning a wage', nor that he had the capital to facilitate his expatriate training. These social and economic facts are elided by his account of that which is innate, a pseudo-prophetic 'fire in the belly' driving him on. It is indicative of the habitus of the powerful that they can claim, looking back over their trajectory, 'I've always fired myself'. It is another way of asserting that one is the sole author of one's life, literally a claim of authority.



Having said all of this, then, is it not unnerving to find the implication, at least within a certain school of cultural criticism, that the newly-liberated social force of the imagination will grant such a power to everyone? These migrants, well aware as they were of the pragmatic and economic intercessions upon which they had been reliant, understood their migration primarily as the expression of a personal differentiation: a distinction. What it proved for them was their own exceptionality – not statistically speaking, but subjectively. This typifies the way in which symbolic forms of capital accrue their legitimacy. A possibility that is economically delimited and discontinuous (one either is or is not, as is said in Nigeria, a 'been-to') is taken by what Bourdieu calls a 'collective misrecognition' as the mark of a kind of election, a specific subjective quality. At this point, it becomes imperative to ask whether the theoretical discussion of migrancy, which treats it as a phenomenon that can be understood only via the issues of personal narration and imagination, is not complicit in this collective misrecognition?

## **A fetishism of the imagination**

There is a great deal at stake in this. Nikos Papastergiadis' *The Turbulence of Migration*, for example, regularly attacks 'neat binarisms and linear oppositions' (2000: 20), promoting instead a variety of 'multivariate' replacement metaphors ranging from a form of social chaos theory to those of circuitry, fuzzy logic and the eponymous turbulence. The fact that his book continually lays claim to the academic high ground of greater complexity, however, does not prevent the author from making the remarkably uncomplicated diagnosis: 'all identity is formed through dislocation' (2000: 53). Or, as he says elsewhere, identity is 'trajective', a thing 'formed by and in the journey' (2000: 4). Obviously, Papastergiadis' intention is to insist on the degree to which subjective factors have been overlooked in traditional sociological accounts of migration: 'Sociologists have underestimated the extent to which migration is based on the transmission of ideas, stories told by other migrants, rumours of opportunity, the strutting of returnees' (2000: 47). It is certainly the case that there has been a tendency to produce models of migration in which humans are reduced to quiescent subjects of economic 'push' and 'pull' factors. To this extent, there is no disputing Papastergiadis' desire to recognize the role of non-economic motivations in migration or his emphasis on the conscious decision-making of individuals. But the obvious danger is that the baby of economic reality will be thrown out with the bathwater of determinism. It is one thing to insist on the role that stories, ideas, hopes and dreamed-of alternative futures might play in migrants' motivations, but a very different one to suggest that such imaginings could be somehow self-realizing. Papastergiadis argues, courtesy of Appadurai, that

the concept of the imaginary and the workings of the imagination have a more central role in the formation of these new social and cultural practices ... Imagination has become central to all forms of social practice. (2000: 119–20)

But imagination is not, in itself, the magical reagent for the development of human liberty. In a world dominated by the processes of capitalist production, that which is objectively true – i.e. that men and women, acting in society, are the authors of their world – takes the distorted appearance of isolated individuals beholden to, and behaving at, the instigation of, abstracted forces that apparently have a power and volition of their own. To respond to this fetishized reality by constructing a fetishism of the imagination does nothing to return social authority to human beings, because it ignores the fundamentally concrete basis of these reifications. It is more urgent now than ever, as Amin (1998) and Wallerstein (1990) insist, to discuss culture, narrative, imagination, not as if they were dimensions that supersede the world of ordinary, sensuous things. As Bourdieu suggests, imagination has to be understood as a social quality. In other words, there is a history and context to that which is imaginable and, equally so, a history and context that affects any effort to realize what we imagine. In the context of migration, this includes such imperatives as the ability to pay for passage and meet all its attendant expenses.

To discuss the imagination as if it existed independently of such factors, or as if it were socially pre-eminent, replicates the processes of self-representation that typify the habitus of the successful. A critical fetishism of the imagination may represent, therefore, what Marx called a form of thought that is 'socially valid'. It may even represent, in the era of increasing migration, what Sohn-Rethel called 'necessary false consciousness' (1978: 196). But what this means is that it continues and exacerbates, rather than challenges, the collective misrecognition by which the economic context of migration is swept under the carpet in favour of a concern with the seemingly self-contained issues of identity and culture.

## **A long conclusion: money, travel and Marx**

Towards the end of the third of his early economic and philosophical manuscripts, Marx writes something that is peculiarly applicable to this discussion:

If I have no money for travel, I have no *need*, i.e. no real and self-realizing need, to travel. If I have a vocation to study, but no money for it, I have *no* vocation to study, i.e. no *real, true* vocation. But if I really do not have any vocation to study, but have the will *and* the money, then I have an *effective* vocation to do so. (1975: 378; emphasis in original)



This is perhaps a more complicated statement than at first appears, and it is by expanding upon it that this article concludes. Marx had, as we would say contemporarily, a fiercely 'anti-essentialist' concept of historical reality, and indeed of identity. These early writings, after all, stem from his desire to demonstrate that private property is not, as political economy had assumed, 'some imaginary primordial condition' (p. 323), but the product of alienated labour, 'just as the gods were *originally* not the cause but the effect of the confusion in men's minds' (pp. 331–2; emphasis in original). As he reiterates with regard to the question of historical creation: '*the whole of what is called world history* is nothing more than the creation of man through human labour' (p. 357; emphasis in original).

At the same time, of course, his account of human being is absolutely opposed to a simple individualism or idealism. For Marx, our existence has content and meaning only in and through its objective expression in relation with the external sensuous world and our social context. As he writes: 'The relationship of man to himself becomes *objective* and *real* for him only through his relationship to other men' (p. 331; emphasis in original). Hence he attacks a version of communism whose demand for equality boils down to the demand for a generalized right of private ownership:

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it, when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc., in short, when we *use* it. (p. 352; emphasis in original)

By contrast, any kind of worthwhile socialism would be premised in the fact that 'My *own* existence *is* social activity' (p. 350; emphasis in original). In this respect, its principle would not be the extension of a right to the ownership of things, but a willingness to find in our individual existence an impoverishment which can be remedied only by other humans:

Given socialism, not only man's *wealth*, but also his *poverty* acquire a *human* and hence a social significance. Poverty is the passive bond which makes man experience his greatest wealth – the *other* man – as need. (p. 356; emphasis in original)

If this is the ideal, Marx is keen also to understand and even mimic, as part of a rhetorical strategy of exposure, the inner voice of a world in which private property has become 'a power belonging to *consciousness*' (p. 342; emphasis in original). This is why his description is so absolutely relevant today. Because for Marx the deauthorizing of tradition, the undermining of that 'narrow nationality' (p. 318) of attachment to place, the dissolving of affiliation and of all prior cultural props of identity, is not the result of

rising migration but the manifestation of the triumph of capital. That is to say, the triumph of what he would later call exchange value: abstract capital that is 'no longer afflicted with *local* and political prejudices' (p. 340; emphasis in original). Thus 'movement inevitably triumphs over immobility ... the avowedly restless and versatile self-interest of *enlightenment* over the parochial' (p. 340; emphasis in original). Marx is here pre-empting Bourdieu, in that he is discussing the way in which capitalist economics change how we conceive of even our most intimate attributes. Private property, the product of alienated labour appropriable by the individual – 'into the very being of man' (p. 342) – is what allows for the development of 'a *cosmopolitan*, universal energy which breaks through every limitation and bond' (p. 342; emphasis in original). Obviously this is a point which poses the most demanding questions for any proposition of a new, post-colonial cosmopolitanism.

For Marx, capital is not merely a facilitator. This is why he is not interested in the politics of equal pay or more equitable purchasing power. Capital is humankind's fundamentally creative, expressive relationship to the world and to itself as a species, abstracted and privatized. When he writes, therefore, that 'if I have no money to travel I have no need to travel', he is saying much more than the obvious fact that those who are economically poor are deprived of life-chances by virtue of their poverty. He means what he says: they are deprived of their need. Like the Irishman who has only one need left – 'to eat *rotten potatoes*' (p. 360; emphasis in original) – the world of private property and that of alienated labour which creates it changes the relationship of the human being to the world. This is tantamount to a shift in our being: those who are dispossessed are *not* simply dispossessed of opportunity, but of that reciprocal relation of need and fulfilment that links us to each other and to the sensuous world, and which defines our full life as a species.

Therefore imagination, like need, exists only for those who command control over sufficient quantities of capital, 'the truly creative power':

[M]oney ... transfers my wishes from the realm of imagination, it translates them from their existence as thought, imagination and desires into their *sensuous, real* existence, from imagination into life, and from imagined being into real being. (p. 378; emphasis in original)

In this respect, like all such misrecognitions, the 'fetishism of the imagination' that purports to discover agency in the imaginative effort of the individual is true in a certain sense. To Marx, the individual with the money to travel or study has the ability to change reality. Literally so: what they are employing is the appropriated quality of the human to do just that, 'the alienated *capacity of mankind*' to change the world, 'to turn imagination into reality' (p. 378; emphasis in original). And in a real sense, as wielders of money, they do this *themselves* and *for themselves*. Such is



the rule of private property. In this regard, those middle-class migrants with whom this article began by discussing are not lying when they present these voluntaristic accounts of their lives. Neither, for that matter, are those theorists who find in globalization the unshackling of imagination. This is true, but it is only true, as Marx insists, to those for whom alienated labour has unshackled the power of private property. In this respect it seems to me that the ethical demand to our imaginations must surely remain the demand that we seek to envisage a world, and ways of realizing a world, in which 'love can be exchanged only for love, trust for trust and so on' (p. 379).

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### Notes

1. The interview material used in this article is derived from qualitative research among Nigerian expatriates in the west of Scotland. This work took place initially in 1998–9 and subsequently in 2004. Some details have been altered in order to ensure confidentiality. The majority of the respondents in this survey – and certainly those that I am concerned with here – were middle-class men and women, many of whom were in Britain to take graduate or postgraduate qualifications, or those who had arrived initially for this reason and subsequently had secured a position academically or professionally. I have also cited material from a questionnaire survey conducted in Nigeria in 1999. For all respondents, brief biographical details are given in the following form: gender, age range, occupation, M: mother's occupation, F: father's occupation.
2. Compare Wendy Griswold's discussion of the 'particular historical conjunction of oil boom/oil bust with the generations of Nigerian writers' (2000: 225).

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### Biographical note

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