

A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRASIAL OF KARL MARX'S ALIENATION OF LABOUR VIS-À-VIS ASUU STRUGGLES

Kelechi Onyeka Ezeani
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
ko.ezeani@unizik.edu.ng
&
Onyeka Emmanuel Uzowulu
NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka
Oe.uzowulu@unizik.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The conflict between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Federal Government of Nigeria has gradually taken on characteristics of a class struggle, particularly as university academics face growing impoverishment and are increasingly pushed into roles that align them more closely with the broader working class. This research examines the industrial conflict within Nigerian universities, focusing particularly on the disputes between the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian Federal Government. While the conflict may not be accurately described as a straightforward struggle between the 'bourgeoisie' and the 'proletariat' in strict Marxist terms, the study has employed elements of Marxian analysis to interpret the situation. Marx's concept of alienation, which highlights the disconnection of workers from the products of their labor, the labor process, their fellow workers, and their human potential under capitalist systems, provides a critical lens through which to examine the struggles of Nigerian university lecturers. The persistent industrial actions by ASUU reflect a deeper structural alienation experienced by academic workers within a neglected and underfunded educational system. By situating ASUU's grievances in the broader context of Marxist thought, the researchers argues that these strikes are not solely about wage disputes, but about reclaiming agency, dignity, and the transformative role of education in society. Through analysis, the research underscores the systemic failures of governance and policy that perpetuate alienation and highlights the need for a radical restructuring of Nigeria's higher public education sector.

Keywords: Alienation, ASUU, Strike, Capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

The problem of alienation is one of the problems that has been widely discussed in many discipline of studies; philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science etc. Alienation was one of the most important and widely debated themes of the twentieth century, and Karl Marx's theorization played a key role in the discussions. Marx's reflections on alienation defined significant moments in the transformation and dissemination of the theory. The human person as social being, derives joy in their creativity and they also seek for proper recognition of their efforts in all their endeavors. Alienation as a concept, speaks more on human predicament and

it reflects on the religious, social, political, economic life of man.

Alienation has long been a significant affliction in human society, manifesting as a dehumanizing force that often incites resistance (Kalekin-Fishman and Langman 2015). Its effects are deeply damaging, impacting both individuals and the broader nation. As noted by Chugh and Gupta (2020), "the term 'alienation' has been used in numerous diagnoses of the maladies of the modern world." Karl Marx's theory of alienation offers a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon, particularly in the context of the persistent challenges facing Nigeria's education sector, most notably, its tertiary institutions. Arguably, alienation is a profound socio-political issue and one of the most enduring and destructive problems humanity has encountered over the centuries. It has significantly hindered national development and adversely affected the wellbeing of countless individuals. Saleem and Bani-ata (2014) describes alienation as a natural outcome of the human existential condition, underscoring its pervasive and tangible presence across all areas of life.

To fully grasp and address alienation, it is necessary to explore the various ways in which the term is conceptualized. According to *The Short Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, alienation refers to "any various social or psychological evil which are characterized by a harmful separation, disruption, or fragmentation which sunders things that properly belong together (TenHouten 2017)." This definition highlights alienation as a destructive force that breaks the harmony of relationships or entities that should ideally be unified. Likewise, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* defines alienation as "a state in which a thing is separated, through its own act, from something else that used to belong to it, so that this other thing becomes self-sufficient and turns against its original owner (Bunnin and Yu 2008)." This view aligns with Karl Marx's theory of alienation, particularly his critique of labor under capitalism. Marx posits that the more a worker produces, the more alienated they become from the product of their labor since the product does not belong to the laborer but to someone else who profits from it. This process dehumanizes the worker and estranges them from their own creative potential. Although this study focuses on Marx's conceptualization of alienation, it is important to note that the idea predates him. *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy* traces the theme of alienation back to Christian theology, particularly the doctrines of original sin and redemption and to Rousseau's notion of the social contract, where individuals surrender natural freedoms in exchange for civil society (Bunnin and Yu 2008). For Hegel, alienation is integral to the unfolding of the Absolute Idea, which externalizes itself in the natural world before achieving self-conscious unity. Feuerbach argued that the concept of God is essentially the projection of alienated human essence (Debnath 2021).

Similarly, Schacht (2015) identified the theme of alienation in Plato's metaphysics, particularly in his theory of the world of forms. According to Plato, these "Ideas" exist independently of the human mind in a transcendent realm beyond space and time. The physical world, therefore, consists only of imperfect copies of these eternal realities suggesting a fundamental separation between the ideal and the real, a hallmark of alienation. Marx's concept of alienation is distinct from those of his predecessors. As Falk et al. (2017) succinctly explains, Marx's analysis is

grounded in the historically specific context of capitalist production. He investigates the inherent principles and contradictions within the economic theories dominant during his time. In the first of his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where his theory of alienated labor is first articulated, Marx begins by examining the dynamics of wage labor, capital, and property relations (Butola 2019). Drawing from classical political economy, particularly the works of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Marx critiques the division of labor, private property, and the capitalist structure of remuneration and accumulation.

For Marx, capitalism is fundamentally driven by profit and the accumulation of capital, which gives rise to two persistent and opposing classes: the capitalists (owners) and the laborers (workers). The laboring class, through their productive activity, not only generates wealth but also perpetuates their own alienation by becoming commodities in the labor market. This self-objectification leads to their dehumanization. As production and accumulation continue, capital expands and tends toward monopoly, further concentrating power in the hands of a few. It is within this exploitative structure that Marx's theory of alienated labor becomes central. Marx's framework has had a profound influence on subsequent thinkers across various disciplines. As Karlsson and Månson (2017) point out, Marx's central focus is "capital," which leads him to develop a thorough and systemic theory of work and labor. In contrast, Émile Durkheim is more concerned with social cohesion and how it is maintained or threatened, focusing on the division of labor rather than labor itself. Max Weber, on the other hand, is preoccupied with rationalization processes, which, although they include aspects of working life, do not require him to conceptualize labor with the same depth as Marx. Each theorist thus brings a unique lens to the study of modernity, with Marx offering the most extensive theorization of alienation through the prism of labor and capitalist production.

Alienation pervades all areas of human life, and to ignore its presence is to deny a fundamental part of our shared humanity. It represents a profound moral and social harm, a violation of what it means to be human. Recognizing the reality of alienation and understanding that others experience it just as we do can foster empathy and solidarity. When this awareness becomes widespread, the possibility of overcoming alienation, or de-alienation, becomes more achievable.

Majorly, people are alienated in many ways, but Marx concentrated on the alienation of human labour. Akinwale, Kuye, and Akinwale (2023) notes that, as a labour union ASUU has suffered in getting to their ideal which is good working conditions of the lecturers, revitalization and funding of universities, autonomy of universities etc. The Federal government over the years has made life miserable for ASUU in terms of fulfilling the agreements reached over the years and this is appalling. Alienation emerges as a natural consequence of existential predicament where man cages himself by his actions and thus shows that man is man's problem.

This explains better the condition of ASUU over the years,

The academic staff union of universities has demonstrated its

anger towards the unacceptable ways by which the nation's universities is being run and among others, the dilapidation and deplorable state of infrastructural deficits in the nations universities which is the highest institution of learning(Odiagbe 2012).

Currently, ASUU is being alienated and this has caused more harm than good in the Nigeria educational system in the sense that lecturers are not paid when due and students spend more years in school because of incessant strike. If something is not done, the country's educational system will collapse and the reigning chant that "school is scam" will become an existential fact. So, government should keep to their promises and they should remember that education is what makes a country to be more developed and progressive.

The ongoing struggles of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) can be interpreted through the lens of Marxist alienation. The Federal Government's consistent neglect reflected in chronic underfunding, delayed or withheld salaries, and general disregard for university staff welfare illustrates a systemic alienation of educators (Nwokeocha 2023). This neglect has become a defining issue within Nigeria's educational crisis. ASUU's demands, which include better funding, institutional autonomy, and the revitalization of public universities, are frequently mischaracterized as self-serving. However, these claims are rooted in a legitimate concern for the collapse of public higher education and should not be dismissed as mere self-interest (Songonuga 2015). On the constant debate between the Nigerian government and ASUU on a way forward, one may be quick to ask, does the Nigerian government lack genuine interest in educational development? Do they fail to recognize education as a cornerstone of national progress? Are they indifferent to the suffering of lecturers, students, and parents? Or worse, do they derive a sense of detachment or satisfaction from this systemic failure? These are crucial questions that require honest answers if meaningful progress is to be achieved. The irony is glaring when government officials routinely send their children abroad for schooling and seek medical care outside the country. Such practices highlight a stark contradiction and demands urgent scrutiny if Nigeria is to move forward.

ASUU (Academic Staff Union of Universities) is a clear victim of alienation, and its history is deeply intertwined with the experience of alienation. Established in 1978, the union was formed to safeguard the interests of academic staff and to enable them to address the pressing challenges confronting higher education in Nigeria (Saint, Hartnett, and Strassner 2003). As Bello and ISA (2016) affirm, ASUU was created to protect its members and respond to broader issues affecting Nigerian universities. Since its inception, ASUU has faced persistent marginalization and denial of rights which is the hallmarks of alienation. Universities, being centers of intellectual development, ought to possess the autonomy to manage their affairs. However, this autonomy has been consistently undermined by federal authorities, which has restricted the decision-making power of the academic community. In response, ASUU has resisted these alienating tendencies, particularly the erosion of academic freedom and

institutional autonomy. As Bello and ISA (2016) notes, the union's first major industrial action occurred in 1980 in protest against the dismissal of six lecturers at the University of Lagos, following the recommendations of the Justice Belonwu Visitation Panel, a move linked to issues of academic freedom. This moment marked the beginning of ASUU's ongoing struggle against systemic deprivation.

In the context of this research, alienation is interpreted as a form of deprivation, particularly the denial of rights to fair wages, proper working conditions, and adequate educational infrastructure. If these essential conditions were fulfilled by the federal government, the sense of alienation experienced by ASUU would be significantly reduced. However, the reality is quite the opposite. Adeyemo and Okeme (2021) outline key causes of ASUU's alienation as substandard wages and conditions of service, chronic underfunding, decaying infrastructure, and the lack of institutional autonomy, all of which directly hinder the quality of teaching, research, and academic innovation in Nigeria's universities.

Alienation inevitably carries consequences, often manifesting in resistance or rebellion. In ASUU's case, the consequence is frequent strike actions, which have significantly disrupted academic activities across Nigerian universities. When the union's demands are ignored and agreements reached with the government are not honored, strikes become a last resort, resulting in a complete halt of academic operations. These interruptions have led to prolonged academic sessions, causing students to spend more years in school than necessary, and in some cases, forcing them to drop out due to frustration, loss of interest, or disillusionment with the educational system. John (2015) highlight that ASUU, like many other labor unions, often resorts to strikes more than other available forms of industrial action because it appears to be the only approach that elicits a response from government officials. However, alienation should not be viewed solely as a critique of capitalism or governance structures rather, it should also be understood as a call for reform. It demands a shift toward a more just and humane society. This transformation can begin by raising awareness of the many forms alienation can take. Although Marx's proposed solution to alienation may seem radical and outdated, its core message remains relevant. As Joseph E. Sawan (2011) observes, Marx's theory of alienation offers a valuable framework for advocating social justice. It emphasizes the need for collective effort in confronting alienation, fostering awareness of our shared humanity, and encouraging peaceful coexistence.

MARX'S PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK OF ALIENATION

Karl Marx's interpretation of alienation is distinct from that of earlier philosophers. While thinkers like Plato, Plotinus, Hegel, and Feuerbach largely understood alienation as a psychological or spiritual condition, Marx grounded it in material and social realities. For Marx, alienation is not abstract, it is tangible and rooted in the structures of society. He used the German term *Entfremdung* (estrangement) to describe this state, referring to the separation

of elements that should naturally be unified (Rotenstreich 2022). It also captures the disharmony that arises among things that are meant to be in harmony.

The term *Entfremdung* is particularly used to illustrate social disconnection, such as individuals becoming estranged from their own human nature (*Gattungswesen*, or species-being), especially within a class-divided society (Rotenstreich 2022). In such a context, workers are alienated by the capitalist class, who control the means of production. During Marx's era, laborers were essentially reduced to tools for generating profit for landowners and capitalists. Although labor is the only possession of the worker, it ironically becomes the very source of their alienation. The more a worker labors, the more wealth they generate, not for themselves, but for the capitalist thereby deepening their estrangement. As a result, workers become alienated from themselves, their nature, their labor, the products of their labor, and even their fellow workers.

Marx outlines these ideas in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, where he discusses the exploitation and objectification of labor. He explores how capitalist systems alienate workers from their essential humanity, separating them from the products they create, the process of work, their fellow laborers, and their own species-being. This leads to deep social inequality and systemic exploitation.

Marx's theory is built on the understanding that humans are inherently social beings. He observed that human consciousness is socially conditioned and expressed primarily through labor. By shaping the world through work, humans express their essence. However, capitalism disrupts this expression by forcing people into narrow, specialized roles, thus denying them the opportunity to fully realize and own the fruits of their creativity. In this way, capitalism alienates individuals from their true nature.

SOURCES OF ALIENATION

Unlike Hegel, Marx did not equate alienation with objectification in general. Instead, he saw alienation as a specific issue tied to a particular type of economic system namely, one based on wage labour, where the products of labour become external objects that confront and dominate their creators. This distinction carries major political implications. While Hegel interpreted alienation as a fundamental feature of human existence tied to the nature of labour itself, Marx viewed it as a condition unique to the capitalist mode of production one that could potentially be overcome by abolishing private property. Marx further elaborated on this view in his notes on James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*, where he echoed similar arguments.

Labour would be the free expression and hence the enjoyment of life. In the framework of private property it is the alienation of life since I work in order to live, in order to procure for myself the means of life. My labour is not life. Moreover, in my labour

the specific character of my individuality would be affirmed because it would be my individual life. Labour would be authentic, active, property. In the framework of private property my individuality has been alienated to the point where I loathe this activity, it is torture for me. It is in fact no more than the appearance of activity and for that reason it is only a forced labour imposed on me not through an inner necessity but through an external arbitrary need (Mill 1826).

Even in his early, incomplete, and at times tentative writings, Marx consistently approached the concept of alienation as a historically specific phenomenon rather than a natural or universal condition. In Marx's theory of alienation, he recognizes three primary sources that contribute to the alienating conditions he describes. They are; private property, political economy, and the division of labor.

1. **Private Property:** Private property stands as one of the key sources of alienation in Marx's framework because it results in the concentration of wealth and capital in the hands of a few. In Marx's view, private property doesn't refer to personal possessions, but rather the control and ownership of the means of production. This includes resources and tools of production that are owned by individuals or entities who are not the producers or workers. Within a capitalist system, where private property dominates, the few who own the means of production dictate how society functions, leading to alienation. Musto (2010) writes, 'Marx advocates for the abolition of private property, as it inherently perpetuates social inequality and alienation.'
2. **Political Economy:** For Marx, political economy refers to the economic systems and theories that govern how society's production and distribution processes operate. However, Marx critiques political economy for failing to explain the origins of these systems and the division between labor, capital, and land. According to Marx, political economy begins with the assumption of private property but never sufficiently explains how it came to be. It presents abstract formulas that describe the material process of wealth generation but does not account for how these processes lead to the alienation of workers. Political economy assumes that the interests of the capitalists are the ultimate drivers of production, leaving no room for an equitable distribution of wealth. According to Howard, Howard, and King (1988), Marx points out that although political economy acknowledges that the product of labor originally belongs to the worker, in practice, workers only receive the bare minimum necessary to sustain themselves as workers, not as human beings, thus treating them as mere commodities. This treatment reinforces the alienation of the worker.
3. **Division of Labor and Exchange:** The division of labor involves breaking down work and the tools required for it, so that each worker is assigned a specialized, often monotonous task. This division limits the worker's ability to engage in other forms of

labor and diminishes their creativity. While the division of labor increases production and capital for the capitalist, it also results in alienation for the worker. Workers become more dependent on their labor to survive, and as the division of labor expands, so does the capitalist's wealth. This process fosters competition among workers, further separating them from each other. Ultimately, division of labor leads to a situation where the worker loses ownership of their products, their sense of joy in their labor, and even their connection to fellow workers, resulting in alienation from all aspects of their existence.

The primary cause of alienation, from the above, is private property. It is through the concentration of private property that we come to understand the concept of alienated labor (or alienated life) in political economy. Private property is a key source of alienation because it concentrates resources in the hands of a few capitalists who dictate how things are managed. This leaves workers enslaved to their needs and to the whims of the capitalist class. Another major factor contributing to alienation is political economy. According to Scott (2011), it defines the type of economic system that governs society and categorizes people into capitalists and workers. Political economy, in its essence, supports the capitalist class. As Marx notes, "the political economist tells us that everything is bought with labor and that capital is nothing but accumulated labor; but at the same time, he tells us that the worker, far from being able to buy everything, must sell himself and his humanity (Howard, Howard, and King 1988)." Political economy focuses primarily on the interests of the capitalist class, alienating the workers who are the true foundation of all production. The policies it generates cater mainly to the capitalists, neglecting the needs and welfare of the workers.

ASPECTS OF ALIENATION

The pivotal moment that greatly expanded the reach of the concept of alienation was the 1932 publication of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, a previously unpublished work from Marx's early years. This text quickly became one of the most widely translated and discussed philosophical works of the twentieth century, underscoring how central the idea of alienation was to Marx's evolving economic theory, particularly during his engagement with political economy. In these manuscripts, Marx extended the notion of alienation beyond philosophy, religion, and politics into the realm of economic production, arguing that the economic sphere was key to understanding and ultimately resolving alienation in all other areas. He introduced the idea of *alienated labour* (*entfremdete Arbeit*) and identified four key dimensions of alienation in capitalist society: (1) alienation from the product of labor, which appears as an external power over the worker; (2) alienation in the act of production itself, which the worker experiences as imposed and not his own; (3) alienation from the worker's own human essence or "species-being," which becomes something foreign to him; and (4) alienation from other people, particularly in their mutual relationships shaped by labor and its products (Yuill 2005).

Alienation from the Product of Labor: Under capitalism, workers are separated from the products they create, they do not own what they produce. Instead, their labor enriches someone else. Marx explains that as the worker produces more goods and wealth, he becomes poorer and less valuable as a human being. The very act of production reduces him to a commodity, just like the items he helps create. As more products are made, their value increases, but the worker's own value declines in proportion. O. Christ (2015) observes that this alienation is intensified by the fact that workers often cannot afford the goods they produce. Their creative efforts result in wealth they do not share in; instead, they are paid wages that often cannot secure the same commodities they help manufacture. The more they produce, the more power and profit are handed to the capitalist, while their own value diminishes.

Marx describes this as a situation in which the laborer's self-realization through work is inverted into self-loss, a situation where the worker becomes so detached from the product that even their own basic needs may go unmet. The worker is left powerless over the fruits of their own labor, which now stand as foreign and dominating entities. This results in a profound sense of helplessness and despair. Consequently, this aspect of alienation reveals that:

1. The worker has no ownership over the product.
2. The product is controlled by someone else (the capitalist).
3. Increased production enriches others, not the laborer.
4. Workers are often unable to purchase the very goods they create.
5. Labor becomes less valuable as more commodities are produced.

Alienation from the Act of Production: Pascal Brixel (2024) posits that workers are also alienated from the actual process of work. Labor becomes something external to them, something they are forced to do, not something they choose or enjoy. Instead of being a creative and fulfilling activity, work becomes routine, mechanical, and imposed. The worker's energy and life are spent not to satisfy personal or communal needs, but to serve the capitalist's profit. Chugh and Gupta (2020) agrees that, work is no longer an expression of human potential; it becomes a means of survival, something done under compulsion and not from genuine interest. This results in a loss of meaning in the act of production thus, what should be an activity that defines human life and creativity becomes something alien and burdensome. In other words, labor feels forced, not free. Workers do not control the process rather, they are controlled by it. Work becomes dehumanizing rather than fulfilling. The process itself becomes something alien and disconnected from the worker's identity.

Alienation from Man's Species-Being (Human Nature): Marx believed that human beings are naturally creative and social. Our "species-being" is realized through conscious and purposeful activity, especially through work that benefits society and expresses our humanity (Brixel 2024). But under capitalism, this natural essence is distorted. When labor is done only for wages and survival and not for communal benefit or personal fulfillment, humans are cut

off from what makes them truly human. Work becomes a means to an end, not an end in itself. This alienation from our human nature reduces us to mere tools of production rather than creative beings.

This exposes that people cannot express their full human potential because, labor is no longer a self-affirming activity. Workers are denied the ability to shape the world in their image thereby, humanity becomes secondary to profit and utility. Thus, engagement with nature allows humans to discover their own universality and opens the path to freedom, provided they see themselves not as dominators of nature, but as part of it, interacting with it as one of its forces. Plants, animals, air, light, and other elements of the natural world are not only essential to human consciousness appearing in science and art as “spiritual nourishment” but, they also form an integral part of practical human life and activity.

Alienation from Other Human Beings: Capitalism also separates individuals from each other. In a system where competition is valued over cooperation, people begin to see one another as rivals rather than fellow human beings. Relationships become transactional, shaped by market dynamics rather than mutual respect or community. This fosters isolation, hostility, and distrust. Workers are pitted against one another for jobs, wages, and recognition. Even relationships between laborers and capitalists are marked by exploitation, not mutual understanding. Human relationships are reduced to economic exchanges. Workers become competitors instead of collaborators. By implication, exploitation replaces cooperation and society becomes fragmented and individualistic.

THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF ASUU STRIKES

The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) was established in 1978, succeeding the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (founded in 1965), which initially represented lecturers at the University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Ahmadu Bello University, University of Ife, and University of Lagos (Hassan and Shuaib 2024). ASUU emerged during a period marked by the end of the oil boom and the onset of economic decline, which exposed the government’s failure to translate oil wealth into sustainable production and social welfare. Military rule during this period also suppressed civil liberties, eroding academic freedom and university autonomy. As education funding worsened, ASUU adopted a more radical stance, becoming vocally critical of the government's authoritarian and anti-democratic policies.

In 1980, ASUU declared a trade dispute, demanding greater university autonomy. Their clash with the Shagari administration (1980–1981) revolved around core concerns: inadequate funding, poor salaries, erosion of autonomy and academic freedom, mass emigration of academics (brain drain), and the broader threat to the university system’s survival (Olusegun 2014). Nsungu and Orabueze (2022) recounts that throughout the military era, ASUU consistently clashed with the government over critical issues including funding, conditions of

service (salaries and benefits), academic freedom, and university autonomy. The union also took a stand on wider national concerns such as opposition to military rule, the privatization agenda, Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), and the influence of the World Bank on higher education. One major instance was the World Bank's \$120 million loan under Babangida's regime and the Nigerian Universities Innovation Project (NUSIP), which ASUU criticized (Aidelunuoghene 2014).

During Obasanjo's civilian regime, ASUU framed its struggle in terms of resisting economic recolonization and national debt enslavement. In response to these economic and political challenges, ASUU organized a national conference in 1984 titled *How to Save Nigeria*, which offered a critical assessment of Nigeria's economy and proposed policy solutions across sectors including industry, agriculture, taxation, debt servicing, and labor (Uzowulu 2020). ASUU's activism also extended to supporting other professional unions (Odiagbe 2012). In 1985, the Buhari-Idiagbon regime cracked down on the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and the National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD), both of whom received support from ASUU (Aidelunuoghene 2014). The government responded by arresting, detaining, and dismissing leaders from all three associations. Oseghale (2005), recorded in his work, *University trade unions and national development: The case of ASUU Up To 1993*;

...also in 1985, ASUU opposed several policies of the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, such as the removal of university cafeteria systems and accommodation subsidies. A major flashpoint was Decree 16 of 1985, which gave the National Universities Commission (NUC) authority over academic program regulation, powers that previously belonged to university senates. This decree imposed standardized benchmarks labeled as "minimum standards," shifting curriculum control away from academic professionals. In 1986, ASUU joined the broader resistance against Babangida's regime, especially after the imposition of SAP and the IMF's harsh loan conditions, which led to economic hardship across sectors. The killing of students at Ahmadu Bello University by a police unit during protests intensified opposition. ASUU's resistance made it a target of the regime, which retaliated by initiating inquiries. The Abisoye Panel, for instance, accused certain lecturers at ABU of teaching subversive content, while the Akanbi Panel was tasked with examining the role of university staff in the unrest. However, the Akanbi Panel's findings were never made public.

Clearly, the military regime did not achieve its objectives. In response, the Babangida administration, in 1988, severed ASUU's affiliation with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and attempted to weaken the union further by making union dues optional.

During the Obasanjo administration (1999–2007), a different more subtle strategy was employed. In collaboration with the World Bank, the government sought to abolish centralized

bargaining within universities, effectively undermining the June 30, 2001 Agreement (Anyanwu 2011). This initiative included ending collective bargaining, introducing tuition fees, accepting a \$68 million loan, implementing staff retrenchments, among other measures, all under a World Bank project known as NUSIP. NUSIP was essentially a rebranded version of the earlier \$120 million loan from the World Bank, which had sparked severe conflict between ASUU and Babangida's regime, including the illegal dismissal of ASUU's president (Olusegun 2014).

In 2007, ASUU embarked on a three-month strike. The following year, in May 2008, the union organized two one-week warning strikes to demand, among other things, a better salary structure and the reinstatement of 49 lecturers dismissed by the University of Ilorin. By June 2009, ASUU declared an indefinite nationwide strike across both federal and state universities due to the government's failure to implement agreements made roughly two and a half years earlier (Bello and ISA 2016). This strike ended after three months when ASUU and other academic unions signed a memorandum of understanding with the federal government in October 2009. However, the government later violated the terms of this 2009 agreement, prompting another strike by ASUU that began on July 1, 2013 and also on February 14th, 2022. It is a mistake to view ASUU's strikes as merely demands for salary increases. The current strike, for example, goes beyond remuneration, it is about reviving the quality and integrity of Nigeria's university system. ASUU maintains that the government must commit to delivering good governance, which translates into tangible improvements in citizens' quality of life and increased life expectancy. Furthermore, the government should properly fund universities and enforce a clear code of conduct for academic staff. Fundamentally, ASUU's negotiations with the government always consider the broader welfare of the Nigerian populace.

ASUU'S LEGACY OF STRUGGLE AND RESISTANCE

The history of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) is marked by continuous struggle, characterized by ongoing conflicts with successive governments, both military and civilian. However, these struggles have also been instrumental in shaping the limited successes achieved within Nigeria's university system. Despite this, many Nigerians mistakenly view ASUU as the main obstacle to progress in higher education due to their frequent resort to strike actions. Strikes, however, are a peaceful means of protest that help avoid the dangers associated with street demonstrations and road blockades. In truth, strikes have served as a critical tool for advocating transformation within the university system and without them, Nigerian higher education might have deteriorated further. While ASUU was initially formed to advocate for better welfare and conditions for its members, its mandate has expanded significantly over time. The union has also championed broader issues such as quality education for all Nigerians and good governance. Notably as Nwikipo and Ojukwu (2022) stated, it is the persistent advocacy of ASUU that led to the creation of the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) when the government was at a loss on how to adequately support public universities. The

union's resistance has been consistent, regardless of whether the country was under military or democratic leadership. Many believed that transitioning to civilian rule would improve the situation, but the challenges have persisted. For example, during both the military and civilian era, ASUU organized various national strike demanding fair wages and institutional autonomy. Strikes have been occurring since the 90s till date and majorly, ASUU's struggles were centered on;

1. **Wages and Conditions of Service: MUSA and ABDULLAHI** agrees, like most labour unions, one of ASUU's primary objectives since its establishment in 1978 has been to address the issue of inadequate salaries and poor working conditions for academic staff. In the early post-independence period of the 1960s, university lecturers in Nigeria were well-compensated, enjoying salaries that surpassed those of civil servants and military personnel. However, this changed dramatically following the rise of military rule in 1966. Over time, Nigerian academics experienced a decline in both economic and social standing, shifting from a secure middle-class status to one of increasing marginalization. This shift marked a significant departure from their previously elite position and was largely due to stagnant wages and allowances that failed to keep pace with those in the civil service and in universities across Africa.
2. **Funding and Infrastructure:** According to Nwokeocha (2023) a major contributor to the persistent disputes between ASUU and the Nigerian Federal Government is the chronic underfunding of universities and the neglect of their infrastructure. Academic staff often view their struggle not merely as one for improved working conditions, but as a defense of the very sustainability and quality of higher education institutions in the country. Research findings indicate that government allocations to the education sector are not only inadequate but also inconsistent and unreliable. As a share of the national GDP, education funding remains significantly low. Although the government has initiated various university development projects over time, most of these initiatives have failed to achieve their intended outcomes. Budget constraints exacerbated by competing national priorities, continue to limit financial support for universities, which are heavily reliant on government funds, especially for operational expenses. Inadequate physical infrastructure such as dormitories, lecture halls, and staff offices, along with insufficient learning resources like libraries and laboratories, further compound the crisis. Moreover, existing facilities are often poorly maintained, and funding for research remains minimal. Several factors contribute to the financial challenges in higher education, including corruption, poor governance, lack of accountability, and misallocation of resources within both government and university administrations. There is a clear link between unmet institutional needs and the likelihood of industrial unrest. In the context of Nigerian universities, the consequences of insufficient funding have manifested in declining academic services, frequent industrial actions, student protests, class boycotts, and even violent uprisings.
3. **Population Growth:** The steady rise in student enrolment has significantly strained the

infrastructure and resources of Nigerian universities. As more students are admitted each year, facilities become overcrowded and the student-to-teacher ratio continues to widen, creating a serious manpower deficit in these institutions. This growing imbalance has increased the workload of academic staff, further intensifying existing challenges. One of the underlying factors worsening the situation is the unattractive salary and working conditions of university lecturers, which has led to a persistent 'brain drain' as many qualified academics leave for better opportunities abroad. To address the growing demand for university education, which far exceeds available spaces, the government has justified the deregulation of university ownership as a way to expand access. Despite these efforts, a significant portion of prospective students, ranging between 60% and 80%—are still unable to gain admission each year (Hassan and Shuaib 2024). As previously discussed, when limited resources are unevenly distributed or contested such as in the case of lecturers and students competing for inadequate facilities, conflict becomes almost inevitable due to the resulting disparities.

4. **Unfavourable Macroeconomic Policies:** The conflict between Nigerian university workers and the federal government has been exacerbated by detrimental economic policies. Two major manifestations of these policies are persistent inflation and a burdensome external debt. Typically, rising living costs drive workers to demand better wages to maintain their standard of living. However, when salary increases do not match inflation, purchasing power declines, leading to deepening poverty. This scenario has played out for Nigerian academics and the broader workforce. Over the years, Nigeria and many other African nations have faced economic downturns marked by mounting debt, high inflation, and worsening trade conditions. As a result, these countries became marginalized in the global economy or engaged with it under highly unequal terms. This economic downturn eroded the middle class, including university lecturers, who found it increasingly difficult to sustain their standard of living. In effect, many academics have been pushed into economic hardship, a process akin to *proletarianization* (Nwokeocha 2023). Consequently, ASUU's struggle has taken on characteristics of a class struggle. What began as a typical industrial dispute has evolved into a more overtly political movement, opposing what the union perceives as elitist economic policies that undermine national interests.

From the above, it is evident that in safeguarding the university system, ASUU's history is one of negotiation and advocacy. Yet, the core issue is not the lack of dialogue but the consistent failure of successive governments to implement agreements reached with the union especially that of 2009. Understanding this legacy of struggle offers important insights into the systemic issues plaguing Nigerian public universities and helps dispel the misconceptions often associated with ASUU's actions.

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON ASUU'S ALIENATION

Alienation is a social and political condition that separates elements which should naturally coexist. It disrupts harmony and makes disconnection seem normal, though it is inherently harmful. Marx's theory of alienation emphasizes this distortion, asserting that what is wrong should not be accepted as normal. For Marx, human beings are social creatures who derive meaning through their creative work but, capitalism strips them of this satisfaction. Alienation is a socio-political condition that hampers both individual well-being and national development. As Karl Marx highlighted, alienation reflects the human condition under oppressive systems, bringing to light dis-connect and fragmentation within society. The struggles of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) are often misunderstood because few have examined them through the lens of alienation. According to *The Short Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, alienation is "any of various social or psychological evils characterized by harmful separation, disruption, or fragmentation that sunders things which properly belong together (Craig 2005)." ASUU, as an academic union, has experienced these effects deeply, though this reality is largely unacknowledged. Alienation is not always obvious; it manifests in various forms. This is why many Nigerians wrongly perceive ASUU as the main cause of repeated strikes, without considering the structural injustices they are responding to.

Viewing ASUU's struggle through the lens of Marx's alienation theory, Agbam, Okocha, and Tartsea-Anshase sheds light on the plight of the union and its members. They believe that Nigerian lecturers, like the workers in Marx's analysis, have had their livelihoods undermined by a government that plays the role of the capitalist oppressor. Marx argued that humans demonstrate their social consciousness through labour. It is through transforming nature and producing goods that humans assert their humanity, what he called their *species-being*. The emergence of ASUU reflects this alienation, as university lecturers were being disregarded and marginalized in their own profession. Their former body, the Nigerian Association of University Teachers (NAUT), was ineffective, prompting the creation of ASUU as a more active and assertive union. Feeling neglected or mistreated often provokes resistance, just as Marx predicted. The following ways explains how ASUU is being alienated by the Nigerian government;

1. **Alienation from the Product of Labour:** Yusuf and Ibrahim (2024) notes that becoming a university lecturer in Nigeria demands a long, costly, and rigorous academic journey. Yet after this sacrifice, lecturers find themselves underpaid and often unpaid for months. They produce the knowledge and train the professionals who run the nation, but their own labour is not respected or rewarded. This mirrors Marx's concept of being alienated from the product of one's labour. Despite their intellectual output, lecturers feel used, undervalued, and helpless. In many cases, they are owed salaries for months, evidence of systemic neglect.

2. **Alienation from the Production Process:** ASUU's demand for university autonomy

stems from government interference in university governance. The Federal government frequently overrides established procedures, appointing university officials at will and dismissing staff without just cause. For instance, under President ShehuShagari, six lecturers were dismissed for opposing government actions. This reflects Marx's idea that workers are alienated from the production process, when control over their work and workplace is taken away from them. University staff have no job security, nor meaningful influence in shaping institutional decisions, which deepens their sense of powerlessness.

3. **Alienation from Species-Being:** This aspect of alienation occurs when work no longer provides fulfillment but becomes a mere means of survival. Patience (2023) stated, many Nigerian lecturers no longer find joy or purpose in their profession. She recognized that the poor remuneration, lack of government support, and unfulfilled agreements reduce their work to a struggle for survival. The intellectual and creative potential that once defined their profession is stifled. This leads to brain drain, as many academics leave the country for better opportunities abroad. Lecturers are alienated from their human essence, their ability to freely express their creativity and purpose through meaningful work.
4. **Alienation of Man from Man:** This form of alienation creates conflict and misunderstanding among people. When lecturers are underpaid and overworked, it leads to frustration that may be passed on to students. Some lecturers resort to exploiting students financially just to survive (Azunwo 2022). As a result, students and parents view ASUU as the enemy of academic progress, blaming them for strikes and school closures. This misperception overlooks the deeper systemic failures that fuel ASUU's protests. The union's actions are a response to their alienation, not its cause.

Marx's notion of alienation is not abstract rather, it reflects the real, lived experiences of people under exploitative systems. In ASUU's case, it explains how professionals who invested years in education and training end up undervalued, underpaid, and mistreated. Their struggles are a response to deep-seated structural injustices, not mere disruption. Understanding ASUU through this philosophical lens reveals the depth of their crisis and the need for meaningful reforms in Nigeria's higher education system.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

A reevaluation of ASUU's situation is necessary, their history reveals the real obstacles to progress in Nigeria's higher education system. When the very institution tasked with nurturing the nation's youth becomes the target of systemic neglect and hostility, failure is inevitable. The Nigerian government must rise to its responsibility of supporting and developing the educational sector. While the country possesses the resources to improve its universities, the government's actions suggest a lack of genuine commitment, especially as officials continue

to send their children abroad for education and seek medical care outside the country. This is an unfortunate contradiction that needs urgent correction. Thus, education should be prioritized, and academic staff must be respected and supported. The researchers recommends that the government must promptly pay lecturers their wages, increase their salaries when necessary, and honor all agreements made with ASUU. These are not just administrative obligations, they are signs that the nation values its intellectual foundation. Education is the backbone of every developed society, and adequate investment in it is non-negotiable.

Lecturers, like all workers, are human beings deserving of dignity and fair treatment. Alienation is a harmful and dehumanizing condition, but it can also awaken a sense of solidarity. Through shared experiences of alienation, we can foster empathy and strive for a more humane society. As Joseph Sawan (2011) argues, “Marx’s theory of alienation can prove fruitful in understanding social movement activity and promoting social justice. At the center of collective action is hope and vision for an alternative future, a strategy for de-alienation.” Abraham (2023) believes that if the Federal Government and ASUU can move past antagonism and collaborate with mutual respect, Nigeria’s education system will be revitalized and able to compete on the global stage. The conflict persists largely because both parties view each other as opposing forces, rather than partners in national development. Cooperation, dialogue, and shared responsibility are the keys to transforming Nigeria’s higher education into a system that serves both the nation and the world. Undervaluing something essential simply because there are alternatives is a serious issue. Alienation remains a prominent challenge in our modern society, and ASUU has experienced it firsthand. The key question becomes: how can this problem be resolved and normalcy restored? Like all human challenges, the alienation of ASUU is not insurmountable. A solution is possible especially when both parties choose to act with reason and mutual understanding. Reasoned collaboration between ASUU and the Federal Government can help reduce tensions and restore a sense of belonging and purpose to the academic workforce, and to create a more supportive academic environment, the government must improve working conditions for lecturers and ensure timely payment of salaries. Such efforts would go a long way in making academic work both fulfilling and dignified. Agbam, Okocha, and Tartsea-Anshase recognizes that cooperation, not conflict, is essential to ending the conditions that have alienated ASUU and, by extension, contributed to negative practices in Nigerian universities such as bribery, extortion, the unethical sale of academic materials, and sexual misconduct. These issues are symptoms of a deeper systemic alienation that is often ignored.

As human beings, we derive meaning and satisfaction from our work, Marx emphasized that when our labor no longer brings joy but merely serves as a means to survival, alienation takes root and with it, instability and discontent. It is therefore essential that we treat workers with dignity and make them feel secure in their roles. A workforce that feels betrayed or unappreciated will inevitably contribute to broader societal dysfunction. ASUU’s struggle to reform Nigeria’s educational system is, at its core a broader struggle to reform Nigeria itself. Education is the foundation upon which any nation builds its future. When education is

neglected, national development slows. As Marx aptly observed, the liberation of workers is a step toward the emancipation of all humanity because all forms of societal oppression stem from the fundamental relationship between labor and production. In essence, to rescue Nigeria's educational sector is to secure the future of the nation. This can only be achieved when academic staff and other workers are treated with fairness, respect, and appreciation. As Marx reminds us, when workers are free and valued, the whole society benefits (Balibar 2017).

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