

One Hundred Years of Dialectics: Macondo and the Dynamics of History

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ABSTRACT

*Marx described the development of human societies in terms of 'historical materialism'. Societies evolve through 'dialectic', an internal process of contradictions. The change in 'tools of production' brings about change in 'superstructure'. For Marx, it is not the 'ideas' that change 'material conditions' of existence but it is the other way round. The initial primitive stages of history came to an end through their internal contradictions and gave birth to more advanced stages. In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the village of Macondo can be taken as a microcosm, a small scale world which also follows these stages of 'historical materialism'. In the beginning, it is just a small apolitical community but later on, it evolves into a coherent social formation and towards the end it reaches an advanced stage of capitalism. The paper explores this evolution in the light of Marx's concept of history and how developments in matter affect the social structure.*

It is customary to interpret *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a historical narrative but as we see that the relationship between history and fiction is an ambivalent one. History, just like fiction, follows a 'narrative pattern' and a 'chronological sequence of events' but the aspect in which they differ is their 'content'. Fiction is what we call 'an imaginative discourse', something "constructed" rather than "found" (White, 1984). But despite this distinction that underlies the fictional and historical discourses, the boundary that separates the two is not often well-defined. Sometimes the fictional world goes beyond the 'mere history' as it constructs something that is 'temporal' as well as 'timeless'. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* creates a fictional world, a fantastical panorama, where the real and the magical exist side by side. Its time sequence is non-linear to say the least, though its overall structure does follow a chronological order in the depiction of events that shape and reshape the destiny of Buendia family. Looking at it in this perspective, the novel is a kind of history, though it would be too simplistic to describe it so. A narrative like this cannot be limited to or boxed into such rigid categories. But here I would not delve into this 'fictional/historical' debate as this is the subject of many other studies. Rather it would be interesting to interpret the novel in relation to Marx's concept of 'historical materialism' and relate it to the history of the fictional town of Macondo.

Marx divided society into two elements 'economic base' and 'superstructure' but the relationship between the two is dialectical i.e. not only the base gives rise to superstructure but in some cases superstructure also affects the base.

Marxist conception of history is based upon this dialectical relationship and how in the epochs of human history, it transforms social structures. Marx discussed his 'Materialistic Concept of History' in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness. (Marx, 1977, p. 389-390)

Productive forces are the forces or things through which human beings produce or in other words "means of production" and in an agrarian society, the productive forces would be land, plough and ox and in an industrial society these would be factories, machines buildings etc. In turn these productive forces give rise to the relations of production or the relation between the people. What we want to establish here is the fact that relations of production are directly linked with the means of production. Marx says that as the means of production change, they also bring about changes in the social relations and the ideology of a society. Marx puts it rather directly: "The hand mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist" (Marx, 1977, p. 202).

The change in the base and consequently in the superstructure is caused by an internal process of contradictions called dialectic. Dialectic is a process in which contradictions in material conditions give birth to new means of production and consequently in the relations of production. On the basis of this philosophy of historical materialism, Marx has described six stages in the development of social formation. In this study I would analyze the history of Macondo in relation to four of them.

The first stage described by Marx is that of primitive communism. The stage probably begins at the dawn of human history. At this stage there everything is owned by the community and there is no concept of private property, leadership, slaves or servants. The community consists of a small number of houses and everything is shared by its members. At the beginning of the novel, Macondo is village very much similar to this form of primitive communism.

At that time Macondo was a village of twenty adobe houses, built on the bank of a river of clear water that ran along a bed of polished stones, which were white and enormous, like prehistoric eggs. The world was so

recent that things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point. (Marquez, 1967, p. 1)

As the village was founded by Buendia family so they are the self proclaimed head of the community. Gypsies are their only link to the outside world as they come every year with their new inventions and entertainments. We see that at this stage there is no political or economical system in Macondo and everything has retained a kind of primitive simplicity. Even the scientific experiments made by Jose Arcadio Buendia are pretty naïve ones as he has no basis in scientific method and just uses his intuition. The expedition that he leads to find the link to the outside world also fails as they lack necessary instruments and means to do that. So the first part of the novel, a kind of primitive communism cannot last long. When Jose Arcadio goes away with the gypsies and his mother Ursula tries to find him, they open up Macondo to the outside world and this, as we come to know, proves to be cataclysmic for the community. The internal contradictions of which Marx talks about bring about the decline of one stage in human history. In case of Macondo, we can clearly see that its primitive form of life cannot survive that test of time. One way or the other, it must come to terms with the outside world and this exposure would transform it for good or bad. But this does not mean that a society is completely destroyed. Rather these contradictions give birth to a new form of social hierarchy and there is a forward movement.

The second stage in historical materialism is that of feudalism. Though Marx was talking about this stage with reference to European feudalism and it is hard to find its parallel in Latin American countries yet there are some elements in the history of Macondo that resemble this historical epoch. Feudalism was the first stage in human history that organized societies in form of political units. There was a social hierarchy with feudal lord at the top and serfs and slaves at the bottom. For the first time the concept of government was introduced. The serfs would work on the land and produce crops which would be traded with other communities. This gave birth to a new class of merchants. The land owning classes became very powerful and the affairs of the state would be in their hands. This also introduced different forms of oppression and exploitation. Political ideologies like liberalism and conservatism also emerged. This second stage surfaces in Macondo when the first government agent, Magistrate Don Apolinar Mascote comes to the town and establishes his office there. The first order that he decrees is that the new Buendia house should be painted blue instead of white. This infuriates Jose Arcadio Buendia and he confronts the man violently.

“In this town we do not give orders with pieces of paper”. He said without losing his calm. “And so that you know it once and for all, we don’t need any judges here because there is nothing that needs judging.” (Marquez, 1967, p. 57)

After that Jose Arcadio Buendia explains to him that the village was not a developed 'polity', rather it has sustained its primitive communism.

Facing Don Apolinar Mascote, still without raising his voice, he gave a detailed account of how they had founded the village, of how they had distributed the land, opened the roads, and introduced the improvements that necessity required without having bothered the government and without anyone having bothered them..... No one was upset that the government had not helped them. On the contrary, they were happy that up until then it had let them grow in peace, and he hoped that it would continue leaving them that way, because they had not founded a town so that the first upstart who came along would tell them what do to (p. 57).

The dialectics of history—the clash of the opposites has already begun. This outside influence also brings with it a kind of awareness that Macondo is not just an isolated island but its destiny must be understood in terms of a sociological whole of which it is just a part. Arrival of the magistrate is the first indication that Macondo is not just a self-sufficient primitive social structure. Secondly, at this stage the inhabitants of the village realize this fact that societies require a socio-political ideological base and must have a governmental structure. The concept of democracy and the ensuing debate between liberal and conservative ideologies was the inevitable result of this awareness and the Macondians not only accept this dialectical change but also become active participants in this political conflict. Ironically, Colonel Aurliano learns about liberal ideology from a conservative—his father-in-law, the magistrate himself.

The Liberals were determined to go to war. Since Aureliano at that time had very confused notions about the difference between Conservatives and Liberals, his father-in-law gave him some schematic lessons. The Liberals, he said, were Freemasons, bad people, wanting to hang priests, to institute civil marriage and divorce, to recognize the rights of illegitimate children as equal to those of legitimate ones, and to cut the country up into a federal system that would take power away from the supreme authority. The Conservatives, on the other hand, who had received their power directly from God, proposed the establishment of public order and family morality. They were the defenders of the faith of Christ, of the principle of authority, and were not prepared to permit the country to be broken down into autonomous entities. (p. 98)

All this controversial political wrangling confuses Colonel Aureliano and he "could not understand how people arrived at the extreme of waging war over things that could not be touched with hands" (p. 99). As we see that this conflict turns the paradisiacal island of Macondo into a highly charged political battleground. In a way, it is a movement from innocence to knowledge, and

Macondo pays a high price for that. From now on its social structure would never be the same.

Up till now Macondo was a real primitive communist society but as it opens its gate and starts looking at itself as part of a broader political milieu, its constitutional make up makes room for institutional restructuring. I have already mentioned the introduction of proper governmental structure but the most important outcome of this development is the concept of private property. Before that there was no such thing as private ownership and capital in Macondo. The land was divided among the inhabitants equally. Jose Arcadio is the first person in the history of the village who tries to grab the lands of other villagers. He seizes the lands of other people and collects illegal taxes from the farmers.

Years later, when Colonel Aureliano Buendia examined the titles to property, he found registered in his brother's name all of the land between the hill where his yard was on up to the horizon, including the cemetery, and discovered that during the eleven months of his rule, Arcadio had collected not only the money of the contributions, but had also collected fees from people for the right to bury their dead in Jose Arcadio's land. (p. 117)

Marx says that private property is the main source of exploitation in a social formation. The people, who own lands or capital, use their power to exploit the under-privileged. Jose Arcadio uses his physical strength and status to subdue the other poor farmers. At this stage, Macondo has already lost its primitiveness and it is prepared to enter into the next historical stage.

The third stage in the dialectic of history is that of capitalism. Capitalism is marked by free market economy in which business and trade forces are concentrated in form of very powerful multinational companies. The means of production are no longer in the hands of feudal class but rather they are monitored by the capitalists. The form of government is parliamentary democracy but all factions of society do not have equal representation because of the class system. Capitalism keeps the working class in this illusion that they are paid exactly the value of their labour but actually this is not so. The surplus money generated through this labour is turned into profit for the capitalists and is used to exploit the working class.

The village of Macondo enters this stage of history with the construction of railroad. Nobody could have guessed that such an unassuming event would give rise to such catastrophic occurrences. "The innocent yellow train that was to bring so many ambiguities and certainties, so many pleasant and unpleasant moments, so many changes, calamities, and feelings of nostalgia to Macondo" (Marquez, 1967, p. 228). Along with other novelties and changes, the train also brings with it 'American Fruit Company', a typical multinational capitalist corporation. It transforms the village in an uncanny manner and builds a

microcosm of its own; “streets lined with palm trees, houses with screened windows, small white tables on terraces” (p. 233). But above all this company descended on Macondo with the might of a god as its arrival proves to be cataclysmic in many ways. “Endowed with means that had been reserved for Divine Providence in former times, they changed the patterns of the rains; accelerated the cycle of harvests, and moved the river from where it had always been and put it with its white stones and icy currents on the other side of the town, behind the cemetery” (p. 233). The company provided jobs to thousands of people but it exploits them by paying low wages, long working hours and poor working conditions. This goes on for quite some time and the workers get agitated. This is when they decide to record their protest.

Capitalism, because of its excessive coerciveness and exploitation, cannot survive for long as its inherent contradictions cause its downfall. Initially, workers are not conscious of their exploitation and think that metaphysical rather than material causes are responsible for their sufferings. Gradually, they gain class consciousness and realize the need to overthrow this system. If this worker’s revolt is successful, society will enter into the next stage called Socialism. Jose Arcadio Segundo and some other union leaders decide to arrange a strike against American Fruit Company. “The protests of the workers this time were based on the lack of sanitary facilities in their living quarters, the nonexistence of medical services, and terrible working conditions” (p. 305).

There are also other complaints like the way sick labourers were treated by company doctors and how the company pays its workers in scrip which could only be exchanged at company’s own commissaries (p. 305). The first step that the government takes is to arrest the union leaders. As it is already mentioned that state institutions assist the capitalist corporation like American Fruit Company and always protect their interests and the same thing happens in Macondo. For example, when the workers decide to file a case against the company, their case does not get registered for a long time and then when it comes to the court, Mr. Brown, the owner of the company, just disappears and the law fails to do anything against him. When the workers cannot make their voices heard they go for the last option. “The great strike broke out. Cultivation stopped half way, the fruit rotted on the trees and the hundred-twenty-car trains remained on the sidings. The idle workers overflowed the town” (p. 307).

The American Fruit Company cannot allow this state of affairs to go on for long as it is detrimental to their repute and business. So Mr. Brown pulls some strings and the conservative government decides to send army to the region. The army arrives with their ominous guns and equipment and all that. “Martial law enabled the army to assume the functions of arbitrator in the controversy, but no effort at conciliation was made. As soon as they appeared in Macondo, the soldiers put aside their rifles and cut and loaded the bananas and start the train running” (p. 308).

But when the state of affairs does not improve for a long time the company puts pressure on the government to use force to crush the rebellion. The crowd of estimated three thousand workers gathers at the station on Friday. “The army blocks all the passages and then the decree signed by General Carlos Cortes Vargas is read in which the protesters are declared as ‘bunch of hoodlum’ and the army is authorized to shoot them” (p. 310).

Fourteen machine guns fire at them and mayhem ensues. Jose Arcadio Segundo observes all this as a surrealist dream. When he wakes up he finds himself alive on the train of the dead. The three thousand workers, who were just recording the protest against the inhuman treatment they suffered through the hands of their masters, lost their lives and were thrown into the sea like “rejected bananas” (p. 312). And thus the uprising of the working class is crushed in such a manner that even those who are alive cannot mourn their dead. The fourth stage of socialism is not to come.

Hegel conceived human history as “the development of the idea of freedom” (Hegel, 1956). This dynamic conception of history, which is based upon Hegel’s dialectic, is in fact an odyssey of human spirit towards its destined aim. From the primitive Oriental societies to the modern Prussian state, every event in human history had a definite goal and significance (Hegel, 1956).

Marx took this “dialectic of spirit” and transformed it into the “dialectic of material forces” that shape and mould the dynamics of history (1955). We see that the Macondo’s history can be explained in terms of Hegel/Marx dialectics but the difference is that dialectic is a linear process, always moving forward in time. But Macondo’s history is somewhat cyclic; it comes into existence out of nowhere and towards the end of narrative, it is wiped off the surface of the earth. It does not reach the higher stages of development as Hegel and Marx envisaged. Does it mean that Marquez’s conception of history is pessimistic? Apparently, it appears so but if we look at it from a different angle, we would see that Marquez does not seem to be concerned with Being/Nothingness binary. Rather he has narrated a story which can be called ‘Becoming’. History is a process, a journey and not a destination. Whether one reaches the destination or not, it does not matter. What really matters is the way you tread on the path of life. Buendias live, love, hate and fight in their own way and on their own terms and this perhaps is the gist of the argument. Macondo is a microcosm, a small Columbia, or a small world, whichever way we put it, but above all it is a village that exists, perhaps, in the imagination of every man.

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