

**Rethinking Political Instability in Nigeria: A Case  
for Bergson's Process Metaphysics.**

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**Abstract:** *This paper is a study in politics and metaphysics. It is an attempt at presenting a metaphysical foundation of political instability in Nigeria. Instability in Nigeria is a topical issue that keeps threatening the unity of the country. However, the various efforts instituted by successive government at ameliorating the issue have often proven abortive. Instead, it steadily progresses, becoming even more creative in its mode of emergence. Unarguably, there is novelty in the unfolding of instability in Nigeria. Most worrisome is the fact that it has, of recent, assumed an institutional status where some people, especially the political class, have seen in it, the opportunity to force the government to re-negotiate economically, and because of this, the trend of insecurity in Nigeria has gone regional. Using the hermeneutic method of philosophical investigation, which focuses on interpretation, the paper attempts a metaphysical interpretation of political instability in Nigeria in light of Henri Bergson's process thought. As a metaphysics, the paper maintains that there is an underlying reality that is responsible for the progressive nature of instability in the country. The paper, therefore, recommends that ending the cycle of instability in Nigeria will demand that its metaphysical cause be arrested, else, the situation will persist in more creative ways.*

**Key Words:** Keywords: Political instability, metaphysics, reality, process metaphysics, inequality

### **Introduction**

The society can be likened to a living organism and like organisms, it also undergoes changes. Unlike organisms, however, society is driven by a force of human activities. But whether the cause of change in the society is human or not, it is paramount for us to embrace the reality of change in nature; this is because experience has shown to us that events in the physical world constantly unfold. Apparently, change is more metaphysical than physical, and in trying to explain the physical change, there may be need to investigate its metaphysical principles, if our claim to such understanding must be justified. Change is associated with transformation and involves progress which is creative. In other words, the present must be better than the future. But this can also take the negative turn, hence, negative progress.

There is a "reality" behind every progress and this underlying reality is what we call the metaphysics of such existent. And our understanding of progress in the human society will be blurry without an investigation of the underlying reality. As a country, Nigeria has witnessed a steady progress of political instability from independence till date. In recent times, it is very sophisticated. However, as political thinkers, scholars and leaders of the country attempt to assuage the problem of instability, it seems to proliferate. The reason for this is because the various attempt to address the problem is without recourse to its foundation. This paper therefore, investigates the metaphysics of political instability in Nigeria. It is a study in hermeneutic, hence, the paper employs the process metaphysics of Henri Bergson as a method to explain the progressive and creative nature of political instability in Nigeria.

## **Explication of Terms**

### **Metaphysics**

The term "metaphysics" is a derivation of the Greek word "meta ta physika," which literally translates "after the physics," of which the concept "physics" does not imply the pure science subject that is concerned with mechanics, but simply that which is physical. Hence, metaphysics from its etymology, simply implies the knowledge of things that are beyond the physical. However, this etymological definition is deficient because it is limited in scope; it does not cover the whole gamut of the discipline. Accordingly, metaphysics has been given various descriptions thus: it is the study of being; it is the study of ultimate reality; it is the study of first principles. While each of these descriptions covers a particular area of the discipline, their indepth explanation is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, Umotong, offers a more simplified meaning of metaphysics. According to him, metaphysics, either an academic discipline or branch of philosophy, is "primarily a study that is focused on unraveling that which is real and the underlying principles behind anything that exists." Going further, he asserts that it is the study of "being," where 'being' is contextually applied in both senses as the essence of things and as the real existence - both in the physical and beyond the physical".<sup>1</sup> The meaning of metaphysics as offered by Umotong is, indeed, very relevant to this work. This is because metaphysics is concerned with the study of being (or reality) in all its ramifications in every given discipline. There is a reality that every discipline cum intellectual endeavour strives to attain. Viewed from this context, therefore, metaphysics entails a generic concept that captures the underlying reality of any subject matter.

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<sup>1</sup> Umotong, *Exploration of metaphysics* (Jakarta: Robert Minder International Limited, 2018), 1.

### **Process Metaphysics**

Process philosophy puts existence as a process at the forefront of intological concerns. As Hussein Inusah conceptualizes it, process metaphysics is a "philosophical tradition that recommends becoming, changing and dynamism over the static being conceived by traditional metaphysics".<sup>2</sup> As a metaphysical tradition, process philosophizing is traceable to the doctrine of Heraclitus of Ephesus, a classical metaphysician who was of the position that flux is the true nature of reality.

### **Reality**

The concept "reality" as adopted in this paper is metaphysically used. Accordingly, we define reality as the totality of all that there is or the sum total of everything that there is which lies in wait for investigation, to be brought to light, or made visible to the naked eyes.<sup>3</sup>

### **Political Instability**

Political instability has been defined separately depending on the indices that a particular scholar employs. However, the concept is defined here through the application of three approaches. In the first approach, we can conceive of political instability as the preference for change of government. In the second approach, which is very important to this paper, we can define political instability as a situation of political violence in a society such as demonstrations, kidnapping, banditry and terrorism. In the third sense, it is a focus on

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<sup>2</sup> Inusah Hamza, "Alfred North Whitehead and process metaphysics," in *Summa philosophica: An introduction to philosophy and logic* (North Carolina: Lulu press, 2011), 260-267.

<sup>3</sup> Ephraim-Stephen Essien, *Summa philosophica: An introduction to philosophy and logic* (North Carolina: Lulu Press, 2011), 55.

the degree to which fundamental policies are subject to frequent changes.<sup>4</sup>

### **An Overview of Bergson's Process Metaphysics**

In his process philosophy, Henri Bergson sees cosmic development as the evolution of life. He conceives life as a dynamite or a 'bombshell' which exploded at the beginning of the universe and its fragmented part ever since continued to explode in different directions in the universe. For Bergson, if we can talk of the history of the universe, then it would, be the history of the expansion of life following an evolutionary course.<sup>5</sup> Bergson's philosophy of evolution is contained in his book, *Creative Evolution*, where he maintains that evolution is creative and rejects both the mechanistic and the teleological theories of evolution. He conceives of evolution as the history of the struggle of the *elan vital*, that is, the struggle of the vital impulse.

*Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy* by Samuel Stumpf and James Fieser tells us that Bergson focused on the process in all things that he called duration, that is, becoming.<sup>6</sup> Duration, he argued, constitutes the continuous stream of experience in which we live. In his *Creative Evolution*, Bergson express:

If our existence were composed of separate state with an impassive ego to unite them, for us there would be no duration. For an ego which does not change does not endure, and a psychic state which remains the same so long as it is not replaced by the following state does not endure either. Vain, there is the attempt to range such states beside each other on the ego supposed to sustain them: never

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<sup>4</sup> Cengage. (n.d). Indices of political instability. <https://encyclopedia.com>

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Omoregbe, *A Simplified History of Western philosophy: Contemporary philosophy* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited,1996), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Stumpf and James Fieser, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy* (New York :McGraw-Hill Education ,2003), 413.

can these solids strong upon a solid make up that duration which flows. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation.<sup>7</sup>

Bergson therefore criticizes the classical schools of philosophy by maintaining that they failed to take duration seriously. According to Nicholas Rescher, Bergson regarded process and temporality as pivotal features of the world and in particular, as central to our human scheme of things where life and consciousness manifest change everywhere.<sup>8</sup> Rescher tells us that Bergson's position is that time both affords the matrix for experience and provides the stage setting for reality in nature. However, he maintains that while time is fundamental, it is also elusive, seeing that we experience events in time but not the passage of time as well. According to him, we see material things but miss the energy that creates them and makes them go. And human conceptual thought is not adequate for the apprehension of time.

Bergson maintains that the creative process typical of duration pervades nature and establishes the central role of change on the stage of natural existence. For him, everything in the world is caught up in a change of some sort, so that it is accurate rather than paradoxical to say that what is changing is change itself.<sup>9</sup> Bergson's process thought, therefore, sees reality as constantly evolving.

### **The "Reality" of Political Instability in Nigeria**

A philosophical analysis of the historical foundation of Nigeria as a state will show that it came into existence as a business

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<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchel (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An introduction to process philosophy* (New York: Sunny Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Rescher, *Process Metaphysics*, 17.

contraption. As a business entity, the aim was to maximize profits, hence, the British gave little or no attention to diversity and as a result failed to balance the force of inequality. Nigeria is a marriage of convenience for economic purpose. Accordingly, the trace of this initial purpose has evolved into modern Nigeria, many years after independence. Let us take for instance, the continuous call from different corners for the dissolution of the unholy matrimony. The country has witnessed political tensions between the northern and southern divides which was even visible before independence. Nevertheless despite this resurfacing tension, there is always the politics of "one Nigeria" whenever the issue of breaking up is raised. We are not, however, supporting the agitation for the balkanization of the country, but the point we are striking at here is that the one "Nigeria politics" is based on economic reason than unity and progress of the country; and this does not happen by accident, but a reflection of the progressive nature of reality that underlies the existence of Nigeria as a political entity.

The history of Nigeria as a political entity is characterized by instability and violence. As Lewis and Watts noted, "the modern Nigerian state has been characterized by turbulent, contentious and often violent politics".<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Herbert and Husaini, are of the opinion that ethnic, religious, regional, and sub-ethnic (communal) identities mark the fault-lines along which political claims and violent conflicts are made. Political Instability in Nigeria, therefore, arises out of absence of ethnic unity among the diverse ethnicities in Nigeria, a condition attributable to political and economic inequality.

### **Revisiting the Foundation of Disunity in Nigeria**

Scholars and political analysts who have studied the socio-political issues of Nigeria have agreed that the present political crises

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<sup>10</sup> Lewis and Watts, "Nigeria: The Political Economy of Governance" (Unpublished), 10.

and national issues that the country faces is attributable to the failure of the British colonial authority not to have consulted with the diverse cultural, religious and ethnic groupings in the country prior to the amalgamation. In their opinion, Princewill et al<sup>11</sup>, believe that the continued insecurity issues in the form of Fulani herders and sedentary farmer's conflict; and banditry, kidnappings, armed robbery and terrorism, and previously in the form of agitations for resource control and militancy in the Niger Delta region are regarded by scholars as consequences of the forceful marriage called amalgamation of the protectorates.

Though we may be deceived by the British to believing that the union was meant to create a more viable territory, the idea behind the amalgamation as it has been discovered over time, was for administrative convenience of the colonial authority. The contraption is held by scholars as all that is wrong with the country today. For instance, Obi-Ani et al (2016) note that some theorists believe that the north, following the amalgamation, has since remained an "economic parasite on the naturally endowed south, while on the other hand, the north sees the union as marriage between an ordered and cultured society and on the other hand between an infidel, impetuous, aggressive and savage group"<sup>12</sup>. Ibrahim Adamu, however, maintains that Nigeria's long-standing problems to be a cause of ethnic competitiveness instead of unity, educational inequality and economic imbalance. This is the root of early conflict that appeared shortly after independence. However, this conflict presented itself in the form of supremacy struggle, for instance, as

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<sup>11</sup> Okereka O. Princewill, Oluka N. Lucas and Igbini M. Daniel, "Colonialism and amalgamation of southern and northern protectorates: Analysis of emerging issues in Nigeria," *Journal of Political Science and Leadership Research*, 6, no. 1 (2020): 49-64, <https://iiardpub.org>.

<sup>12</sup> Obiajulu Sunday Obikeze, Emeka Anthony Obi and Victor Iwuoha, *Government and Politics of Nigeria: The struggle for power in an African State* (Abingdon: Book Point Educational Ltd, 2016), 27.



regional leaders aspired to protect their privileges in the early period of independence, the south complained of northern domination while the north feared that the southern elite were bent on capturing power.

### **The Trial of Federalism: Any Solution at Sight?**

Federalism, according to Tamuno "represents that form of government where the component units of a political organization participate in sharing powers and functions in a cooperative manner"<sup>13</sup>. A federal political system consists of at least two levels of power, a central government otherwise called the federal government and other states labeled variously as states, region, republic, canton or union. William Livingston argues the nature of a federal state from a sociological perspective when he submitted that:

The essential nature of federalism is to be sought for not in the shading of legal and constitutional terminology but in forces economic, social, political and cultural that makes the outward forms of federalism necessary. The essence of federalism lies not in the constitutional or institutional structure but in the society itself... Federal government is a device by which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected.<sup>14</sup>

However, Omotso and Abe applaud the attraction for federalism as bordering on its perceived integrative tendency, which makes it capable of serving multi-ethnic societies well in situations of crisis.

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<sup>13</sup> Takeda Tamuno, "Nigerian federalism in historical perspective," in *Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria*, ed. Amuwo, K. et.al (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited. 1998),13.

<sup>14</sup> Femi Omotso and Toyin Abe, "Federalism, politics and governance in Nigeria," *Public Policy and Administration Research* 4, no. 7 (2014): 64-69.

Nevertheless, Odukoya and Ashiru<sup>15</sup>, see beyond the claim to integration. They argue that federalism does not solve in entirety, the problem of ethnic heterogeneity. Rather they believe that there is need for "socio-economic and political specificities of different societies, coupled with constant and continuous engineering, re-engineering and adjustment" in the pursuit of the goals of federalism.

After independence, Nigeria turned to a federal system of government to neutralize the political threats and accommodate the divergent interest of the various groups. But how successful is federalism in Nigeria? Why has it not address the problem of inequality? Or does it even possess the potential of providing a lasting solution in the future? Well, our responses to the following questions are obvious. But truth be told, the problem of Nigeria far outweigh the promises of federalism, or perhaps because federalism in Nigeria is grounded on a faulty claim. This is because it has failed to address the metaphysical problem of inequality. Anyio rightly observes that the corporate existence of Nigeria is threatened not only from the politics of identity, but also ethnic, racial and religious dimensions in recent times.

### **Rethinking Political Instability in Nigeria in the Light of Bergson's Process Philosophy**

In our overview of the historical foundation of the Nigerian state, it is evidenced that the seed of instability in the country was already sown. It is this seed that has acted as the force that navigates political unrests in the country. In his process conception of reality, Henri Bergson believes that reality consists of a force and that this force permeates the present from the past and into the future. However, as it progresses, it becomes more creative. In other words,

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<sup>15</sup> Odukoya, A and Ashiru, D, "Federalism and the National Question in Nigeria," (eds).in *Nigeria Beyond 2007 issues, Challenges & Prospects*, ed. R. Anifowose and T. Babawale (Lagos: University of Lagos Press. 2007),

what becomes of the present is never an accident, but a continuous movement of the past into a more creative form. Apparently, it follows that process metaphysics of Bergson conceives the actions of organisms (or human beings) on the basis of cause and effect. Bergson, in his *Creative evolution* (1944), asserts:

Generally speaking, unorganized bodies, which are what we have need of in order that we may act, and on which we have modeled our fashion of thinking, are regulated by this simple law: the present contains nothing more than the past, and what is found in the effect was already in the cause.<sup>16</sup>

This means that reality is creative, nothing new comes from non-reality but an already existed one. It therefore implies that the present is a fragment of the past made more creative and dynamic. This claim restates the reality (being) of the current instability that faces Nigeria. From the Bergsonian position, the problem of instability in Nigeria is an effect of a prior cause which is the seed of disunity, inequality and exploitation that was already sown before independence. As Bergson sees it, every reality "creates its own form through a unique series of acts that really constitute"<sup>17</sup>. The manifestation of this unique series of act then becomes the function of time. Bergson refers to time as duration. Accordingly, he ties the progress of reality to duration. Time, therefore, plays a very important role in our understanding of the progressive nature of reality

This implies that Bergson's process metaphysics sees event in our physical world as a product of its time, a seed of which grows from the past to the present; and our experience of such event at the present is a mirror of its progress overtime. In this sense, our

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<sup>16</sup> Bergson, *Creative evolution*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

experience, then, becomes nothing but a "recurrent confluence of events or processes"<sup>18</sup>.

As the country continues to tackle the problem of political instability, the panacea lies in acknowledging the progressive effect of inequality. For this is the metaphysics of instability in Nigeria. The undoing of the nation's current state of affairs require that we revisit our very foundation as a country. This is the caution we derive from Bergson's progressive nature of events in the world. In his *The two sources of morality and religion* (1974), he attempts to show that process has a way of corrupting the present, manipulating it to attain its aim. This, therefore, implies that if the problem of Nigeria is leadership, for instance, then it will be futile to believe that subsequent generation will be better when there is no strong institution to safeguard such progress.

This means that the various aspect of socialization are necessary in transmitting ideals of the past to the present and the future. In other words, until the metaphysics of instability is addressed, future generations shall continue to follow the footsteps of the past since they have been socialized from birth. Bergson acknowledges the freedom the the vital force in existence. However, this freedom as he sees it, cannot be proven because it would require analysis and analysis, for him, is a fragmenting process that would obscure the phenomenon of freedom (Lawhead, 2002). Instead, he believes that this freedom is discoverable in our everyday experience. But in our freedom to act, we may assume that we are not determined in our actions. However, it is possible that as we try to live our authentic (what he termed superficial) selves, we passively allow ourselves to be influenced by so ial pressures within our environment. This social

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Mautner, *The penguin dictionary of philosophy* (UK: Penguin Books, 1997), 256.

pressures are the basic forces by which the past reproduces in the present.

The process metaphysics of Bergson maintains that reality are restless and creatively striving for the emergence of novelty. However, the essence of this novelty is to attain harmony. Nevertheless, he reminds us that any harmony in the world is the harmony created on the run. It follows continually as the society progresses. In this case, progress becomes the progress of our metaphysical experience as the key to reality. Thus is the function of the 'elan vital, the vital force, which manifests in our continuous experience of time. This force transcends the present stage of organization in which it finds itself by breaking through its limits. For Bergson, therefore, the manifestation of dynamism in process exemplifies ordering reality. Reality, then, is ordered; and this order reappears Ina more creative manner as it unfolds and is made manifests in our thought and experience.

This means that since reality is ordered, our experience and how we experience these events in the world also are ordered in line with the vital order so that events are forward driven.

Accordingly, Bergson's process metaphysics offers an hermeneutic of political instability in Nigeria. The application of his process thought to the situation of nigeria reveals that there will always be an advancement in the way instability plays out in Nigeria except the force necessitating it is arrested. However, this paper wishes not to be seen from the perspective of blame gamers; its objective is only intended to arrest once and for all, the issue and the issue of political instability in Nigeria has gone metaphysical and until we change the narrative from the metaphysical perspective, then it will continue to progress in more creative dimensions.

### **Conclusion**

Nigeria is a heterogeneous society which was annexed by the British for administrative convenience. However, in annexing these ethnicities, the interest of the minorities were not considered. This gave rise to economic and political inequalities. This inequality has created disunity among the various ethnicities in the country. However, as these ethnic groups grow and integrate into the modern society, so also their perceived insecurity and fear of economic and political exploitation and marginalization. This is the reality that underlies the continuous instability in Nigeria. As Bergson's process thought shows, reality in its progressive state is also creative and this explains the more brutal nature of politically motivated instabilities in Nigeria. This inequality is further given impetus to by the various political institutions in Nigeria. Bergson, therefore reminds us that we cannot be acted upon by the same destructive force in a progressive society and intends to get a positive result. To address the problem of instability in Nigeria, therefore, requires a return to the very foundation of the country. And this entails the total overhaul of political institutions in the country. These institutions must be rebuilt on true principles of equality, for until the country addresses the issue of inequality in all her institutions of governance, political instability will progress steadily and every new phase shall always be more dangerous.

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