

NEGRITUDE, UNIVERSALISM, AND SOCIALISM

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It is important to read afresh today the meaning of the Negritude movement without reducing it, as is often the case, to a counter-essentialism in response to the essentialism of the discourse of colonialism; to realize that Senghor, Césaire, and Damas were first and foremost global philosophers, that is, thinkers of the plural and de-centred world that the Bandung conference of 1955 had promised. Thus, their different perspectives converge as the task of thinking a humanism for our times based on a non-imperial universal, a universal of encounter and translation founded on equality. And, consequently, a socialism that is, in its different translations, a force of emancipation, but also of humanization and spiritualization of the earth. That task is still ours.

Il est important de relire aujourd'hui la signification du mouvement de la négritude sans la réduire, comme cela est souvent le cas, à un contre-essentialisme en réponse à l'essentialisme du discours du colonialisme. De s'aviser donc que Senghor, Césaire ou Damas ont été avant tout des philosophes de la totalité, des penseurs d'un monde pluriel et décentré, tel que la conférence de Bandoeng de 1955 en était la promesse. C'est pourquoi, dans la convergence de leurs différentes perspectives, ils ont voulu penser un humanisme pour notre temps fondé sur un universel non impérial, un universel de la rencontre et de la traduction reposant sur l'égalité. Et, par conséquent, un socialisme qui soit, avant tout, dans ses différentes traductions, une force d'émancipation, mais aussi d'humanisation et de spiritualisation de la terre. Ce projet est aujourd'hui encore le nôtre.

The reception of the Negritude movement has too often been a reductionist reading of its significance as a counter essentialism in response to colonial racism and essentialism. Sartre's preface to Senghor's *Anthology* in 1948¹ may be in part responsible for that reading, especially when he presented Negritude as an "Anti-racist racism" and, using the language of Hegelian dialectics, declared that Negritude represented the antithesis to colonial racism before the eventual synthesis that would be a nonracial society. One important point to consider is that when Sartre wrote his 1948 preface, the discourse of Negritude was mainly, in fact only, poetry. Therefore, all that Sartre was quoting was verses by the poets gathered in the *Anthology* by Senghor. The philosophy or the thoughts of the authors themselves were not part of the significance of their movement as analyzed by the French philosopher and could not be beyond what their poems expressed, because there was almost no theoretical, philosophical work produced by the Negritude writers at that time, except Senghor's "*Ce que l'homme noir apporte*" ("What the Black Man contributes"), published in 1939,² which was mainly on the topic of African art.

In 1948 the philosophy of Negritude was still to come. It is important to emphasize this point for two reasons. First, the chronology of the works matters. Second, those philosophical works reveal the authors of Negritude as global thinkers, beyond associating them with a mere reaction to the colonial discourse. The Negritude authors are thinkers of universalism, and thinkers of socialism as a humanism. Those are the points I want to consider here.

I will start with a quick reminder of what Negritude is: the literary, philosophical, and political movement called Negritude that took shape in the second half of the 1930s in France. Such simple dates indicate that even though Negritude found its inspiration in the significance of African arts, even though it was a translation of the Harlem Renaissance movement, it was also part of what French philosopher Frédéric Worms has called "The 1900 moment in philosophy."³ Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) from Senegal, Aimé Césaire (1913–2008) from Martinique, and Léon Gontran Damas (1912–1978) from French Guiana began publishing their works just before the Second World War. In 1939, a first version of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au*

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¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Orphée Noir," preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1948.

² See Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Ce que l'homme noir apporte," in *Liberté I: Negritude et Humanisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1964).

³ See F. Worms, ed., *Le moment 1900 en philosophie* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2004).

pays natal (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*) was published; two years earlier, Damas's collection of poems had been published (*Poetes d'expression française*) as well, just before Senghor's own *Anthology*. In 1938, Damas had published his essay *Retour de Guyane*, a work that was originally intended to be an ethnography of the Bosh Negroes (natives of Surinam who remained a "pure" group) commissioned by the Trocadero Museum but turned out to be a denunciation of French colonialism in Guyana. *Retour de Guyane* is completed by an essay published under the title "Misère noire" in 1939 in the journal *Esprit*, in which Damas reflects again on colonialism in the federation of West African territories known as AOF,⁴ asserting that there should be not assimilation but association. Senghor would also publish poetry after the war, but he had already contributed in 1937 and 1939 to the movement of Négritude with a lecture in Dakar and the important essay on "What the Black Man contributes".

While it is true that the main theoretical texts of Négritude were published in the 1940s, they still belong to the "moment of the spirit" described by Worms, which was Bergsonian for the most part. This philosophical history continued, with the various "philosophical moments" overlapping, of course. Sartre, who is undoubtedly the main figure of the "moment of the existence," also recognizes the influence of Henri Bergson, affirming that Bergson's 1889 *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* attracted him towards philosophy. Moreover, the philosopher-theologian Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose works deeply influenced Senghor after World War II, was certainly a Bergsonian belonging to the moment of the spirit. More importantly, the writers of Négritude recognize and celebrate what Bergsonism meant for the movement of ideas in general, and for the movement of Négritude in particular. No one has expressed this more eloquently than Senghor, who has often stated in his writings that the publication in 1889 of Bergson's essay was simply "the revolution of 1889" that ended the "stupid" 19th century and marked the true beginning of the new one, namely the 20th century.

European Universalism versus a Truly Universal Universalism

Sartre's preface to Senghor's *Anthology* was certainly a philosophical gesture of questioning a very Euro-centric notion of universalism. All the themes that we consider postcolonial and de-centring can be

⁴ AOF, acronym for *Afrique Occidentale française*, was the federation, created in 1895, of the French West African colonies.

found in Sartre's text, *e.g.*, the deconstruction of a "white privilege" (identified with the privilege of looking at the others without being looked at) as well as the idea that Europe is now a simple province of the world, nothing more—in Sartre's words—than "a geographical accident, the peninsula that Asia shoves into the Atlantic."⁵ This is a gesture of provincializing Europe. Does that mean the end of the Hegelian idea that Europe is naturally the universal stage of universal history? What happens to universality in a postcolonial world? At the end of *Black Orpheus*, Sartre accomplished a move that Frantz Fanon will famously criticize in *Black Skin, White Masks*. After having extolled the Negritude movement as having produced the only revolutionary poetry in our times, Sartre re-centred the movement of history around Europe. In a dialectical move that made Frantz Fanon cringe, Sartre concluded his praise of the poetic revolution created by the Negritude movement by an invocation of the "real" revolution to be achieved by the universal class and agent that is the European proletariat. Emancipation could only be the work of the universal class that is the European proletariat. Frantz Fanon's reaction in his *Black Skin, White Masks* is the following:

When I read that page [of *Black Orpheus*], I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance. I said to my friends, "The generation of the younger black poets has just suffered [an unforgiving blow]." Help had been sought from a friend of the colored peoples, and that friend had found no better response than to point out the relativity of what they were doing.... Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal.⁶

Negritude's response to Sartre will come later. In this regard, it is not coincidental that the reflections of Césaire and Senghor on the "universal" came after 1955, the date of the Bandung Conference. What makes the Asian-African conference, organized between April 18 and April 24 of the year 1955 by Indonesian president Sukarno in the city of Bandung, an emblem of post-colonial thinking? What made the conference the "thunderous" beginning saluted in those terms by Senghor was that it projected the very image of what a decentred world looks like: a meeting happening between Asians and Africans, where Europe becomes an object of the conversation and not the centre that organizes it, where horizontal relationships are being built as opposed to vertical ones with the centre. The Bandung conference was (1) the

⁵ Sartre, "Orphée Noir," x.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (tr.) C. L. Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 133–35; trans. mod.

irruption of the plural on the stage of history; (2) the evidence that Europe was not the ultimate stage of universal history. Universality needed rethinking or, in fact, thinking for the first time.

On the problem of the universalism versus particularism, the response from Aimé Césaire came one year after the Bandung conference in the form of his famous *Letter to Maurice Thorez*, presenting to the then Secretary General of the French Communist Party his resignation. Given the time when Césaire wrote the letter, he expressed, of course, his grievances against the actions of the Soviet Union accepted by the French Communist Party. However, his main point was about the universal and the particular. Césaire could not find himself in the universalism represented by the Party. It is not that he intended to enclose himself in his particularism; he simply considered communist universal fraternalism no better than colonial universalist paternalism. Let us remember the very words of Césaire:

Provincialism? Not at all. I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the “universal.” My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.⁷

Sartre’s leftist universalism and the response by Césaire are not ancient history. We still face the same questions concerning the inscription of the universal in the plurality of the world.

The Universality of Socialism

In a less dramatic way, Senghor had anticipated Césaire’s rupture with the French Communist Party when in 1948 he wrote a letter to the General Secretary of the French Section of the Workers Internationale (SFIO, as the Socialist Party was known), Guy Mollet, presenting his resignation. His letter is motivated by the same desire to redefine universalism and to free an African socialist project from a tutelage that also translated into an inscription in the framework of European industrialism, following the idea that ultimately the true subject and agent of history can only exist on the European stage.

⁷ Aimé Césaire, “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” (tr.) C. Jeffers, *Social Text*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2010): 145–52, here 152.

Senghor thus agrees with Julius Nyerere, who wrote in *Uhuru na Ujamaa (Freedom and Socialism)*,

The universality of socialism only exists if it can take account of men's differences, and be equally valid for all of them. And it can.... It is my contention that socialist societies in different parts of the world will differ in many respects even when they are fully developed instead of being, as now, at different stages on the road to socialism. The differences between these societies will reflect both the manner of their development, and their historical traditions.⁸

In other words, the universal exists only in its concrete translations without pre-existing them, these translations being themselves variable and always in the process of becoming a permanent construction site.⁹ This is what the pragmatist Nyerere tells us when he insists on the plurality of the African ways of socialism. The language of "African socialisms" is an ethical, humanist, and spiritualist one. It is the opposite of a positivist discourse on the "scientific" character of socialism or Marxism. That is true of Nyerere's philosophy of *Ujamaa*. It is also true of Senghor's "African Path to Socialism."¹⁰ It is even true of Kwame Nkrumah's doctrine of "consciencism."¹¹ Because if the latter does insist on the necessary foundation of socialism on a strict "materialism," he still defines the "philosophy of consciencism," which is its African translation, as the harmonious synthesis of traditional African thoughts, Islamic cosmology, and Western contribution.

Generally, the thinkers of the concept of "African socialism" share the following two principles: first, that socialism exists only in its different vernacular translations; second, that before being a political ideology, it is first and foremost a metaphysics, an ethics, and an aesthetics. About socialisms, in the plural, Nyerere thus declared,

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⁸ Julius K. Nyerere, *Nyerere on Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 29.

⁹ See Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *De langue à langue. L'hospitalité de la traduction* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2022).

¹⁰ See Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1961).

¹¹ Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-colonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). Originally published in 1965.

developed instead of being, as now, at different stages on the road to socialism. The differences between these societies will reflect both the manner of their development, and their historical traditions.¹²

In a word, socialisms exist as the many translations of socialism without an *original* text to be considered the normative model. Senghor, for example, considered that the translations of socialism that spoke best to the African situation were the Chinese, the Yugoslavian, or that of Israel's *kibbutzim*.

Negritude considered socialism as a metaphysics, an ethics, and an aesthetics. The sources of Senghor's philosophy of socialism in particular are African cosmologies, Bergson's concept of *élan vital* prolonged by Teilhard de Chardin's notion of cosmogenesis, and of course Karl Marx's philosophy of emancipation.

Concerning African cosmologies, Senghor often speaks about the importance in his thinking of what he called the "kingdom of childhood," that is, the Serer cosmology in which he was raised while also being educated as a Catholic. That cosmology and many others in the West African region can be characterized as cosmologies of emergence where nothing is inert or lifeless. "From God to the pebble," as Senghor declared, in the human, the animal, the vegetal, or the mineral, the push of life is continuously at work.¹³ Every existent is a force of life striving to become more of a force, that is, to be reinforced. Senghor would easily translate such a cosmology in Bergson's language of *élan vital*. Or, in Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy, one also finds a continuous cosmogenesis by which the universe is on the move towards a point of convergence that he called "the Omega point." In the light of Teilhard de Chardin's work,¹⁴ which Senghor discovered and read assiduously and attentively after the Second World War, before being a political or an economic system, socialism has the metaphysical significance of being the driving force of Love in the direction of that cosmogenetic convergence. For that reason, socialism is in opposition to the force of dissociation embodied by capitalism. Socialism is thus a movement toward fuller or "more" being (*plus être*) in Teilhard de Chardin's language.

¹² Nyerere, *Nyerere on Socialism*, 29.

¹³ Senghor returns often in his work to this cosmology of forces, from God to the mineral. See, for example, "De la négritude," in *Liberté V. Le dialogue des cultures* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), here 19.

¹⁴ See, for example, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008). The original French, *Le phénomène humain*, was published in 1955.

This language certainly spoke to Senghor, who learned in the “kingdom of childhood” that what is good is defined as what reinforces (*i.e.*, increases the force of) life, and what is bad is what decreases it, a negative action for which he coined the neologism “to *de-force*.” Reading Marx through the lenses of the cosmology of his “kingdom of childhood” and Teilhard de Chardin’s spiritualist philosophy, Senghor understood the fundamental truth of Marxism as the metaphysics and the ethics of the reinforcement of life against the *de-forcement* of alienation.

Alienation is at the centre of the early writings of Marx. Before the war, his early writings had been discovered and published in Leipzig in 1932 under the title *1844 Manuscripts*. 1844 is the year when the different essays composing the manuscripts had been written by Marx in Paris, then abandoned, so he declared, “to the gnawing criticism of the mice.”¹⁵ It is in the post-war period that the writings of the “young Marx” became a philosophical and political question. What did they say about Marxism as we know it today? How can we connect them with the canonical texts of the *Capital* and other later works? There are two possible answers: a scientist one and a humanist one.

The scientist view is well represented by French Marxist philosophers Georges Politzer and Louis Althusser, whose work on Marx was premised on the notion that the early writings of the young Marx were not part of the history of the scientific Marxist texts but their pre-history. From Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* to the works of maturity, including the *Capital*, there had been an epistemological break and a total reformulation in the new language of the science of history that had been expressed first in an uncertain terminology. For Althusser, Marx’s use of the notion of alienation was the perfect example of an uncertain language that would become, after the epistemological break, the measurable and scientific concept of *surplus value*, and thus acquire its full theoretical and practical effectiveness.

Here is what Senghor writes in 1947, in an essay entitled “Marxism and Humanism” that he wrote just a few months after the publication in France of Marx’s *Manuscripts*:

For us, men of 1947, men of the post-war period, who have just escaped the bloody contempt of dictators and who are threatened by other dictatorships, what a profit to be made from these works of youth! They contain the principles of Marx’s ethics, which

¹⁵ Karl Marx, “Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,” In *Defense of Marxism*, [<https://www.marxist.com/classics-preface-to-a-contribution-to-the-critique-of-political-economy.htm>], accessed Sept. 13, 2022.

propose to us, as the object of our practical activity, the total liberation of man.¹⁶

Senghor agrees that from the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts* to the Marx of the *Capital* there is the distance separating a philosophical and ethical language on the one hand, and a scientist and positivist one on the other hand. That is why he considers the former as the truth of socialism, as its fundamentally spiritual meaning and as a force of *désaliénation* that makes socialism an *élan vital*, a force of life towards “the total liberation of man.”

Senghor could not but be attracted to the vitalist language that Marx uses when speaking about alienation in these early texts. Here is a passage from Marx’s *Manuscripts* on “alienated labor” that the Senegalese philosopher often quotes:

[T]he worker is related to the *product of labor* as to an *alien* object. For on this premise it is clear that the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own.... The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity, the more the worker lacks objects. Whatever the product of his labor is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life, which he has conferred on the object, confronts him as something hostile and alien.¹⁷

The Marx that Senghor adopted, and to whom his spiritualist socialism would always refer, is precisely the thinker of alienation, not the economist of surplus value. Therefore, when Senghor thought of “alienation,” he had in mind the alienation of the human in general and of the colonized humanity in particular. When he declares that Negritude is “a humanism for the twentieth century,” he means that the

¹⁶ Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Marxisme et Humanisme,” in *Liberté II: Nation et voie africaine du socialisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 31.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (tr.) M. Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 71–72.

liberation of Black people from all forms of alienation is a humanization of humanity in general.¹⁸

That is the meaning of Damas's work, expressed essentially in his poetry but also in his essays *Retour de Guyane* (1938) and *Misère noire* (1939). The will to assimilate, in his view, is simply alienation. When he studies Guyana he declares that the problem to tackle is that of "assimilation," that is, imitation and external conformity instead of expressing one's self-consciousness. Conducting a sociology of Guyanese society, Damas shows the extent of the problem in the way the *petite bourgeoisie* apes Frenchness. He explains that neither the younger generation nor the workers in the rural communities who could have been expected to constitute a true force of *désaliénation* are immune from it. The same question of assimilation is at the centre of *misère noire*. The response to it, for Damas, quoting an often-repeated phrase by Senghor, is, or should be, "assimiler non être assimilés" (we assimilate, we are not assimilated). And he denounces the elites who, in Martinique especially, manifest the worst aspect of assimilationism and alienated conscience that is colourism. Such a denunciation of colourism is at the centre of one of the best-known poems from the collection *Pigments*: "*Le hoquet*," translated as "Hiccups."

Conclusion

Socialism as a humanism of *désaliénation* is a celebration of the force of life. Its best manifestation is art. I have noted that Senghor's Negritude is at its core a philosophy of African art. This is true of Césaire as well. For Senghor, African classical art is the visual language of the cosmologies of vital force. An artefact is the manifestation of the sub-reality of a "rhythm" which is a composition of forces. The act of creation is, in the words of the poet, that of "channeling" what is concrete, material, sensual into the light of the spirit. Creation is a *poiesis* that turns lower forces into spiritual rhythm, and that is why, for Senghor, African art turns its back to reproduction or imitation of reality. He considers "socialist realism" a negation of the very philosophy of African art and African socialism.

Imitation is also the enemy of African art, as Césaire declared when he was invited in 1966 to the World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar. This art is threatened by self-imitation, which would consist in copying and repeating what has become established as "African art." Self-imitation would indeed be the worst mimesis against which African

¹⁸ Léopold Sédar Senghor, "La négritude est un humanisme du XXe siècle," in *Liberté III: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 69–79.

creativity must remain the life force on which the arts of the continent have always been nourished and on which African vitality in general, in all fields—cultural but also economic and political—will ultimately depend.

To conclude in one sentence: it is important that our re-reading of Negritude does not simply focus on Negritude itself as its object. We need to study what the Negritude writers had to contribute from their own perspective to general questions that are still important for us today, such as that of the universal, or of the reconstruction of socialism.

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