

PLURALISM - TRUE AND FALSE

Cultural pluralism generally signifies three things:

- 1) the *fact* of cultural plurality, considered as the co-existence of cultures which, in principle at least, belong to *different geographical areas*;
- 2) *the acknowledgement of the fact* of this plurality;
- 3) *the affirmation* that this plurality is a good thing, and the *desire* to make something of it in one way or another, either by preserving the various cultures in an individual sense in order to avoid any kind of reciprocal contamination, or, conversely, by organising between them a kind of peaceful dialogue, with a view to their mutual enrichment.

In this hitherto classic form, cultural pluralism is a reaction against the cultural exclusivity of the West, and—which is an important fact—this reaction itself occurred in the West. The same Europe which produced Tylor and Levy-Bruhl also produced Levi-Strauss. The same Europe which produced the Count of Gobineau also produced Jean-Paul Sartre. The same Europe which produced Hitler had previously produced Lenin. This indicates that European culture is itself pluralist, and that it is permeated by widely different tendencies and currents. And when we talk about “Western civilisation” in the

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singular, it also indicates that we do not really know what we are talking about. Perhaps we are simply guilty of linguistic abuse by wrongly supposing that there is an identity of meaning among irreconcilable and opposite currents.

The fact nevertheless remains that it is this "Western civilisation"—be it real or imaginary—which was erected at a given time as a unique civilisation. It is in relation to it that the civilisations of the other continents have been depreciated and devalued. It is in the name of its exclusive value and worth that the cultural accomplishments of other societies have been sometimes destroyed. This attitude has a name: ethnocentrism. It has had its hour of glory too: during the latter half of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century. Today nobody can seriously doubt the fact that it was historically linked with colonisation. It also boasted its own professional ideologists: Levy-Bruhl among others, to quote one of the most well-known, a man who, to boot, is "completely French-speaking."

I. FROM THE "PROGRESSIVIST" ETHNOLOGIST TO THE "NATIONALIST" OF THE THIRD WORLD

As a reaction against this cultural imperialism people have been saying for at least half a century¹ and people still are saying that the civilisation of Europe is not the only civilisation, but simply one way among many ways of organising man's inter-relationships and man's relationship with nature. In this way the plurality of cultures has come to be recognized. In this way, in principle at least, the myth of Western superiority has been rejected, since the time when people perceived that the advanced technical and economic state of a society did not automatically mean that that society was superior on a social or moral level. The point was even reached where the imperialist scale of values was purely and simply overturned, by considering as valid the non-

¹ As a point of reference I have taken out of pure convention the publication of the classic work by Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, London, 1922. But the idea of a plurality of cultures is in fact older than this. For example, it was widely discussed in 1911 at the first Universal Congress of Races in London. (cf. Gerard Leclerc, *Anthropologie et colonialisme*, Paris, 1972, p. 83).

technicity of 'exotic' societies, by interpreting their being less developed on a technological level as the condition of a greater 'authenticity'—in other words of a greater transparency in human relations. In an article dated 1930 Malinowski was already writing:

"Many of us ... see in the aimless thrust of modern mechanisation a threat to all the true spiritual and artistic values ... One of the places of refuge from this mechanical prison of culture is the study of the primitive forms of human life, such as they still exist in societies at the farthest ends of the world. For myself at least, anthropology was a romantic flight from our standardised culture." (Quoted by Gérard Leclerc, *op. cit.*, p. 59-60).

Closer to us in time, Levi-Strauss emphasises with the same Rousseauesque accent that the 'primitive' societies are more 'authentic' than the 'civilized' societies, because they are not aware of man's exploitation of man, because relationships among them are less anonymous and more personalised, because all their members know one another by virtue of the small membership, and because of this they handle the various important problems with perfect unanimity. (Cf. especially Georges Charbonnier: *Entretiens avec Lévi-Strauss*, Paris 1961, p. 51-65).

Today, in consequence, we can see the valuation of this plurality, the existence of which was not only unknown but also unthinkable to the 'imperialist' ethnologist. The evolutionism of a man like Tylor or Morgan, and the ethnocentrism—both behindhand and garrulous—of a man like Levy-Bruhl were unable to admit the idea that other cultures existed apart from European culture. They could only conceive of the cultural life of 'primitive' societies as archaic stages in a unique, single cultural process, of which the most advanced stage was represented by Europe. Today, on the other hand, Western anthropology admits the existence of other cultures, and, not content just to admit their existence, it sees in them a chance to save Western civilisation itself, which is so exaggeratedly technical and standardised and for which the 'exotic' cultures would be summoned to supply a 'spiritual supplement'—in the words of Bergson.

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A remarkable fact is that the nationalists of the Third World have been quick to model themselves on the ethnologists of the new school. Take Césaire for example. Many African intellectuals of my generation have fervently read these admirable lines—among others—from the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (and I must excuse my nostalgia for bygone feelings which makes it hard for me to resist the temptation of quoting them in full):

Those who have invented neither powder nor compass
Those who could never tame steam or electricity
Those who have explored neither seas nor skies
but those without whom the earth would not be earth
a hump all the more charitable because the earth deserts
the earth still more
a silo preserving and ripening what is most earthy about
the earth,
my blackness is not a stone, with its deafness flung against
the clamor of the light,
my blackness is not a speck in the dead eye of the earth
my blackness is not a tower or a cathedral
it plunges into the red flesh of the soil
it plunges into the burning flesh of the sky
it bores a hole in the opaque overwhelming force of its
own patience
Eia for the royal citron-tree!
Eia for those who have invented nothing.
for those who have never explored anything
for those who have never tamed anything
but in the grip of it they abandon themselves to anything
ignorant about the surfaces but gripped by the movement
of anything
not worried about taming things, but playing the game
of the world
truly the eldest sons of the world
porous to the gusts of the world
brotherly eyrie of all the gusts of the world
undrained bed of all the waters of the world
sacred spark of fire of the world
flesh of the flesh of the world, palpitating with the very
movement of the world!²

² Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1956, p. 71-72.

Remarkable as it is for its fullness of movement—a movement which makes the poetry strongly felt even by the most resistant temperaments—this text is also of considerable historical interest because to our knowledge it is the first work in which the neologism: “blackness” (negritude)—since become famous—figures in a context which throws light on the full meaning of the term.³

But what is even more remarkable is that the black poet has spontaneously found a manner of argument to express his revolt against white racism which white society itself had given birth to. The *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* was published in 1939.⁴ At that time functionalism was no longer a novelty, because the classical work by Malinowski: *Argonautes du Pacifique occidental* dates back to 1922. Césaire therefore has invented nothing when he claims that the non-technicality of the Blacks, far from being a failing, is on the contrary a virtue; that it is the reverse side of an essential disposal about which Europe is unaware; that the West has nothing to teach other cultures in the way of man's vital qualities, a sense of brotherhood, a sense of openness to the world, and rootedness.

What is more, Césaire himself knows this all too well. He, like his friend Senghor, readily invokes the authority of Malinowski, Herskovits and other representatives of functionalism, just as he invokes even more frequently the au-

³ The uninformed public generally attributes the term: negritude to Singhor. However, Senghor himself is the first to correct this error. Cf. the introduction to *Liberté I. Négritude et humanisme*, Paris, Seuil, 1964.

“We have been content to study (the negro-African civilisation) and to give it the name of ‘Negritude.’ I say ‘we.’ I was about to render unto Césaire what is Césaire’s. Because it is Césaire who coined the word in the years 1932-1934” (op. cit. p. 8).

The verse quoted above is in fact the second occasion on which the word negritude appears in the *Cahier*. The very first mention of the word is however not very illuminating. It occurs in a verse in which Césaire draws up an inventory of his historical heritage. He says: “Haiti where negritude raised its head for the first time” (p. 44). In this instance the word seems to denote nothing more than the black race, and does not have any other qualitative shade of meaning. Its use in the long verse quoted shows, on the contrary, that it denotes a complex of virtues associated to the race.

⁴ The poem was in fact first published in the twentieth and last edition of a magazine called *Volontés*, Paris, August, 1939. Subsequently it appeared in a bilingual edition with a Spanish translation in Cuba in 1944, and was then published in Paris in 1947 by Bordas with a preface by André Breton, “Martinique charmeuse de serpents,” and finally by Présence Africaine.

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thority of Leo Frobenius. In this way the path of nationalism in the colonies has never consisted in a total rejection of the culture of the colonizer; in fact it has always consisted in choosing from the numerous currents of that culture those which were the most favorable to the Third World; or rather in discovering at a second stage—starting from a spontaneous act of revolt and from an initially unconsidered self-affirmation—those favorable currents which contrasted violently with the colonial organisation as it had been experienced.

An undeniable complicity was consequently established between the nationalist of the Third World and the 'progressivist' anthropologist of the West. From that time to date—and for a long time to come—they will support one another mutually, the former calling upon the latter in support of his cultural claims, the latter calling upon the former in support of his pluralist theses.

II. CULTURE AND POLITICS—THE CULTURALIST IDEOLOGY

1. *The hypertrophy of the cultural.*

I have quoted Césaire as an example of the nationalist figure. I could have quoted Senghor, who has, as we know, contributed more heavily to the popularisation of the term 'blackness' invented by Césaire (négritude) by discussing it at length and weaving around it a real black ideology. This loquacious 'négrism' might be explained by a simple reason: the exaltation of black cultures only works with Césaire as a balancing argument in favor of political liberation, while with Senghor it works as an alibi to elude the political problem of national liberation. Generally speaking the hypertrophy of *cultural* nationalism is always destined to compensate for the hypotrophy of *political* nationalism.

This is undoubtedly why Césaire, as a coherent Leninist, talks so soberly about culture, and why he purposely subordinates the solution of the cultural problem each time he approaches the subject to that of the more fundamental problem of political liberation. This also explains why Senghor, as a good Catholic and disciple of Teilhard de Chardin, places—in *Li-*

berté I for example—often artificial cultural problems right up-stage, by laboriously defining the manner of being original, the specific being-in-the-world of the Black as such, and by conscientiously eluding the problem of the struggle against imperialism.

The higher complicity revealed between the nationalist and the ethnologist is thus particularly disastrous in the case of the cultural nationalist, that is to say, of the nationalist who is inclined to stress exclusively the cultural aspect of foreign domination to the detriment of other aspects, especially economic and political. For want of a more adequate term, let us call this attitude *culturalism* (by analogy with economism, and without special reference to the anthropological school usually indicated by this term). The main feature of culturalism thus understood is to turn aside from political and economic problems, and to twist them skilfully to the exclusive advantage of cultural problems. Still worse is that these cultural problems are themselves strangely simplified, because in this instance culture is reduced to its most superficial level, its most apparent and flashy aspect: the level of folklore. Nothing is perceived of its deep movement, its internal contradictions, of the rich tensions which permeate and stimulate it, nothing is perceived of its life, its history, its evolution and its revolutions. Culture is fixed fast in a synchronic, horizontal, strangely simple and single-voiced picture. It can therefore be totally set in opposition to other cultures for reasons of comparison, and those other cultures are similarly schematised, and similarly reduced to their most simple expression.

2. *A misleading use of the singular.*

In this way we presently talk of *the* 'traditional' African civilisation as opposed to *the* Western civilisation. As if 'an' African civilisation could exist in the singular or 'a' Western civilisation could exist in the singular; as if 'the' civilisation was not, essentially, always a permanent collision of contradictory cultural decisions.

Obviously I am not suggesting that one should proscribe for ever the use of the word 'civilisation' in the singular; I am

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simply saying that this singular use should be re-interpreted: it should not refer to the imaginary unity of a system of values, but to the real and empirical unity of a defined geographical area. The civilisation of Europe is not a closed system of values but the total complex of the irreducible cultural productions which have emerged on the continent of Europe. In a deeper sense, the complex of these productions and the creative tensions which carry them through; the essentially open-ended complex of these productions and these tensions, in the forms which they have assumed and in the forms which are unforeseeable at the present time but which they will assume tomorrow, in that tiny corner of the earth which is called Europe. The civilisation of Africa, likewise, is not a closed system in which one can enclose oneself or let oneself be enclosed; it is, on the contrary, the unfinished history of this same contradictory debate, such as it has unfolded and such as it will unfold further in this portion of the earth which is called Africa. It is only in this sense—the sense of an external designation and not that of an impossible internal characterisation—that one can talk of ‘the’ civilisation of Africa in the singular; for the only real unit here is that of a continent.

On the other hand, if the use of the singular is tolerable if not absolutely necessary, the adjective ‘traditional’ in the expression: ‘traditional African civilisation’ must be definitely proscribed because it conveys a pernicious counter-meaning. The expression is used in a practical sense as a synonym for ‘pre-colonial African civilisation,’ and it is true that one has the perfect right to talk about the civilisation of pre-colonial Africa—in the sense, once again, of a conventional historical slice of time. But when, instead of this neutral expression, one uses the more colorful expression: ‘traditional African civilisation,’ one adds thereby a nuance of value to it; one is in fact claiming to set the pre-colonial civilisation in total opposition to the so-called ‘modern’ civilisation (that is, in fact, colonial and post-colonial civilisation which is supposed to be very ‘westernized’), as if they were two essentially different systems of values. One thus shrinks the pre-colonial history of Africa into a single synchronic picture, in which all the features would be contemporary with one another and uniformly opposed to another picture which is equally as synchronic but symmetrical to the first, in relation to the only apparently pertinent break in the history of the continent: the

colonial break. One ignores or pretends to ignore the fact that the African tradition does not have just one voice, any more than does the tradition of any other continent; that a cultural tradition is always a complex heritage, at once contradictory and many-sided—an open system of multiple choices. It is the task of the present generation to bring this system at least partially up to date by valuing one choice above another, and, of necessity, by sacrificing all the other possible choices. One ignores or pretends to ignore that a cultural tradition only exists in order to be exploited in the present moment, in one or other of its aspects to the detriment of all its other aspects; and that the choice of this favored aspect itself constitutes the object of a current struggle, of an incessantly rebounding debate, in which, with hesitance, the destiny of a society is inscribed. Above all, one ignores or pretends to ignore the fact that the cultural tradition of Africa is not closed, that it does not stop with colonization, but also includes both the colonial and post-colonial cultural life; that so-called modern Africa is as 'traditional' as pre-colonial Africa, in the only acceptable meaning of the term 'traditional,' in the sense in which tradition does not exclude but rather by necessity implies a system of discontinuities.

3. *The culturalist system*

All this ignorance, be it real or feigned, is present in culturalism. It is even organised there in a huge ideological system, that is, in an indirect sense, in politics. I purposely say *indirectly*, and I use the word *politics* because ideology is politics in camouflage. Culturalism is an ideological system because it indirectly produces a political effect, which is to obscure on a primary level the problem of effective national liberation, and on a secondary level, the problem of the class struggle.

On the primary level, and in the form of an exclusively cultural type of nationalism, culturalism very considerably simplifies the national culture, schematises and smoothes it out, in order to oppose it to the culture of the colonizer and to usher in this imaginary cultural opposition *before* the real political and economic conflict.

In the case of an independent country, culturalism takes on

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the form of a delayed cultural nationalism, and continues to deaden the national culture by reducing its internal pluralism and its historical depth, in order to swerve the attention of the exploited classes away from the real economic and political conflicts which divide them from the ruling classes, under the false pretext of their common participation in 'the' national culture.

Cesaire, therefore, is not the cultural nationalist type, because in his work, as in the work of any true freedom-fighter, the cultural aspect has always been prescribed by and subordinate to the political aspect. Cesaire simply contrived the term: *negritude*, and crystallised around this word the arguments for a revolt, which were then unhappily taken up and rendered banal by other people, in the guise of a mystifying ideology.

Furthermore, 'blackness' is not the only form of cultural nationalism, but the latter can develop under other names; under the name, for example, of 'authenticity,' or under the name of the 're-personalization of the African man.' The diversity of the labels and the importance of the local shades of meaning should not conceal the unity of the structure. And the dominant feature of this structure is still what is currently called traditionalism—which, in this instance, should be understood as the exclusive valuation of a simplified, superficial and imaginary scheme of the cultural tradition.

It is this same structure which I denote by the very general term: culturalism. I say 'culturalism' and not just 'cultural nationalism' because this structure is at once common to the Third World nationalist and the Western ethnologist. Their objective complicity is organised in this structure.

The ethnologist also has a tendency to isolate the cultural aspect from among all the aspects of the life of a society. And the cultural aspect is arbitrarily favored to the detriment of the economic and political aspect. And even when he is concerned with the political aspect, it is always in effect with the so-called traditional political life, that is, a simplified plan of the political tradition, arbitrarily reduced to its fixed, ossified, pre-colonial dimension, stripped of its tensions, its discontinuities, and its internal upheavals. The political problem of colonial or neo-colonial domination is in no instance posed. Anthropology considers itself a-political, even when it specialises in the study of political structures. The numerous works hitherto dedicated to 'political anthropology' have

always in fact tried to elude the problem of the national liberation of the peoples which they were studying. At the very most they have thought themselves in certain cases obliged to describe what they abstractly called the 'colonial situation' (cf. Balandier), thus translating into terms of *ambiguity* (cultural) what was, in effect, a *conflict* (political). But in the vast majority of cases this allusion does not even exist; the various political anthropologists prefer to pass over, in silence, the political life as it stands of the dominated peoples, and focus exclusively on their so called 'traditional' political organisation (this is to say, in fact, their pre-colonial organisation).

So there is a desire for a-politicism even in so-called political anthropology. In the other branches of anthropology this desire is still more evident. In the various cases, and according to the nature of the author and the times, it is always a question either of confirming the supremacy of the West by demonstrating that the civilisation of the West is the only complete civilisation, and that the other societies are, at best, just embarking on the process which it has already gone through (Levy-Bruhl, classical evolutionists, etc.), or, on the other hand, of showing by a repentant gesture which is nonetheless made *deep within the very same comparativist* problematic that the civilisation of Europe is not the only civilisation, and that other civilisations do indeed exist which are just as valid. And because, nowadays, these other civilisations are also in contact with Europe, because, in spite of themselves, they are involved—thanks to the period of colonisation—in a process of westernisation, the pluralist anthropologist (in order to confirm his thesis) will refuse to consider their actual state, and will rather attempt to reconstruct their pre-colonial state. Better still: in considering this precolonial past, he will avoid making mention of the evolution, revolutions and discontinuities which might have affected this past, the unstable balance which, for a time, has made these civilisations what they are today. The anthropologist needs to play with simple units, with single-voiced cultural complexes which have no break or dissonance within them. He needs dead cultures, cultures which are stuck fast, and always identical, in the undifferentiated space of an eternal present.

Broadly speaking this is the manner of thinking in the context of culturalism. In it we find the way in which the complicity

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between ethnologist and nationalist is organised. This is the structure in its most general terms which greets the incidentally very different landmarks of 'progressivist' anthropology (functionalist, structuralist, dynamist etc. . .) and cultural nationalism; the universal structure in which one can, at a given moment, perceive the thesis which is common to the 'progressivist' ethnologist and the nationalist: the thesis of the pluralism of cultures. For both these figures the thesis operates as a sheet anchor which enables the western anthropologist to escape the boredom of his own society and the Third World nationalist to escape the psychological and political rape which western imperialism tries to force on him, by a violent (but imaginary) return back towards his original culture.

III. TRUE PLURALISM

1. *The false problem of acculturation*

In this way the theoretical affirmation of the plurality of cultures still serves as a pretext for a conservative cultural practice. Neither the anthropologist nor the nationalist can, of course, ignore the fact that the 'exotic' cultures no longer exist today in their pure state, that they no longer offer the nostalgic European or the nationalist in revolt an absolute alternative, that they have ceased to be the Difference in itself (always supposing that they ever had been) because of the progressive inter-penetration of cultures. The ethnologist and the nationalist readily recognise that we are more and more—and in a manner which is irreversible—becoming onlookers before the approach of a world civilisation. But instead of grasping this phenomenon in its whole complexity, they simplify it, render it banal, strip it of all real content, by calling it: 'acculturation.'

As a young 'completely French-speaking' anthropologist, Gérard Leclerc recently showed in an admirable book how, when faced with the impossibility of glossing over the colonial fact, anthropologists on site introduced it surreptitiously in their analyses under the term 'acculturation'.⁵ The vast literature

⁵ Gérard Leclerc, *op. cit.*

dedicated to this theme between 1930 and 1950, the erudite analyses relating to the 'changing native,' the 'culture clash,' 'culture contact,' 'social change,' and so on, all are based on the basic ideological supposition that: in a non-Western culture, change can only come from outside.

G rard Leclerc justly points out the mechanistic vocabulary used by all these analyses. But what he omits to say—what he has probably not seen⁶—is that, far from "expelling speculation and ideology," this vocabulary, on the contrary, very precisely betrays the ideological concept that turns non-Western cultures into dead, fixed, cultures, culture-things, always identical, stripped of all inner power to exceed or negate. What G rard Leclerc did not say—perhaps because he did not dare carry his criticism right through to the end and preferred, despite everything, to save ethnology in the form of a 'critical anthropology,' rather than purely and simply evacuating the ideological (epistemologically indefensible) presumption which makes it autonomous—and what we must therefore underline for our part, is that a culture is never something inert; rather, it is a perpetual invention, a contradictory debate between men chained to one and the same destiny, men who are each and all keen to make this destiny as bright as they possibly can. What we have to realise is that in any society all its members have never agreed with all its members. One of the most perverse myths invented by ethnology, the effect of which continues to contribute to its very survival, is precisely the myth of primitive unanimity, the myth whereby non-Western societies would be 'simple' societies, societies having little differentiation on all levels, including the levels of ideology and belief. What we have to recognize today is that pluralism does not befall any society you care to think of from without; it is always inherent in it. The so-called acculturation, the so-called 'meeting' between African civilisation and European civilisation are in fact simply supplementary mutations brought about in African civilisation itself, mutations which occurred later than many others about which we have no more than imperfect knowledge at best, mutations which in addition herald many more to come, which will perhaps be more radical.

⁶ Because to a certain extent he justifies this "mechanistic vocabulary" which is perhaps no more than a derision of strictness and "knowledge," but the intention of which is to expel speculation and ideology (op. cit., p. 89).

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The decisive meeting is not that between all Africa and all Europe, but that which Africa has always maintained and will continue to maintain with herself. Real pluralism is not the result of an eruption of western civilisation in our continent, it does not just happen from without to a civilisation which was previously based on unanimity; rather it is an internal pluralism, which has issued from the permanent confrontation and occasional face-to-face encounters between Africans.

2. A DANGEROUS POLARISATION

Far from thinking that cultural pluralism came with colonisation, it is, on the contrary, extremely probable that colonisation checked and impoverished this process by reducing it artificially to a confrontation between two poles: the dominating pole and the dominated pole. All the advantages which might have resulted for our cultures from a free exchange with the cultures of Europe, the extraordinary enrichment which could have contributed to the debate within our societies if it could have freely complicated the previous terms by an assimilation of terms which came from elsewhere (we know that European art, for example, has been able to enlarge its system of choices in this way by integrating as an extra possibility the style which Europeans call 'Negro art'), all these promises have been aborted, betrayed, because no real exchange has been possible at any time in a climate of violence. Colonialism has thus blocked the cultures of Africa, reduced their internal pluralism, attenuated the dissonances, weakened the tensions just when they were drawing their vitality. Further, it left the African with the one fake alternative of cultural 'alienation' (a correlative of political treason) and cultural nationalism (the other side of, and sometimes the derisory substitute for political nationalism).

What we have to understand here and today is that this polarisation is itself impoverishing, and that its liquidation constitutes one of the first and most important conditions of our cultural renaissance. In a word, we must give African culture back to itself, to its internal pluralism, to its essential openness.

Consequently we must liberate ourselves psychologically, on the individual level, and put into motion a free relationship as much with the cultural tradition of Africa as with the cultural traditions of other countries and continents. This will represent neither westernization nor acculturation; it will simply be tantamount to creative freedom; it will represent a contribution to the enrichment of the African tradition itself, as an open system of multiple choices.

3. WORLD CIVILISATION

We are left with the well-known problem of world civilisation. Some people will hold that mankind will advance in leaps and bounds towards a kind of supra-culture, a synthesis of every regional culture, a synthesis in which their various differences will be toned down. When examined closely, this concept is once again at error by promoting an excess of simplicity. Because it envisages the various regional cultures as closed, completed systems which are only today starting to open on to one another and exchange their values. The apparently dynamic concept of world civilisation, such as it is usually professed, thus, and in fact relies on a static concept of the regional cultures.

On the other hand, if one recognizes the internal dynamism of these cultures, if one admits that they only exist as cultures in the form of contradictory debates which unfold in such and such a society, in such and such a geographically situated area, then world civilisation (which we are in effect experiencing right now) will no longer be conceived as a system of values which is accepted by everyone, but rather as an enlargement of the debate on a universal, worldwide scale, bringing to light ideological, artistic, scientific and other conflicts, and permeating different societies. World civilisation, such as it effectively exists, is far from being a synthesis. On the contrary it is the deepening of those cultural conflicts which existed hitherto within each and every society, and it is the new consciousness that these conflicts are after all the same in all the various societies.

On the cultural plane the situation is therefore analogous with the situation on the political plane. The late Kwame Nkrumah, in his last works, was fond of repeating that the struggle against

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imperialism today is nothing more than a class struggle on an international level; that the real opposition is therefore not between a dominated nation and its colonial or neo-colonial metropolis, but between the exploited classes of the neo-colonies and the bourgeoisies of these same neo-colonies, which are allied with and subordinate to the great imperialist powers.

Of course, cultural conflicts do not purely and simply lead back to political conflicts. Things are clearly more complicated than this. And the cultural pluralism (within each and every society) is infinitely richer than class pluralism, which, by and large, always leads to a dualism. What is more, the cultural conflict is certainly not as dramatic as the political conflict, because it is neither mortal, nor, generally is it as exasperated, being in general a situation which is not class facing class but men or groups of men sometimes belonging to the same class confronting one another, men who feel a solidarity in their common search for truth.

But if there is no identity, at least there is analogy. For just as the class struggle crosses frontiers and demotes to a lower plane the struggle of nations or ethnic groups, so the cultural debate crosses frontiers too today, bringing to light from one country to the next new feelings of solidarity between people or groups of people who are fighting for the same opinions and the same cultural styles.

IV - THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Let us conclude with a few words on the role of the university. We can straight away say that many of the African universities today practice what can be called Africanist ideology, another name for cultural nationalism in our continent. One must recognize in these universities the merit of having finally posed the problem of Africanising their programs, if one considers that for a long time their respective countries have been content to be servile reproductions—in the perspective of a cultural ‘acculturation’—of the programs in use in the ‘metropoli.’ Nevertheless this Africanisation often takes on the form of a furious particularism which is extremely dangerous for our scientific culture.

Of all the disciplines, the human sciences are those which lay

themselves most open to this shortcoming. People no longer study sociology, but 'African sociology'—or better still, ethnology. People do not study history, they study African history; they do not study geography, but the geography of Africa; not linguistics, but African linguistics. This is without doubt a praiseworthy reaction against the false universalism of colonial culture; it is a legitimate effort at environmental exploration, an effort to study, scientifically, the natural and human environment. But it also represents a grave risk of theoretical imprisonment; and an even graver risk of illusorily affirming the specificity of the phenomena studied, for want of a comparative term.⁷

Perhaps it is time today to realise that the most important thing is not to study African cultures, but to live and experience them; not to treat them as something to stare at, not to dissect them scientifically as scrupulous observers, but to involve oneself with them on a practical basis; not quietly to digest them, but to transform them.

From this viewpoint the teaching of African languages, for example, should make way for teaching *in* African languages. Rather than studying the linguistic structure of Yoruba or Fon in French or English, it would be more valid to discuss the structures of French and English in Fon or Yoruba, and in a more general sense, to deal with the most difficult problems in the various sciences using the various African languages: problems of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, linguistics, etc. In short, instead of treating our languages as scientific objects, we should rather practice and use them as vehicles of science and knowledge, vehicles which should be enriched and transformed so as to be elevated to the level of complexity of scientific knowledge. It is clear that this will require huge preparatory work, which only the University can carry out.

What we have to impose upon ourselves is nothing less than a real reversal of the state of things. I hesitate to call it 'Copernican' because I am neither Kant nor Césaire. But basically speaking what Aimé Césaire intended to say in his remarkable

⁷ In order to avoid useless repetition, I shall allow myself to refer to my short work entitled: *Libertés; contribution à la révolution d'aboméenne*, Cotonou, éditions Renaissance, 1973. Cf. especially the chapter on 'Science et révolution,' pp. 41-52.

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and still up-to-date *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*⁸ is somewhat analogous. As far as culture is concerned we have grown used to treating our very selves as a spectacle, to looking at ourselves through the eyes of others. We should, on the contrary, now give back to this spectacle its experienced dimension, restore to it those dramas and discords within it which go to form a culture; awaken, behind the false plurality of cultures, the internal pluralism of our own original culture, and henceforth take up our stand within this culture, by using to advantage all the information acquired from contact with other traditions. Break down the restricted horizon imposed on us by anthropologists, liberate the collective initiative of our peoples, and by the same stroke liberate our own creativity.

⁸ Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1956. This is a letter of resignation from the French Communist Party. As far as the 'Copernican revolution' is concerned, we know that Kant used this term for the reversal of the natural hypothesis according to which the human mind is regulated by things in order to know those things. For his part, on the contrary, he admitted that objects are regulated by the *a priori* structure of the human mind, and for this reason cannot be known except as phenomena. This reversal is analogous with the Copernican revolution in astronomy, which consists in substituting the heliocentric hypothesis for the classical geocentric hypothesis.

Aimé Césaire demands a similar revolution in politics. Forgive us if we quote him at length:

"I think I have said enough to make it understood that I am denying neither Marxism nor Communism, that it is the use that certain parties have made of Marxism and Communism that I disapprove of. What I want is for Marxism and Communism to be put at the service of black peoples and not for black peoples to be put at the service of Marxism and Communism. I want the doctrine and the movement to be made for people, not people for the doctrine and the movement. And of course this does not just relate to the Communists. If I was a Christian or a Moslem I would say the same thing. No doctrine is valid unless it is re-considered by us and for us, and converted to our needs... In this context a true Copernican revolution must be achieved, because in Europe and all over the world, in every sector, from the extreme right to the extreme left, there is a deep-rooted accustomedness to do things for us, to handle things for us, to think for us, in short to question our right to exercise the initiative, as I mentioned just now, and in the last analysis this means the right of personality." (op. cit., p. 12-13).