

AN EXAMINATION OF THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF LEOPOLD SEDAR SENGHOR, AN AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE LEADER

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INTRODUCTION

Political philosophy is generally defined as the study of city, government, politics, liberty, properties, justice, rights, law and the enforcement of legal codes by authority. In other words, it deals with issues ranging from the debate about the legitimacy of government, duties of citizens to when governments may be legitimately overthrown. Thus, “political philosophy has chiefly concerned itself with how men ought to live and what form of government they ought to have, rather than with what are their political habits and institutions” (Fortes, 1960: 4).

One of the pre-eminent African intellectuals of the twentieth century, Senegalese poet and statesman, Léopold Sédar Senghor, is hailed as a powerful voice of postwar black cultural pride and self-determination. A leading proponent of Negritude, a literary movement based on the repudiation of Western imperialism and the reclamation of Pan-African heritage, Senghor was instrumental in the cultivation of postcolonial aesthetics and black racial consciousness. His profound writings celebrate the cultural legacy of Africa while attempting to reconcile his affinity for European civilization with the devastating effects of its colonial policies. He is a recipient of numerous international honours and the first black person to be elected to the prestigious French Academy Senghor was the first president of modern Senegal, a political position he served with distinction from 1960 to 1980.

Thus, political philosophy can be differentiated from political science in the sense that whereas political philosophy is really a doctrine or an ideology, setting up norms or ideal standards for society and government, telling us what ought to be the case or what we ought to do, political science, on the other hand, explains how governments conduct their affairs and how men behave in their pursuit of actual political objectives, instead of prescribing what governments ought to do and what ought to be our political objectives (Raphael, 1970:17).

As seen above, Senghor is one of the famous African independence leaders whose political philosophy is worth mentioning. He grew up in a society where the indigenous people of Senegal had been divided into ‘*subjets*’ and ‘*citoyens*’ through the French colonial policy of assimilation. Assimilation “asserts that all men were equal irrespective of their racial origin or cultural background, there being no differences between men that education could not eliminate” (Crowder, 1968:167).

Senghor’s Socialism

The political philosophy of Leopold Senghor revolves round his philosophy of communalism which he espoused in his book titled *On African Socialism*. In this book, Senghor tries to defend the idea that Africans have their own version of socialism which is distinct from the scientific socialism of Karl Marx and Friederich Engels whose ideas are so acclaimed in the western world. On the socio-political outlook of traditional Africa, Senghor argues as follows: “Negro African society is collectivist, or more exactly, communal because it is rather a communion of souls rather than an aggregate of individuals. Africa had already realised socialism before the coming of the Europeans. But we must renew it by helping to regain its spiritual dimension” (Senghor, 1964:36). One can conclude from Senghor’s remarks that socialist behaviour and practices prevailed in Africa prior to the arrival of the Europeans on the African soil.

The reflection on socialism and for that matter African socialism did not escape the intellect and vigilant lenses of Leopold Senghor in the post independence period. Senghor’s conception of socialism revolves around certain themes, namely, the collectivist character of traditional Africa, its humanist character and the egalitarianism which characterized the social segment of traditional Africa. Thus Senghor’s reflection on socialism is based perhaps on his partial understanding of African metaphysical complementarity. In African metaphysics, forces are not antithetical. Rather, objects exist to complement one another. Besides, his reflection on this subject is derived from his study of Marxian socialism and his subsequent rejection of Marx’s materialism, and the acceptance of Marx’s rejection of the capitalist mode of production (Senghor, 1964:59).

On African socialism, Senghor argues that prior to the European advent on African soil whose mission it was to colonize and civilize “the savage tribes,” Africa had already devised an ideology called socialism. Hence, African socialism predates the coming of the Europeans. The above assertion reminds us of Julius Nyerere’s view that the African is by nature socialist, and so socialism is an attitude of the African, he does not need to be taught in order to comprehend its tenets. The implication of these two related views implies that a logical conclusion can be drawn that the African does not need to be taught socialism, because it is his very nature to live with and die by it. In brief, it is his genetic trait.

In addition to the collectivist aspect of African socialism, Senghor is of the view that African socialism is humanist in form since it aims at the material welfare and well-being of man, the improvement of production for the satisfaction of all people as well as the equitable distribution of resources (Sogolo, 1999:202). On the humanist nature of African socialism, Senghor agrees with Marx that African socialism restores the dignity of man as opposed to capitalism that is more like alienating man from the fruit of his labour, from his personal dignity and from the person's self. Here we see Senghor agreeing with Karl Marx's position that whilst capitalism encourages individual lifestyle, socialism on the other hand recognizes the whole interest of the masses. According to Senghor, individualistic behaviour is derided and frown upon if not completely discouraged in Africa. That is why in most African societies, especially among the Dagaaba of northern Ghana, bringing up a child is the collective social responsibility of every member of the family and the society as a whole. An ill trained individual is not only a disgrace to the individual and his/her immediate family, but the society into which he/she was born. For Senghor, though the individual is unique in himself or herself, he or she is regarded as an integral part of the community in which he or she lives and practises, which as it were, derives its harmony from the congregation of the sum total of the individuals. Hence, any unhappiness felt by one individual in the community affects the whole community since the whole community is a "symbiotic" rather than a "parasitic" association. Needless to mention here, is to whatever extent that classical Marxian socialism is humanistic, it is compatible with the humanist element inherent in the African socialism.

However, Senghor was very critical of Marxism because he felt that its principles could only be applied to the Europe of the nineteenth century and do not reflect the reality and experience of African people. In this position, Colin Legum agrees with Senghor for three reasons namely: that "the cultural references in Marx's thought are nearly all drawn from western experience; the economic situation of western proletariat cannot be strictly identified with that of the underdeveloped people; a doctrine is all the more universal in so far as it takes account of all experience, historic or economic..." (Legum, 1962:107). We grant that the position of Senghor and Legum is valid only with respect to cultural relativity. However, no matter how relative cultures may be, there are some elements that make cultures, though separated by vast expanse of land and sea, similar. And one of such elements is the African ability to adapt to the ever changing conditions of life as the Heracliteans would want us to believe. Thus an ideology such as Marxian socialism can be seen to be borrowed and adapted in order to meet human technological and scientific demands. The situation in Libya of Africa, Cuba in the Caribbean, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Bolivia all in Latin America are evidence to the assertion that a developing nation can adopt Marxism and adapt to suit their own circumstances. All the same, cultural and environmental differences play a significant role with regard to the receptiveness of a given ideology at a particular time frame.

More so, Senghor also finds Marxism “unacceptable because it is atheistic in content and contemptuous...” of African spiritual values (Sogolo, 1999:200). The materialistic determinism of Marxism in Senghor’s view tends to neglect ethics and the fundamental values that define man as a free being. This explains why Senghor labels Marxism as ‘materialism without warmth’, never the less, he believes that it has an essential merit of being ideologically humanistic. Senghor contends also that egalitarianism is another vital aspect of African socialism. He argues that African society prior to the advent of colonialism was classless and so, there was no social ladder in which one class sat on the neck of another. In short, there was nothing like one class exploiting another class and no working class (proletariat and bourgeoisie in Marxian sense) so to speak. While appreciating and accepting the Marxian methodology and framework as both politically and economically valid for Africa, Senghor believes that Marx would have revised his notes on socialism in the face of Africa’s socio-economic situation in relation to the scientific achievement of the twentieth century Africa. The cardinal point worth noting here is that Senghor believes strongly that African society has no place in Marxism (Crowder, 1952:60).

Like his African counterparts, Senghor also thought that at independence, Africa had inadequate or very few resources and was too far behind the developed countries to be able to pursue development under competitive free market capitalism where the market forces such as demand and supply instead of communal spirit dominate the production and distribution of goods and services. Such an approach produced inequitable distribution of goods and services which was both undesirable and intolerable in creating the necessary unity in the society, he argues. Moreover, Senghor believes that capitalism could not be a viable alternative ideology because it tends to glorify individual initiative or interest, which is incompatible with African traditional values of the family, the clan, and the general community ahead of the individual (Senghor, 1964:46). Thus we see most African independence leaders rejecting capitalism for the same reasons as cited above. Seeking to distinguish African socialism from Marxian socialism, Senghor indicates:

Our socialism can no longer be exactly Marx and Engels which was elaborated about a hundred years ago according to the scientific methods and circumstances of the nineteenth century and Western Europe.... Our socialism then would be elaborated not in the dependence but in the autonomy of our thought and it will choose the most scientific, up-to-date and above all the most efficient methods and institutions and techniques of the western world and elsewhere. But in the final analysis, they will be efficient only if adapted to the African situation... to our geography, culture and psychology (Senghor, 1964:15).

The objectives of socialism in Senghor's thoughts have a great deal to do with the predicaments of Africans, stemming from the colonial experience. Thus, his major task was the mental decolonization of the African, and a return (adaptation) to the pre-colonial values which ensured that the collective spirit of communalism, humanism and egalitarianism thrived. At the same time, Senghor felt that it would be unwise not to recognize the invaluable contribution of science and technology which were legacies of colonialism. Thus, unlike Nyerere who advocates a complete ideological autarchy from the West, Senghor advocates that certain positive elements of the West such as scientific development, educational advancement and technological ideas can be borrowed and adapted to suit African conditions. "Rejecting the notion of European supremacy and the forced assimilation of Western culture among colonized Africans, Senghor and other negritude writers, mainly French-speaking African and Caribbean writers, sought to inspire renewed pride in the rich history and cultural tradition of Africa" (Sologolo, 2000:23).

To conclude, Leopold Senghor's Negritude owes its genesis to people like Etiene Lero through to Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, and as a concept concerned with the conditions of descendants of Africans in the Caribbean. Using Marxism to analyze its doctrines, Negritude still maintained this Marxian flavour up to Senghor's time and even beyond. As an ideology, Negritude was earlier concerned about racial discrimination against the black race, but after independence, its racial reaction lost its appeal as new programmes had to be coined out in order to meet post independence challenges such as nation building. In this era, Senghor, like most independence leaders of Africa defended the view that African socialism is different from Marxian socialism because though it shares the humanist character with Marxism, Marxist deterministic, materialistic and atheistic claims cannot be reconciled with traditional African values of communalism and egalitarianism. He also believes that the positive contribution of colonialism such as the French educational system, science and technology should be adapted to meet African situations.

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