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Slavery, Colonialism, Human Rights, and the Négritude of Léopold Sédar Senghor

According to Article 1 of the 1948 United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."[1] Adopted eighty-three years after the Americans abolished slavery, a hundred years after the French, and 141 years after the English, what the UN declaration underscored is the fundamental principle of universal humanity, and what it hoped to achieve was the immediate granting of at least a "juridical humanity"[2] to those under colonial rule. Furthermore, by recognising all humans as such, the declaration aspired to the prevention of future human rights violations such as those perpetrated in the nineties

revisions, but remained in full force until the dawn of the French Revolution in 1789. Under the Code, which also took care to ban all Jews from French island colonies, slaves had no rights

reparations.[12] The issue is far from being resolved. In 2001, Human Rights Watch offered its own contribution to the debate in a document titled “An Approach to Reparations:”

> We begin with the premise that slavery, the slave trade, the most severe forms of racism associated with colonialism, and subsequent official racist practices such as Apartheid in South Africa or the Jim Crow laws in the United States are extraordinarily serious human rights violations. If committed today these would be crimes against humanity.[13]

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president Chirac, in the same speech mentioned above, noted: "Slavery fuelled racism. It was when attempting to justify the unjustifiable that people constructed racist theories, i.e. the revolting assertion of the existence of 'races' which were intrinsically inferior to others."[18] A student of European history and the Enlightenment, Chirac knew what he was talking about.

In nineteenth-century France, theories on racial differences were quite fashionable. For example, Gustave Le Bon, French social psychologist best known for his work on crowd psychology, *La psychologie des foules* (1895), wrote in an earlier work, *Les lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples* (1894), that each race was distinguished by what he called its *constitution mentale*. According to Le Bon, the mental constitution of a people is what determines how they think and act, what they can or cannot learn, what sort of civilisation they are capable of building.[19] He went on to use his research to conclude that the black race, being of an inferior mental capacity, deserved no more than an elementary education.[20] For his part, Ernest Renan, another of France's renowned humanists writing almost contemporaneously with Le Bon, observed in his 1871 book, *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale*, that

> The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity. With us, the common man is nearly always a déclassé nobleman; his heavy hand is better suited to handling the sword than the menial tool. Rather than work, he chooses to fight, that is, he returns to his first estate.... Pour forth this all-consuming activity onto countries which, like China, are crying for foreign conquest.... Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honor; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the blessing of such a government, an ample allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should;.... Let each one do what he is made for, and all will be well.[21]

Theoretical assertions such as were made by Le Bon and Renan were then used not only to justify slavery but also to condone or even actively encourage post-slavery atrocities like colonialism and Apartheid. It is no surprise, therefore, that Ernest Renan would directly and explicitly urge France to go out and colonise so-called inferior peoples as a way of boosting the nation's prestige at home and abroad:

> La colonisation en grand est une nécessité politique tout à fait de premier ordre. Une nation qui ne colonise pas est irrévocablement vouée au socialisme, à la guerre du riche et du pauvre. La conquête d'un pays de race inférieure par une race supérieure, qui s'y établit pour le gouverner, n'a rien de choquant. L'Angleterre pratique ce genre de colonisation dans l'Inde, au grand avantage de l'Inde, de l'humanité en général, et à son propre avantage.[22]
>
> [On the whole, colonisation is a political necessity of the utmost importance. A nation that does not colonise is irrevocably doomed to socialism, to the war between rich and poor. There is nothing appalling about the conquest of a land of inferior race by a superior race which settles there to govern it. England practises this kind of colonisation in India to the great benefit of India, of humanity in general, and to her own benefit.]

Indeed, as the African scholar Simon Gikandi points out, "it is impossible to think about instances of evil, all the way from African slavery to the Jewish genocide, that were not underwritten by a theoretical apparatus."[23]

In general, colonisation was packaged and sold to the citizens of the colonising nations as well as to the colonised subjects as a divinely sanctioned undertaking (*une mission civilisatrice*, as the French called it) that sought to eliminate ignorance, superstition and disease, to bring progress and the light of God to the heathen savages of the rest of the world.[24] It was the confidence bestowed by this self-delegated mission of altruism, backed by an unequivocal superiority complex, that gave colonialists like George Nathaniel Curzon, viceroy of India from 1898 to 1905, the tranquillity of mind to stand at the Birmingham Town Hall in 1907 and proclaim: "wherever the Empire has

The majority of Senghor's poems in *Hosties noires* deal with the encounter, through slavery and colonisation, between Africa and Europe as well as the catastrophic impact of that encounter on black peoples, their cultures and civilisations. It is also through some of the poems in this collection that Senghor begins seriously to elucidate his vision of a new world order governed by a praxis of love, mutual respect, dialogue, and eventual reconciliation and international cooperation. I have singled out one poem in particular, "Prayer for Peace," because of its breadth and depth of coverage. The poem is a maelstrom of emotions, ranging from anger to calls for peace, forgiveness, brotherhood, and even forgetting:

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[symbiosis of all the different civilisations],"[41] is the search for equilibrium, a shared idea and a common reason for living. It is the acceptance of the complementarity and interdependence of telluric forces. According to de Chardin human differences, physical and otherwise, represent only a phase in the inexorable planetary march to what he calls the "Omega point" where the civilisation of the Universal will find its efflorescence. In de Chardin's understanding of human existence, the very "spherical geometry of the earth" reflects "the psychic curvature of mind...,"[42] hence the potential for eventual universal human convergence:

> ...just as it happens on a sphere, where the meridians spring apart as they separate from one pole only to join again at the opposite, this divergence gives way and becomes subordinate to a movement of convergence, where races, peoples, and nations consolidate and complete one another by mutual fertilization.[43]

So, for Teilhard, the natural tendency of the cosmos is unification of all planetary forces, and the violence that has always plagued humankind is a reflection of man's artificial attempts to move against the forces of "human planetization."[44] De Chardin reminds us that "[w]e have reached a crossroads in human evolution where the only road which leads forward is towards a common passion."[45] He warns that "[t]o continue to place our hopes in a social order achieved by external violence would simply amount to our giving up all hope of carrying the Spirit of the Earth to its limits."[46]

Much like race and cultural *métissage*, or cross-fertilisation, of which the younger Senghor was an avid proponent, the Civilisation of the Universal, for Senghor, is not a melting-pot where race and cultural differences are dissolved and disappear;(m pe)4(iw 3.05 0 Td (-)Tj.00

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In his struggle to understand Senghor's "quality of mercy,"[57] and love for France, Soyinka finds no explanation other than the fact that "France is exceptionally blessed

> This is neither desirable nor possible. It is about acknowledging the Other's *right to difference*, that is, the right to think, act and live by and for oneself.... It is the *dialogue of cultures* based on clearly understood and accepted differences that will enable men to know themselves, to acknowledge one another and to cooperate in the brotherhood of men.… The New International Economic Order must achieve two inextricably linked goals: to change the world and to transform life in such a way that the human being can be better fed, better clothed, better educated, stronger and more beautiful, indeed more human.]

As we celebrate, on both sides of the Atlantic, two important events—the 200th anniversary of London's abolition of slavery, and the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown in Virginia—we should take a moment to reflect on the legacy of Léopold Sédar Senghor and the personalities and events that helped shape his worldview. In a world where fundamentalisms of all shapes and stripes continue to undermine the bedrock of our very existence as a species, and where men, interest groups, and nations are becoming increasingly entrenched in their parochialisms, the above words from a man who made it his vocation to remind the rest of humanity that we are all one, that our differences are God's way of sparing us the ugliness and monotony of sameness, cannot be more relevant, more urgent.

Notes

as goods of personal estate ….” (31-32); Prop. XII of South Carolina’s slave edicts stipulated that “Slavery is hereditary and perpetual” (99). George M. A. Stroud, *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: H. Longstreth, 1856).
6. Joan DeJean and Margaret Waller, “Introduction,” *Ourika* (New York: The Modern Language

25. The Open Door Web Site, “Britain,”

each other. *In order to give and to receive*. It is necessary that you remain *Arabs*. Otherwise you would have nothing to offer us." Léopold Sédar Senghor, *The Foundations of "Africanite" or "Negritude" and Arabité*, trans. Mercer Cook (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971), 86-87.
48. Paolo Freire, "Pedagogy of the oppressed," in *The Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment*, eds. Kenneth P. Jameson and Charles K. Wilber (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 551.
49. Ibid., 552.
50. Senghor, "Prayer for Peace," 70.
51. Wole Soyinka, "Senghor: Lessons in Power" (*Research in African Literatures* 33.4, 2002), 1.
52. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," in *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 186.
53. Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 106.
54. Senghor, "Prayer for Peace," 70-71.
55. Senghor, "The Kaya Magan," 79.
56. Senghor, "Prayer for Peace," 70-71.
57. Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, 105.
58. Ibid., 109.
59. Senghor's commitment to love 'at all costs' finds echo in Teilhard de Chardin's own conviction: "We must believe without reservation in the possibility and the necessary consequences of universal love" (*Building the Earth*, 86).
60. Soyinka, "Senghor: Lessons in Power," 1-2.
61. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc attests to the transience of socio-economic systems founded on hypocrisy and inequality.
62. Léopold S. Senghor, "Préface" to *The New International Economic Order: Philosophical and Socio-Cultural Implications*, ed. Hans Köchler (Guildford: Guildford Educational Press, 1980), vii-ix.