Senghor and Socialism

CLIVE WAKE

Marx to Teilhard de Chardin

IN MANY WAYS, SENGHOR’S CONCEPT OF AFRICAN SOCIALISM IS REMINISCENT OF THAT OF OTHER AFRICAN LEADERS, DISTINGUISHING ITSELF PERHAPS MAINLY BY EMPHASIS ON ITS AFRICANNESS AND BY THE INTELLECTUAL OBJECTIVITY WITH WHICH IT IS ELABORATED. SENGHOR IS KNOWN CHEF-LAY AS A POET AND AS THE EXPONENT OF NEGROIDITY. MANY IMAGINE HIM TO BE A DREAMER WHOSE PRESENCES IN POLITICS IS DIFFICULT TO COMPREHEND. IN SPITE OF THIS RATHER UNFAIR IMAGE, HE IS AN ASTUTE POLITICIAN WITH IMMENSE PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE, AND ONE OF THE THREE LEADING FIGURES IN THE POLITICS OF FRENCH-SPEAKING WEST AFRICA, ALONG WITH SEKOU TOUCÉ AND HOUPHOUET-BOIGNY.

The independence of French-speaking Africa owes a great deal to his intelligent handling and foresight. He is a practical politician with considerable understanding of human nature and its weaknesses, and gifted with great tolerance. He enjoys undoubted popularity among the mass of Senegalese peasantry, much to the chagrin of the opposition. Little of what he has written on politics and the future of independent Africa is known outside the French-speaking world, except by the experts. He has recently published his thoughts on what he calls African Socialism, stressing mainly the cultural and political aspects, while his Prime Minister, Mamadou Dia, has written in a very illuminating way on its economic aspects. For Senghor, Africa will not be really free until it is culturally free, although he does not mean by this that Western Civilisation must be in any way rejected. What he looks for is a “symbiosis” of Europe and that part of African traditional culture that is still relevant here and now in the 20th century. He places great emphasis on the need for Africa to face up to the demands of its contemporary situation, and not to waste time on negative recriminations against the colonialist régime or in digging up from the past an African culture that no longer has any relevance.

Senghor starts with Marx. He talks of the tremendous propaganda he and his fellow African students were subjected to by French Marxists in the early thirties, as they still are. One sees its influence in many African intellectuals who have studied in Paris. Senghor himself is more attracted by the early Marx, on the way to becoming a great metaphysician and moralist, before he became side-tracked into a negative determinism. Senghor repeatedly criticises the French-speaking African élite for remaining blindly loyal to an idea of Marx that is not only irrelevant to modern Africa, but also to the modern world as a whole. Senghor himself really uses Marx as a jumping-board, distinguishing those aspects of his thought which can be retained as useful - mainly questions of method - and those, such as the class-war, materialism, which have no relation to the African situation. Yet, while he uses Marx as an intellectual starting-point, he has, like Mamadou Dia, little time for European Communism, because, he claims, the European proletariat has profited as much from colonialism as anyone else, and the economic enslavement of Russia’s satellites is even more complete than anything Capitalism could do.

IT IS OBVIOUS TO ANY OBSERVER THAT SOME FORM OF SOCIALISATION IS NECESSARY IN THE NEWLY INDEPENDENT AFRICAN STATES FOR SOME TIME TO COME, TO ENABLE THEM TO TRANSFORM THEMSELVES FROM UNDERDEVELOPED COUNTRIES INTO DEVELOPED ONES. THE CONCEPT OF THE SINGLE-PARTY STATE, WITH ALL ITS DANGERS, STEMS INEVITABLY FROM THIS IN THE ABSENCE OF A NATIONAL UNITY SO OFTEN STILL TO BE ACHIEVED. SENGHOR’S IDEA OF AFRICAN SOCIALISM ESSENTIALLY COMES DOWN TO THIS AS WELL. HE APPEALS TO THE PEOPLE OF SENEGAL TO WORK AS ONE TOWARDS THE CREATION OF THE FULLY SELF-RELIANT NATION, IN SO FAR AS ANY NATION CAN BE SO IN THE MODERN WORLD. HIS FIRST CONCEPT, THEN, IS THAT OF THE NATION, WHICH, UNLIKE MARX, HE SEES AS THE BASIC UNIT. A WIDER UNITY FOR AFRICA THERE MUST AND WILL BE, BUT ON THE LINES OF THE FEDERATION SYSTEM. SENGHOR HAS ALWAYS HELD FAST TO THIS IDEA OF A FEDERATION OF STATES, WHICH HE REGARDS AS THE ONLY WAY TO MAINTAIN A PROPER RESPECT FOR LIBERTY.

In order to play a constructive part in what he calls the creation of the Universal Civilisation to which the world is tending, each race, but more particularly each Nation, must contribute its own personality. The future unity of the human race which, with Teilhard de Chardin, he sees as inevitable, will be constructed not out of a levelling of all cultures inherent in the Marxist vision, but by a complementing of one another. Quoting Teilhard de Chardin — who with Marx is his greatest source of inspiration — he says that men are not equal, they complement one another.

But the Nation must first be built. The under-developed countries have the duty to become Nations, and for this they require internal solidarity of purpose. He criticises the opposition parties of African states for their will to sabotage the popularly elected, therefore democratic, government for the sake of power. He also comes down heavily on the Trade Unions for having betrayed their vocation.

Senghor rejects the class struggle in Africa, whereas the Trade Unions still cling to it; he also rejects any attempt to bring it into existence. The Trade Unions, says Senghor, are still too tied to their European counterparts. (Most political parties and trade unions in French-speaking West Africa, until fairly recently, were affiliated to metropolitan organisations.) Senghor points out that the members of the African Trade Unions do not represent the proletariat of Africa. On the contrary, they are the better-paid section of the community, and, in Senegal, form only 10% of the population. The real proletariat is the peasant class, and it must be the endeavour of the State to raise its
standard of living to put it on a par with the rest of the community. To this end, agriculture in Senegal has been almost entirely socialised — and the salaries of government employees pegged. Senghor advises the Trade Unions to occupy themselves more profitably by organising workers' co-operatives, a task they have too long neglected. He will give them no say in the active running of the country, which must remain the task of the elected democratic State.

The State then becomes the key instrument in the building of the Nation. It is democratic because elected by the people, and it must assume the powers necessary to direct, with strength, the building of the Nation. We are back now where we started. The State is the focal point. Senghor is well aware of the dangers of such a system, but he gives no real safeguards which bind the State and ensure personal liberty, except for his own deep humanism and, although he affirms the existence of God against the Marxist atheism, he does not place Him above the State or allocate to Him any fundamental rights.

Senghor rejects the tendency of the communist state to depersonalise and to make the person part of an impersonal whole. He insists on the decentralisation of the administration, so as to spread as much responsibility as possible throughout the system. In actual practice, this is what is being done in Senegal, especially in the “rural animation” schemes, as they are called (another way of talking of community development).

Senghor starts from Marx and ends with Teilhard de Chardin. Marx has provided a method and is the discoverer, in modern times, of sociology, but Senghor finds his materialism unsatisfactory, a dead-end. God does exists and Spirit is of greater importance than matter. The latter, in fact, derives its meaning from the Spirit. Man is not merely the homo oeconomicus, but is essentially homo sapiens. Nevertheless, Senghor sees in Marx what Marx did not believe himself to be, a philosopher, and more, a metaphysician whose mistake was to have allowed himself to be side-tracked by materialist determinism. Senghor points out that, as can be seen in the work of Teilhard de Chardin, modern thought, scientific and philosophical, emphasises the unpredictable, the unmeasurable in nature and in Man. Determinism deprives Man of his liberty, but contemporary thought restores it to him by reasserting his right to choose for himself. The alienation of the colonial world was done away with by the restoration of the right to choose by the Constitution of 1958.

The essence of independence, of freedom lies in this right to choose for oneself how one will act, as an individual, as a Nation. Modern Africa must make the choice that will give it its place among the nations of the world. This choice, which must be made from the right use of the Nation's own assets, will enable it to make its contribution to the Universal Civilisation. Senghor always sees Senegal's own future as inseparable from that of the rest of Mankind. This Universal Civilisation is the centre-piece of his vision, for which he finds confirmation in Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionism and and not in Marx's proletarian millennium.

At this point, Senghor brings in negritude. While nothing of value from the West should be rejected by Africa, there are elements in her own culture which can be used. He sees African society as essentially socialistic, in its emphasis on the community, a communion of persons, superior to the Marxist collectivity of individuals. This must form the basis of the African socialism. Moreover, the African has a method of perception which, because of its penetration of the object (as opposed to the objectivity of the European method) gives the African a real sense of the value of the person and of things. This method of perception is very close to the modern European one, as expressed in phenomenology, personalism, etc., but whereas Europe has only now come upon it, Africa has always had it, and still has it. The African socialism can therefore possess a genuine humanism.

For Senghor, African socialism must be open, receptive, able to absorb anything of profit to it, from whatever source. It must be based on spiritual values, and on the primary need to give Africa a culture of her own. No society can be built on politics alone, and Senghor does not follow Nkrumah in his dictum: Seek ye first the political kingdom. He refuses an inhuman dogmatism, and emphasises the value of the person. Senegalese Socialism must work with the rest of Africa and the world towards the realisation of the Universal Civilisation.