



CHICAGO JOURNALS

---

*Liberté 1: Negritude et Humanisme* by Léopold Sédar Senghor

*On African Socialism* by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Mercer Cook

*Liberté 1: Negritude et Humanisme* by Léopold Sédar Senghor; *On African Socialism* by Léopold Sédar Senghor; Mercer Cook

Review by: Barbara Celarent

*American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 119, No. 1 (July 2013), pp. 299–305

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/673281>

Accessed: 13/11/2013 17:25

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Journal of Sociology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

This book is a valuable addition to the debate about young women and the future of feminism. Reger's major and unique contribution is to bring together a political generations perspective, a deep knowledge of social movement studies, and attention to local community dynamics. While at times it comes across as slightly labored as every topic is worked through case study by case study, the argument about the state of contemporary feminism becomes strong, clear, and compelling chiefly because of this focus on specific activist communities. A substantive rather than style-related limitation is the choice of communities, especially given that they are in many ways so similar. It would have been extremely interesting to include feminist activist communities that were not overwhelmingly white and middle class. However, Reger makes no claims to representativeness nor generalizability and indeed she is able to unpack many challenges related to privilege as a result of her case-study choices.

Reger's argument that overlap and dialogue characterize the relationship between contemporary and second wave feminisms is also an important angle in this book. While she rightly rejects categorization of feminists according to age range and uses the term "contemporary feminists" instead of "young feminists" in order to get at overlapping generations, this nuance was not reflected in the constituencies of the activist communities (partly no doubt a result of having two college-based case studies). We come away with some important questions about how different political generations can and do interact and work together. The book is insightful, important, and tremendously helpful for anyone seeking a rigorous, empirically grounded assessment of the state of contemporary and future feminist activism in the United States.

*Liberté 1: Negritude et Humanisme.* By Léopold Sédar Senghor. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964. Pp. 445.

*On African Socialism.* By Léopold Sédar Senghor. Translated by Mercer Cook. New York: Praeger, 1964. Pp. 173.

Barbara Celarent\*  
*University of Atlantis*

Although he became an internationally famous political leader, throughout his life Léopold Sédar Senghor remained an intellectual. His poetry is enshrined as classic. His incidental writings make up five thick volumes of elegant prose. His concept of "negritude" remains a vibrant challenge to the many varieties of racism. If politics did not leave Senghor the time to transform all of this insight into a systematic analysis of society, it nonetheless provided him with a breadth of experience and a depth of understanding

\* Another review from 2052 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

unavailable to the writers of systematic treatises. And in the modern culture of superficial summaries, Senghor's writings stand out for their combination of brevity with precision, of accessibility with grace. They say much in little space, and their consistency is the consistency of the man himself, always changing over the course of a long and eventful life, yet always remaining the same.

Léopold Sédar Senghor was born in the coastal town of Joal, Senegal, but grew up in his mother's inland village of Djilor, his mother having refused to join her husband's other wives in the elder Senghor's compound in Joal. Senghor's father was a hunter-turned-merchant, brokering the rural peanut trade for a French firm and practicing a loose Catholicism despite his polygamy. The family hybridity was evident in Senghor's name, the Catholic "Léopold" being added to the Serer "Sédar." For seven years, Senghor grew up in the rural countryside, dreamy and thoughtful. His father then called him to Joal and sent him to school. Although Senghor himself felt a vocation for the priesthood, a combination of French assimilationism, astounding talent, and amazing luck took Senghor through various schools to the top of the French educational system. In 1928, at age 21, he arrived at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand to prepare for the exams to enter the École Normale Supérieure, the alma mater of six prime ministers, as well as of Henri Bergson and Jean-Paul Sartre, of Louis Pasteur and Émile Durkheim. Among Senghor's close friends at Louis-le-Grand was classmate Georges Pompidou, who introduced the reclusive Senghor to the broader social and intellectual Parisian world and who would be prime minister and then president of France from 1962 to 1974 when Senghor was president of Senegal. Choosing not to retake the École Normale exam after his first failure (Durkheim, for example, passed only on his third try), Senghor took a university degree and began teaching in Tours, meanwhile pursuing studies in ethnography and linguistics with an eye to a university post. At the same time, he began writing poetry and, with Aime Césaire and Leon Damas, built the negritude movement. In the mid-1930s, he became *agrégé* of the University of Paris, the first African to do so, and in the late 1930s, he gradually emerged as an important political spokesman for French West Africa.

The French assimilationist ideal included military service, and during the war, Senghor was captured and spent 18 months in a POW camp. There he wrote what would become his second main collection of poetry (*Hosties noires*) and rediscovered his African roots directly, since German policies segregated prisoners by race. After the war, Senghor decided to enter politics, becoming an elected deputy to the French Assembly under the tutelage of Lamine Guèye, then Senegal's leading politician. Although both men affiliated with the French socialist party, Senghor found European socialism irrelevant to the African situation and broke with both the party and Guèye. He built his own political organization, based on the rural masses and, in predominantly Muslim northern Senegal, on the marabouts, the traditional religious leaders. He was aided in this task by the brilliant Muslim schoolteacher and rural organizer, Mamadou Dia (toleration was characteristic

of both Senghor and Senegal). As a result, Senghor's party dominated Senegalese politics in the years leading up to independence in 1960, and Senghor emerged in this period as one of the two most important politicians of West Africa, alongside the more radical Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire.

In 1960, Senghor became independent Senegal's first president, a position he held until 1980. Throughout all this time, he continued to write poetry, to produce elaborate and learned political analyses, and to participate actively in literary and intellectual life. But his popularity waned during his presidency. In part this reflected his break with Dia in 1962. More important, the inevitable problems of development in a country with few natural resources led to public disillusionment, although the post-Senghor years produced a certain nostalgia as well. Senghor was one of the few African leaders of his time to give up power voluntarily, continuing a Senegalese tradition of democracy that extended well before independence. Senghor's retirement held further surprises, however. In 1984 he was elected to the Académie Française. His writing continued unabated, and his poetry became established in the French canon. He died in France in 2001.

Senghor's published work takes two forms. First are the poetry collections, which appeared in 1945, 1948, 1956, 1961, 1964, 1969, and 1979. They constitute a sustained examination of Senghor's life, from the first poetic memories of Africa, written in the gray winter of Paris, to the elegy for his son Philippe, who died in an automobile accident when Senghor was 76. Senghor's poetic gift was lyrical and self-consciously African. His poetry is pervaded by repetition, rhythm, and assonance—devices he identified as central to *négritude*, the black experience of the natural and social worlds. Likewise, his choice of the lyric genre paralleled his identification of *négritude* with direct sensual experience and a “surreal” connection to the world (for Senghor, “surreal” meant “beyond the real” or “more than real”). Indeed, Senghor once remarked that a black man always possessed a lyrical sensibility [*Liberté 1*, p. 66]). Although Senghor was both an adept practitioner as well as an admirer of the abstract thinking that he found in Europe, he contrasted European abstraction throughout his life with the lyrical and direct mode of experience for which Africa was both his personal source and—in the abstract, European sense—his symbol. It is the merit of thinking in poetry that Senghor could always sustain this ambivalence between abstraction and concreteness, where the pressures of consistency and discipline would have forced a writer of treatises to choose the one or the other.

This persistent ambivalence also pervades the second form of Senghor's work, the collections of other writings that form the five volumes of *Liberté*. Here are contained speeches, lectures, introductions and prefaces, reviews, essays, reports: all the prose Senghor generated in a long intellectual life. The volumes are loosely organized by topic, but since they appeared in 1964, 1971, 1977, 1983, and 1993, they are also inevitably chronological. *Liberté 1*, reviewed here, contains two prewar pieces, but the majority of its contents

date from 1950 to 1964, the years of Senghor's rise to political eminence. The book contains everything from Senghor's first major public lecture in Dakar (1937) to essays on Senegalese poets and folklore, from analyses of the Harlem Renaissance to discussions of 16th-century French poetry, from essays on linguistics to elegies of famous Senegalese. (Senghor's essay on reading Goethe in his prisoner-of-war camp is very moving.)

That the longest of the 58 pieces in this book is 35 pages makes clear at once that Senghor the social and cultural theorist writes in the same form as does Senghor the poet. He does not make a long and systematic argument. He writes in short pieces that we might call theoretical lyrics. In these are deployed, again and again, the basic terms of Senghorian thought: negritude, surreality, integral humanism, sense and symbol, civilization and culture, rhythm, image, and the civilization of the universal. Indeed, the longer pieces of Senghor reveal themselves, on inspection, to be linked chains of smaller theoretical insights. In keeping with the lyrical—as opposed to narrative—tendency of Senghor's thought, there is no long logical thread of theoretical argument, but rather a detailed sense of the central realities of a present, expressed again and again, in various settings and with various materials. And most important are the realities that black African culture has something profoundly important to offer to European culture, that this something has been lost in Europe itself, and that a universal civilization cannot lose any major part of the human project. (For readers who prefer traditional exposition of theory, the essay "Éléments constitutifs d'une civilisation d'inspiration négro-africaine" [*Liberté 1*, pp. 252–86] is as close as Senghor gets to a systematic presentation of the underpinnings of negritude.)

The three longer essays contained in the translated volume *On African Socialism* date from the period of Senghor's political triumph, and one finds in them a much more practical approach. Here Senghor the politician is demonstrating that classical Marxism is irrelevant to Africa, but that a renewed socialism, rooted in African culture, can provide Senegal with a way forward. These essays present Senghor the pedagogue, working his way through the details of Marx and then onward to the contemporary French Marxists like Lucien Goldmann and Henri Lefebvre. He is concerned that his listeners get the definitions right, but also that they follow him in his re-reading of Marx as a humanist who got lost in the details of economic materialism. (Senghor very much preferred the earlier, more philosophical and abstract Marx to the later and more historically localized one.) He wants his hearers not to reject the Negro-African heritage for a Europeanized materialism, for Marx's "terribly inhuman metaphysics, an atheistic metaphysics in which mind is sacrificed to matter, freedom to the determined, man to things" (*African Socialism*, p. 76). Yet these essays are also filled with specific political and social recommendations, as befits their origin as lectures to party audiences in Senegal. One can only guess what the young Senegalese cadres must have made of Senghor's extended elaboration of the

ideas of Teilhard de Chardin, whose writings became central to him after the mid-1950s.

Senghor's ideas changed slowly but steadily over the course of his life, since both his habits of thought and his immediate political needs drove him to focus on present matters. One sees this first of all in his sources. The early works employ the writings of Leo Frobenius and other European ethnographers to undermine racist descriptions of black "primitivism," whereas the later ones engage directly with Marxism as a flawed account of present-day Africa. The early works derive their tolerant humanism in part from the attempt of Jacques Maritain (in *Humanisme Intégral*, 1936) to envision a world society in which Catholicism would be but one of several religions, where the later ones rely heavily on the progressivist evolutionism and scientized moralism of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. (It is striking that both writers were considered dangerous by the Catholic church, to which Senghor remained dedicated throughout his life: Maritain's book was nearly placed on the Index, and Teilhard de Chardin's major work was suppressed during his lifetime by the general of the Jesuit order to which he belonged.)

But the change in Senghor involves not only sources, but also ideas. Senghor's earliest pieces make much of *métissage*—hybridization. He saw *métissage* everywhere—in his father's combination of native beliefs with Catholicism, in the Senegalese racial mixture of Berbers and sub-Saharan Africans, in his own combination of French and Senegalese experience. But hybridization eventually staled for Senghor the politician and writer, however much it may have described Senghor the man. His later work argues the need for a different African way, less a hybridizing of Western and African ideas and more a newly envisioned form of socialism, rooted in what Senghor took to be the traditional society of Africans. The judicious professor, standing above the fray, had to take sides when he became a politician and president.

It has been common to belittle Senghor's social theory as having mistaken the distinction of traditional and modern societies for the distinction—correlated with the first in Senghor's experience—of black and white societies. This is false in two crucial respects. First, Senghor was well aware that not all nonmodern societies were black, as one notes from his scattered remarks about China, the Arab Middle East, North Africa, and India. To be sure, he never evinces the broadly historical consciousness that typically sustains a narrative sensibility's concept of the universal. But that was not his way. He seeks the universal realities of the colonial encounter through a profound mastery of his own case, as the lyrical sensibility requires.

But more important, Senghor does not think that the virtues of negritude are either absent from or indeed optional in modern life. Quite the contrary, for him negritude embodies the direct experiencing of the world that must be recovered if humanity is to advance. So he identifies the key signs of negritude in Western writers as diverse as Louise Labé, Victor Hugo, and even J. W. Goethe. Philosophical movements like existentialism and phenom-

enology were clearly, for Senghor, merely more evidence of this fact, and so we find him citing writers like Jean Piaget and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Negritude was thus for Senghor not by any means unique to Africans. As he said when discussing the reverse case, of whether Negro Africans had the European virtue of discursive abstraction:

Does this mean, as certain young people would like to interpret my remarks, that the Negro African lacks discursive reason, that he has never used any? I have never said so. In truth every ethnic group possesses different aspects of reason and all the virtues of man, but each has stressed only one aspect of reason, only certain virtues. (*African Socialism*, p. 75)

Thus, negritude was for Senghor a universal attribute which Negro Africans had developed to a particularly high degree:

Let us then consider the Negro African as he faces the object to be known, as he faces the Other: God, man, animal, tree or pebble, natural or social phenomenon. In contrast to the classic European, the Negro African does not draw a line between himself and the object, nor does he merely look at it and analyze it. . . . Immediately, he is moved, going centrifugally from subject to object on the waves of the Other. . . . Thus the Negro African [literally] sympathizes, abandons his personality to become identified with the Other, dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate. He is assimilated. . . . Subject and object are face to face in the very act of knowledge. It is a long caress of the night, an embrace of joined bodies, the act of love. (*African Socialism*, p. 73)

For Senghor, there was a long list of European versions of this immediate perception of, this identification with, the Other. But they had been lost. An increasing awareness of them was what black Africa could give back to Europe.

As the first of these passages proleptically suggests, Senghor's ideas have been widely caricatured. His insistence on the centrality of rhythm and emotion in negritude have been turned by a sound-bite culture into trivial beliefs. But in fact, Senghor's concept of rhythm is extremely complex, having been strongly influenced by his linguistic studies of the formal varieties of rhythm in Wolof and Serer poetry and folktales. Or again, his concept of emotion is not the simple one usually attributed to him, but a complex theory of unmediated, direct experience of the sensual world by assimilating oneself to it and searching for the *sens* behind the surface, whether of reality or symbol. (The word *sens* in French can mean "meaning," "intuition," and "sensation." Most often, Senghor intends all three.)

Senghor's theories therefore make an important contribution to our conceptualization of personal and social experience. The direct attachment of them to racial difference may not survive, to be sure, although the notion that there are societies that particularly value unmediated experience is an interesting and possible one. But the depth Senghor's theoretical contribution itself is unquestioned, even though that contribution came not through a systematic treatise but through a flexible set of concepts and ideas deployed again and again throughout his writing.

The historical facts matter, too. It is important that a black African confronted the entire edifice of then-current Western theory about race, accepted it more or less on its own terms (with some modifications by paleontologists like Teilhard), and then found a way to turn it on its head: Senghor used Western knowledge itself to say African experience represented something every bit as important as European experience. That this feat later came to seem pointless because those old theories of race were pushed aside in favor of newer theories does not lessen Senghor's achievement. Reinterpreting European ideas in the light of African experience, he found something essential that black Africa could contribute to a French civilization wallowing in military defeat, imperial decline, and materialist emptiness.

If there is a question that remains after reading Senghor, it is what he actually meant by "Civilization of the Universal," a phrase that comes from Teilhard. Senghor made much of Teilhard's insistence that unity alone permits differentiation and that difference is complementary, not hierarchical. Yet the unity Senghor saw in Africa fell victim to a hundred particularisms. His projected West African federation foundered at Independence. His political coalition cracked within two years of his presidency. The ideal Africa of his memory/theory dissolved under the pressures of dependent development. (If one peruses the later volumes of *Liberté*, one finds him in 1975 paraphrasing Goethe somewhat mournfully, saying "everyone should be hybrid [*métis*] in his own way" [*Liberté* 5, p. 51]). As a practicing politician Senghor changed with his times, but like all politicians he could not change fast enough nor escape the prices he had paid for power. For all their size and authority, social structures change much faster than men, and the ideologies that made Senghor an ideal leader for peaceful independence did not serve as well in a nation suddenly on its own and challenged by internal differences that had been hidden by the fact of a commonly suffered imperialism. In the active world, there can be no man for all seasons.

But what Senghor bequeathed us as social scientists is not his political heritage, but a body of social thought unlike any other. For he addressed one of the great questions of his century—the question of race—through the unusual perspective of a lyrical sensibility. He wrote his ideas in poems. He elaborated them across dozens of occasional pieces. He avoided consistency of argument for consistency of *sens*. For it is the consistency of his immediate sensibility as a thinker that one encounters when reading Senghor. Not an argument summarizable in short statements or an example of this or that position. Instead, one encounters a unique man with a unique perspective compounded of unique experience. He has the gift to tell his thoughts in page after page of beautiful prose and poetry. There is only one Sédar Senghor.