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IN MEMORIAM

Paulin Hountondji

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On February 2, 2024, Paulin Hountondji, arguably the most famous African philosopher of the last fifty years, passed away in Cotonou, Benin. First African to hold the agrégation in philosophy, this former student of the Ecole Normale Supérieure de la rue d'Ulm, Paris, was, for many young Africans, a discoverer and a trailblazer. A few days earlier, we had gathered with a number of colleagues at a major colloquium in Toulouse and at Sciences Po in Paris, to discuss the current state of African philosophy, and he was one of us. Of course, he was not in great shape, but as always, he was alert, jovial and warm with everyone, and no one could have guessed that this would be our last meeting.

"*African philosopher*"? Isn't it somewhat paradoxical to describe as an "*African philosopher*" someone who, from the very first book that made him famous, *Sur la "philosophie africaine*," published in 1977 by Maspero, Paris, went down in history as the greatest critic of the thesis of the existence of an African philosophy? The paradox is only apparent, since he wasn't questioning the existence of philosophy as such in Africa—which wouldn't make any sense—but the ethnological conception of it in Reverend Father Tempels' book *La philosophie bantu*, published in 1947 by *Présence africaine.* The latter consisted in thinking that philosophy in Africa was *already done*, because it was deposited in tales, myths, ontologies, and cosmogonies, and all we had to do was to collect it.

This famous critique of ethnophilosophy was obviously not aimed at the intrinsic value of African wisdoms, but rather at the body of work that had developed on the continent in the wake of Tempels' book, and that had sought to construct, from the ethnological data of the various African societies, a particular *Weltanschauung,* a specific worldview, supposedly common to all Africans, immune to historicity and, what's more, intended to be *philosophical.* Should the African philosopher simply be content to let an already-constituted thought from the past express itself through him or herself, thus denying himself or herself as an enunciating subject? On the contrary, as Hountondji explains, "this apparent effacement of the subject aims to hide from view its massive omnipresence, its convulsive effect, in order to anchor in reality a fiction full of it" (Hountondji, 1977).

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In other words, when philosophers believe they can hide behind the objectivity of a restitution approach, they are only revealing, sometimes unconsciously, theoretical biases, ideological orientations, and political stances that, once made clear, say more about them as individual subjects than about their society. Therefore, the only thing that really exists, *a contrario*, is that ethnophilosophical literature produced by Africans. The aim of this inversion is, on the one hand, to make ethnophilosophers assume responsibility for their own texts, and on the other, to show that in philosophy there can be no collective subject spontaneously producing an implicit thought of which we only become aware afterwards, when—thanks to an external author—it is restituted and set out in full.

It is important to say that beyond this criticism of the "collective subject thesis," it is above all the supposed unanimity of African cultures, and thus their rejection of conflict and hence of historicity, that draws Hountondji's attention. In this respect, he points out that the success of Tempels' book, in Europe and in Africa, cannot be fully understood without first realizing that it is an end-to-end part of the history of Western philosophy, and that it takes its place in an intra-European debate in which Africa is only present as an object. In fact, this book takes its place in an ideological configuration largely dominated by Lévy-Bruhl's racist theses on the "pre-logical mentality of the primitives." We need to keep this singular context in mind to understand that this book comes at the perfect moment to put everyone on the same page, not only nationalists anxious to rehabilitate the scorned dignity of Africans, but also the European intelligentsia anxious to mark the anthropological difference supposed to separate European cultures from those of the "primitives."

There was never any doubt in Hountondji's mind that African philosophy existed. But ethnophilosophy looked for it where it could not possibly be, that is, somewhere in the depths of the "African soul." In a famous text, chiseled to hit the nail on the head, the redoubtable polemicist that he was, makes a clean sweep: "I call *African philosophy* a set of texts: the set, precisely, of texts written by Africans and described by their authors themselves as 'philosophical'". To put it another way, philosophy, in Africa or elsewhere, can only be claimed as such by a subject who assumes it as their own, with full responsibility. In this respect, Hountondji liberated energies and (re)casted philosophy after the Tempelsian gesture, by showing that if philosophy is not wisdom and cannot be relative to an era or a person, it is because it is open to the infinite, that is to say, it is history and not a system.

Many of his critics, however, saw this requirement for universality as nothing more than a way of pandering to the West, probably because they believed that the science to which he linked it was an exclusively Western tradition. For Hountondji, however, the fact that Europe was at one point in its history the epicenter of science could only be due to pure historical hazard, since the universality of Reason is by definition the property of no culture to the exclusion of others. This mere chance, according to Hountondji, "does not make science an essentially European value, any more than syphilis, introduced among the American Indians by their first visitors from the old continent, is an essentially European disease. Cultural values are like venereal diseases; they erupt here or there, develop here rather than there, depending on whether the environment is more or less favorable to them, but this pure historical chance cannot be the basis for a claim of ownership, or conversely, immunity" (Hountondji, 1977).

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Through his philosophical practice and his political commitment, Hountondji has always nurtured the project of making Africa "an autonomous space for theoretical reflection and discussion, indissociably philosophical and scientific" (Hountondji, 1977). If he never separated philosophy and science, it's undoubtedly because, as an Althusserian and a great reader of Husserl, Bachelard, and Canguilhem, he knew better than anyone that the great scientific revolutions, especially those that punctuated the history of the twentieth century, always required philosophy to overhaul its categories in depth, because they changed our relationship to the world through the acquisition of a new mental structure that apprehends reality according to new coordinates, as Alexandre Koyré had once established.

That's why he has always believed that a genuine tradition of critical thought is only possible in Africa if, at the same time, there is also an endogenous history of science on the continent. It was this conviction that led him, from the late 1970s onwards, to "endogenous *knowledge*"—that kind of knowledge produced by Africans about humans, plants, animals, the universe and the gods—in order to assess its epistemological status in the light of the most recent scientific advances, at a time when practically no one was yet talking about the decolonization of knowledge.

Inspired by dependency theorists such as Samir Amin, André Gunder Franck, and Emmanuel Wallerstein, Hountondji has shown that when it comes to knowledge production, Africa's role is almost always that of the "field," that is, where one goes to test and/or amass empirical facts that will subsequently be stripped down, refined, processed, and theorized in the North. After more than sixty years of independence, we are still an appendage of Europe when it comes to scientific research. Europe defines the paradigms, establishes the methodological protocols, funds the projects, and decides which questions are relevant to its needs. In this ecosystem, African researchers are rarely more than mere informers, however talented they may be. They participate as subordinates in a global research system that only recognizes their merit when they meet the expectations of the North. This extraversion of African research is the counterpart of the structural extraversion of our economies on the global capitalist market. It is its epistemic translation.

How to break with this predatory logic? This is the ambitious research program he left to the younger generations of intellectuals in Africa and the global South, because he was convinced that "the brilliant short-circuits of nationalism, the pseudo-revolutionary lies have, at best, only limited effectiveness. Beyond all the easy solutions, beyond all the myths, we must today, courageously, dare to start again" (Hountondji, 1977).

Author Biographies. As a specialist of phenomenology and epistemology, Bado Ndoye teaches philosophy at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar.

Reference

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