

When Communism Met Black Anti-Colonialism in Interwar France

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On the evening of February 11, 1927, the tall, gaunt figure of Lamine Senghor strode to the podium at the inaugural meeting of the League against Imperialism (LAI). The LAI was one of the interwar communist movement's foremost attempts to forge a united anti-colonial front of nationalists, communists and socialists, uniting white Europeans and colonial subjects from around the globe. Yet, like other such initiatives, it proved short-lived.

Senghor was a decorated Senegalese veteran of World War I, who had risen to prominence in mid-1920s as a leading figure in the emerging communist-inspired anti-colonial movement in France. In his rousing speech at the LAI meeting in Brussels, he denounced imperialism as a modern form of slavery and called on the workers of the world to unite and overthrow the entire capitalist-imperialist system. His call for a world of "no more slaves" applied equally to the exploited of the colonies and the working class of the industrial nations.

He reserved particular scorn for France's treatment of its colonial soldiers during and after the war — a central factor in his own radicalization. His views on the suffering endured by colonial soldiers had extra authority given his own status as a "war invalid," the self-description he typically used

on the official public documents produced by the movements to which he belonged. In April 1917, his battalion of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* [West African infantrymen] had been gassed near Verdun, and Senghor had lost one of his lungs — an injury from which he never fully recovered.

By all accounts, the Brussels speech was received rapturously by the delegates gathered at the Château d’Egmont. In many photographs from the Congress, Senghor is clearly the center of attention: other delegates drape their arms around his shoulders, broad grins etched on their faces. He was one of the stars of the show. A posed photograph of Senghor in profile, fist clenched standing at a lectern was reproduced in the official proceedings and was used to illustrate various articles over the months to come, including pieces in *The Crisis* and *The Survey* (the latter penned by Roger Baldwin, founder of the ACLU).

Lamine Senghor thus seemed poised to become a leading figure of the nascent anti-colonial movement. In an alternative timeline, the staged photograph from Brussels might have attained the radical chic of the romantic portraits of Che Guevara that would adorn the walls of so many student bedsits in a later period. But before 1927 was over, Senghor was dead, as the dreadful injuries he had suffered during the war finally caught up with him. Yet his political activity in his final three years remains full of lessons. His life as a militant illustrates the complex ways in which issues of race, class and anti-colonialism were intertwined in this era — a telling case study of the

opportunities and dangers of intercolonial co-operation for black groups in the interwar period.

Recruited for the Slaughter

Senghor first came to public attention when he appeared as a witness for the defense in a libel trial that centered on African troops' contribution to the French war effort. In October 1924, a Paris-based black newspaper, *Les Continents*, had published an article in which Blaise Diagne, MP for the four communes of the French colony in Senegal, was accused by celebrated French Caribbean novelist René Maran of having received "a certain commission for each soldier recruited" to take part in the war. Late in the conflict, Diagne had been sent to West Africa by prime minister Georges Clemenceau to recruit more African troops. The thinly veiled aim of his mission was to try and finally bring the war to an end while limiting the further loss of white French soldiers. Diagne's success in recruiting 80,000 troops made him a hero both in France and in its African colonies, where locals could hardly believe their eyes that a black African was being greeted with the pomp and ceremony usually reserved for white dignitaries. But by the time of the libel trial, a growing number of voices on the Left and in the black community were beginning to question what they perceived as Diagne's cozy relationship with the colonial establishment.

The Parisian media was thrilled at the whiff of scandal that clung to the case. But, more significantly, the trial placed the politics of France's black colonial populations at the forefront of public debate — in particular the issue

of colonial troops' participation in the war effort. Lamine Senghor's testimony before the court presented the African colonial infantryman — the *tirailleur sénégalais* — as a man radicalized by his experiences who would now devote himself to denouncing colonial injustice. Shortly after the trial, Senghor wrote that: "Instead of attempting to prove precisely how much the great slave trader [Diagne] received for each Senegalese he recruited, they should have brought before him a whole procession of those blinded and mutilated in the war. ... All of these victims would have spat in his face the infamy of the mission that he had undertaken."

A constant refrain in Senghor's speeches and writings was the iniquity and double standards involved in the treatment of colonial veterans, and, in particular, their military pensions. As he stated in his Brussels speech: "You have all seen that, during the war, as many Negroes as possible were recruited and led off to be slaughtered. ... The Negro youth are now more clear-sighted. We know and are deeply aware that, when we are needed, to lay down our lives or to do hard labor, then we are French; but when it's a question of giving us rights, we are no longer French, we are Negroes." Senghor's position as a "war invalid" opened up a space within 1920s France in which radical ideas could be given a hearing. Could a man who had loyally served France, sacrificing his health, be so readily dismissed as an enemy of the state?

Communist Anti-Colonialism

Senghor had been pressed to appear as a witness in the trial by the committee of the Intercolonial Union (UIC), a group that he had only recently joined. The colonial archives reveal, with no little irony, that he had initially been pushed to register as a member of the UIC by the secret police of the Ministry for the Colonies (the infamous CAI). It appears that it recruited him as an informer in mid-1924, after his white French wife wrote to the Ministry in search of financial aid amidst Senghor's worsening health condition. Yet, within months, this gambit had backfired spectacularly, as the events surrounding the trial precipitated a genuine radicalization of his political beliefs.

The UIC was ostensibly an independent group run by and for representatives of the colonized peoples. In reality, it was controlled by the Colonial Studies Committee of the French Communist Party (PCF), and was launched within months of this party's historic split from the Socialists at the Tours Congress in late 1920. Nguyen ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, was the sole colonized voice heard in the debates in Tours, and he would become one of the UIC's most active members in its early stages. Yet, while the UIC was designed to demonstrate PCF commitment to the Communist International's anti-colonial agenda, PCF support for the UIC and the anti-colonial cause was inconsistent, to say the least. By 1923, a frustrated Nguyen ai Quoc had departed for Moscow, and, from the mid-to-late 1920s, the UIC began to split into separate national, regional and ethnic movements for independence that often sought to keep the PCF at arm's length.

Nonetheless, in late 1924, the UIC was still attempting to widen its appeal to more colonized groups in France, and Lamine Senghor's rise to prominence provided an opportunity to reach out to the growing sub-Saharan African community. At the same time, the PCF was anxious to ensure that the UIC's leaders were all given an "appropriate" political education. In 1925, the PCF thus opened a "Colonial School" for its growing band of colonized activists in the UIC, designed to improve their knowledge of Marxist ideology. Very few activists attended the classes and the 'school' closed after a few months but, while its doors were open, Senghor was one of the most assiduous student. His writing for the UIC's newspaper *Le Paria* ["The Pariah"] bears the imprint of this ideological training.

The 1924-25 campaign against France's colonial war in the Rif mountains of Morocco was the arena in which Senghor would hone his famed skills as an orator. This short-lived but fascinating experiment – in which UIC members played a central role – saw French Communism finally attempt to prove its internationalist, anti-colonial credentials to an increasingly impatient Comintern, which regularly berated the PCF for failing to tackle French imperialism. Scholars have justifiably argued that the PCF hierarchy was not fully committed to the Rif campaign, which it largely perceived as a form of gesture politics that might appease the Comintern. There were, however, important individuals within the campaign – not least Jacques Doriot, head of the PCF's Colonial Commission, and Paul Vaillant-Couturier, editor of the PCF newspaper *L'Humanité* – who appeared committed to the anti-colonial cause.

Equally, it would be misleading to suggest that the campaign solely interested a few figures in the PCF hierarchy. For the message that the struggle of the colonized was also the struggle of the proletariat could rally significant numbers within the broad workers' movement. French Socialists and the League for the Rights of Man often spoke on issues related to racism and the need to "reform" the colonial system but they did not offer the same political space that the PCF was here opening up, even if only temporarily, for an explicitly anti-colonial cause. Two Communist rallies at Luna Park in the Paris suburbs in May and November 1925 attracted crowds of over 15,000, while in August of the same year 60,000 attended a huge anti-war rally in the Parisian suburb of Clichy at which Senghor appeared.

The Clichy rally powerfully illustrates, however, the limits of the PCF's vision of its "partnership" with the colonized subjects of the UIC. The crowd was addressed by Marcel Cachin and other members of the PCF hierarchy, but there was no speaking role for Lamine Senghor or other members of the UIC. As reported by *L'Humanité*, Senghor did appear before the massed crowd arm-in-arm with an unnamed "Arab" in a choreographed display of inter-racial, communist-inspired unity. But the symbolism of the scene was all too apparent: although Senghor and the UIC might play a useful role in the political theater of the campaign, the masterminds remained the white, French leadership of the PCF.

Amongst the PCF figures who appeared most committed to the anti-colonial cause, we should take particular note of the contribution of Paul

Vaillant-Couturier and the novelist, Henri Barbusse, who would later deliver the opening address at the Brussels Congress of the League against Imperialism. Both men had fought in World War I and had gravitated towards Communism via the Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants (ARAC), a virulently anti-war veterans' organization. It is possible, though not proven, that Senghor may have encountered these prominent PCF members through ARAC; at the very least, it seems clear that their shared experience as war veterans created a bond between them.

After loyally serving the PCF and the UIC throughout the Rif campaign, Senghor gradually came to resent the limited space the Communist movement devoted to black questions in general as well as to his own marginalized status. There were only so many times he could accept the non-speaking role or being asked to deliver the "fraternal salute" of his black brothers to PCF gatherings. Apparently, the final straw came when the PCF was invited to send two representatives to the Congress of Black Workers in Chicago in October 1925. They selected Senghor and the Antillean lawyer Max Bloncourt but, at the last minute, informed them that they would have to pay for the journey out of their own pockets. When Senghor objected, it was suggested that he either work his passage to America or stow away: he refused. Senghor decided that in order to promote the interests of black people, it was necessary to create independent black organizations, and in early 1926 with the creation of the Committee for the Defense of the Negro Race (CDRN), that is just what he did.

Black Independence?

Senghor's decision to leave the UIC appeared to assert the primacy of race over class. As with so much of Senghor's career as a militant, however, appearances could be deceptive, with genuine and potentially contradictory motives hidden in a tangled web of ideological leanings, personal connections, gut feelings, and cunning political tactics. There were very real tensions between Senghor and the PCF, but there are also ample reasons to believe that any break with his Communist allies was largely strategic: not least amongst these is the fact that Senghor announced the creation of his new movement in an article, "The Negroes have Awoken" (with its conscious but unacknowledged echoes of the discourse of Marcus Garvey), in *Le Paria* in April 1926. It is difficult to imagine the UIC and their Communist handlers permitting a declaration of black independence within one of their own publications for anything other than strategic reasons: after all, the mid-1920s PCF was not renowned for its tolerance of dissenting internal voices.

After the CDRN's creation in early 1926, Senghor crisscrossed France in a successful recruitment drive seeking to draw members of emerging black collectives, often constructed on an ethnic or regional basis, into a single black movement. Visiting the port towns of Marseilles, Bordeaux, Le Havre and the major colonial military base at Fréjus (where trainee African officers were a primary target of his propaganda), he had, by late 1926, recruited – the CAI estimated – close to 900 members, from among a black population then numbered at less than 20,000.

Indicative of Senghor's influence was his meeting with Claude McKay, one of the most rebellious figures of the Harlem Renaissance, whom he encountered in Marseilles during his recruitment tour. While various commentators have dismissed Senghor as a hardline communist, McKay instantly recognized the hybrid nature of his politics, the fraught and complex attempt to marry left-wing thought and black radicalism: "He was a tall, lean intelligent Senegalese and his ideas were a mixture of African nationalism and international Communism," McKay wrote appreciatively in his memoir, *A Long Way from Home*.

For its part, CDRN was a broad church in which Senghor sought to bring together both politically moderate and more radical members of the black community in France while also reaching out to subjects in the colonies, primarily through the circulation of the movement's newspaper (typically sent overseas in small packets with sympathetic sailors). It utilized the language of France's humanitarian, abolitionist tradition, mixed with the language of black pride that had been made popular by Marcus Garvey.

By early 1927, however, the broad coalition that had come together within the CDRN was already beginning to fragment. The first issue of its newspaper, *La Voix des Nègres* [The Voice of the Negroes] proudly and insistently proclaimed unity. But the CDRN was in fact in the middle of a long and protracted schism that would a few months later lead to its break-up, with Senghor and his fellow radicals deserting en masse to create the League for the Defense of the Negro Race (LDRN). The split in the organization was the result

of complex personal, political and cultural issues but appears primarily to have divided the CDRN on ideological lines with the more assimilationist members remaining within a rump CDRN and the more radical, Communist-leaning members departing for the LDRN (this appears in part to be a result of PCF maneuvering to drive a wedge between these camps).

If in his Brussels speech Senghor had spoken of colonialism as a modern form of slavery, he again explored this theme in his one book-length publication, *La Violation d'un pays* [The Rape of a Land], published in June 1927 (its preface authored by Vaillant-Couturier). This slim, polemical volume relates the bloody history of slavery and colonialism, in a deeply hybrid style that mixes the form of the fable with a highly didactic approach, utilizing the political language of revolutionary communism: the text is also accompanied by 5 simple line drawings designed to reinforce the political message. It concludes with the overthrow of the colonial regime by a world revolution that liberates not only the colonies but also the metropolitan center from the yoke of capitalist imperialism. The resolution of Senghor's story acts as a form of ideological wish fulfillment, the "performance" of an international anti-colonialism, that imagines the overthrow of Empire through a partnership between the colonized "over there" and the workers "over here" (as Sartre would write decades later write in *Colonialism and Neo-colonialism*). Within weeks of its publication, however, Senghor's health faltered, and he would pass away just a few months later with the LDRN in turmoil, wracked by arguments about finances and political orientation.

Remembering Senghor

How, then, should we remember Lamine Senghor? It would be misleading to make grand claims for him as a political theorist. He was, rather, a brilliant communicator of ideas, driven by moral outrage at the injustices of capitalist imperialism. In political terms, he spent the period between 1924-27 exploring different potential ways of rallying various forces against empire, while recognizing the specificity of the racial oppression suffered by black people.

The political trajectory for anti-colonial figures, such as Senghor, is often cast as either a movement from nationalism to communism or, more typically, a recognition that communism had no room for the black experience. Yet, unlike figures such as George Padmore or Aimé Césaire, Senghor was not obliged to make a choice between Pan-Africanism and communism. The experience of his successor as leader of the LDRN, Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté, constantly in conflict with the PCF hierarchy over the next decade, warns us that Senghor may well have struggled to maintain an affiliation to both communism and black internationalism. But, throughout his brief career as an activist, Senghor believed that these two ideologies could complement each other in the quest for black liberation.

Indeed, perhaps the most productive way of viewing Senghor's entire career as a militant is that of a balancing act in which he veered between radicalism and reformism, communism and black internationalism. He

consistently kept both his friends and his enemies guessing about his true motives and allegiances, as he sought to carve out a political discourse in which both race and class might carry equal weight.