Debates

Reflecting on the Future from Africa

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For our fifth round table on this fortieth anniversary of CODESRIA, we have resolved to raise the question of the next forty years and beyond, by beginning to both think about the dynamics that will shape the face of future Africans, as well as ask ourselves which analytical tools will allow such exploration. It is within this forward-looking approach that the Executive Board of our organisation has entrusted me with the honor of saying a few words in this address.

My first point relates to a question raised during the presentation of the round table; the question of reconciling on one hand, an approach at the center of which the imagination of the future inherently resides, and on the other, I quote: "an ethos of respect for the tradition and history many agree constitute the essence of the meaning of to be African." It is true that self-affirmation, and the affirmation of an African world presence in time has involved, and still involves the writing of the history of the continent. It is also true that for the past forty years, CODESRIA has never failed to give to research in this area the priority that such fundamental discipline requires. Specifically, our organisation has promoted research in the critical area of intellectual history of the continent, a history still largely to be written or rather re-written, against the dismemberment and de-historicsing of Africa. I refer to the dismemberment that divided the continent into an Egyptian area linked to Asia, a North African area whose Mediterranean tropism was an appendage of Europe and finally, what Hegel – the one who gave value to this philosophical vivisection- called "Africa proper". Given that "Africa proper" became an isolate outside of the intellectual commerce that sustained ideas, its de-historicsing could not but follow. It was therefore, only natural that the result from this state of affairs should be a division of labor between the colonial discipline of Orientalism dedicated to Mediterranean areas of the continent, and that of an invented static science of Africa, namely ethnology. It should further be noted, as Edward Said has demonstrated, that Orientalism is a posture and a look that essentializes. CODESRIA's contri-bution has been instrumental in bringing about the paradigm shift which today, is moving us away from a sort of ethnologisation aiming at the immutable essence of a stubbornly oral civilisation, toward the reconstruction of a true history of written scholarship in Africa, the very one to which Cheikh Anta Diop called atten-tion. I quote here the subtitle adopted by Ousmane Kane for the French translation of Meanings of Timbuktu. This volume on the Malian town's manuscripts that Shamil Jeppie and I edited is a symbol of this history, a history that is intelligible only when one conceives the Sahara as it always was: an inland sea dotted with numerous roads, a sea many times crossed over, not only by flows of goods and slaves, but by books, ideas and scholars as well. The theme "Thinking on Africa" is precisely dedicated to some titles that CODESRIA has published over the last decade that symbolize the paradigm shift occurring from the "four corners" of the continent. And when I say "four corners" I mean this expression literally, bearing in mind, in addition to Dakar of course, other important centers linked to our organi-0sation such as the one led by Shamil Jeppie at the University of Cape Town, the Institute of African Studies in Rabat under the long-standing directorship of our president Fatima Harrak, and the Centre in Cairo directed by Helmy Sharawi which devotes considerable work to African manuscripts in Ajami. This account gives me the opportunity to pay tribute here to the pioneering work of the historian John Hunwick, founder of ISITA (Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought in Africa) at Northwestern University.

That said, if this recalling of the need to replenish the African intellectual history illustrates the concern for an ethos of respect for tradition and history, such respect is effective only if it does not represent the sign that the father of forward-thinking, Gaston Berger, called retrospective stubbornness. If our history is indeed as Césaire wrote, the "who and what we are," our truthfulness to what we are can only be realised in the movement to become just what we have to be. Such is the essence of the forward-looking approach. What it tells us is that as history goes so does memory: it is not a passive repository of that which is hence available to us merely for contem-plation, or perhaps replication; it is that which only exists to be mobilised in the present, and engaged with the present in the movement to invent the future. Forward-thinking then, contrary to what the Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti would submit, is not the prerogative of any culture; neither is it naturally present, nor naturally absent in any. Rather, it denotes the ability of the human being to build a political culture of the time. History, therefore, simply teaches us that the very motion that opens the door to the future shapes the principle that commands the actions to be taken, and that the meaning of it all is not dictated by the past, but originates from the future.

The issue is not merely theoretical; it is rather practical, and eminently so when one considers the African youth - a topic out of which CODESRIA has every reason to make a real obsession. This youth, much too often seen storming waves and barbed wires to reach an elsewhere it holds to be the only medium leading to a promising future, is much less concerned about its identity and what it really is, than about its future. It is this youth that urges us to come out of this retrospective stubbornness to determine from the future what to think and do today. That is the

starting point for our reflection on the forty years ahead; those are the questions, not of identity but of the future, that we must learn to formulate and for which we must invent proper tools. Allow me to bring to mind, in a somewhat inevitably simplified way, some of these major issues for the future: the issue of equality of religions, that of education, and that of Pan-Africanism.

Equality will be, in fact already is, urgently and insistently the big issue of the coming decades. It is engraved at the heart of all other questions all over the world, particularly in our continent. On the world stage, it takes only one look at the extraordinary success of the book Capital in the Twenty-First Century by economist Thomas Picketty to be convinced of such a claim; it was acclaimed to be The Capital rewritten in our time. The book essentially sets the metrics and analysis that forces us to see, bar the "Thirty Glorious Years", the relentless continuous increase in inequality. Facing this destiny, we saw a promise emerge, the kind born out of inextricably political and ethical movements, be it activities modeled on Occupy Wall Street or the protest of those who, reiterating Stéphane Hessel's intractable anger, took the name "the Indignants". The promise is what the philosopher Etienne Balibar calls the "equaliberty proposal", a concept that intimates a connection between the two ideals that neoliberal capitalism presumes separate: the demand for liberty and that of equality. As one in the "egaliberty proposal", the they form a requirement for the decades to come. In The Economist journal's view, Africa's status has moved from that of a region on a downward slide for which there was little hope, to that of a "Rising continent", now a new frontier for investment. There is indeed reason to believe that we are at a turning point, and that the obvious seeds of change are real possibilities of emergence. In his interviews published in the issues of Le Soleil dated June 7, 8 and 9, 2014 Ebrima Sall, with good reason, and contrary to the pessimistic discourse often instinc-tively delivered about the continent, points to some indisputable impro-vements that have been accomplished. In the same breath, he mentions the part played by intellectuals in general, with particularly attention to those who keep CODESRIA alive in the reflection "on better understanding the situation and challenges in formulating policies to change the living conditions of African people. " And that is because therein lies the whole mission of our organisation: " to understand in order to formulate policies "; understand that the coming years will see the reflection delve further still into the probable and foreseeable consequences of emergence in the context of neoliberal globalisation on our continent, i.e. deep inequalities between regions, and within our young nations in which living together and democracy will then be undermined. Many examples may be cited to substantiate this claim, but the one that immediately comes to mind is Brazil, the new prosperity of which is sang around the world; Brazil, where the Lula government has had undeniable success in promoting access for the many to conditions that define the middle class, but where those left behind by this emergence also understand that their demands for a more just and equal society cannot be concealed, neither by bursts of celebra-tion of this new economic power, nor by the soccer festival held there a few months ago.

Setting the target of equality at the center of the forward-looking reflection means paying utmost attention to education, and that brings me to my second point. Speaking on the topic of education in the interview I have already mentioned, Dr. Ebrima Sall mentions the considerable effort that has been made with the multiplication "almost everywhere (...) of schools and institutions of higher learning. " Be that as it may, these insti-tutions " almost everywhere " presently exist in such a state of crisis that it raises doubts as to their ability to truly fulfill their ascribed mission of manufacturing the future and fostering equality. The question of how to return them to this fundamental mission will remain on our minds in the years ahead. In fact, it has been raised in the third round table devoted to "Crises and revolutions." On this topic, I will briefly consider two key points around which the issue must be formulated: the promotion of science and technology, and that of the necessary anticipation of rapid changes that are now emerging in distance learning.

On the first point, it is clear at present that emergence dictates that our continent faces the challenges of knowledge economies through significant development of the so-called STEM disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Countries that have built their economic progress on such development, and those involved in the competition to stay ahead in this field are living proof that such a direction is needed. Needless to say, such an orientation must not only be unwavering, but it cannot in any way, undermine the importance of Humanities and Social Sciences. This is, as the Secretary General of CODESRIA rightly stated, the human factor. The idea is not simply that the social sciences and humanities have the irreplaceable function of placing the human factor at the heart of development, but moreover, that they are necessary for STEM development policy. Indeed, a humanistic culture is not an external accessory to scientific and technological expertise; on the contrary, it gives it its full meaning. This idea is truly well – captured in the acronym STEAM as it naturally inscribes the Arts, in the sense of both creativity and intelligence of the human significance of our choices and actions, in a necessary complementarity with the so-called hard sciences and technology.

The second point I would like to raise concerns distance learning. A novelty not so radical after all, but which has become such a phenomenon over the past three years, that is has been labeled a "revolution" because it foretells of profound changes from which no institution of higher learning will escape. Like Janus, MOOCS (the online courses offered to the vast majority of students), typically present the face of risk and that of opportunity simultaneously. It is our responsibility to demonstrate our ability to anticipate and to creatively adapt to available technologies for the solution of our problems. This would mean finding a way to ensure that, with the new technologies of information and communication applied to distance education, we establish definite ownership modeled on what is happening with mobile telephony.

I now come to the third big question indicated above, that of religion. On this issue, we must first recognize that, for a long time, African social sciences have lacked foresight. That was understan-dable considering that the field essentially developed in connection with the natio-nalist and socialist projects: religion simply did not fit in the framework, and the tools for thinking on religion were simply not elaborated. It is therefore, all the more remarkable that in 1960, Léopold Sédar Senghor

should deem it important, perhaps even urgent, to write an article which called for "Muslim -Christian co-operation" for nation building on the continent – a necessary cooperation in view of the inevitable disappearance of tradi-tional religions, he explained. A kind of cooperation in the role of education and edification that is their own was, according to Senghor, the only guarantee for harmonious coexistence of the Abrahamic religions on the continent. Presently, the social sciences cannot ignore the fact that we live a time in which the most serious crises most naturally find expression through the language of religion. A time in which religion produces constructed, ready-to-wear identities so often that governments are not always able to maintain among citizens a common will to live together. For our future, we must forge our own tools of analysis of this multifaceted reality imposed on us, and our organisation's research agenda should reflect the urgency of executing a theoretical volte-face in the same vein as sociologist Peter Berger. It is known that he was one of the theoreticians of the so-called secularisation theory, a theory which holds that modernisation means ipso facto disappearance of religion, of public and social space first, and then gradually, of individual consciences. Having supported this view, Berger ventured to claim in the late 1990s, that the same process was also a factor in generating powerful movements against secularism: one had to know how to think on religions and secularisations together.

I will end with a brief concluding note to essentially say that the horizon upon which CODESRIA's reflections are inscribed, is and will remain, Pan-Africanism, renewed today in its philosophy, generous as ever, but above all pragmatic. Will the next forty years reveal the United States of Africa to be more than merely a distant dream? We must hope for that, but more importantly, we must build it because, as its father philosopher Gaston Berger reminds us, the meaning of forward-looking reflection is that the future is not that which inevitably shall be, but that which, together, we invent.