3. Towards an Intercultural Emancipation

What Does it Mean to be Human in an Increasingly Dehumanised World?

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Intentions, Text, Context and History

Given the current global situation, the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a disaster-ravaged country, where the political leadership at least ought to declare a state of emergency, Professor René Devisch's question – 'What is an anthropologist?' – somehow reminds one of the captain of a sinking ship, who is more concerned about the state of the ship than the situation of the passengers. In reading his address, several questions come to mind: What is a human being? What is a Congolese? What is solidarity? The narration also makes us think of the possible outcome of a text titled: How Congo became a disaster-stricken country. And the list goes on. Perhaps – and this is even more serious for an anthropologist – one could ask how and why he ignores Sylvain Lazarus' 1996 work: *L'anthropologie du nom* (Paris, Seuil), since such a work, even if it were at odds with his own writings, would certainly have compelled him to think more in terms of a genuine reality and not a mystifying reality. Beyond the above questions, this chapter seeks to understand why he has not seized the opportunity to speak as loudly as possible for those who do not have a voice.

RD advocates a 'de-westernized post-colonial anthropology', which sides with 'the ordinary human being' and seeks to develop 'the ethical underpinnings of the two-fold universe of the knowledge related to either dimension'. He dwells at length on an anthropology overflowing with good will and good intentions towards those who suffered the consequences of a science which, as we are fully aware, was contrary to RD's therapeutic dream. He wishes to turn the page as quickly as possible. However, he does so by invoking, lightly, allies such as Césaire and, in particular, Fanon categorised as militants of Négritude. Both Césaire and Fanon had distanced themselves from Négritude, Fanon going as far as castigating the 'yes men of Négritude'.

Unfortunately, confronted by such statements, RD relates the recent history of Congo, which is at odds with his own intentions. We will revisit this below. The ethical underpinnings he proposes are not really taken seriously by the author himself, for if they had been, we would have expected him to make the proposition at the very beginning of the address in order to guide research on what could be called an ethics of truth in the wake of the epoch-making event of 30 June 1960.[1] That event (Patrice Lumumba's speech) gave birth to an idea in the consciousness of many Congolese. The ethics of truth would therefore consist in examining how and why fidelity to the truth has not been pursued, in certain cases, and why efforts to achieve such fidelity have been isolated or practically individualised.

What, then, would happen if we adhered to principles of truth and rewrote the history of Congo through intellectual biographies of people of all origins, but which, nevertheless, meet the standards of world history – to borrow Ernest Wamba dia Wamba's cherished expression? To be more precise, what if, instead of viewing the Congolese out of the kindness of our hearts, as a people who need to be assisted through secular, religious or scholarly humanitarianism, we viewed them as the survivors of a long, unending catastrophe? An unending catastrophe that has engendered and nurtured the habit of viewing the Congolese as a people who have acquired the right to exist only thanks to 'sacrifices' made by Léopold II, or thanks to the good works of the civilising Europe or North America that has proclaimed itself the defender of the good and bulwark against evil.

Century of Light or Century of Misery?

There is, however, another long tragedy, so to speak, consisting of a long and ever-growing list of Congolese people – recognised, unrecognised, disregarded, unknown – who, from the Slave Trade till now, have viewed themselves as human beings and not as slaves, colonised people, or people obliged to yield to that which, in retrospect, looks like a process of programmed liquidation. Some of these people who have resisted the imposed tendency to see themselves as slaves or colonised people had rejected Mobutu's dictatorship as far back as 24 November 1965, contrary to a thoughtless and insulting assertion made once by Laurent-Désiré Kabila to the effect that 'everyone had joined in the dance'.[2]

These voices from Kimpa Vita to Cyanguvu, from Kimbangu to Mulele, from Lumumba to Mitudidi still echo in the memories of people everywhere. Furthermore, we still hear in our human consciousness the loud echo of unknown voices of people howling in despair and anger before being shoved down into the hold of ships, colonial jails, or of people banished during the colonial era or postcolonial dictatorship.

As the living, familiar with the terror inflicted on Congolese, is it not high time we confessed what our conscience is persistently telling us: to reject the habit of denying our own humanity by accepting to inculcate the habit of accepting the unacceptable? 'Living beings' or, better still, 'survivors' of a holocaust that has never been recognised because – whether wittingly or not – the suffering of white people continues to matter more than the suffering of the poor illiterate or animist; the suffering of men matters more than that of women, children or the handicapped. The hierarchy of the suffering of human beings, as Fanon had already observed in *White Skin, Black Masks*, appears to be complicated, but remains simple: as people approach the

nerve centre of power (or whatever that is understood to mean), submission is automatic as well as the discriminatory form of the economic, political and social pyramid. Power spreads and radiates like the sun: all turn toward it and depend on it. In case of a ceremony, such as that of the crowning of Professor Devisch, the institutionalisation of discriminatory relationships will be strengthened.

Should the commemorations, enthronements or, as in the case of Professor Devisch, the honorary academic crowning of an individual, not serve as one of those moments when it is allowed – no, where it is the duty of whoever is being awarded the honorary doctorate – to try to recall Kimpa Vita's lesson and some or the above-mentioned persons: that of remembering that the privilege to speak loud and clear should be exercised mainly to protect the weak, the poorest of the poor, survivors of an annihilation that is still being denied and whose explanation or justification is still being updated? Such mutilation of a part of the human race (no matter how small) always ultimately leaves scars in the collective conscience of the survivors and orchestrators of the liquidation of respect for the principle of life. Paradoxically, a mentality that denies the principle of life, purportedly in defence of a sacrosanct 'freedom', has emerged. It is obvious that, in the final analysis, anything goes. And when institutionalised force or power enshrines this privilege, would it not incite those who side with the marginalised to fight to put an end to the practice of favouring only certain voices?

Such a mindset – denying, renouncing or refusing all responsibility for a crime whose magnitude has not yet been fathomed – gradually set in, uninterrupted, from the Slave Trade to Hiroshima/ Nagasaki,[3] including the genocides, unrecognised and recognised, but which are fuelled, *inter alia*, by what was known as the Black Code.[4] This brings forcefully to mind Einstein's comment upon hearing about the bombing of Hiroshima: 'The release of atomic power has changed everything except our way of thinking.' The process leading to the fission of the atom started in earnest with the systematic fission of humanity between those who matter and those who do not, between the discoverers and the discovered, between the occupants of the land and the occupied, between the able-bodied and the handicapped, etc. In brief, between those who matter and those who do not matter: how can we tell their own story and give an account of their own existence while denying their existence?[5] So, gradually and with increasing conviction, some people, particularly scholars, got into the comfortable habit of siding with the powerful who determine, explicitly or implicitly, who matters and who does not matter. For some, the habit is conscious and for others, it is unconscious.

In his address accepting the honorary doctorate, RD narrates, between the lines, the history of Congo from 1965 till now. For someone who is explicitly inspired by Franz Fanon and who is an expert in research on individual and social healers, this narrative is surprising because of the open praises heaped on the principal co-perpetrator of the destruction of the DRC. Could this be because RD sees in Mobutu a reflection of Léopold II? Did he see himself as a Belgian diplomat compelled by his position (as Kasa-Vubu in the independence ceremonies) not to say anything that could be viewed as high treason against the Congolese state?

Fidelity to What Truth?

The tone of the narrative, if not the narrative itself, sometimes borders on apology. A case in point is his mention of 'President Mobutu's powerful call for the propagation of a sovereign Zairian identity'… Of course, he talks about those who, on 14 June 1971, were 'forcibly enlisted in the army… for civil insubordination and the crime of high treason against the Head of State' – the same crime with which Lumumba was charged on 30 June 1960. This passage is perhaps the most important in RD's entire speech for therein RD is stating in black and white the reasons why he became an anthropologist. This (sovereign? – a reference to Mobutu) dictatorial manifestation brings to an abrupt end the idea of settling permanently in Congo. 'I chose', he writes, 'to acquire in-depth knowledge of life here in Congo and truly relay it to people in Europe.'

However, given the way the conscious, the subconscious or unconscious link hands to mould human consciousness, we can rest assured that RD had not forgotten other events that heralded (for those who wanted to see and think) the intentions of Mobutu and the international clique in power in Congo: on 4 June 1969 students were massacred. On 2 June 1966, on Pentecost Sunday, Jérôme Anany, Emmanuel Bamba, Evariste Kimba and Alexandre Mahamba were hanged. Pierre Mulele was also eliminated after the authorities had promised to grant him an amnesty in 1967. Would it be the memory of Mulele that prompted RD to decide, in the wake of 4 June 1971, to 'plunge, body and soul, into a daring adoption, [RD's emphasis] albeit temporarily, in a Bandundu village community'. (We cannot afford to ever stop remembering this date set aside for the commemoration of the martyrs of 4 June 1969.[6]) Only the author can relate this experience to us, but we can assume it must, at least, have dawned on him that it would take a great deal of courage to go and practise anthropology in a community that was suspected of being geographically situated in a region on the same wavelength with Pierre Mulele's native Kwilu.

In the history of Congo, as narrated by Professor Devisch, there is a rejection or betrayal of the objective that emerged from Lumumba's 'multi-splendoured' speech of 30 June 1960. Any averagely informed analyst of that event would have expected him to be faithful to that truth. Did Césaire himself, overwhelmed by that truth, not write *Une Saison au Congo*, thereby strongly saying yes, in the manner of a master of theatre arts, to a speech by Lumumba that is more unifying than the travesty of authentic nationalism committed by his executioner some years later? Mobutu exceeded all possible limits of betrayal. He out-heroded Herod in turning values upside down, thereby automatically consolidating the stranglehold of the West, the self-proclaimed custodian of universal values. In other words, he left no stone unturned to make sure the Congolese would no longer think in terms of truths that would spur on human beings to transcend themselves by building an immortal (see Badiou 1993).

Should One be an Anthropologist, Psychiatrist, Historian, Philosopher or Simply a Human Being?

Congo's aimless wandering life can be traced as far back as the Slave Trade and double genocide (African peoples and Amerindians from the Caribbeans and from North America), but which is still systematically denied as if the system could not have gone wrong. The split in

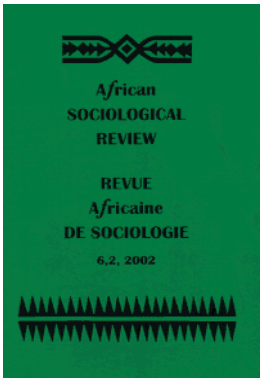
humanity has also led to the fission of the organisation of human knowledge and self-knowledge. Science, human conscience, generally referred to nowadays as the human sciences, have split into disciplines that are unwittingly becoming cannibalistic. This fission *ad infinitum* of human knowledge was and remains one of the pillars of tolerance of the intolerable, acceptance of the idea that the suffering of certain parts of humanity is more acceptable than that of those who believe they ought to suffer less than the others.

Anthropology is not like art, science, love or politics. In the art of relating and practising human relations, poetry, for example, has existed for as long as human speech – long before the invention or discovery of anthropology. The latter disappeared, but poetry continues to flourish. Have we not arrived at a stage in the history of the human race where we should ask ourselves how we can put an end to this mentality that led to the fission of the human sciences? In spite of the efforts of those who have sought to decolonise anthropology, such an undertaking was, by definition, impossible. The split in knowledge production has not improved the knowledge of the human being. In place of what could have happened, we have witnessed a sharp increase in the human sciences which, at the end of the day, are only an ersatz whose propagation enables a party of producers and reproducers to save face. What can one expect from anthropology other than that it should conserve what cannot but confine it to practices that make it tolerate the refusal to think?

RD's exercise is a near-perfect illustration of how a ceremonial and quasi-state preoccupation prevented him from pursuing what he is most proud of: becoming a Congolese by marriage. In spite of his desire to be bold, he was apparently afraid of resolutely siding with those whose audacity had cost them their lives (see the names mentioned above). His boldness could have been of the kind that seeks to attain what is possible albeit unimaginable and unexpected.

Notes

1. See Alain Badiou, 1993, *L'Ethique, essai sur la conscience du mal*, Paris, Hatier.
2. Laurent-Désiré Kabila, who, at the time, was returning to wield absolute power, had recruited and defended Skombi Inongo (one of the high priests of Mobutu's *authenticité*), which was a joke and insult to those who had paid with their lives for refusing to obey the orders of the dictator.
3. We are aware of the contribution of the Union minière du Haut-Katanga [Upper Katanga Miners' Union] in supplying the uranium used to make the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Belgium, in turn, made great strides in the nuclear industry. The University of Kinshasa received a small nuclear reactor. However, to my knowledge, neither Congo nor Belgium, which boast of having a very active anti-nuclear movement, have ever bothered to ask what became of the Shinkolobwe miners of Katanga province and their families. Does this not call for a major healing process, to set the record straight in world history?
4. See Louis Sala-Molins, 1992, *Les misères des Lumières: sous la raison, l'outrage*, Paris, Robert Laffont.
5. In rereading this phrase, I realise that it echoes what Lewis Ricardo Gordon said at one of the meetings commemorating the tenth anniversary of the *Fabrica de Ideias* International Seminar of CEAO/Universidad Federal de Bahia, from 15 to 17 August 2007: he called it the Black's schizophrenia.
6. Among the known names of those who were eliminated are all those who are no more, as Zamenga Batukezanga writes in one of his poems: 'If the River Congo could speak', referring to the bodies of the people who were thrown, alive or dead, into the River Congo from helicopters. One day, we will have to record all the people they tried to dissolve in the sulphuric acid of Congolese memory.



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