

# Senghor and Morris: Socialists

by Peter Faulkner

LÉOPOLD Sédar Senghor was born of Christian parents in Senegal in 1906, passed through the assimilative French educational system of that country, studied in Paris where he was the first African to complete a French doctorate, became known with Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas as an exponent of *Négritude* and a powerful poet (his 1948 anthology of Negro poetry, with an introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre, being a milestone in the history of modern African culture), served voluntarily for France in the war, became a Deputy in the French National Assembly and a leader of Senegalese nationalism, and has been since 1960 President of Senegal. It is a unique career in which Senghor has achieved success as both poet and statesman.

It is Senghor's theoretical writings about African Socialism which, I should like to suggest, link him interestingly to William Morris. But before discussing those, it is perhaps desirable to give some brief account of the poetry with which he first made his reputation. This poetry is associated with the idea of *Négritude*, the attempt to define and assert a specifically Negro-African personality in self-defence against the assimilative effort of French culture. Like all such movements, *Négritude* emphasised one part of a total reality in a way which could be regarded as misleading. It made little appeal in English-speaking Africa: Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian poet and playwright remarked, 'I don't think a tiger has to go round proclaiming his tigritude.' Nevertheless, for Senghor and others from French colonies, *Négritude* was a vitalizing creed, which led to the writing of good poetry. Typically it contrasts the warmth and immediacy of the Negro with the cold rigidity of the West, as in Senghor's *To the American Negro Troops* (who took part in the liberation of Paris in 1945):

Down flowing streets of joy boys play with dreams.  
 Men dance in front of machines and, astonished, burst out singing.  
 The eyelashes of students are sprinkled with rose petals...  
 Oh, black brothers, warriors whose mouths are singing flowers—  
 Delight of living when winter is over—  
 You I salute as messengers of peace.

This is a simplifying rhetoric, yet one that is based on a strong feeling for life. In *New York*, Senghor goes beyond contrast towards a more inclusive harmony. The first section of the poem evokes the sterility of Manhattan with devastating force; the second sets against it the pulsating life of Harlem, nocturnal, violent; the third is an appeal for unification:

New York! I say to you: New York let black blood flow  
into your blood
 That it may rub the rust from your steel joints, like an oil of life,  
 That it may give to your bridges the bend of buttocks and  
the suppleness of creepers.
 Now return the most ancient times, the unity recovered, the  
reconciliation of the Lion, the Bull and the Tree.
 Thought linked to act, ear to heart, sign to sense.

The vitality and directness of this take us into a realm remote from that of most of Morris' poetry, but the concern for humanising modern civilisation is common to both writers.

Senghor's three essays comprising the Praeger paperback *On African Socialism*—'Nationhood' (1959), 'The African Road to Socialism' (1960) and 'Sengalese Socialism' (1962)—all begin with the Marxist criticism of capitalist society and then go on to suggest a more inclusive philosophy than that of Marx, drawing also on the French Utopean Socialists (Saint-Simon, Proudhon and Fourier) and such recent thinkers as Teilhard de Chardin.

Senghor accepts Marx's account of the alienation of man in capitalist society. Production, work, ceases to be a free activity and becomes an imposed necessity:

Free in the peasant community, labour becomes forced in the factory, deprived of its living rhythm, without song, without joy. No longer is the creative labour of the worker realising his aim freely, in body and consciousness, by 'fulfilling himself'. Now it is work on the assembly line, imposed from the outside by the employer.

Senghor makes use of the term 'reinfication' (originally used by the Hungarian Marxist Lukacs) to describe a world in which

'mercantile relations . . . replace human relations'. He applies this insight to the world situation :

In truth, and this follows from Marxian analysis, all Western civilisation, all machine-civilisation, all factory-civilisation, is reified. We shall see what role the colonized peoples must play in the struggle for dereification.

Here is a positive development of Marxism.

It follows from the concern about alienation that Senghor does not fall into the view, so widely accepted among politicians in both developed and under-developed countries, that economic growth is the supreme good :

African politicians have a tendency to neglect culture, to make it an appendage of politics. This is a mistake. These two areas . . . are certainly closely connected, each reaching on the other. But if one stops to reflect, culture is at once the basis and the ultimate aim of politics.

The quality of its culture is for Senghor the measure of a people's degree of civilisation. Culture is something not to be accepted, but created: man must become 'not only a consumer, but above all a creator, of culture.' Thus Senghor has a wide view of education, which is to promote the understanding of the national culture. Education is not to be thought of as competitive book-learning ('The race for the BA degree is sterile in France; it is *homicidal* in Africa'), but as including a wide range of folk festivals, theatrical and athletic events, lectures and cultural clubs. In a fine passage Senghor raises the question of the aims and values of society :

What would be the use of raising the living standard of our masses without a rise in the standard of culture? What good would it do to increase purchasing power only for the comfort of the belly and backside; to buy parasols and sunglasses, even automobiles, refrigerators, washing-machines, and the like? What would be the advantage, unless we occupy our leisure by creating works of art to provide spiritual nourishment for our people?

This eloquent and searching passage may remind readers of Morris of his question in 'How I Became a Socialist' about whether the efforts of the nineteenth century were to find their consummation in 'a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing room in the offing.'

Senghor's concern for culture, for the whole quality of the

life of his people, makes him critical of the historical development of Communism into a centralised bureaucracy:

In the Communist Countries, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', contrary to the teachings of Marx, has made the state an omnipotent, soulless monster, stifling the natural freedoms of the human being, and drying up the sources of art, without which life is not worth living.

He argues that, by restricting itself to economic goals, Communism has paradoxically brought itself close to American capitalism:

The paradox in the building of socialism in Communist countries, or at least in the Soviet Union, is that it increasingly resembles Capitalist growth in the United States, the American way of life, with high salaries, refrigerators, washing-machines and television sets, but with less art and less freedom of thought.

De-Stalinization is welcomed as the expression of the people's 'thirst for freedom', and freedom necessarily leads to the question 'to do what?'

It is here that Senghor believes Africa has a special contribution to make to what he, following Teilhard, calls the Civilisation of the Universal. This contribution has several aspects, but they are all part of Senghor's underlying sense of *Négritude*. For one thing, Negro-African 'knowledge' is that of 'confrontation and intuition' rather than abstraction and analysis: it is therefore more direct and personal than 'knowledge' as understood in the Western tradition, which includes Marxism with its claim to scientific objectivity. Similarly, for Senghor, love is a value more effectively recognised in African society; European Marxists, in his view, 'speak . . . positively about science, production, normative ethics, sometimes about art—and never about love.' This emphasis is totally opposed to the Negro's:

Because Negro Africans have kept a sense of brotherhood and dialogue, because they are inspired by religions that preach love, and above all, because they live those religions, they can propose positive solutions to the construction of the international, as well as the national, community. The importance of love as central energy, the stuff of life, is at the heart of *Négritude*, underlying the black man's ontology.

Finally Senghor stresses the communal nature of traditional African societies:

West African realities are those of underdeveloped countries—peasant countries here, cattle countries there—once feudalistic, but traditionally classless and with no wage-earning sector. They are community countries

where the group holds priority over the individual; they are, especially, religious countries, unselfish countries, where money is not King.

This has become clear through work on African civilisation by twentieth century scholars:

We would learn that Negro-African society is collectivist or, more exactly, communal, because it is rather a *communion* of souls than an aggregate of individuals.

Marxism, in Senghor's view, has restricted itself by insisting that it is a science when it is essentially an ethical philosophy. A truly inclusive and satisfying system of values, giving a place to every worthwhile form of human activity, may be achieved 'by integrating socialism with *Négritude*.' With these emphatic words Senghor's discussion of Senegalese Socialism ends.

I think that any student of Morris' social thought will recognise the similarity of much of Senghor's outlook, especially in the emphasis on the alienation of man in a capitalist-industrialist society. This is to be explained, of course, not by direct influence but by both men's indebtedness to the Marxist view of history. It seems to be a notable triumph of character and intelligence that the leader of a small African country should, in public discussion of crucial social issues, forcibly have expressed an outlook so strikingly wider than that of the typical English, American or Soviet politicians.

Morris, as is well known, frequently refers to the Middle Ages in his attempts to define by contraries the plight of the nineteenth-century factory worker. For many modern African writers, including Senghor, the traditional African past offers the same kind of valuable contrast with modern industrial society, for in it men were engaged in creative activities within a communal system. Indeed, this contrast is central to Senghor's view of *Négritude*, as we have seen. In neither case does the writer idealise the past, or ignore its physical or mental privations, but in both cases our attention is drawn to the essential problems of our own civilisation.

I should like finally to suggest that there is a rough parallel between the ways in which Morris and Senghor accept and enlarge the Marxist tradition. In Senghor the process is perfectly overt, while in Morris who, as Shaw tells us, 'was on the

side of Marx *contra mundum*', it is less obvious. Nevertheless I believe that the reader of Morris is aware of an enlargement of the Marxist system in his writings. What I have in mind is supported by Edward Thompson's lecture *The Communism of William Morris* of 1959, in which he deplored the development of the later Marxist tradition by those whose emphasis has been so largely economic that they made it 'incapable of absorbing the great enrichment of the ethical content of Communism which was Morris' unique contribution.' For Thompson, the moral critique of Morris is the *necessary* complement of the economic analysis of Marx. A sense similar to Thompson's of the loss among later Marxists of the 'essential concept of the "whole man"' led Senghor to the undertaking which he had been discussing, that of formulating a socialist philosophy which does justice to all aspects of the human personality and of human experience.

It would be misleading to suggest that all Senghor's modifications of Marxism can be exactly paralleled in Morris. The ideals of *Négritude* do indeed have much in common with those of the European romantic movement, to which Morris belonged, but much of the strength of Senghor's outlook lies in his practical sense of the West African situation. Moreover, Morris has none of Senghor's religious sense, nor of his pleasure in speculation (shown in his enthusiasm for the ideas of that grandiose speculator Teilhard de Chardin). But both men, it seems to me, seek to complete an economic analysis with a moral critique, and in so doing they make use of an ethical vocabulary scorned by exponents of scientific socialism. Senghor's stress on the Negro African's sense of 'love as central energy' is comparable to Edward Thompson's description of Morris' Society of Equals, embodying 'the ethic of co-operation, the energies of love'. It is pleasant to imagine the enthusiasm with which Morris would have welcomed Senghor's writings and—more importantly—his attempts to put them into practice for the benefit of the people of his country.