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Dialogue with Lansana Keita: Reflections on African Development

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Ten Questions

Lansana Keita asked me ten revealing questions about his own personal expectations and demands as a philosopher. The first one was on the responsibilities of African philosophers and other intellectuals in relation to developments in their own society. The second one was on the future of socialism as a doctrine and its relevance to Africa, considering the collapse of communism in the former Soviet Union and the economic disruptions taking place in modern China. The third question calls for a diagnosis of development obstacles in contemporary Africa and proposed solutions. The fourth question probes the relationship between science and philosophy and the possible promotion by philosophy of the development of science and technology in Africa, instead of being submitted to the development of science as is generally the case everywhere. The fifth question is a very specific one concerning Nkrumah and the mission he assigned to philosophy in the political field. Alluding to Frantz Fanon and Cheikh Anta Diop, the sixth question wondered about the relevance of their political thought in relation to the current development tasks in Africa. The seventh question acknowledges my observations on North/South disequilibrium in the area of production and scientific knowledge management and wonders about the solution. The eighth one seeks to know what type of economic, political and cultural system can make Africa regain its sovereignty and autonomous decision-making... The ninth question ponders over the real value of NEPAD in relation to the demands of a united and sovereign Africa. The tenth and last question concerns the possible contribution of African thinkers and philosophers of the past, from ancient Egypt up till today, to thinking what Lansana Keita named development *telos*.

Needless to say that such questions can only emanate from a philosopher and a committed one who is concerned with the destiny of his own society, and particularly the immense tragedy that contemporary Africa is going through; one who believes

philosophy should address these questions and contribute to providing their solution; one who also believes in the power of philosophy and its capacity to respond to the society's concerns. I can't remember which character in Malraux called out to Miguel de Unamuno in *L'espoir* in these terms: 'I do not have anything to do with your thinking if it does not concern my tragedy. Lansana Keita would have probably liked to author this retort and use it to question both himself and all African philosophers.

I must say first that this demand is a legitimate one. Africa is calling out to us and you cannot claim to be a responsible intellectual if you remain deaf to this call, to this painful scream rising from a whole continent. Something needs to be done. Let's mobilise all the available forces, including the intellectual and scientific forces, to end the tragedy. Art for art's sake is out of place in such a context. Science for science's sake, philosophy conceived and practised for the sake of it can just not be relevant, legitimate and useless, to say the least.

But the truth is that things are not so simple. I am almost tempted to repeat, word-for-word, a presentation that I had to improvise in Cotonou at the end of the 1970s and published in 1981 in *Présence africaine* under the title: 'What Can Philosophy Do?'¹ My answer must have sounded excessively negative to many of you, and subsequently disappointing, but this disappointment is a lesser evil and even a necessary stage if you don't want to delude yourself, if you don't want to expect from philosophy more than it can give and thus be in a position to better grasp its objectives: philosophy should literally be given its legitimate place.

I therefore appealed first to lucidity and my first reaction will still be the same today. Why so? First, because the philosopher, as a philosopher, is not necessarily *committed* and when he or she is, it might not necessarily be in the right direction. In fact, there are philosophers of the left and philosophers of the right, or if you choose to avoid these lateral metaphors which also have their particular history, there have always been philosophers who conform to colonial and post-colonial Africa and who are prepared to fight tooth and nail for a social and political *status quo*, and bolder philosophers and anti-conformist thinkers who can imagine the possible beyond reality because they relativise the existing power relationship, because they have assimilated the master-slave dialectics and understood that no domination, and inversely no servitude, can be eternal. And yet, no one can rigorously argue that the philosophers of the latter calibre are more philosophical than the others.

Secondly, a philosopher, the one who is *committed* and committed in the positive way does not hold a monopoly over boldness and political clear-sightedness. He/she shares those values with tens, hundreds, thousands of other intellectuals and tens of thousands of conscious citizens who do not necessarily consider themselves intellectuals and who reject humiliation and suffering. A committed philosopher has exactly the same similar demands.

This having been said, once a philosopher is recognised as a human being among other human beings, an intellectual among others and at best, an activist intellectual among other activist intellectuals, one cannot deny the role played in history by the

social doctrines invented by intellectuals who also happen to be ‘philosophers’. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves two questions: first on the specific terms governing the work of a philosopher and possibly his/her function as an activist intellectual and secondly, on the relationship (accidental or essential coincidence or mutual ownership) between the complementary components of a given philosophical doctrine.

I would like to respond very quickly to the ten questions asked by Lansana Keita.

Philosophers and the City

As you would have noticed, some of the authors mentioned tried to theorise capitalism (Adam Smith, Hume, Stuart Mill), others (Saint-Simon, Proudhon, Marx) believed they had to challenge it by proposing an alternative. While both sides should be credited with showing concern for the problems of society, they did not do it the same way nor did they follow the same orientations. It is also obvious that the philosopher’s interest in social concerns did not start in the 18th or 19th centuries but well beyond those periods. Plato and Aristotle demonstrated similar interest. The author of *Gorgias*, *Théétète*, *Cratyle* also wrote *La République*. The author of *Métaphysique* and *Organon* also wrote *Le politique*.

I even think the question could be put the other way round and, instead of overplaying the philosophers who explicitly invented political doctrines or built systems of society organisation, let’s wonder whether, in the history of philosophy, some authors have actually remained totally unconcerned throughout their work about the problems of society. My opinion is that you wouldn’t find any. Any philosophy carries directly or indirectly a society project. The whole difference lies indeed in ‘directly or indirectly’ that is, in the more or less explicit nature of the project. The authors cited by Lansana Keita should be credited with clarity just like their predecessors, Plato and Aristotle, whom we mentioned and many others who could have also been cited. Their social doctrine is explicit. By laying their cards on the table, they make it easier for the reader, without making too many efforts, to adhere or not to adhere, to approve or disapprove of their proposed vision.

I would like to add a detail: anyone can propose a vision, but not anyone is a philosopher. The philosopher’s originality is not only to propose a vision but to also claim to have founded it, leaving the reader with the option to appreciate the robustness or inversely the weakness of such foundation.

Now, let’s turn to Africa, since Lansana Keita himself cited the European philosophers just as examples. Yes of course, we had and still have in Africa some thinkers who explicitly proposed visions of society and, more precisely, alternatives to dependency and under-development. Yes, we have Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Cheikh Anta Diop who were precisely mentioned in the questionnaire. We have many others including Senghor whom you may or may not like but whose contribution, after all said and done, is considerable; Julius Nyerere who proposed Ujamaa and tried in vain to put it into practice in Tanzania, Césaire, the volcanic thinker from the islands who does not consider himself a philosopher but who is more and

better than a philosopher. At another level, we have had Sékou Touré whose chattering on 'communaucracy' has led us nowhere both in theory and practice.

Did you say 'philosopher'? Somebody like Samir Amin does not consider himself a philosopher, though I believe he cannot be overlooked today as a critical thinker, as an open and imaginative economist for anyone who wishes to know the origin, nature and mechanisms of under-development in Africa and have an insight into the possible alternatives.

I would therefore respond to Lansana Keita and to all those who are puzzled like him that the important thing is not philosophy as such, but critical thinking. This is the type of thinking we should today develop in our universities and research centres, making us imagine the possible beyond reality and seeing to it that the commonplaces of the present do not become the measure of everything and should also be measured, relativised, put in their legitimate place, ordered and subordinated to other exigencies and tested against higher standards if we want to pull out of conformism and resignation.

Future of Socialism

What today is the future of socialism? More precisely (and this is the second question), does socialism as a doctrine still have a future? Does it have any relevance to African problems? Does it have any credibility considering the collapse of the governments which rightly or wrongly, claim to embody it in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, though not openly said, in the last countries that still claim today to represent it in a more theoretical than real way (China and Cuba)?

Cautioning against the then dominant understanding of Marxism among the would-be African left wingers, I called a few years ago for a responsible reading of Marx, Lenin and all the Marxist tradition. I warned against a catechistic and dogmatic approach to Marxism, against being tempted to swallow Marxism the way you swallow a pill, so to speak. I called for a critical appropriation of this historical and political heritage. I was speaking from Benin, a country that converted to communism overnight as you convert to a religion but in which the revolutionary claptrap, inspired by the Soviet propaganda manuals, then flowing into the country, barely concealed the most despicable police dictatorship which treated democratic freedom cheaply and tended to nip in the bud any responsible initiative or thought.

I believe the intellectuals and other executives should be more ambitious for themselves and for the country. Instead of passively consuming and worse, making the masses consume the neo-Stalinist clichés for instance on the 'dialectics law' (sic) from which strangely enough the 'law on the negation of negation' cherished by Lenin had been expurgated, they should have gone back to the roots and see clearer by themselves the troubled history of the doctrine and hold free discussions at their own level, develop a plural and contradictory Marxist theoretical traditional, as any credible theoretical traditional would do.

And yet, what has happened since then? After the global collapse of communism, indeed, there was a sudden shift from purely ideological to hundred per cent economic concerns, in other words, from a Marxist-Leninist claptrap lacking collective research back-up or local theoretical tradition to the-straight-to-the-point prose of the World Bank and IMF experts, repeated in unison by our local leaders. There was a sort of overnight ‘rectification without self-criticism’, which Althusser deplored in the practice of the French communist party and which clearly denotes one of the worst forms of opportunism and irresponsibility.

However, the question asked is very specific: yes or no is socialism outmoded today? The first answer might be: yes, socialism is outmoded at least in two ways: first, *it is no longer fashionable* – but this is not a serious argument against socialism as a doctrine; secondly, history has indeed demonstrated the extraordinary capacity of the capitalist system to adapt, to resolve more or less its internal contradictions, to regain balance and to excel itself precisely when deemed doomed. Marx had underestimated this invention and adaptation capacity and his predictions about the self-destruction of capitalism bound to succumb to its own contradictions were contradicted by the facts, at least up to this point.

Let’s put the question this way: What was the *place* of these predictions in the overall doctrine? Should they be rejected for this single reason? Should this mistake, if it is really one, be treated as a detail? Should the real analysis of capital, which provides an unprecedented insight into the way the capitalist system operates, be thrown overboard under the pretence that it would have led, from Marx’s perspective, to purely fanciful predictions? Or should these predictions be put back to their place and be relativised to the analysis itself? And which other doctrine and reading method might help us today to understand ‘imperialism, the superior stage of capitalism’ as Lenin called it or ‘neo-colonialism, the superior stage of imperialism’ as Nkrumah described it, if we rejected altogether this precious heritage? How could we understand what André Gunder Franck called the ‘development of under-development’ or Samir Amin’s ‘growth without development’, how could we put into historical perspective our current misery and both relativise and surpass it, if we rejected altogether the precious Marxist heritage, just to be fashionable or to be in the limelight?

I want to make it very clear that socialism as a creed, socialism as a catechism, socialism as ideological purring is not only outmoded today but it has never been fertile, it was never productive then and it is not now either. The global collapse of communism opened our eyes: it revealed in broad daylight the failure of a certain use of socialism; it encourages us to show more responsibility and judgment in the way socialism, and more generally any political and social doctrine, is appropriated. But it does not discredit socialism as an analytical method, as a policy, as a societal project, as a demand for justice and equality in the management of human communities.

Obstacles to Development

Third question: What are the main obstacles to development? Are they purely economic, political, cultural, psychological or all at the same time? *A priori*, the obstacles are of different type. But the foregoing draws our attention to one obstacle which is much too often neglected: the absence of thinking, intellectual passivity leading us to follow changing ideological modes like an opportunist. What is the solution? I have already written it somewhere: '*start thinking again*';² in other words, we should reach today beyond the ready-made solutions proposed by international experts and look into the problems of society by ourselves. I insist, therefore, on the role of intellectuals and the elite or, more precisely, on their responsibility. I insist on the need for collective appropriation of existing knowledge, a high-level internal debate on social, economic and political options, and also on their pros and cons.

Science and Philosophy: Place of Politics

Yes, you are right: philosophy should not be viewed through a too narrow prism. Reading Althusser was enlightening to me, helping put philosophy in its place and calling on it to be more humble. Philosophy indeed claimed to have founded science, prescribed in advance the terms of its validity, define *a priori* the framework in which it should be lodged and the bounds within which it should be established. Althusser warned that in fact, it is the reverse taking place: great philosophical revolutions always follow great scientific revolutions. As a result, nothing or not much is understood of Plato if you don't realise the development of Greek mathematics during his era. You don't understand at all Descartes if you do not see in his philosophy, as Judith Miller put it, a 'metaphysic of Galilean physics'. You underrate the stakes of Kantianism if you ignore Kant's admiration of Newton and the deep fascination exerted on his thinking by the new physics. You don't quite appreciate the real significance of Husserl if you do not realise the novelty of mathematical logic in relation to the traditional bounds of science.

However, science is not the only determinant of philosophical thinking. Althusser himself admitted it in his *Eléments d'autocritique* that: philosophy is not simply science theory, it is also first and foremost class struggle in theory. Even though today the concepts of class struggle should be handled more delicately, this self-criticism says it all: science theory is not all philosophy is about. Beyond these theoretical stakes, philosophy also has practical stakes. Ignoring these practical stakes is tantamount to falling into what Althusser describes as 'theorecist deviation'.

Despite this warning, I believe the initial assumption is still an enriching one in many respects. While science theory is not all what philosophy is about, it remains an essential component and in some way the hardest nucleus, the specific concern of a genuine philosophical thinking as distinguished from the other forms of discourse. For, a thread must be found to lead us through this profusion of verbal inventions today proposed in Africa and elsewhere by all kinds of system sellers who introduce themselves as philosophers and who, alas, do not always exercise the patience of the concept.

Nkrumah, Fanon, Cheikh Anta Diop

To be honest, the main issue is that I am suspicious of philosophy or whatever appears as such. I always ask to have a closer look at it. Since you are asking me a question on Nkrumah,³ let me say clearly that: *Consciencism*, to me, seems to be less robust, far less convincing than books like *Africa Must Unite*, *Neo-colonialism*, *The Last Stage of Imperialism*, and even *Class Struggle in Africa*, where a remarkable fine analysis is developed and applied to economy and politics. Nkrumah's greatest contribution lies in this vision of a united and sovereign Africa, as a project now more topical than ever of building the United States of Africa. *Consciencism* wanted to supersede this political unification project with another project: conscience unification. The latter project was neither necessary nor consistent.

You are asking a question about Frantz Fanon and Cheikh Anta Diop? Of course, they are also part of our common heritage and the intellectual weapons that we have and can use to think about building a new, unified, self-reliant, sovereign Africa, which can constitute an autonomous development hub in a globalisation with many voices.

Let me make this additional observation. In the case of Nkrumah or Cheikh Anta Diop, they both lived at a time when the major issue was that of sovereignty and regaining lost autonomy in relation to colonialism and neo-colonialism. The result is that they did not address the problem of human rights and democratic freedom that have since become a hot issue in the States. We also know that in the specific case of Nkrumah, the political theoretician was also once a Head of State whose dictatorial practices were denounced by several opponents. We shouldn't close our eyes: the contribution made by these authors remains considerable but are marked in the corner by some objective limit. This contribution should today be lucidly, critically and responsibly appropriated.

Global Knowledge Build-up

I would not elaborate on the seventh question. It is an enriching one indeed in understanding Africa's technological and scientific backwardness in applying to scientific and technological activity the same reading method that has enabled neo-Marxist economists (Samir Amin, for instance) to put 'under-development' in general into historical perspective so as to better capture its origins, development and possible remedies. I therefore tried first to describe 'the colonial research pact'; this system consisted, during the colonial era, in developing in dominated territories a feverish activity of gathering information destined for processing in the Metropolitan laboratories and research centres; then continuing the system into the postcolonial period despite the remarkable progress made in some cases in specific sectors.⁴ I drew attention to this 'extraversion logics' which thus governs the African researcher's activity and always puts it directly or indirectly at the service of knowledge build-up at the system centre, in Europe or USA.

You are asking me what the remedy is. In substance, the same as the one proposed for developing economies: 'disconnection'. This metaphor is, undoubtedly, very equivocal but it clearly indicates the direction in which to search. The question is only to know what this necessary reorientation, this conquest of self-reliance would mean for peripheral scientific activity, and how it can, like a general economic activity, 'pull out of the global market'.

What is the Worth of NEPAD?

I will answer Questions 8 and 9 together: Which economic, political and cultural system can free this balkanised, indebted Africa, which has subsequently become easy prey to the institutions of developed countries such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and these hordes of paternalistic NGOs streaming onto the continent. Would NEPAD, which is today much talked about, be the system sought or is it just a deception invented by developed countries in the face of the danger of what an organised Africa would represent for them? What is the real scope of NEPAD?

I am almost tempted to say: I don't know! And this has nothing to do with coquetry. I am waiting to study the issue. But as of now, I can already express one concern: that NEPAD does not experience what happened to the Lagos Plan of Action; that is, remaining a dead letter. I should also say that I don't like too much the word 'system'. The Lagos Plan of Action bore the appropriate name; it was a plan of action. Besides, I don't see a real mobilisation of the African intelligentsia and live forces behind it. Without such a mobilisation, nothing sustainable will come out of it, regardless of the intrinsic value of the proposed programme.

Heritage Appropriation

The tenth question looks like an ordinary one and is too obvious to dwell on. Yes, indeed, we should interrogate the ancient authors on our current problems, ask them the questions worrying us today and make the best out of their contribution and teaching. However, the most interesting thing is what lies behind this question: a project on the history of African thinking. Nobody would have thought of it forty years ago. Nobody, because the then dominant concern was for identity and this has led into imagining African thinking, an essential component of this identity, as a closed system deprived of history. The big issue then for philosophers was to describe, decipher and rebuild this system. African philosophers felt compelled in this context to practise philosophy as a particular chapter of ethnology, or as it would be called today, cultural anthropology.

Things have changed a lot since then. Perhaps ethno-philosophy has been subjected to excessive criticism, but it has at least led to freeing the project on a history of African philosophy, a history of African thinking and more generally of what Abiola Irele described as an intellectual history of Africa.⁵

I will conclude on that note. We should today appropriate this rich heritage critically and responsibly. We should equally freely appropriate, with the same critical vigilance, what is produced in other parts of the world and which may serve us because if you look at it closely, you will always discover that we have contributed in our own way to these inventions. No, history has not finished yet. It is just starting or, more precisely, re-starting.

Notes

1. Paulin J. Hountondji, «Que peut la philosophie?», *Présence africaine* (Paris), 119, 1981 : 47-71. Translated into Hungarian by Sipos Janos in *Magyar filozófiai szemle* (Hungarian Journal of Philosophy), 1981 and English under the title 'What philosophy can do' in *Quest: Philosophical Discussions* (Lusaka), I, 2: 2-28.
2. « Alors, que faire? Au-delà du repli nationaliste sur nous-mêmes, de l'inventaire laborieux et interminable de nos valeurs culturelles, du narcissisme collectif induit par la colonisation, réapprendre à penser » (P. Hountondji, *Sur la «philosophie africaine»: critique de l'ethnophilosophie*, Paris, Maspero, 1976, p. 47). Please forgive me for citing myself. I know this is contrary to established practice. I'm doing this mostly to signal once again a regrettable misunderstanding created by the excessively literal translation of this sentence: 'So what is to be done? Apart from a nationalistic withdrawal into ourselves, a painstaking, unending inventory of our cultural values, a collective narcissism induced by colonisation, *we must re-learn how to think*' (*African Philosophy Myth and Reality*, London, Hutchinson, 1983:52-53). Part of the criticism could have been avoided if the sentence were translated as: «*we must start thinking again*».
3. I'd rather write *Nkrumah* without an apostrophe as he himself used to write his name. French speakers have got into the bad habit of writing *N'krumah*.
4. In an excellent thesis on the sociology of science presented at Bielefeld, Germany, Maxime Dahoun reported on his field studies which confirmed entirely these views. Cf. Maxime Dahoun, *Le statut de la science et de la recherche au Bénin. Contribution à une sociologie de la science dans les pays en développement*, Berlin, Logos Verlag, 1998. Up to this point in time, I still don't know whether similar studies on other countries of the sub-region exist. Anyway, this is an investigation area that needs to be systematically explored.
5. Cf. F. Abiola Irele, 'Réflexions sur la négritude', *Ethiopiennes* N° 69, 2nd semester 2002, p. 83-106.

