

THE POVERTY OF africanism

The terms Africanism and Africanisation have been much bandied about in white student leftish circles since the beginning of the year. And ever since its appearance the questions "where does it come from?", "where is it going?" and "how authentic is it?" (Is it a man? Is it a bird?) have been floating around in its murky atmosphere.

The answer to the first question is pretty straight forward - Africanism is the project of a small group of white English-speaking students associated mainly with so-called radical student organisations. Since the beginning of 1977 they have been propagating Africanism in the guise of "a new philosophy" for white students.

Clearly this "new philosophy" is partially a somewhat belated response to black consciousness - a subject I will return to later. But it also claims its own positive dynamic: a new nationalism and patriotism for white Africans.

But what about the other questions - where is it going to, and how authentic is it. Most of this article will be devoted to this last question.

PSEUDO PHILOSOPHY

One of the most disquieting features of Africanism is the pseudo philosophical language used as a device, a device to conjure up profundity in an intellectual desert. Take for example a definition of Africanism proposed by Patrick Fitzgerald: Africanism is common (sic) value or assumption of both black and white consciousness. It serves to define the shared data complex and represents authentic being-in-the-world." The terminology used here is mainly that of the Heideggerian ontological philosophy (ontology = science of, question of being).

It posits an African ontology - in other words a way of undertaking "existence in the world" which is unique to Africa. This constitutes the similar abuse to that of Manganyi when he refers to "being-in-the-world". Quite simply both Fitzgerald and Manganyi are attempting to popularise a very narrow and unauthentic approach which will never be able to move beyond gross idealism.

SKIN DARKENING LOTION

After all, is the reality of one's existence defined by one's geographical location? Africanist propaganda is invariably accompanied by maps indicating (the somewhat elementary fact) that South Africa is on the African continent. Or, perhaps, the fact that most people on this continent and in this country have dark brown skins is of greater relevance than the geography of

the matter. So, is Africanism the white radical's answer to skin lightening lotion?

AN AFRICAN CULTURE?

More actively it could be a question of "culture". Pitagora clearly states that "the real struggle is the cultural struggle". Culture can be defined (perhaps inadequately) as a set of guidelines and codes through which we are able to "understand" everyday life and interpret our experiential reality.

What, in that case, is our South African culture? Is it closer to the modes of communication and understanding of an Ethiopian poor peasantry, or to that of other peripheral capitalist societies such as Brazil or Taiwan? Or, to put it differently, is the self-perception of the worker or the schoolkid in South Africa more closely related to that of a herdsman in Niger or Mali, or to that of a Greek or Palestinian migrant worker?

AFRICAN UNITY?

It is also ironic that Africanism appears in South Africa in 1977 - for in 1977 Africa has seen more internal wars and divisions than ever before. Egypt and Libya, Mauritania and Morocco, Sudan and Ethiopia, Somalia and Ethiopia, Uganda vs. Tanzania and Kenya, Guinea and Benin, Angola and Zaire, "Rhodesia" vs. Botswana, Zambia and Mocambique - the list is endless, not even to mention civil wars and insurrections.

The OAU Congress this year ended with deep and unresolved splits, mostly congruent with the conflict between the conservative states (led by the French ex-colonies) and the radical states centering around the ex-Portuguese colonies and some former British colonies. Some commentators see the life expectancy of the OAU, in its present form, in terms of months.

THE MYTH OF AFRICA

And what of the core of the Africanist world view - the unity of Africa in spirit and in action?

It is sadly ironic that its ideologues should have chosen Aime Cesaire, as a cultural symbol of Africanism. Cesaire, a heroic figure, is a man who has become a curiosity in his own time.

In the late twenties and early thirties, Cesaire was a member of a group of radical black/French intellectuals who developed and propagated Negritude, in France. These intellectuals were to different degrees influenced by Surrealism, Marxism and Existentialism/Humanism. Cesaire in fact, joined the French Communist Party as many others did.

But today, Leopold Senghor, the best known member of the group, would probably refuse Cesaire an entry visa into Senegal - where Senghor is executive President. Negritude, however, has not been renounced by Senghor and other "conservative" African leaders.

Negritude is a flexible tool, as are many components of nationalistic ideologies (eg. "anti-imperialism", often cloaked in garments of anti-capitalism to enlist broader support). In the case of Negritude and Pan-africanism the same ideas and symbols which had, or were meant to, mobilise the popular masses in the anti-colonial struggle are now being used, if somewhat unsuccessfully, to legitimize the replacement of European oppressors with black puppets and petty capitalists.

Though etymological analyses are usually regarded with some, justifiable, suspicion, they are often approved of in the Heideggerian tradition. Consequently I feel it is worthwhile to point out the origin of the term "Africanisation". It means - to bring under the civil control of Africans, especially "negroids". Its most important usage has been to describe the handing over of control of bureaucracies and managerial posts in private enterprises from whites to blacks in Africa. In the propaganda of the sixties and early seventies one will find that this is exactly what Africanisation means - changing the colour of the bureaucrat/manager.

The East African Community has all but broken up - just as similar experiments in West Africa folded in the late sixties, as did the United Arab Republic in the early seventies.

Where is the unity of Africa?



AFRICANISM A RESPONSE?

In South Africa, black consciousness is reaching a crisis point. When organisations such as Inkatha and the "Council of Ten" take up the cause of b.c., it is clear that its end is nigh. In any case it is well known that civil organisations and groups in South Africa formed at the crest of radical black consciousness, have been gradually purging themselves of elements of black consciousness. Some assert that the role of b.c. is exhausted, and that a class-based ideology is far more important in South Africa today.

In this light, it seems, at the very least, odd, that white student leaders should be attempting to promote a way of thinking - or, rather, a package deal of slogans, cliches and images which might have at one stage interested black students, but now would be considered irrelevant. This query will have to remain unanswered for the moment.

Finally - is Africanism working, and where is it going? I shall not attempt to answer that question - that is the reader's job. Let it just be said that the flimsy foundations and tottering edifice of Africanism outlined in this article cannot bode well for its future.

