

## Defending the 'Negro Race':

### Lamine Senghor and Black Internationalism in Interwar France

The history of black culture in France in the interwar period has long been dominated by accounts of jazz, Josephine Baker and the *vogue nègre* of the 1920s; of Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, Léopold Senghor and the birth of Negritude in the 1930s. Over the past three decades, groundbreaking academic research (Dewitte 1985; Miller 1998; Edwards 2003a&b) has uncovered the writings and activism of another largely forgotten group of black militants from the 1920s. This research never managed fully to displace the dominant narrative regarding this period, especially in the mind of the general public. However, a spate of recent cultural artefacts in France—from exhibitions to publications to documentary films—have sought to position the history of what is now commonly termed 'La France Noire' within a wider historical framework that extends beyond the wave of mass migration that began during the *trente glorieuses*.<sup>1</sup> Pap Ndiaye's *La Condition noire* (2008), a genuine media phenomenon (which saw the text misleadingly dubbed 'the birth of black studies à la française'), devoted a chapter to exploring the history of black people in France. In late 2009, the *Présence Africaine* exhibition at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris gave prominence to a group of pioneering black activists from the interwar period (as did the special issue of *Gradhiva* that accompanied it).<sup>2</sup> In late 2011-early 2012, Pascal Blanchard, leading figure in the ACHAC collective of scholars, was involved in two initiatives that made a point of beginning their historical narrative well before the Second World War: his co-edited collection *La France Noire* (2011), a handsomely produced *beau-livre*, promptly sold out in the run-up to Christmas (has the story of blackness in France attained the level of acceptability that allows it to be offered as a stocking filler?), and he co-authored the documentary film, *Noirs de France* (2012), which served as a televisual companion to *La France Noire* and was screened to audiences over 3 weeks on France 5. The material highlighted in these various forums was not new, but the impact of these high-profile cultural events was to create a sense of a lost history at last being rediscovered.

One of the central recurring figures at the heart of these accounts of black France in the 1920s is Lamine Senghor, a Senegalese veteran of the First World War, who emerged in the mid-1920s as the best known and the most influential black anticolonial activist of the period. In his writings and activism, Senghor combined a communist-inspired critique of empire with an attempt to forge a shared sense of black identity across disparate groups within France and more globally. This article will chart the trajectory of Lamine Senghor's brief career as an activist from 1924-27 (he died of tuberculosis in November 1927, having suffered serious lung damage when his battalion was gassed at Verdun in 1917), as a means of exploring the possibilities for black advocacy in 1920s France.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the story of Senghor's activism and ideas will serve as a platform from which to assess briefly, in the conclusion, the more celebrated advocacy of blackness by the Negritude writers of the 1930s. For Lamine Senghor and his fellow activists of the 1920s, such as Tiémoko Garan Kouyaté and Max Bloncourt, are generally perceived as representatives of a failed movement, the positive dimension of their work limited to their role as precursors to the successful black movements of later periods. However, it is my contention that we cannot simply dismiss Lamine Senghor's project because of its 'failure'. As Frederick Cooper, the renowned historian of Francophone Africa, has argued in another context (the collapse of a federal project linking France and Africa under the Fourth Republic): 'the failure [...] is explainable, but explainable does not mean that failure was inevitable and that the attempt is a minor detour along the path of history' (2009: 117). In the context of this special issue on racial advocacy in France, the case of Lamine Senghor offers us an important historical vantage point from which to examine some key issues that remain of central relevance today: should the black community seek equality through its own independent pressure groups or through strategic alliances with mainstream political parties? And how does one engage with issues of racial (or religious) equality within the terms of the purportedly colour-blind and secular Republic?

### *The Diagne-Les Continents trial*

On 24 November 1924, Lamine Senghor made his entry on to the French political scene when he appeared as a witness for the defence in a libel trial, at the

Tribunal de Paris, which for a few days at least thrust several key black actors to the forefront of public debate in France.<sup>4</sup> The antagonists at the heart of the trial were the most (in)famous black Frenchmen of their day: the plaintiff, Blaise Diagne, had developed an international profile over the decade since he was first elected deputy representing the *quatre communes* of Senegal in 1914, as is illustrated by the political capital he deployed in hosting W.E.B. DuBois's 1919 Pan-African Congress in Paris; while the main defendant René Maran was author of the Goncourt-winning *Batouala* (1921), a novel whose anticolonialist credentials rested primarily on the staunch critique in its preface of French colonial practices in Central Africa.<sup>5</sup> In reality, very little separated Diagne and Maran in terms of their fundamental attitude to French colonialism: both believed profoundly in France's *mission civilisatrice* and they argued for the full assimilation of black people into French culture. However, as with so much of the racial politics of the 1920s, the fault line between the two men centred on the 'dette du sang' that France was deemed to owe to its colonial troops who had played such a vital role in the First World War. Over 130,000 black African troops had participated in the war with over 30,000 killed, and Diagne played a crucial role in recruitment, especially in the latter stages of the conflict.<sup>6</sup> In January 1918, he accepted an invitation from Clemenceau, desperate for the extra troops that might finally bring the war to a successful conclusion while limiting the loss of further French lives, to lead a recruitment tour in French West Africa. Given the title of *Haut Commissaire de la République*, Diagne was greeted in the colonies with the pomp and ceremony normally reserved for white dignitaries from the imperial centre, which initially enhanced his reputation amongst France's many black subjects and its few black citizens. However, by the time of the libel trial in 1924, Diagne had become a figure of hate for some, especially amongst black activists: promises made about black participation in the war leading to reform of the colonial system, as well as increased access to rights and citizenship, had proven illusory; for many reformist and radical black groups, Diagne had sold out to colonial interests.<sup>7</sup>

It was in this context, in October 1924, that Maran published an article 'Le bon apôtre', in the black newspaper *Les Continents*, in which he accused Diagne of having received 'une certaine commission par soldat recruté'.<sup>8</sup> Similar

accusations had previously appeared in the mainstream French press but an indignant Diagne regarded the publication of such claims in a 'black' newspaper as a danger to his reputation as an advocate for equality. *Les Continents* was the newspaper of *La Ligue Universelle de Défense de la Race Nègre* (LUDRN), founded by the colourful figure of Kojo Tovalou Houénou, a lawyer and dandy, the son of a prosperous Dahomean merchant (he claimed that he was in fact a descendant of the mythical King Behanzin). Although Houénou was a great admirer of Marcus Garvey and his United Negro Improvement Association (at the time of the trial, he was actually in the US where he met Garvey and addressed the UNIA convention), LUDRN and *Les Continents* shared little of the Jamaican's radicalism. In the terminology of the times, LUDRN was 'anticolonialiste' in the sense that it called for the reform of the colonial system; it did not call for the independence of the colonies. It was thus closely aligned with the position of the moderate French left (SFIO) and the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme: indeed, Félicien Challaye, one of the Ligue's most powerful orators also appeared as a witness for the defence in the libel trial.

In late 1924, Lamine Senghor occupied a far more radical position in relation to empire than LUDRN, and his testimony presented French society with a troubling image of the *tirailleur sénégalais*. The arrival of vast numbers of African troops on French soil had led to a significant transformation of the vision of the African in the popular imagination: in place of 'le sauvage', the image spread of 'le bon tirailleur, ce grand enfant' who smilingly served France (most infamously in the imagery for the *Banania* powdered chocolate drink). However, Lamine Senghor's intervention projected the *tirailleur sénégalais* as a man who had been radicalised by his experiences and who would now devote himself to the denunciation of colonial injustice:

Au lieu de s'attarder à prouver à combien de centimes près le grand négrier [Diagne] touche par tête de Sénégalais qu'il recruta, il aurait fallu faire passer devant lui toute une procession d'aveugle[s], de mutilés. [...]

Toutes ces victimes lui auraient craché à la face toute l'infamie de la mission qu'il avait accomplie. (Senghor, 2012: ??)<sup>9</sup>

Senghor had already been a militant for several months in the Union Intercoloniale (UIC), an organisation created by the Parti Communiste Français in 1921 with the aim of providing a forum in which a broad transcolonial front against empire might develop. Although nominally an independent group run by and for representatives of the colonised peoples (Nguyen ai Quoc, the future Ho Chi Minh, was one of the most active members of the group in its early stages), the UIC was in fact controlled by the PCF's Comité d'études coloniales. In the columns of the UIC's newspaper, *Le Paria*, were to be found the most violent denunciations of empire of the period. What made the UIC particularly menacing was the group's Communist provenance, for the Communist International (or Comintern) of 1920 had adopted a resolutely anti-imperial stance and it was increasingly pressuring communist parties in the imperial nations to adhere to the party line. Although one might legitimately question the good faith of the Comintern in its anti-imperialism, the fact cannot be underestimated that communism was the sole metropolitan movement of the mid-1920s to call for the independence of the colonies: in the eyes of its colonised members, the UIC represented the potential for fruitful alliances in the imperial centre; while for the French authorities, the movement was a potentially subversive revolutionary force that needed to be closely policed.

Why though did the young Senegalese communist come to the defence of a bourgeois, reformist newspaper? Lamine Senghor appears largely to have been motivated by his status as a war veteran, something that would remain central to almost every article and speech he would write. The fact that he had fought for France made it that much more difficult for the French authorities to dismiss him as a subversive, a fact that surely did not escape the PCF leaders who decided to promote him within the movement's ranks. Also, in 1924, the Comintern had called on communists to seek alliances with all anti-colonial nationalist movements: and, as Philippe Dewitte, the leading historian of black movements in France in the interwar period, has argued, the *Diagne-Les Continents* trial was perceived as an opportunity to create a united anticolonial front (1985: 91). This united front would only last a few years but it is in this context that we must situate Lamine Senghor's activism. The newspaper lost the trial but, as was indicated above, the incident cemented a profound change in the perception of

Diagne: previously seen by many blacks as a defender of his race, his status as a deputy constituting proof of the promises of assimilation, he now came to be regarded as a traitor to the black cause. For the radical black movements of the next few years, Diagne was the *bête noire*, often caustically dismissed as a *nègre blanc* or, in an echo of the charge made against him by Maran, decried as a *négrier*: he became virtually the sole figure around whom disparate black groups could unite in opposition. There is a major irony here of course in hatred of a black leader, one who had hosted the 1919 pan-African congress to boot, acting as a unifying force for more radical black movements. In reality, though, such manoeuvres would become a mainstay of national and transnational black politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the pioneers of one era were decried as Uncle Toms (or worse) by younger, more radical generations that followed. When Lamine Senghor launched a black movement in 1926, the group would insistently refer to itself as 'la jeunesse nègre', positing their radical position as a generational break with a conservative, older black leadership. But would this bring about a radical break with the assimilationism of their elders?

*L'Union intercoloniale: building a transcolonial front against imperialism*

In the aftermath of the trial, Lamine Senghor became a mainstay of UIC activities and a regular contributor to *Le Paria*. He wrote about strikes in French West Africa projecting black and whites workers united against their capitalist bosses, and condemning forced labour in the colonies as a new form of slavery. However, his most significant contribution was in seeking to forge alliances with representatives of other colonial movements, based on the principle that the transnational reach of empire must be met with a transcolonial front of anticolonial resistance.

In late 1924 and throughout 1925, the PCF, responding to the Comintern's policy of building alliances with nationalist movements, carried out its most sustained anti-colonial campaign when it sought to organise resistance to the colonial war in the Rif Mountains of Morocco.<sup>10</sup> The most zealous advocate of the Comintern's anticolonial line within the PCF was Jacques Doriot who saw in the resistance of the Moroccan indigenous leader, Abd El-Krim, against Spanish and French domination of the Rif region the perfect occasion for the PCF finally to

prove its anticolonial credentials to an increasingly impatient Comintern. When Abd el-Krim won a remarkable victory over the Spanish colonial army in September 1924, Doriot and Pierre Semard sent a congratulatory telegram on behalf of the *Jeunesses Communistes* (published on the front page of *L'Humanité* the following day), which expressed the wish that 'après la victoire définitive sur l'impérialisme espagnol, qu'il continuera, en liaison avec le prolétariat français et européen, la lutte contre tous les impérialistes, jusqu'à la libération complète du sol marocain' (cited in Senghor 2012: ??) Doriot's notoriety increased when he suggested in parliament on 4 February 1925 that French troops in Morocco desert rather than fight their 'proletarian' brothers in the Rif.<sup>11</sup> It seemed at last as though the PCF was fully embracing the Comintern's anticolonial agenda but, in reality, much of the PCF hierarchy was reluctant to lend the campaign its full support.

By contrast, Lamine Senghor threw himself wholeheartedly into the campaign against the Rif War, appearing at countless rallies alongside French communists, particularly Doriot and Paul Vaillant-Couturier, as well as prominent UIC members, such as the Antillean Max Bloncourt and the Algerian Hadj Ali. It was during this intense period that Senghor appears to have developed his extraordinary skills as a powerful orator. There was a concerted attempt (particularly by Doriot) to present Abd el-Krim as a proto-communist figure, seeking to create a modern republic, although this was by no means a move unanimously welcomed in communist circles, including the UIC where the likes of Bloncourt and the Haitian Camille Saint-Jacques privately argued against lending support to a 'backward', tribal leader such as Abd el-Krim.<sup>12</sup> Lamine Senghor adopted the 'official' Comintern line and promoted an alliance between all those engaged in anticolonial struggle: for instance, in his one (revealingly titled) article on the question for *Le Paria*—'Les Riffains<sup>13</sup> ne sont pas seuls. Ils ont avec eux les opprimés du monde'—, he begins by linking the events in Morocco with the communist-nationalist revolt in China. However, his contributions go way beyond Doriot et al. in thinking through the specific nature of the uprising in the Rif, in particular articulating the potentially revolutionary nature of Islam and its role in fomenting anti-colonial revolt:

L'Islam, en particulier, a les yeux tournés vers la lutte qui s'engage entre le vaillant petit peuple riffain et le formidable militarisme français; l'Islam tout entier, transporté d'enthousiasme, regarde cette marche victorieuse vers l'indépendance.

Alors, le capitalisme français, qui opprime plusieurs dizaines de millions de musulmans, hurle de désespoir et de rage. [...] (2012: ??)

Whereas Doriot 'translates' the actions of the Rif rebels into a proto-communism, Lamine Senghor regards the sense of despair and oppression felt by the Islamic world as sufficient motivation in itself for their revolt. Indeed, his analysis of the role of Islam in popular resistance to Western military intervention is couched in terms that resonate with our own contemporary post 9/11 world:<sup>14</sup>

Avec son hypocrisie habituelle, [l'impérialisme français] présente le succès riffain comme le prélude d'une croisade islamique contre les peuples chrétiens.

L'Islam, représenté par 300 millions d'esclaves, écrasés sous la botte des différents impérialismes européens, reçoit pour la circonstance le qualificatif de « Barbarie », tandis que le capitalisme européen devient la « Civilisation occidentale ». (2012: ??)

The Rif war is not the result of a Samuel Huntington-style clash of civilisations but rather the understandable resistance of a colonised people to external domination. Indeed, there is considerable hypocrisy in the demonisation of Islam, for it is a 'spiritual force' that France itself had recently tried to win over to its cause: 'Eh quoi! l'impérialisme français ne se souvient donc plus qu'il avait construit lui-même, à Paris, une mosquée réclamée pour essayer de prendre sous sa tutelle la force spirituelle de l'Islam et rallier des «partisans» sous les couleurs de son drapeau? (2012: ??). Senghor here refers to the decision taken by parliament in 1920 to build a mosque in Paris, giving state recognition to the contribution of France's Islamic subjects to victory in the First World War, the parallels are striking with the Sarkozy government's schizophrenic attitude



towards Islam with approval accorded to state-sponsored groupings while Islam more generally is demonised.

After loyally serving the PCF and the UIC throughout the Rif campaign, Lamine Senghor had gradually come by early 1926 to resent the limited space devoted by the communist movement to black questions in general as well as to his own marginalised status in particular. Many historians of French communism have signalled 'the imperial patriotism which coloured the colonial policies of the French Communist Party' (Hargreaves 1993: 261). Although seeking to situate themselves as the natural allies of the colonised, the communists often saw themselves as culturally superior to those they were purporting to help. In March 1925, Lamine Senghor had already expressed his frustration when asked by the PCF to stand in the local elections in the 13th *arrondissement* in Paris, a bourgeois district in which he had little chance of winning (a tactic not unfamiliar to French political parties today when 'promoting' minority candidates). As Dewitte argues, he was increasingly aware that he served as a 'faire-valoir' and 'caution nègre' for the PCF (1985: 109). The final straw came when the PCF was invited to send two representatives to the Congress of Black Workers in Chicago in October 1925. The PCF selected Senghor and Bloncourt but, at the last minute, informed them that they would have to pay for the journey out of their own pockets. When Senghor objected, it was suggested that he either work his passage to America or stow away: he refused. From that moment on, Senghor realised that in order to promote the interests of black people, it was necessary to create independent black organisations, and in March 1926 with the creation of the *Comité de Défense de la race nègre*, he did just that.

### *Defending the Negro Race*

On 26 March 1926, Lamine Senghor officially registered his new association and embarked on a tour of France's port cities (Toulon, Marseilles, Bordeaux, Le Havre) in order to encounter the small working-class black community and attempt to convince them of the utility of joining the CDRN: his skills as a public speaker, honed during the Rif campaign, served him well and by the summer of 1926 it was estimated by the secret agents of the Ministère des Colonies' CAI<sup>15</sup> that he had recruited over 500 members (in a black population numbered at less

than 20,000). Throughout the rest of the year, it appeared that he had broken entirely with the PCF and had decided to devote himself to defending the black community, deploying the reformist language of the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* and parts of the SFIO. The respectable CDRN fired off letters to the President and the Minister for the Colonies proclaiming their loyalty and devotion to France, and requesting financial and logistical support (the CAI archives reveal that these requests were met with silence by distrustful French authorities). In early CDRN documentation, there was no mention of capitalist imperialism; instead, the group diplomatically positioned itself within the lineage of France's great humanitarians and philanthropists:

Depuis des siècles, des philanthropes élèvent la voix pour nous défendre. Au-dessus de toutes les questions religieuses et politiques, ils se sont unis pour faire entendre leurs protestations indignées contre l'esclavage. Ils ont placé avant tout la cause suprême de l'Humanité. Mais l'œuvre à laquelle ces Grands Hommes ont consacré toute leur fortune, leur intelligence et leur vie n'est pas terminée. (Senghor 2012: ??)

As with many contemporary groups seeking equality for black people in France, the CDRN posited slavery and racism towards black people as a betrayal of Republican France (rather than a paradox inherent in the alleged universalism of the post-revolutionary nation). It is thus unsurprising that one of the first acts of the Comité was to organise a procession in July 1926 to lay a wreath on the grave of Victor Schœlcher (a procession to Schœlcher's grave was the default gesture on which almost all black associations fell back at some point during this period). Far from the scathing attacks on imperialism found in *Le Paria*, the CDRN evoked the notion of 'la Grande famille humaine'. Senghor's self-presentation was as a 'mutilé de guerre', thereby underlining his service to 'la patrie'. Almost pleadingly, the CDRN claimed that all they wanted was that 'le Nègre soit traité à travers le monde avec plus d'humanité' and they proposed a set of concrete proposals for black community institutions: '[o]ffrir à chaque Nègre membre du Comité des avantages intellectuels, moraux et matériels' (the documentation mentions a museum, a library, a bar-restaurant, and a hostel).

An agenda of this sort would appear to situate the CDRN less within the frame of an emerging black internationalism than within the type of reformist assimilationism that critics have seen as the hallmark of black politics in France, especially in the 1920s. However, Republican politics in the interwar period were inherently bound up in a complex set of transnational allegiances that simultaneously acknowledged and sought to challenge the universality of the Republic, as Gary Wilder has argued:

[I]n an imperial nation-state—containing a multinational population spread across disjunctive territories and subject to diverse regimes of governance—nation-centred politics may themselves be transnational. And transnational forms of identification become a modality through which to participate in the national politics of an imperial power. Within this system, Panafricanism and republicanism often entailed one another. (2003: 249)

Moreover, as, both Miller (1998) and Edwards (2003a) have shown in their meticulous analysis of CDRN writings, what is most original about the movement is its critical reflection on the language of race, its exploration of the modes of self-definition available to black people. The CAI records indicate that there had been much internal discussion within the CDRN about whether to use the term 'noir' or 'nègre' in their title, and Lamine Senghor appears to have played a central role in pushing the committee towards the latter term.

The two key newspaper articles in which Senghor articulates his ideas on the language of race are: 'Le Réveil des nègres', published in *Le Paria* in April 1926, which constituted an intellectual 'manifesto' announcing the creation of his new movement; and 'Le Mot Nègre' from the first issue of *La Voix des Nègres*, the newspaper of the CDRN, published in January 1927. The latter article has received by far the greater critical attention (Miller, 1998; Edwards, 2003a) but, in fact, the two pieces are almost identical, the latter essentially a minor reworking of the former. This complicates the notion of the 'racial' turn in Senghor's thinking as evidence of his complete disillusionment with communism: the publication of such an article in the columns of *Le Paria* makes it clear that in many respects the break with his former communist allies was

only partial (and alongside him in the CDRN were stalwarts of the UIC—Max Bloncourt, Camille Saint-Jacques, Stéphane Rosso).

In ‘Le Réveil des nègres’, Senghor articulates a racial identity that is based not on shared racial characteristics but (as with the Islamic identity outlined in his article on the Rif War) on a shared sense of oppression:

Une des plus grosses questions du jour est celle du réveil des nègres.

[...] Les impérialistes dominant des peuples de race nègre, par crainte de l’explosion de la colère de ces derniers, que la spoliation dont ils sont l’objet fait gronder journellement dans leur cœur, ils (les impérialistes) exploitent la division de castes et de tribus existant primitivement dans notre race, en divisant les nègres en trois espèces différentes : « Hommes de couleur », « Noirs » — tout court — et Nègres.

[...] Etre nègre, c’est n’être bon [*sic*] qu’à être exploité jusqu’à la dernière goutte de son sang ou être transformé en soldat pour la défense des intérêts du capitalisme envers et contre tous ceux qui oseraient gêner à son extension. [Senghor 2012: ??]

In 1926, to call for ‘réveil des nègres’ was immediately to evoke a set of ideas and a vocabulary that had been rendered popular by Marcus Garvey. In the course of his seemingly inexorable rise as a major leader of black America (until his conviction for mail fraud in 1925), Garvey had consistently called for the black world to wake from its long sleep, and his calls for black people to take pride in themselves had resonated around the world. Indeed, although not directly acknowledging his influence, the CDRN clearly owed a lot to Garvey—in terms of iconography (the shooting star in the naïve and romanticised image of Africa featured on the association’s headed paper, and the black star of its official stamp) and of language, especially the repeated appeals to black pride and solidarity: equally, Senghor and the CDRN rejected the elitism of the Jamaican’s African-American rival W.E.B. DuBois who argued that racial progress should be led by a ‘talented tenth’ of black people. The influence of Garvey on black politics in interwar France has commonly been underplayed, as the general assimilationism that marks these French groups seems in many ways to be the

antithesis of Garvey's identitarian discourse, and the Jamaican's anti-communist stance meant that it would have been difficult for Senghor and other militants to embrace him openly (Garvey did meet black groups including the LDRN when he visited Paris late in 1928). However, from Kojo Tovalou Houénou to Lamine Senghor and later Césaire, Damas and Senghor, these black French activists are operating (consciously or not) within a discursive space opened up by Garvey when they argue for the dignity of 'le Nègre' and call for the rejection of the white world's stereotypical and racist vision of the black world. This dialogue between Garvey and the militants of the CDRN should not come as a surprise, for as Brent Hayes Edwards (2003a) has so convincingly argued, the black movement of the interwar years is a resolutely transnational phenomenon in which translation (both literal and metaphorical) of ideas from one context to another plays a central role. Such translation can often appear as *mistranslation*, but, for Edwards, the translational and transnational nature of black diasporic practice inevitably highlights differences across black communities in the very process of seeking to imagine unity.

The most striking aspect of this transnational process of translation of Garvey's ideas is the CDRN's use of the term 'nègre' as a proud badge of self-identification, just as Garvey had proclaimed himself a 'Negro' (always with a capital 'N'). In an era when the term 'noir' was widely gaining prominence as a more dignified replacement for 'nègre', seen as derogatory and demeaning, Senghor and the CDRN deliberately choose 'Nègre' as the term that encompasses all black people:

[...] [N]ous ramassons ce nom [nègre] dans la boue où vous la traînez.  
Nous en ferons notre symbole !

Ce nom est celui de notre race! [...]

Nous [...] nous faisons honneur et gloire de nous appeler Nègres, avec un grand N majuscule en tête. C'est notre race nègre que nous voulons guider sur la voie de sa libération totale du joug esclavagiste qu'elle subit. Nous voulons imposer le respect dû à notre race, ainsi que son égalité avec toutes les autres races du monde; ce qui est son droit et notre devoir.

**[Senghor 2012: ??]**

The 'nègre' is an individual who has been downtrodden and oppressed through slavery, colonialism, segregation: the terms 'noir' and 'homme de couleur' are seen merely as escape routes for educated blacks seeking a place in a dominant white society. The first step towards liberation is to embrace one's identity as a 'nègre': for that allows one to see the true nature of Western oppression of the black world. The transnational black identity evoked here is, in sociological terms, 'thin', that is, a strategic identity designed to create a coalition against empire: it was not until Negritude a decade later that a 'thick' black identity, based on culture and philosophy would begin to be articulated.

As Senghor believes that only the independence of the colonies and liberation from the white man can bring freedom and equality for 'les nègres', this means that there can be no liberty within the western colonial system. His articles for *Le Paria* envisage a colour-blind community bound together by communist ideals, and the revolutionary conclusion to his most sustained piece of writing, the allegorical *La Violation d'un pays* (1927), might be deemed an attempt to imagine a multiracial future post-empire. However, as he writes in an article in the first issue of *La Voix des Nègres*: 'les nègres ne sont d'aucune nationalité européenne et ne veulent servir les intérêts d'aucun impérialisme contre ceux d'un autre impérialisme' (Senghor 2012: ??). Under empire, black people cannot and will not be French.

Even as the first issue of *La Voix des Nègres* proudly and insistently proclaimed the unity of 'les nègres', the CDRN was in fact in the middle of a long and protracted schism that would several months later lead to the break-up of the organisation with Senghor and his fellow radicals deserting en masse to create the *Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre*. The split in the organisation was the result of complex personal, political and cultural issues but appears primarily to have divided the CDRN on ideological lines with the more assimilationist members remaining within a rump CDRN and the more radical, communist-leaning members departing for the LDRN.

In the midst of the CDRN in-fighting, Lamine Senghor enjoyed one final moment of glory, which sealed his reputation as the leading black anticolonialist of his day, when he was invited to speak at the inaugural meeting of the League against Imperialism (LAI) in Brussels (10-14 February 1927). The LAI was

largely a communist initiative, but in its initial phase it sought to rally all anticolonial forces together (a realisation of the Comintern's 1924 call for alliances between communist and nationalists that would within a year be superseded by a shift to the promotion of class-versus-class struggle). In his speech at the Congress, Lamine Senghor, liberated from the moderation that had marked most of his contributions to the CDRN, launched into a vehement attack on imperialism as a renewed form of slavery. Imperialism cannot hope to bring civilisation to the colonies for it is an inherently unjust system of domination. Senghor denounces the cruel treatment of the colonised, the violence, forced labour and, yet again, the iniquity and double standards of the pensions paid to colonial veterans of the First World War:

La jeunesse nègre commence maintenant à voir clair. Nous savons et nous constatons que, lorsqu'on a besoin de nous, pour nous faire tuer ou pour nous faire travailler, nous sommes des Français; mais quand il s'agit de nous donner les droits, nous ne sommes plus des Français, nous sommes des nègres. (Senghor 2012: ??)

The speech was a huge success not solely in the Congress hall but around the world: it was immediately translated into English and reproduced in journals in the United States.<sup>16</sup> In a fascinating article published just a few months after the Congress, Roger Baldwin (1927), the director of the American Civil Liberties Union, cited Senghor as one of the most eminent of the 'hommes sans patrie', those political exiles who had made Paris their home. In the final stages of the Congress, the LAI placed Senghor at the head of the working party asked to draft the 'Résolution sur la question nègre' and the finished document bore all the hallmarks of his fiery stance. The situations of blacks in Africa, the Caribbean and the Americas were brought together within a history of oppression dating back five centuries: 'Pendant près de cinq siècles, les peuples nègres du monde ont été des victimes et cruellement opprimés' (Senghor 2012: ??). The unity of all 'nègres' and all colonised would finally bring such oppression to an end. Little more than two years after his first public appearance, this young man from Senegal had managed to carve out a position as a radical spokesman for black

people not only in France but also internationally. In parallel, Senghor had been pulling together similar ideas on slavery and colonialism in the form of his anticolonial allegory, *La Violation d'un pays*, which was eventually published in June 1927. The text marked a desire to take the anticolonial struggle into the cultural sphere; however, at that very moment, his health faltered: he retreated to the south of France in the hope that its drier air would give him some respite from the tuberculosis that was ravaging his lungs, but on 25 November 1927 he succumbed to the illness, almost exactly three years to the day after his appearance at the *Diagne-Les Continents* trial. The black community in France would not see a more effective political leader until after the Second World War.

### *Conclusion*

In February 2010, yet another 'affaire du foulard' controversy broke out when Ilham Moussaïd, a young female candidate for Olivier Besancenot's *Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste* stood in the regional elections in the Vaucluse, and campaigned wearing a Muslim headscarf.<sup>17</sup> The controversy arose in the middle of the public debate on the law that would eventually be introduced early in 2011 by the Sarkozy government, banning women from wearing the *burqa* or *niqab* in public places. The affair was essentially cast as the homogenous, secular Republic attempting to deal with the arrival of a new religious and racial diversity. Critics called on Besancenot to reread Marx and Trotsky, as though it were unthinkable that Marxism might ever find common cause with Islam.

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, such attitudes reveal a lack of unawareness of an earlier period in modern French politics in which a more diverse vision of left-wing politics had been possible, one in which issues of religion and race were (potentially) less divisive than they have become in the contemporary period. As Frederick Cooper has argued in relation to the complex constitutional arrangements of the Fourth Republic and its attempts to reconcile the Republic with its religious and ethnically diverse populations in the colonies:

[H]istorical analysis [...] can show that the spectrum of political possibility in the past was wider than people in the present—projecting backward



their own positions—allow it to be. Perhaps a less closed past could help us at least to recognize the possibility of a more open future. (2009: 93)

The past does not offer the present an easily digestible lesson on diversity and tolerance, and we must be wary of turning to the past solely in order to bolster our contemporary visions of race, religion and the public sphere. This points to a potential problem with certain ways in which the past has been revisited in some of the cultural artefacts discussed at the outset of this article: for a recurring feature is their (understandable) desire—in a contemporary period in which racist and anti-Islamic discourse have returned to the mainstream of public debate—to promote inclusive notions of Frenchness, in which the longstanding black presence (particularly, but not exclusively) in metropolitan France can be integrated into a more inclusive historical narrative of the Republic. The status within this revised historical narrative of a figure such as Lamine Senghor appears especially thorny, for he was far less concerned with carving out a space for blackness within French society than with forging an alliance between different black communities and the ‘darker nations’ more generally in order to create a radical break with France.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the black activists of the 1930s were generally more moderate than the radicals of the 1920s: direct confrontation with the imperial nation-state appeared undesirable for a wide variety of reasons. Césaire, Senghor and Damas did not shy away from politics (far from it) but they saw culture as a key area in which they could both prise open a space for blackness within French culture and create strong bonds between diverse black groups: ‘These colonial moderates were never as organised or activist as their radical counterparts, but they were perhaps more successful at maintaining Panafrican cultural alliances without exploding from internal and external pressures’ (Wilder 2003: 244).<sup>19</sup> Negritude was both a celebration of blackness and an appeal for *le droit à la différence* within French Republican identity: it was a discourse that engaged simultaneously with national and transnational politics and as well as national and transnational forms of identification, just as Lamine Senghor had sought to do via the (trans)national politics of communism and pan-Africanism. This, in turn, belies the view that contemporary debates on race, religion and minority rights in France are the

result of a shift from national to transnational concerns in a globalised world. For if there is one thing that the interwar period can definitively teach us, then it is that the Republic has been engaging with racial and religious diversity for far longer, and in far more complex ways, than is usually imagined.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas (2006) provides the first, and perhaps the best, synthetic analysis of twentieth-century black history and culture in France.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the exhibition and its aims, see: [www.quaibranly.fr/en/programmation/exhibitions/last-exhibitions/presence-africaine.html](http://www.quaibranly.fr/en/programmation/exhibitions/last-exhibitions/presence-africaine.html) [accessed on 27 September 2012].

<sup>3</sup> The material in this article is drawn from my recent work on Lamine Senghor: a critical edition of his writings (Senghor, 2012) and an intellectual biography to be published by Verso in late 2013.

<sup>4</sup> The most complete account of the trial is to be found in Conklin (2003).

<sup>5</sup> As most commentators have noted, the novel itself is far more ambiguous in its representation of Africa than would appear from a reading of the preface.

<sup>6</sup> According to Michel (2003), over 200,000 sub-Saharan African troops were raised during the war but only about 130,000 saw active service in France. In the interwar period (in the absence of reliable historical research), the estimates for the number of troops who saw action and the numbers killed were vastly over-inflated: for example, Lamine Senghor and other critics of the

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war regularly claimed that over 100,000 had been killed. The debate still rages between historians regarding the extent to which African soldiers may have been used as 'shock troops' in order to spare French lives.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of Diagne's career, see Johnson (1971).

<sup>8</sup> The full text of the article is included in Senghor 2012 (??). The original article was unsigned but Maran later acknowledged authorship of the piece.

<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, the *procès-verbal* of the trial was lost in a fire in the municipal archives in the 1970s; however, Lamine Senghor wrote an account of the trial for *Le Paria* from which I have cited here. The model of the tirailleur who is blindly loyal to France is to be found in *Force-Bonté*, an autobiographical work by Bakary Diallo, published in 1926.

<sup>10</sup> For a critical analysis of the PCF's campaign against the war, see Slavin (1991).

<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the Rif War was won by the French primarily with the help of colonial troops, which meant that Doriot's fraternisation strategy was largely irrelevant to conditions on the ground.

<sup>12</sup> The wariness expressed by these UIC members is emblematic of a debate that dates back to the Comintern conference of 1920 over whether alliances with nationalists were useful in the context of anticolonial struggles (as Lenin argued) or whether they were fundamentally misguided (as the Indian Marxist M.N. Roy argued).

<sup>13</sup> Senghor consistently spelt 'Rif' with a double 'f' in his writings: I have chosen not to alter this spelling here.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the arguments made regarding Muslim protests across the globe against the anti-Islamic film circulated on the Internet in September 2012 in Milne (2012).

<sup>15</sup> The full title of the CAI was the Service de Contrôle et d'Assistance aux Indigènes. Its files are available for consultation in the SLOTFOM section of the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence now officially titled the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM).

<sup>16</sup> For details on the reception of the speech, see Edwards (2003b).

<sup>17</sup> For an account of the affair, see: <http://lci.tf1.fr/politique/2010-02/ilham-candidate-npa-voilee-besancenot-silencieux-5671378.html> [accessed 26 September 2012].

<sup>18</sup> Witness for example the almost unanimously positive response to Rachid Bouchareb's *Indigènes* (2006) which deals with colonised Algerians participating in the liberation of France in the Second World War and the far more mooted and in some cases hostile reaction to its follow-up *Hors-la-loi* (2010) which traced the way in which these same troops later formed the heart of the FLN rebellion against France in Algeria.

<sup>19</sup> Wilder (2003) examines similar difficulties in maintaining unity within black groups in the contemporary period.