Négritude

- this idea (it was not really a movement—at least in an organisational sense, no conferences, etc.) had its origins in the the 1930s; Léopold Senghor, who became its main exponent, in fact credited the term itself to the West Indian poet, Aimé Césaire, a close associate during that time. See the excerpt from Senghor’s article, “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century.”

- in a number of ways it was an equivalent of pan-Africanism in the Francophone world and it too had connections and participation from members of the black diaspora.

- however, there were differences too:

  - compared to black people in the US and the English-speaking world, Francophone blacks had relatively little segregation and colour prejudice; there certainly was disparagement of African culture, but for the minority of Africans who made the educational and assimilation grade, opportunities and acceptance were much more available. People like Senghor did not face the personal humiliations that were the lot of black people in the English-speaking world.

  - in the English-speaking world, there was no centre of black consciousness; it was diffuse—in the West Indies and even outside the British Empire entirely in the US.; for Francophones, the centre was in Paris and blacks from the West Indies and Africa went there, not in great numbers but rather a small core of very highly educated elite.

  - finally, recall that the colonial policies of France and Britain tended to have very different effects on the western educated elites: in British areas, the elite were mostly excluded from significant participation in politics and government; in French colonies the elite were incorporated, perhaps even coopted. This also affects the level of grievance.

- perhaps all these things help to explain the main difference: négritude was primarily a cultural movement with political aspects being indirect and secondary. It was devoted to defining and expressing the special, distinctive, cultural characteristics of black people and then to asserting the worth of those distinctive characteristics.
- pan-Africanism, while having some of these same features of assertion (e.g., Blyden and others), was always directed towards politics and the acquisition of greater rights and freedoms in civil and political areas.

**Léopold Senghor** (1906-)

- Senghor was born south of Dakar, Senegal to well-to-do Catholic parents who were able to give him a good education in Senegal and then on to France.

- by 1935, he had become the 1st African *aggrégé* (this meant that he had qualified as a secondary school teacher—a bit more than a BA in English education). He subsequently qualified and became a teacher in French *lycées* (these were the elite secondary schools and teachers normally had to have significant post-graduate accomplishments).

- he was friends with a number of West Indian and African intellectuals, and in the 1930s, these people, including Césaire, began to explore what it meant to be black.

- Senghor served in the French army after war broke out in 1939. After his capture, the Germans tried, without success, to get him to turn against France.

- after the war, he turned to politics in Senegal, getting elected to the French parliament. He stayed away from the 1946 conference which founded the Rassemblement Démocratique Africaine (RDA) which later was affiliated with the French communist party until 1950; instead, he formed his own party, associated with socialists, which was influential, not only in Senegal but also in Upper Volta and other areas of FWA. In fact Senghor’s party was the main opposition in these areas to the RDA.

- with independence in the early 1960s, Senghor became the first president of Senegal, a post which he retained until 1980; there were no serious challenges politically to his leadership.

- however, Senghor’s real influence was in the cultural and intellectual fields. In 1947, with a fellow Senegalese, Alioune Diop, he founded the very important literary magazine, *Présence Africaine*. This was founded as a means to develop and explore négritude and other aspects of being African. Later, under the Diop brothers, the magazine became very sharply marxist, but it remained very influential.
- during the 1950s especially but continuing later as well, Senghor’s influence and example were very important in encouraging African intellectuals to devote themselves to writing, poetry and the arts.

Négritude

- Senghor was often accused of being racist and négritude was declared to be a form of racism. Superficially, there are some similarities with some Africanist strains of pan-Africanism. However, the African uniqueness that Senghor was claiming was cultural, philosophical or ontological, not racial.

- moreover, Senghor himself was assimilated to an extraordinary degree; he was more cultivated in French culture than the vast majority of French people. As we shall see, what he claimed was that this dual cultural background gave insights that neither could produce separately (see the reading). Even more, that insights and approaches in African culture could help to solve some of the problems that people of European and French culture had not been able to solve. Of course he accepted that the reverse was also true; this last direction of cultural influence had always been asserted and assumed to be exclusively one way. Senghor was asserting that it was and should be a cultural two-way street.

- in the excerpt, Senghor answers the charge of racism and gives his definition:

  “Négritude .... is neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one’s being. It is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the African personality.”

- he also claims that by developing the notion more closely, the creators of the term, such as himself, have made it a weapon for liberation and a contribution to a humanism for the twentieth century.

The Revolution of 1889

- here Senghor is talking about the great rebellion and upheaval in western thought and cosmology which began late in the 19th C. He uses the publication of Henri
Bergson’s book as a symbol, but the assaults were much more extensive, and in many cases more savage, than just Bergson.

- the rationalist tradition stemming from the renaissance and the enlightenment, including the ‘Newtonian’ scientific tradition, were attacked from a number of directions.

- it is important to know something of what he is talking about, if we are to grasp what he thinks are the important contributions that négritude can make in creating a humanism of the 20th C.

- the Enlightenment and Newtonian science had created an image of the universe as a completely rational entity—the giant Clock; the universe was a giant machine with all the parts working together and in perfect harmony according to universal laws and forces. The Creator—the great Clockmaker—was the embodiment of Reason and Rationality, and this had been the basis for the creation.

- this also affected the view of what humans are or should be; i.e., if humans are created in the image of God, then we are, or should be, rational too. It was clear that humans were not totally rational, but thinkers of the Enlightenment argued that irrationality was the result of ignorance and superstition. As ignorance was diminished by greater knowledge and irrational impulses were reduced by eliminating superstitions, humans would become more rational. Humans are animals, but are capable of higher and better things than other animals; this is what distinguished humans from animals. Thus, rationality was held up as the higher characteristic which distinguished humans; irrationality and the expression of unbridled emotions under the influence of superstition were leftovers and regrettable vestiges of our animal origins. Thus, the goal should be to become more rational and to leave these vestiges behind.

- it was this rationalist tradition which had produced the humanist tradition in western culture.

- the decline in and revolt against the rationalist tradition occurred in several areas:

- as Senghor notes, the great certainties of Newtonian science began to dissolve in the 1880s.
- Newtonian science had been based upon certainties: that the laws and regularities governing the interactions of bodies and matter were universal and immutable, that everything belonged in nice neat categories, and that the ‘scientific method’—observing, measuring, recording, and finally, using inductive logic to discover and define the regularities (the ‘laws’) from this data—was the pathway to Truth.

- it is true that Immanuel Kant and other philosophers had questioned the validity of Knowledge gained through the senses (i.e., all the observing and measuring of science); however, scientists had continued to beaver away and the results in scientific discoveries and in the new technologies which emerged from that seemed to discredit the doubts and quibbles of such philosophers. Science seemed to be proved by the results.

- thus, by the late 19th C, science seemed the pathway to Truth; in fact, many abandoned their belief in Christianity and religion generally to make science their religion.

- suddenly, beginning in the 1880s (the experiments by Michelson and Morley in 1887 are often picked as the trigger that started it), a new science began to emerge which began to undermine many of the basic precepts of Newtonian science:

  - the conceptions of light had to change; it was discovered that ether did not exist (i.e., the universe was mostly nothing!); it was discovered that Newton’s laws were not universal because at the subatomic level, many were violated (e.g., electrons do not act in accord with the law of gravity, Newton’s first law!)

  - also, at the level of the very large in the universe, the theories of relativity assert that most things can only be perceived in relative terms (i.e., there are few absolute answers).

  - not only that, but many of the distinct categories are not really so; e.g., some subatomic particles cannot be categorised because sometimes they act like energy and sometimes like matter. The famous equation $E = Mc^2$ which underlies the atomic bomb among other things, is part of this interchangeability.
- time and space too according to the Theory of Relativity are not distinct categories but part of a continuum.

- it was shown that the act of observing affected the outcomes; thus, observing was not only not neutral, but in fact actively distorted what happened.

- quantum physics is not based upon ‘laws’ which predict outcomes, but upon probabilities because the outcome of specific events cannot be predicted.

- this new science has produced much of the technology of the 20th C so it has been validated by results. However, it did affect the belief systems that were based upon Newtonian science and the certainties it provided. This did not mean that it was all untrue. Rather that the laws of Newtonian science were not universal; they applied only to a rather narrow range of circumstances and situations.

- other philosophers had additional objections to the exaggerated assertions about the ability of science to reveal Truth. The reference by Senghor to the French philosopher Henri Bergson is very significant.

**Henri Bergson**

- Bergson questioned many of pretensions of science. He made a distinction between the rational, conceptualising intellect and the intuitive understanding. The first, which included the scientific, analysing function, is a practical tool concerned with useful knowledge, but it is not truth-giving because reality cannot be divided up and conceptualised. Reality is a continuum, to be grasped by intuition. Intuition is instinct which has become self-conscious and reflective.

- for example, science tells us that the sound of bells is series of vibrations at specific frequencies, but we experience it as a whole. A melody is not simply a series of notes and frequencies; it cannot be described; we intuit it. Reality is indivisible and therefore unanalysable; insofar as we do analyse it, we falsify it. “Science consists only of conventions, and to this circumstance solely does it owe its apparent certitude; the facts of science and, *a fortiori*, its laws are the artificial work of the scientist; science therefore can teach us nothing of the truth; it can serve only as a rule of action.” (Stromberg, *European Intellectual History since 1789*, pp. 191-2.)
- this was not an attack upon science but it did argue that science (while it was useful) was not the only nor even the best means to understand reality and to learn the Truth. The emphasis upon intuition could open the doors to non-rational approaches to knowledge and helped to stimulate the new interest in the mystic eastern religions, psychic phenomena etc.

- moreover, in the same period, the enlightenment view of what it means to human was also being attacked. Darwin’s theory of evolution seemed to undercut the view that humans were significantly different from other animal and life forms. Humans seemed to be the product of exactly the same processes as all other life forms.

- when Darwin’s hypotheses were applied to humans in what became known as ‘social darwinism’, it seemed that humans, like all life forms, were engaged in an unremitting struggle for existence and survival. Thus, rationality, morality and any consideration for others that was not rooted in self-interest first, was irrelevant and probably harmful. Thus, the very qualities that had underpinned humanism in the west were dismissed and disparaged.

- even stronger attacks came:

  - probably the most extreme was by Friedrich Nietzsche; he argued that the Greeks had recognised two aspects of human character and personality in two separate cults:
    1. Cult of Apollo—was rational, but also included poetry and literature;
    2. Cult of Dionysus—was irrational, instinctive, orgiastic and sexual.

- according to Nietzsche, the second was the source of all creativity. Creativity emerged only from the instinctive and subconscious areas of the human personality and mind. A certain amount of reason and rationality were needed to tame and direct this creative energy, but too much rationality stultified and smothered it.

- Nietzsche argued that the dominance of the rationalist philosophers (e.g., Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) had marked the decline of Greek creativity and
brilliance. Unfortunately, in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, Europe had also adopted the rationalist approach to its detriment. The result was mediocrity and even decay.

- Nietzsche called for people to break out of the bounds of rationality, morality and bourgeois formality to delve into the subconscious, the sensual and animalistic Dionysian aspects of human nature in order to recover the dynamism and creativity that these could provide. He also called for ‘supermen’ who could wrench and drive society in more creative directions. The Nazis were not what Nietzsche had in mind, but they claimed Nietzsche as their prophet.

- claiming a more ‘scientific’ approach, Freud and others also began to probe and explore the human subconscious; there are similarities—Freud’s ‘Superego’ and ‘Id’ are in some ways analogous to Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy.

- Freud made the sex drive even more central to human character and behaviour; e.g., he argued that great art was a result of people ‘sublimating’ unsatisfied and repressed sexual drives and energies.

- the key point for Senghor’s argument is that the bases of humanism in the west were undermined; Senghor is of course not the first to point this out. Many people and thinkers, in trying to explain the horrors that we have seen (certainly, the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis including the Holocaust; but people on the other side also committed crimes—mass saturation bombings of German cities, especially of Dresden which had no military significance, and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japanese cities are the extreme cases), have pointed to these changes as a profound crisis in the West. The collapse of certainties in religion and science and the loss of faith in reason and humanity left people in the West with an enormous moral vacuum. This also left people vulnerable to secular religions, like fascism, Nazism and communism.

- the vacuum was reinforced by horrors like the first world war and calamities like the great depression; there seemed little grounds to believe any longer that the universe was rational. Therefore, many tried to escape into the irrational; this is a common explanation for the appeal of fascism in the interwar period in Europe and the willingness of so many to follow without question, fascist leaders who promised them certainties, no matter how far-fetched.
- moreover, following this path led to even greater horrors in world war two without producing even the slightest evidence of ‘creativity’ or the other nobler things that Nietzsche had talked about. The only thing the Nazis and other fascists were good at was destruction; in the end, Hitler and the Nazis were nihilists. Thus, this road was not a solution; it was simply a bigger and worse problem! In the nuclear age, this could result in the complete destruction of the human race.

- however, Senghor goes further to criticise the rationalist tradition too; it is not possible simply to go back to the rationalist tradition. The western rationalist tradition has tended to reduce things to dichotomies (i.e., it is rooted in the logic of the syllogism—something is or is not).

  - things are public or private, right or wrong, material or spiritual, secular or religious, etc. etc.

  - thus, the entire tradition creates problems of perception. Like Newtonian science, deductive reasoning constantly creates artificial categories of reality.

- this is where the references to Bergson become very important. Bergson argued that we humans should strive to understand Reality as a whole instead of always trying to break it down into artificial categories just because that is easier for the rational mind to deal with. The holistic approach could be achieved only by using intuition, not relying primarily upon reason.

- Bergson’s notions were very influential, particularly with writers, musicians, poets and artists. In the visual arts for example, artists moved away from exact representations, arguing that the external appearance did not adequately present reality. Thus, impressionist artists were trying to convey something of the inner reality of things, not just the external appearance. Later movements went even further in the attempt to portray ‘reality’ until abstract art had no connection with the external appearance at all.

- in the field of philosophy too, there has been an on-going search to find what it means to be human in light of the revolution or ‘break-down’ (whatever one wants to
call what happened at the end of the 19th C and through the experience of the 20th C).

- here Senghor follows in the tradition of Bergson in his ontological emphasis—i.e., trying to understand ‘being’ as a whole.

- Senghor argues that African approaches have already influenced this approach in Europe and the West and that they have even more potential to assist further in developing this approach.

- Senghor points out the very important impact that African art made on European art and artists at the turn of the century. Picasso and others were bowled over by the power and by the multiple levels of representation. African music too, either directly or much more extensively indirectly through people of the African diaspora, has added enormous new dimensions to music in the west.

- Senghor claims that négritude is the embodiment of African cosmological approaches; these African approaches, he argues, are inherently holistic and integrative. They do not make artificial divisions between the material and spiritual worlds but see them as a continuous whole. Even things that we in the West view as inanimate—stones, streams etc.—or totally material—trees, shrubs, herbs and lower animals—also embody elements of the ‘spiritual’ or supernatural. Recall our discussion of African religion in Hist. 316. African religion and African medicine try to use these supernatural or ‘spiritual’ elements.

- also, what we called the ancestor cult (that name is to some extent our western, rationalist, ‘scientific’ assessment) gives an example. Individuals are inescapably a part of the family; thus, what people are cannot be understood without reference to the family. The family spans both the material and the spiritual realms. The ancestors are simply the members of the family who are no longer living in the material world, but they continue to be concerned about and affect the family members who are still living in the material world. Part of the respect for the elderly is related to the fact that not only are they the major point of contact between the non-living and living members of the family, but they are also starting or are about to make the transition. In fact, in many societies, the new-born are not considered part of the family. Only after a year are they formally introduced to the ancestors and given a formal name. The process of joining the family is one that lasts throughout life and extends beyond life into the afterlife. The point here is that existence is perceived to be much more than physical, material life. Moreover, families are part of larger entities, eventually
all human life and even non-human life.

- as individuals, Africans share much with the rest of the world around them, including the animate and inanimate entities. The latter not only share a similar blending of the material and the ‘spiritual’ into an integrated whole, but also can affect the well being of human individuals for good or ill.

- thus, according to Senghor, African understanding of who they are and what they are involves this much more holistic view of the universe.

- this is the contribution that négritude and Africa can make in the search for a new humanism for the 20th C.