Roxanna Curto  
Illinois State University  

Senghor and Heidegger: Negritude’s Appropriation of German Phenomenology

This essay examines the influence of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger on the Senegalese writer and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor. Although Senghor studied Heidegger extensively throughout his life, the fundamental importance of this German philosopher for his work has not been recognized. This essay focuses on how Senghor appropriated Heidegger’s ideas about “being-in-the-world” and the detrimental mindset created by technology (“Enframing”) in developing his notion of Negritude and the dominance of an emotive perception of reality in black African culture. The final section explores some of the parallels between the politics of the two authors: National Socialism for Heidegger and the African Socialism invented by Senghor.

In the essays of Liberté 1-5, Senghor famously denounces discursive reason, which he associates with the West, and defends emotion, which he equates with a black African mode of being, stating: “L’émotion est nègre comme la raison est hellène” (Liberté 1 24). This statement is often cited as evidence of Senghor’s essentialism and interpreted to mean that Senghor more generally rejects Western philosophy. Nevertheless, Senghor’s critique of discursive reason is very much founded in his appropriation of French and German phenomenology, and far from rejecting Western philosophy, Senghor assiduously studied a number of European thinkers (such as Nietzsche, Bergson, Sartre, and Heidegger) and embraced many of their ideas. In particular, critics have overlooked the extent to which Senghor’s
extensive readings of the later Heidegger’s writings on art and technology, especially “The Question Concerning Technology,” shaped the key concepts of his work: Negritude, technology, and African socialism.

Senghor read the German phenomenologists, especially Martin Heidegger, extensively throughout his life and appropriated many of their ideas in his writings on Negritude. In “Senghor and the Germans,” János Riesz writes, “Senghor’s relationship to Germany and the Germans marks every phase of his life” (25). In “Négritude et Germanité I” and “II,” Senghor states that he was drawn to the German phenomenologists because they described a way of relating to reality that resembled that of African culture, and he identifies himself as a “Negro-African” “qui a toujours été attentif aux Allemands, qui a toujours réagi au contact de leur civilisation” (Liberté 3 11, quoted in Riesz). While interned in a German prisoner of war camp from 1940 to 1942, Senghor studied German and spent much of his time reading Heidegger (Bâ 17). Regarding his experience there, he writes: “Et je trouvais chez les Allemands comme des échos aux appels que je lançais dans la nuit: comme les expressions expressives des idées et sentiments ineffables qui s’agitaient dans ma tête, dans mon cœur” (Liberté 3 13). After he was freed from the camp in 1942, Senghor continued to immerse himself in the reading of German philosophers, including Heidegger:

Si, après ma réforme et ma démobilisation en 1942, je me suis plongé, de nouveau, dans les philosophes allemands en commençant par Marx, Engels et Hegel, si, après Sartre, j’ai découvert Heidegger, c’est, sans nul doute, que je sens, même chez les penseurs socialistes, ce Wirklichkeitsinn qui est le sceau du génie allemand. (Liberté 3 16)

In the only analysis of Senghor’s appropriation of Heidegger, Sandra Adell asserts that Senghor

blindly assumes that Heidegger — through his preoccupation with the relationship between (hu)man, Being, the logos and poësis — is engaged in a “modern universal humanism” with its emphasis upon the “role and action of Man in and upon the world.” (36).

Adell argues that when Senghor claims Negritude has “already responded affirmatively” to this form of humanism, he is grossly mis-