

Afro-pessimist discourse as a war song against the enemy, Africa

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Abstract

Afro-pessimism is a totalitarian discourse that leaves nothing to chance. It mobilizes the whole world to its end, starting with those who are likely to repudiate it: the Africans in general, and the Africanist intellectuals in particular. In this whole business, it'll stop at nothing to get what it wants. On the one hand, there is seduction which assures Africa of the good intentions of the Western World. Seduction is also to be found in this strategy consisting in waging war without looking like: the use of irony for example embodies disruption between speech and action. On the other hand, there is repression targeting those who do not conform to its watchword. The intellectual elites, aspiring to the freedom of thought, shall be the first victim of this resentment-rousing (self-hatred) repression. Concerning Africa, the accusation of the victim can be excessively violent, to a racist extent as in the example offered by Stephen Smith.¹

Besides, we can identify omnipresent war, both thematic and rhetorical. A close look will discover that war rhetoric reinforces the elements that are typical to primary Afro-pessimism, that is, disease and death; which leads us to the conclusion that Afro-pessimist discourse is amazingly coherent. The plight of Africa is described as a tragic fatality before which nothing can be done. Desolation befits the continent given its natural tendency to all kinds of anarchy and excesses. This judgment which leaves no chance to Africa raises an opposite discourse denouncing syncretic and simplistic pessimism in which Africa is shrouded. In response to this “unsavory” optimism, Afro-pessimism sets order in its arguments and paternalism replaces detachment: “we need to stop misrepresenting African realities, mixing what should be with what is[...] the present has no future for the continent. The freedom of tone is the freedom of urgency, with no disrespect for any one.” (Smith 11)

Key words: Afro-pessimism, social discourse, war rhetoric, metaphor, intellectual elites.

¹ We chose to propose an illustration of hard-line Afro-pessimism through an appeal to Stephen Smith whose pamphlet *Nécrologie. Pourquoi l'Afrique meurt* is subject to a very lively controversy today. It is through a close examination of this text that the efficient principle of Afro-pessimist discourse is materialized.

1. Introduction

The turn of the 20th century is characterized by a tangible global discontent: all-out violence, internal and international political crises, zero-tolerance attitudes which aggravate all kinds of extremisms, unemployment and the ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor; the list is far from being exhausted. The authors of this paper interpret this state of affairs as the result of a crisis in thinking, as lack of positive values on the part of the elites. Values are totally devoted to globalization. Africa cannot escape this pervading pessimism, but it is through a particular discourse that Africa is talked about.

Already over the past ten years, the image of Africa which has been fostered by the Western World is hopeless, to say the least. The widespread idea with the historians, the economists and the political analysts at the end of the 20th century is that the black continent is going through the darkest period of its history as a result of the multifaceted failure undermining it. And as that was not bad enough for its misfortune, Africa can no longer rely on the great powers' assistance to pull out of it. They are not interested in Africa at all since its strategic importance was linked to the context of the Cold War which belongs to the past now.

Another complexity concealed by this concept lies in the political circle that originated it: Jimmy Carter's administration. Paradoxically, the same political figure created a humanitarian, political and scientific Foundation dedicated to Africa. Why should Africa then mistrust Carter whose pessimistic acknowledgement about Africa seems to be well meaning? The reason is that one discourse may conceal another. Kerbrat-Orecchioni rightly noted in *L'Implicite* (1989) that not everybody talks in a straight way. Otherwise, communication would be easier.

Besides, in addition to its overtly disparaging content, the construction of the concept draws attention on itself: "Afro-pessimism" is a compound neologism. And where word formation is concerned, Roland Barthes created one himself and called it portmanteau word. It is a lexical unit stemming from a play on words consisting in forming a new word through the association of certain syllables borrowed from several words in order to produce a shock effect. Playing on words or playing with words is the first characteristic of political discourse, especially when this discourse turns itself into propaganda. There are many examples of this: "voyou-cratie" [government by rascals], "socio-fascist", etc. Therefore, from the very beginning, "Afro-pessimism" seems to be promised to a big political and ideological fortune. Very efficient as it is, it cumulates the functions of acknowledgement, action plan, and pragmatic standards, according to the point of view one adopts. The latter function is particularly interesting in that while *Rwanda Journal, Series A: Arts and Humanities, Volume 1 (1), 2016*

creating legitimacy on the one hand, and discrimination on the other hand, Afro-pessimism somehow brings together the dominant group(s) who must harmonize speech with action. Marc Angenot makes the precision that “legitimate discourses function less to controlling the dominated [...] than to rallying, motivating and keeping busy the minds of the dominant who must be convinced in order to believe.” (1989: 27).

2. Notional tools and methodological approach

Corroborating researches are convinced that this metaphorical process is a well established feature in contemporary discourse. While metaphor was seen in the past as simple ornamentation, this figure is increasingly considered beyond its aesthetic qualities. Without being clamorous, it actually affects the way we perceive the world, our way of thinking, indeed even our way of acting. So, it would be very difficult to do without metaphor since it is inseparable from our daily life, according to a very suggestive title by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Alain Mons confirms this:

The analogical play becomes a paradigm of our contemporaneity characterized by the globalization of economies, the mediatization of society, the post-modernism of forms (artistic, architectural, design). In such a situation, a specific figure of style seems to win, one consisting in bringing together ideas and images which are otherwise distant, in an effect of similarity a new signification (La métaphore sociale,9).

This conception of metaphor matches up with its ancient definition, from Fontanier to Ricoeur, that is, present an idea using the sign of a more striking idea. However, Alain Mons goes further when he insinuates that this sign standing for another is a way of creative diversion; indeed, the process ends up in a “transfiguration of meaning” (15). The opinion of American linguists is along the same lines since they acknowledge that the essence of metaphor is that it allows understanding of something (while experiencing it) in terms of something else. From a simple symbolization process obtained by the comparative term “as/like”, we end up with a tactics of diversion, so much so that the instance having the power of instituting discourse is quite free to present reality under the features of that which it thinks best. It is a commodity offered by the metaphoric expression that would explain the different realities under which the Western World represents Africa: a spectacle, a patient or corpse on which a post-mortem is practiced.

This has certainly been noticed: this kind of metaphorical diversion is far from being random. It is well and truly politically motivated. Being a discriminatory pragmatic norm, it accounts for the hegemony of a speaker who “usurps the right to speak on others, determined as they are with regard to it [...] accomplices in full understanding with the play of dominant themes” (Angenot 1987: 31). This discourse is intended to “an implicit addressee who is also legitimized, and there is no better means to legitimize it than give it “the right to inspect” those who do not have the right to speak: madmen, criminals, children, women, peasant and urban commons, savages and other primitives” (31)

3. Afro-pessimism: war song against Africa, the enemy.

3.1. Afro-pessimism and war drum

It is a truism to say that war is part of our everyday life. Not only because we experience the battles of the four corners of the world directly or through the media, but especially because the principle of war rules over human relationships. For example, even the most banal discussion in our family life follows, without looking like, the model of a fight – attacking, defending, and counterattacking. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson identified (Lakoff 62) the most common verbal “weapons”, that is, intimidation (...because I am stronger than you), threat (...because if you don’t, I’ll...), invoking authority (...because I’m the boss), insult (...because you’re stupid), belittling (...because you usually do it wrong), challenging authority (...because I have as much right as you do), evading the issue (...because I love you), bargaining (...because if you will..., I’ll...), flattering (...because you are so much better at it), and even trying to present one’s reasons as objective.

We notice that it is exactly the same tactics which is used in professional life (the academic world, the legal world, the diplomatic world, the ecclesiastical world and the world of journalistic) even if these “serious” professions deny it because they are supposed to pursue a more rational argumentation than intimidation or the use of use authority. But according to the adage, it is not easy to get away with one’s nature; it is often in terms of war that the institutions speak. There is always “some ground to defend”, “a winner and a loser”, “an opponent whose position must be attacked and destroyed.” This means that it is not only our conception of arguing which adopts the model of a physical fight, but also the way in which we conduct it. Shall we conclude that war is part and parcel of the deep essence of man? In all evidence, human beings have the behavior of other animals; with the latter, warring is a survival mode. They are obliged to fight physically to eat or to protect their territory. Man behaves exactly in the same way, but

with more civility and more sophistication. The metaphorical machinery is then for rational animal, man, a kind of primitive language, a reminder of his origins; or a way for man to “regain strength”, so to speak.

Some paradoxical wisdom about war and peace is that “if you wish to have peace, prepare for war.” The maxim is in no way outdated since the function of “soldier of peace” is a modern notion we owe to humanitarianism, an institution of the second half of the 20th century. The logical abnormality of this formula resides in the fact that peace leads to war and vice-versa. To re-establish logics, we should perhaps say that the two realities making up the paradox actually have some conniving consubstantiality according to which war is always latent within a so-called peaceful context. In fact, considered from this viewpoint, in all human practices, offensive and inoffensive, physical or discursive, we can find some warlike behavior, in varying degrees of course. For example, the most cordial verbal exchange uses certain warlike strategies, as soon as a pragmatic intention gets into play in every utterance.

Michel Foucault studied this issue through the concepts of order and bio-power. The philosopher explains the paradoxical cohabitation between order regulations and war. As backcloth to this analysis which brings opposites together, Foucault seeks to explore how to imagine power in terms of balance of power. We have noted two issues that are of direct interest for our subject:

Since when and how have we started to imagine that it is war that functions in the balance of power, that uninterrupted combat is the driving force of peace and that civilian order is fundamentally a war order? [...] How was it sensed that peace was but veiled war? Who, in the noise and anarchy of war, in the mud of battles, sought the principle of the intelligibility of order, of institutions and of history? Who was first to think that politics was war continued with other means? (1898: 87).

War order asserts itself after the examination of a few subsidiary questions we consider to be rhetorical questions or hypotheses at least. A fundamentally political concept, Afro-pessimism is precisely a motivated discourse that conceals the opinion of the wealthy and disdainful Western World over Africa, so-called “soft underbelly”, the land of disorder positioned between white Africa and South Africa. This negative and given to denying discourse was qualified a murder by Emmanuel Levinas because it is a radical denial of the other. In a study on otherness which warns against power abuse on the other, he problematizes “killer power” (we mean violent, warlike power, by extension) in the following words: “the other is the only being whose denial can only be total: murder. The other is the only being I can want to kill” (1991, 22).

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Correlatively with the issue raised by the problematic relation between war and peace, a new paradox is developed in what Michel Foucault calls “right of death and power of life”. Power to kill in the name of life has always been a pretext for murders, massacres and genocides:

Wars are no more waged in the name of the monarch who must be defended; they are made in the name of everybody’s existence; whole populations are opposed to kill one another in the name of necessity for them to live. Massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of groups and races that so many regimes were able to carry out wars, through the killing of so many people (180).

This is the reason why Afro-pessimism, considered as a discursive mechanism whose ultimate finality is to subjugate a continent, comes under the paradigm of war. This becomes still more obvious when the true motivations – economic, political and strategic – that are hiding behind what looks like a simple discourse of moral legitimization, are taken into account. It is in this way that Henri Mitterand’s terrible thought can be explained: “be able to kill in order to live, that supported combat tactics, became the strategic principle among States; but threatened existence is no more the existence of sovereignty, the legal, but one of a people, the biological.” (Foucault, 1976:180). It is the notion of “bio-power” under discussion here which is all the more disquieting for otherness because with it, the enemy is henceforth identified as the racial, religious and cultural other. With this new enemy involving “massive phenomena of peoples”, Foucault concludes with a remark on justified pessimism: “genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers” (180).

3.2. The Rhetoric and Poetics of Combat: Negrolology

From rhetoric to the art of the essay, recognized warlike practices subsist: combat literature is well and truly a flourishing literary genre. People even went as far as saying that given the cognitive and performative character of every utterance (in other words, the “constative” is inevitably accompanied by a “you must” or a “you need to”), since the finality is to con-vince the resisting addressee.

What is convenient to call combat literature is a typological field which is quite vast: essay, advocacy, homily, satire, polemics, editorial and pamphlet belong to this literature and have common semantic specificities, some more than others. Marc Angenot² dedicated himself to the establishment of the

² *La parole pamphlétaire. Typologie des discours modernes.*
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typology of these discourses, with a partiality for the pamphlet, polemics and satire which tie up better. The respective nuances for pamphlet, polemics or satire owe then to an approach drawing from the opponent side. Still talking about Marc Angenot's meaning of typology that we schematically represent, either the opposing opinion with regard to the veracity of the speaker does not simply exist, since the whole "truth" would be on the latter's side (satire), or there is copresence of "error" and "truth" accepted in majority, but "error is only an accident that can be identified and eliminated, truth wins by its own strength" (38) (polemics), or finally, there is imposture, where "falsehood" replaces "truth" while the speaker is the only one to censure this scandal (pamphlet). It is important to correctly limit the three textual typologies which partially overlap; otherwise, Stephen Smith's war song would have no follower. And from the point of view of methodology, the more consideration of the "opponent's thesis" is crucial to decide on the type of text at stake, the more fundamental the good definition of the status and the function of the two antagonistic discourses which are at the center of this study, that is, "Afro-optimism" and "Afro-pessimism". Are they separate discourses, or, is one a kind of intra-discourse in the other? Which of the two is hegemonic and which is but a resistant micro-discourse? Such are the many questions whose responses have an obvious theoretical and methodological impact on the issue.

In all evidence, a standard bearer of 20th century Afro-pessimism, Stephen Smith's *Necrologie: Pourquoi l'Afrique meurt*, is positioned between the pamphlet and polemics. It is the more difficult to separate both war genres as in many respects, the author alternatively adopts both positions. The latter constantly accusing its "Afro-optimist" opponent, explicitly or implicitly, the satirical thesis is dismissed, at least according to the very narrow defining criterion of Marc Angenot. It remains to account for polemics and the pamphlet which dramatize the combat between the two opponents. Stephen Smith thematizes "Afro-optimism" to demolish it better, and he stops at nothing: pathos, sophism, invective, and irony are made use of. In this war which is not so clean, the speaker lays the blame on the opponent and attacks his arguments that advocate a minimum of viability for the African continent, now and still less in the future:

In 1997, a long time friend to the continent, photographer and film-maker Raymond Depardon entitled a documentary *Afriques: comment ça va la douleur?* Very bad, very bad, indeed. Africa is agonizing, whatever the frenzied optimists of the special files on "moving Africa) may say, once a year at the lowest point in the news. Yes, fortunately, the dead man is still moving.

Of course, there are survivors, islets of wellbeing within an ocean of misery. Most certainly, in the long run the Africans will pull through, in spite of the "destructured" conflicts, AIDS and the carelessness of

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their powers. However, as John Keynes, a big-hearted economist, noted: in the long term, we shall be all dead. In spite of the mitigating circumstances we may acknowledge for it, Afro-pessimism is a crime against information. There is neither choice nor right. One cannot exonerate or blacken the information about the continent according to one's pleasure, through sentimentalism or sensationalism (Smith, 13-14).

All along, we noted to what extent what is supposed to be a rational and objective demonstration of "Afro-pessimist" error is but "a parody of objectivity" (Angenot 1995: 53). The multiple concessions to the opponent are deconstructed, not by a coherent logic of arguments, but by nasty witticisms fired at the opponent and invariably constructed on the basis of the opponent's very words. We are now facing a symptomatic case: the pamphleteer, more particularly, considers himself as a victim of "lexical spoliation". Therefore, he must "re-conquer a language that was hijacked by the world of scandal" (41). That is what the speaker did with the verb "move" whose subject the opponent had usurped. Then, it is not "Africa that moves" but "the corpse that moves". Elsewhere, it is through a chiasmus that the speaker successfully restores the truth misrepresented by the "Afro-optimists": in the long term, the Africans will not pull out, since in the long term, we shall all be dead.

So, given the treatment given to the opponent's instance by the speaker, the overlapping between pamphleteering and polemics is hardly avoidable, both textual types being close in the typology of Marc Angenot. However, given methodological imperatives, we give up the polemic genre in favor of pamphleteering in order to do a better account of the reality of Afro-pessimist discourse of which *Nécrologie. Pourquoi l'Afrique meurt* is a prototype. This said, we are aware that pure pamphlet does not exist. It is often combined with satirical and polemical elements. We shall use pamphlet simply as a generic concept.

But beyond this motivated methodological choice, some features that are typical to pamphleteering relate it to the "sunset vision" of Afro-pessimist discourse. Indeed, it is in the very essence of the pamphleteer to combine pessimism and passion. Willingly prophetic, the future he announces is inevitably somber, and this brings Marc Angenot to say that "the pamphleteer is a Cassandre, *vox clamans in deserto*, announcing the death of something." (1995: 42). This picture perfectly corresponds to the alarmist beginning of *Nécrologie*:

Why is Africa agonizing...It is now the only issue that remains, the only one that is important, vital for Africans, fundamental for the rest, at least those who keep seeking to understand this continent,

“Ubuland” with no borders, a land of massacres and starvation, an old people’s home for all hopes (Smith, 13).

Furthermore, pamphleteering is more virulent and more systematic than polemics. While polemics “must not only increase the audience’s adhesion but also shake it from its apathy and urge it to action, this imperative is much more stronger for the pamphleteer who pretends to shake the ataraxy of an established system” (41-42). Clearly, the paradox in the pamphlet is that while being itself a doxological discourse, it “develops” against an accepted opinion, the doxa. This discursive type is therefore the most representative of Stephen Smith’s fiery verve which makes the most of what it has, borrowing from the best advocates of Negritude and the continent in general the arguments to construct Afro-pessimism. Severed from their context, the quotations from Frantz Fanon, Yambo Ouologuem and others are obviously hijacked for an opposite end.

3.3. “Negrology” as “Necrology”

Imitating Roland Barthes in S/Z,³ substituting G by C in “negrology” is murderous. In a decent move, even if an undertaker journalist, the author prefers to conceal the (la/le) death/dead⁴ (necrology) under the back sheet of “Négrology”.

The title “Negrology” is a diversion. The term comes from *Négritude et Négrologues* by Stanislas Spero Adotevi, an essay whose subject is a criticism of Negritude. The author’s position is in the direction of a Marxist perspective which clears the African issue of the time of any racial aspect which was privileged by the minstrels of Negritude, and rather questions the capitalistic exploitation to which Africa had fallen a victim. The essay is especially known for its systematic deconstruction of the concept of Negritude and exposes its followers, henchmen and profiteers. Since then, so much water flowed under the bridge and if Stephen Smith has now recuperated the word to make a title out of it, it goes without saying that he means to apply it to a totally new reality where the term covers a new concept. “Negrology”, in Stephen Smith’s sense, is “this supplement to self-damnation, the killing cultural exception” (29). State-of-the-art

³ Roland Barthes carried out a phonetic, graphological and psychoanalytic study of « Sarrasine » which should Sarrazine, « in conformity with the uses of French onomastics » (1970, p.113)

⁴ There is a play on words, articles and nouns, which is missed in the English translation. Feminine article “la” and masculine “le” are both rendered by “the” in English. When associated with substantive “mort”, both articles apply for either “la mort” (death) or “le mort” (the dead). Disjunctive la/le mort becomes \emptyset death/ the dead

“Negrology” is therefore perfectly in solidarity with Afro-pessimist “contemporary atmosphere.” It proclaims the death of the continent, as the subtitle “Pourquoi l’ Afrique meurt” precises it.

This relationship between the main title and the subtitle is very revealing. A constant that has been noted in modern titology is a strong tendency to use enigmatic titles. The title thus opens a question which will have an answer only later. This time, the reader will not wait for long; the subtitle “Pourquoi l’ Afrique meurt” provides the key to the enigma. The book will be about the death of Africa which is presented as a fatality, because the statement apparently is unchanging truth, a kind of theorem which, pushed to its limits, does not even need demonstration, except for the leisure of doing some exercise. This fools nobody. The interrogative “pourquoi” (why) raises no problem here. That the question mark is absent is justified and if it were even there, it would be a simple rhetorical question. On the contrary, the question mark brings answers to the implicit question paradoxically contained or raised in the elliptical nominal utterance “Negrology”. Indeed, this title involves semantic anomaly which must be eliminated. The anomaly stems from its anachronistic character. It used to be a commonplace in the bygone days. And that is where the subtitle intervenes, giving it a new shine with a morbid connotation. By “Negrology” we must in fact to understand “necrology”. Besides, Stephen Smith confirmed this on Radio Canada in an interview with Marie-France Bazzo, a commentator for *Indicatif Présent* Program, on 23rd January 2004. The utterance “Negrology” is for the author a kind of conscious *lapsus* which changes Africanity (since that is what “negrology” is) into a synonym for inevitable death.

Besides, the enigma being finally limited only to the only utterances which make up the title and subtitle, we are exempted of this difficulty on the level of the title and the co-text since the title overlaps the co-text [let us understand the content of the work], which constitutes a “cataphoric succession”, the reverse (the co-text referring to the title) being an “anaphoric” relation (Hoek 153-153). However, we need to acknowledge that both theoretical possibilities are not exclusive; which is the case with Stephen Smith’s essay. The title announces the content and the content confirms the title. This is how the author’s very self-satisfying balance sheet is presented: “The present has no future in Africa. This was our starting point. On arrival, the demonstration is already done. It is crushing, depressing, incontestable. The continent is agonizing” (Smith 227).

Conclusion

The reality which is presented under the concept of “Afro-pessimism” is, as we have already noted, pessimism about Africa, one whose dominant figure is death, death essentially due to poverty, hunger and war. However, it is interesting to note that the discourses that represent this reality do it in metaphorical terms. Whether on the level of events or of phenomena, nothing is explicitly or bluntly delivered. Seemingly, it is the reign of analogical culture. And it is necessary to precise that the strong tendency to metaphorical use is not exclusive to fictional texts; it is as much pregnant in the essay and as in critical discourse.

Reading Stephen Smith’s work, *Nécrologie. Pourquoi l’Afrique meurt*, made it possible to show that the efficient principle of Afro-pessimist discourse makes use of the intellectual elite. The latter spreads this discourse even when he means the opposite. The power of hegemonic discourse overtly uses him as an instrument against his will. The result is that even if he denies this, the intellectual serves his ego and Afro-pessimism.

In solidarity with economic, social and cultural violence, the rhetoric of Afro-pessimist discourse uses metaphor which allows the mutual reducibility of foreign realities, while organizing an insistent dramatization of war. The form of polemical or overtly pamphleteering essayism is very efficient for the matter. As we have just seen, warlike motifs weave Afro-pessimist discourse. We have verified this in the very concept as well as in a case essay. This example made it possible to show to which extent Afro-pessimism is a totalitarian discourse which occupies the smallest details in the text, and recuperates the statements opposed to it, using them to its own ends.

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