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Paulin J. Hountondji and the Defense of the Universal: An Interview with Carmen De Schryver (Part II)

Zeyad el Nabolsy, Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at York University and Africa editor at *Borderlines*, interviewed Carmen De Schryver, Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College, on her work on Paulin J. Hountondji and how to

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history.

Zeyad el Nabolsy: Hountondji, while critical of the ethnosciences, namely the study of things like “traditional” mathematical and astronomical knowledge from an anthropological perspective, does defend the importance of studying what he calls “endogenous knowledge”. Can you say something about this?

Carmen De Schryver: We should say something about his choice of the term “endogenous” over the term “indigenous”. He really wants to question the idea that, insofar as we are talking about African systems of knowledge, we are talking about “indigeneity” because of the connotations of that term, especially in the anthropological literature that he is responding to, with pre-modernity. The concept of “endogeneity”, by contrast, is really getting at the contrast, not between the indigenous and the modern, but between endogenous and exogenous, where it is a question of where do these systems of knowledge emanate from; are they

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from Europe? That is the key distinction for Hountondji, rather than this tradition-modernity distinction. This idea that something that is contemporaneous with European science is pre-modern is, I think, worth challenging.

Z.N.: I always have suspicions about the way that the concept of tradition is invoked. For example, when we speak of “traditional African religion”, because one thing that happens there is you do not have a temporal marker at all. A point made by Mahmood Mamdani. Nobody would talk about some Roman religious practices as traditional religious practices on the Italian peninsula. We would have to give explicit temporal markers. That way we understand that this society has a history and that it experiences qualitative transformations. And of course, historically speaking, one trope that was used to describe African societies is that they are societies without history and that we have nothing to learn from them because they are not characterized by any dynamism whatsoever, let

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away from this notion. Moreover, it seems that Hountondji takes ethnoscience and ethnophilosophy to task because he does not think that they adequately deal with this problem.

C.S.: One of key criticisms that he makes of Tempels is that there is not a real effort to learn from the “Bantu philosophy” that he is purportedly describing. There is no real effort to test these philosophical claims as philosophical ideas that might have a claim on Europeans. Even though it looks an epistemically hospitable gesture, Tempels never believes that he can learn from “Bantu” philosophy. The problem with Tempels’ gesture is that the characteristic feature of a philosophy is that if you engage with it as a philosophy, you might have to change your mind about something. I think that Hountondji is absolutely right that the gesture of respect really demands something else beyond description. It demands a serious engagement, which could change everything about the way that you think. This goes beyond the descriptive endeavor.

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offers to us today. Hountondji does not seem to think of himself as doing anything more radical than taking the principles of the Enlightenment, with its dreams of universal rational discourse, at face value and saying: “this is what is entailed by them, this gesture of generosity which must be critical of that which it examines”. I am bringing this up to see if we can frame it today in a way that says something interesting about contemporary debates regarding what to do with the legacy of the Enlightenment and its claims to universality, because it seems that, today, many proponents of decolonization, like Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, think that we should jettison claims to universality. However, Hountondji thinks of decolonization quite differently. What do you make of this?

C.S.: Universality has all of these very negative associations. It was used as a justification for European colonialism. So, on that picture, the colonial venture looks like a project of universalization. If this is true,

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and a celebration of its opposite, which in this case would be epistemic relativism and a claim to incommensurability between cultures. I think that what Hountondji shows us is that this all hinges on a misunderstanding of universality. Because if you think about what universality is, it is a question of the inclusivity of other particular perspectives, the testing of your own particular perspective against a particular perspective held by somebody else. European colonialism was simply a relationship of conquest and domination, which left no space for that kind of epistemic parity and the kind of relationships that would lead to the serious testing of claims. So, from that perspective, decolonization gives you an opportunity for universality rather than requiring a retreat into relativism. I think that is a really fascinating feature of his thought.

Z.N.: So how does he conceive of universality?

C.S.: This is something that I see him as very much taking from Aimé

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research, sites of invention, and sites of discussion, are the starting points, and the contact between those sites is how you get a genuine orientation towards universality. However, that universality would remain provisional, since there are always more particular perspectives that could come forward to pose a challenge.

Z.N.: The point about Césaire is quite interesting because he does chide the colonialists for their “barbaric repudiation, for the sake of the cause, of Descartes’ statement, the charter of universalism, that “reason is ... found whole and entire in each man””. Moreover, emphasizing the influence of Césaire’s account of universalism is significant because it points to why Hountondji is interested in the sociology of knowledge. It seems that, for Hountondji, if universality is the outcome of contact between particular perspectives, under the condition of equality, then social conditions that involve domination place fetters on the dialogical process that leads to the emergence

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philosophical enterprise requires a transformation of the world.

C.S.: Yes absolutely. I think all of this work on the sociology of philosophy points to his concern about social conditions that lead to the false valorization of particular perspectives. Philosophy often presents itself as independent of socio-political history. The goal of philosophy, a kind of universal discourse, is also often presented as something that can occur, whatever kind of world we inhabit. However, I think that one thing that really comes through very powerfully in Hountondji 's work, but also, I think in Césaire and Fanon is this very strong claim that colonialism disrupts philosophy's fundamental aim. In this sense, for philosophy to flourish, we need a decolonized social world.

Z.N.: So, the idea here is that because universality is forged through confrontation between particular standpoints, philosophy needs a social environment that allows for as much contact as

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C.S.: Yes, insofar as philosophy wants to be this rational discourse with universal validity, it has to be open also to not just the margin, so not just the geographical margin (the formerly colonized world), but also the margin of the margin (that which is suppressed in the formerly colonized world). I think that is also closely connected to this idea of universality always being provisional, because there are always perspectives that have been suppressed, and without a confrontation with them, we can never be sure that our claims to universal knowledge are not just claims to a spurious universalism.

*-Prepared with the editorial assistance of
Charles Milne-Home*



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