



IN SEARCH OF AFRICA(S)

Souleymane Bachir Diagne
Jean-Loup Amselle

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Universalism and Decolonial Thought

Souleymane Bachir Diagne and
Jean-Loup Amselle

Translated by Andrew Brown

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Foreword

In focus: a comparative reading of Souleymane
Bachir Diagne and Jean-Loup Amselle

Anthony Mangeon

Seeing double

Let us warn the reader right away: while browsing the pages of these discussions, he or she will often see double, and for many reasons. Firstly, the two interlocutors, Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Jean-Loup Amselle, often look at the issues they are addressing from different angles, and are not always concerned to reach complete agreement; secondly, they frequently take up views that they have developed elsewhere, in their previous books and articles; and, finally, their discussions regularly juxtapose and assess two theoretical and critical currents – postcolonial studies and decolonial thinking – whose outlines, and, above all, concrete differences, are sometimes difficult to discern.

The preliminary remarks in my foreword are not an attempt to replace this ‘seeing double’ with a synthetic image, nor do they aim to show how, as they put forward their arguments, our two authors often glance sideways towards other points of view. I will merely note the framework in which postcolonial and/or decolonial studies have grown and developed, and explain that, while they follow their own paths, Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Jean-Loup Amselle are ultimately quite close to such studies; this will make it easier to see what brings them closer to each other, and this book of discussions may help the reader to develop not an overview of all the questions tackled here, but simply a nuanced point of view that goes beyond traditional black and white distinctions.

Looking through cultural spectacles

The day will come – perhaps, indeed, in some academic or activist circles, it came a long time ago – when we will talk of postcolonial studies and decolonial thought in the past tense. However, they have been a subject for discussion for only a score of years in France, and no doubt they could be seen, in the recent history of ideas, as part of a perspective specific to the early 2000s.

It was with Jean-Marc Moura's *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale* (*Francophone Literatures and Postcolonial Theory*), first published in 1999 and later reissued,¹ and the collection of articles that he co-edited the same year with Jean Bessière, *Littératures postcoloniales et représentations de l'ailleurs* (*Postcolonial Literatures and Representations of Elsewhere*),² that this area of research started to cause a stir in the French academic world. As these two titles suggested, this new field was an offshoot of literary studies, establishing as it did a close link between literature, representations and 'theory'.

In fact – and the many genealogies drawn up since then have continued to insist on this point –, what is still called 'postcolonial theory' first saw the light of day in literary studies departments, initially in the English-speaking world.³ Whether we take the pioneering work of the American-Palestinian critic and historian of literature Edward Said, *Orientalism*, first published in 1978,⁴ or the equally pioneering collective work co-edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, first published in 1989,⁵ the starting point and the critical issue remained the same. (Said's work was translated into French in 1980, while *The Empire Writes Back* had to wait until 2012.) On the one hand, the question was how, in the era of European colonial expansion, a discourse on 'the other' developed, either seen from a scholarly point of view (the literature of ideas and the various human sciences), or envisaged in a more literary light (fiction, especially 'exotic' and then colonial literature) – a discourse that soon trapped that 'other' in a posture of radical difference from the Western world. But on the other hand, and more importantly, by a boomerang effect not anticipated by the colonizers, this very 'other' – or this 'the same but otherwise' – answered Westerners back in the very same languages and genres of discourse (literature, history, philosophy, etc.) that they had imposed on it, in order to develop a reverse picture, a critical image, of the European world. This is particularly emphasized by English-speaking thinkers of Indian origin such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁶ and Homi Bhabha.⁷

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Postcolonial studies, in short, focuses on how colonial and imperial domination, by exercising itself in a double form, through power and knowledge, or through weapons and representations, in fact generated a reciprocal influence – not just of the colonizers on the colonized, but also of the colonized on the colonizers – that tended to confuse binary oppositions and the hierarchies between them.

The very term ‘postcolonial’ is affected by this confusion, since it serves both as a historical marker – what comes after colonization and was produced by it – and as a critical project, aiming to get beyond schematic or dichotomous distinctions between the West and the non-West, colonizers and colonized, colonial era and postcolonial era. It follows from this confusion that ‘the colonial’ – whether in the shape of mentalities or practices – has obviously been able to survive historical decolonizations and to persist into the postcolonial era, while, conversely, subjects of the various European empires were – even in the past – able to produce ‘postcolonial’ critical, political and poetic gestures. Though still in the colonial era, they anticipated a world to come that would shake off the forms of relationship and social conceptions that predominated in their time. So we can, for instance, produce a ‘postcolonial reading’ of the political and literary history of Haiti, which the Black revolution, leading to the abolition of slavery and independence from the French colonial metropolis, turned into the first truly postcolonial nation – even more than the United States, which, though it had indeed emancipated itself from British tutelage, still preserved slavery and a racial hierarchy as the basis of its economic and social relations.

‘Postcolonial’ thus becomes, so to speak, the equivalent of ‘antico-colonial’. In particular, by maintaining the demand that the process of decolonization be brought to completion, going beyond the historical independence attained by former colonies formerly run by colonial powers such as Britain or France, this term easily lent itself to reappropriation by various militant circles, especially in the voluntary or communal associations that had emerged from or were caught up in the history of immigration.

This is how we can identify a second stage in the emergence of a postcolonial paradigm in France. This stage came about in the mid-2000s and was a combination of chance and the zeitgeist: January 2005 saw the launching of ‘the call of the Indigenous of the Republic’, which, a few months before the sixtieth anniversary of the Algerian uprising (it was put down by France in Sétif on 8 May 1945), aimed to establish the ‘foundations of postcolonial anticolonialism’ and to denounce the prevalence in the French nation of

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forms of domination and discrimination inherited from the colonial period.

Published a few weeks before the riots in the French suburbs in November 2005, the collective volume *La Fracture coloniale* (*The Colonial Fracture*),⁸ most of whose authors came from the worlds of local communities or scholarly activism such as ACHAC (the Association pour la connaissance de l’Afrique contemporaine, i.e. the Association for Knowledge of Contemporary Africa), in turn stirred up many echoes. In fact, it was only restating in postcolonial language a political slogan (*‘la fracture sociale’* or ‘the social divide’) that had won Jacques Chirac his first presidential election ten years earlier.

The years 2005–7 saw many journals – *Esprit*, *Hérodote*, *Labyrinthe*, *Mouvement*, *Multitudes* – devoting special issues to postcolonial studies, while the anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle led a charge that was as heroic and chivalrous as it was critical,⁹ followed by the political scientist Jean-François Bayart.¹⁰ These soon met with a response in a new collective work from the ranks of ACHAC, *Ruptures postcoloniales* (*Postcolonial Breaks*).¹¹

Tempers now seemed to be flaring between African intellectuals – such as the Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf and the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe – and French Africanist intellectuals. It was on the basis of their training and their publications devoted to African studies, such as the *Cahiers d’études africaines*, edited by Jean-Loup Amselle for nearly thirty years, and the review *Politique africaine*, founded by Jean-François Bayart in 1980, that Amselle and Bayart conducted their critique of postcolonialism. In a certain way, the present book brings this dialogue back to the public stage, even if in actual fact it was never really interrupted, nor devoid of persistent misunderstandings.

Where was the main point of friction and hence of discord? We could say, summarily, that the Africanists criticized postcolonials for trying to reinvent the wheel and thereby giving a new lease of life to some of the essentialist and culturalist quirks of their predecessors (Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi) at a time when Négritude and anticolonial critique were in the ascendant. Postcolonials, meanwhile, mocked the tendency of Africanists to reduce them to mere epigones of prestigious masters and ancestors, though they claimed to have a more complex filiation with these forebears than the mere phantasmatic projection of a new ‘strategic essentialism’ might suggest.¹²

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Finally, the main issue of this disagreement was without doubt the following: to what extent could a true decentring be achieved, a shift away from the Western thought that had influenced the founders of anticolonial criticism themselves and a return to more autonomous, even autochthonous, traditions of thought? And to what extent was such a decentring envisageable or possible within Western thought itself? A secondary question was: could one ‘provincialize Europe’ by making it *one* pole of reflection and *one* tradition of thought among others, without the precedence or pre-eminence it had enjoyed? Could other dialogues take place between various points and intellectual traditions of the global South, without systematically requiring Western mediation? It is undoubtedly the growing force and importance of these questions, together with an exponential polarization of the positions *for* or *against* postcolonial thought, which may explain the gradual shift to a new paradigm: that of decolonial thought.

As Jean-Loup Amselle explains on several occasions in the following conversations, the genesis of decolonial thought differs from that of the postcolonial theory first developed by Edward Said and Australian and Indian thinkers. Decolonial thought admittedly involves a similar circularity: we need to take into account the point of view of the colonized, a point of view underestimated by Western literatures (in both fictional works and the literature of ideas); in particular we need to adopt a ‘subaltern’ point of view or a view ‘from below’. But decolonial thought radicalizes this critical standpoint in a twofold way. Firstly, it traces the emergence of modern colonial hierarchies right back to the time of the discovery of the Americas (1492), and, secondly, it examines the implementation of a new formula of social domination and economic exploitation, a formula now indexed to the notion of race.

These ideas are developed in concert by many South American thinkers, such as the Argentine semiologist Walter Dignolo, the Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel, the Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel and the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. Brought together in an interdisciplinary research collective called ‘Group M/C’, decolonial theorists endeavour to demonstrate the interdependence of modernity/coloniality as two simultaneous phenomena linked in space and time up until the contemporary period. The decolonials also emphasize the collusion, if not the compromise, in this same modernity between, on the one hand, Cartesian rationality with its various dualisms and their hierarchical relations (between mind and body, man and nature, with the first terms systematically dominating the second), and, on the other hand, colonial reason

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(where the European must himself overcome non-Europeans, reducing them to an almost animal status of machine-bodies, so as to have an exclusive right to human intellectual functions as his own domain).

Two major consequences ensue for decolonial thinking: on the one hand, the progressive but precocious implementation of a capitalist world order organized for the sole benefit of Europe, mobilizing colonialism and racism as principles of the division and organization of labour on a global scale; on the other hand, the concomitant establishment of a Eurocentric episteme, or of a geopolitics of knowledge where the European point of view – and more exactly that of the Western White man – replaces God’s point of view as the only measure of all possible and universal knowledge, thereby relegating, de facto, all non-Western intellectual traditions and forms of knowledge to the realms of belief, magical or primitive thinking and, at best, mere folklore.

This unequal organization of the world continues today in other forms, since (despite the two waves of independence, in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in Africa and Asia in the twentieth century) global capitalism has merely given a new lease of life to the fundamentally dichotomous and hierarchical structures of the world system that divides the human population into Whites and non-Whites, centre and periphery, North and South, superior and inferior, and so on. Taking note of this, decolonial thought, as its name indicates, proposes a radical decolonization that would involve, on the one hand, the rehabilitation of ancient and non-Western forms of economic and social organization, as well as the quest for new forms of solidarity between the various Souths and, on the other hand, a fundamental break with epistemological and cultural Eurocentrism and its claim to be the sole embodiment of scientificity and universality.

This critique of Eurocentrism is admittedly not new: more than a century ago, the German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas was already denouncing the ‘cultural spectacles’ (*Kulturbrille*) of what he called ‘Nordicism’ in reference to the sense of superiority that the White man’s mastery over the forces of nature conferred on him.¹³ Boas emphasized how the advent of a truly scientific point of view would only be achieved by correcting these forms of conceptual myopia and, in particular, by getting rid of teleological illusions that viewed the White man as an empire within an empire, and his culture as the destination if not the destiny of all other cultures, ordained as these were to follow the path his model traced from barbarism to civi-

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lization, from tradition to modernity, from community to individual and from despotism to democracy.

Postcolonial thinking in its turn denounces this Eurocentrism as well as the binary oppositions and purely linear evolutions that it established between 'the West and the rest'. But decolonial thought goes further insofar as it does not simply plead for 'epistemological plurality', that is, the recognition of traditional cosmologies and epistemologies as having the dignity of forms of knowledge every bit as legitimate as Western scientific-technical rationality. It shows that these kinds of knowledge, often local, indigenous or 'native', are today highly valued, desired and more and more often appropriated by the Western economic and industrial powers themselves, in the context of a new transformation of global capitalism, moving from the exploitation of 'natural capital' (raw materials and the products derived from them) to the exploitation of a 'human capital' which now values the knowledge, skills and experiences of diverse social actors.

However, this new age of capitalism, cognitive in some ways since it accords a central role to knowledge (including the most traditional forms of knowledge, suddenly promoted to the rank of the 'intangible heritage of humanity'), never renounced what Enrique Dussel calls its 'structural heterogeneity', namely the consubstantiality and interdependence between modernity and coloniality; instead, it has reprogrammed it according to its new needs and objectives. Thus, biodiversity and traditional knowledge are the new 'green gold', part of what is now conceived of as sustainable development, and we are witnessing a new appreciation, in postmodern form, of other types of knowledge, non-scientific, non-rational and non-Western, which had hitherto been excluded from the realm of legitimate knowledge.

But in this new postmodern and postcolonial framework (in the historical sense of the term 'postcolonial'), there is still a strict hierarchy between dominated South and dominant North, and the transfer of knowledge remains a one-way street, with the pharmaceutical, agri-food and biotechnological industries granting themselves the right to document, to preserve and soon to patent traditional knowledge and genetic heritages for their sole benefit. From this point of view, postmodernity and postcoloniality do not in the least imply the end of modernity and of its colonial substratum; they are, rather, a reorganization and extension of these phenomena: 'Just as coloniality is the other constituent face of modernity, postcoloniality is the

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structural counterpart of postmodernity. On this view, postcolonials are the new updated forms of coloniality in the postmodern stage of the history of the West,' writes the Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez.¹⁴ Here, he agrees with the critique voiced in 1992 by the Anglo-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who waxed ironical about postcoloniality, writing: 'Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery.'¹⁵

Convergences

The reader will indeed note, in the following pages, many convergences between the views of Souleymane Bachir Diagne, those of Jean-Loup Amselle, and decolonial thought. In particular, the two thinkers share with decolonial thought a scathing criticism of Eurocentrism and its erroneous identification with the universal. They also declare themselves to be sceptical about so-called 'postcolonial breaks', when these breaks merely invert the stigmas or values associated with non-Western worlds and thereby reinstate the usual hierarchies, such as the hegemonic domination of the West. Amselle's critique of postcolonialism as the 'new ruse of reason' (p. 17), whether this reason be colonial or simply 'ethnological' (p. 33); Diagne's parallel denunciation of 'epistemological colonialism' (p. 97); their shared willingness to 'break with the Cartesian mechanical view that provided the enterprise of transforming "nature" into "natural resources" with its philosophy' (p. 27); their desire to go back and produce a 'history of philosophy in Africa' integrated into the history of philosophy in the Western world and into 'the history of philosophy in the Islamic world in general' (p. 98) – all these points of agreement are so many decolonial gestures that mark real convergences between the two thinkers. These convergences are actually even more prominent when we explore their respective oeuvres. For that, we need to conduct a brief overview of their work: this will enable us to put the following dialogues into perspective, to draw the line of convergence where two parallel and distinct itineraries could finally meet.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne: a philosophy of translation

One need merely glance at the bibliography of the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne to discover that he is the author of an oeuvre as demanding as it is disparate, since it has three distinct aspects. First of all, it includes works on various European thinkers (George Boole, Henri Bergson), such as studies in critical epistemology on the type of thinking and logic inherent in mathematics, especially algebra (*Boole, 1815–1864*),¹⁶ followed by an edition with commentary of Boole's *Laws of Thought*.¹⁷ Then come books devoted to philosophical practices in the Islam world: *Islam and Open Society*¹⁸ and *Open to Reason*.¹⁹ Finally there are the works on philosophical practices in Africa, such as *African Art as Philosophy*²⁰ and, more recently, *The Ink of the Scholars*.²¹

Diagne is clearly working at the crossroads where different disciplines and different worlds meet, and he embodies a form of transcultural thought that straddles and ceaselessly interrelates continents and eras. When you look more closely, his work appears de facto driven by two imperatives: on the one hand, it strives to be rooted in 'specific' thought traditions (algebraic logic, the Muslim world, the African world), and, on the other hand, it aims to bring these traditions into dialogue with one another.

Whenever he talks about Boole, Diagne reminds us, following Descartes, for example, that algebra came to Europeans via the mediation of the Arab world, so we need to constantly bear in mind the existence of other traditions of thought that make similar demands on rationality. All things being equal, and as if in a spirit of symmetry, Diagne stresses that the act of philosophizing as it developed in the Muslim cultural world itself came largely from the thinkers of ancient Greece with whom Arab and Persian thinkers entered into dialogue by translating their works. This dialogue was pursued in other Muslim areas: the Indian thinker Muhammad Iqbal, for instance, engaged in a veritable philosophical conversation with the works of European philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson.

Translation, of course, involves written traditions, and inevitable shifts of emphasis. Diagne looks back at the different intellectual disciplines that filled the shelves of the Islamic library, and focuses on three discursive practices: rational theology (*kalam*), philosophy (*falsafa*) and Sufism (*tasawwuf*). In his view, philosophical reflection goes beyond the limits of *falsafa* alone in order to manifest itself in

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other discourses, or even other human practices, such as art. This means that two additional dimensions become important for him.

Diagne pays particular attention to the question of the becoming-philosophical of languages: for him, all thought is built not only in a language, but also in the ordeal of its passage or its translation into another. Over the years, he has produced some remarkable analyses of the transformations of Arabic into a philosophical language (*Open to Reason*), via translations of Greek texts; and more generally he has investigated all the practices of philosophizing in non-European languages, especially in African languages (*The Ink of the Scholars*).

In tandem with this observation, which might border on a certain conceptual if not linguistic relativism, Diagne comes to a quite different and almost antithetical conclusion. Noting that, thanks to symbolic writing, thought can also be emancipated from the limitations of a given language – especially in the context of algebra –, and can thus be transmitted otherwise than by oral means, he emphasizes what we could call a ‘cognitive universalism’ that always ultimately transcends differences in culture and language.

Finally, this question of the symbolic underpinnings of language goes beyond the strictly linguistic dimension, since other practices can themselves proceed from a form of philosophizing and arouse thought in their turn. In the West, of course, as we know especially from the work of the art historian Daniel Arasse, ‘painting thinks’, it produces and stages thought through modes of non-verbal figuration (such as framing, perspective and composition).²² But in his study of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Diagne shows that, in Africa, art (and, in particular, sculpture) is also a way of producing thought, or ‘a certain approach to reality’, just as ‘scientific knowledge is another [such approach]’. From this point of view, “‘Negro art’ is philosophy”, insofar as it is ‘interpretable as philosophical observations about the nature of the world’.²³

What does African art, as philosophical expression, actually think about? Senghor’s answer lies in insisting on rhythm as the ordering force behind Negro style, while at the same time rhythm is mainly for him the manifestation of a ‘vital force’, or, more precisely, a vitalism of strengths. We can of course compare this answer with the one proposed by Muhammad Iqbal, who characterizes philosophizing in Islam as a ‘movement in thought’, as Diagne puts it in *Islam et société ouverte*.

It is indeed a real tour de force on the part of Diagne to have drawn a comparison, in his *Bergson postcolonial*,²⁴ between some

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of the key ideas in Iqbal and Senghor, and to have related them to the influence of Bergsonism on non-European thought. In the Indian philosopher, says Diagne, ‘the juridico-theological concept of *itjihad*, which is usually translated as “effort of interpretation”’ (p. 67), or as ‘movement in thought’, is seen as a way of ‘mobilizing Islam’ – in other words, ‘getting it on the move again’ – by leading it, via Bergson, to reconnect with its initial ‘vitalist philosophy’ (p. 79). Life must then be understood as a permanent renewal of the presence of God in the world, and the cosmology of the Qur’an as a ‘creative evolution’ according to a number of verses or sayings of the Prophet (the hadith), quoted on two occasions (pp. 85 and 111). Similarly, the Négritude of Senghor – who insists on emotion, who roots his outlook in a dynamic ontology (‘being is strength’, p. 47) and who highlights the importance of dance and rhythm as a ‘corporal cogito’ (p. 22) – flows directly from the ‘1889 revolution’ when Bergson, in his book of that year, *Time and Free Will*, underlined the primarily affective nature of the human mind.

If Bergson arouses so much interest in Diagne, this is not only because he allows him to mediate between two such culturally distinct and religiously distant thinkers as the Indian Muslim Muhammad Iqbal and the Senegalese Catholic Léopold Sédar Senghor. Beyond his insistence on the emotional dimension, Bergson also attacked the opposition between primitive or pre-logical mentality and civilized or rational thought in his last book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). In sum, Bergson is not only the thinker of the *élan vital*, but also the philosopher of the coexistence of opposites and their unification within every individual. From this point of view, we can call him ‘postcolonial’ *avant la lettre*, since, in Diagne’s view, he always insists on the hybridity inherent in the human being (both body and mind, affect and judgement, belief and rationality), and thereby rejects the artificial binary oppositions between Westerners and non-Westerners disseminated by the ethnology of his time, as for example in the works of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.

So, if I were to summarize Diagne’s philosophical position in my turn, I would be obliged to conclude that he himself embodies a paradoxical style of thought that flies in the face of the accepted ideas of his time. Against the common idea that Africa is the continent of orality, this Senegalese thinker keeps coming back to the ancient and dynamic presence of written traditions – including philosophical traditions – in Africa, as in the manuscripts of Timbuktu. Against the idea that languages and cultural identities are distinct entities with rigid

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contours, he shows that they are in fact always fluid, that they borrow from other entities some of their constitutive elements, and that they are defined by subjecting these entities to operations of translation. Finally, while admitting that one can be (or think) 'Negro', he never reserves this privilege solely to the 'Blacks' of Africa or its diasporas, but insists, on the contrary, on the importance of the interbreeding and pluralism within each individual, each culture.

'In searching for origin,' he wrote in his book on Senghor, 'one is always brought back to the exploration of one's own hybridity, to the discovery that one is "legion"', so that ultimately 'all human civilization is only such because of mixture'.²⁵ This is a lesson that the reader will easily be able to draw from the following interviews, and this defence of an 'originary syncretism' will also clearly signal the close connections between the thought of Souleymane Bachir Diagne and that of Jean-Loup Amselle.

Jean-Loup Amselle: an uncompromising anthropology

As presented in the bibliography of his works, the oeuvre of Jean-Loup Amselle might also seem perplexing: by adding a new title almost every year, it is constantly opening up new horizons and objects of research. Yet despite its very profusion, and its both pioneering and iconoclastic character, the thinking that underlies it still has a powerful drive towards synthesis. It ultimately appears, in all the senses of the term, 'uncompromising'.

In the best anthropological tradition, nothing human is foreign to Amselle's work, and the intellectual curiosity it displays is unbounded; but it is also intransigent with regard to a certain number of demands and principles. For example, it rejects all essentialism, and, like Diagne's work, it opposes all the culturalizations or continentalizations of thinking that would trap thought in predefined predicates such as European thought, African thought, Black thought, Mestizo (or 'mixed') thought, and so on. Moreover, Amselle's work aims to overcome binary oppositions and all hierarchies presented as natural, so as to defend a concrete universality of all cultures in their openness to others, or in their fundamental porosity with their surroundings.

An anthropologist by training, Amselle in fact broke with the rigid categorizations of his discipline (race and ethnicity as fixed units), while at the same time refusing to analyse social and cultural phenomena on a strictly local scale. From his earliest works, *Les Migrations africaines (The African Migrations)*²⁶ and *Les Négociants*

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de la savane (*The Traders of the Savannah*)²⁷ up to his recent studies *Psychotropiques* (*Psychotropics*)²⁸ and *Islams africains: la préférence soufie* (*African Islams: The Sufi Preference*),²⁹ he has constantly probed the deployment of identities within extensive networks, including commercial systems that are spreading across the world in the contemporary process of globalization.

From an epistemological point of view, his approach remains mainly genealogical, in other words, quick to spot significant paradigm shifts, the most important of which is certainly for him ‘the defeat of the continuum’.³⁰ The various phases of European colonial expansion established a range of oppositional, hierarchical and binary schemas in the relations between the West and the rest of the world. These ethnological or raciological patterns then broke the great chain of entanglements, interweavings and concatenations that have always linked Europeans to other societies, cultures or epistemes.

This ‘defeat of the continuum’ subsequently led to two major upheavals. Firstly, the cultures that were brought into contact with each other slipped into relations of gradual differentiation, or ‘schismogenesis’, to use a term taken from the anthropologist Gregory Bateson.³¹ They thus gradually became specialized in attitudes that were sometimes symmetrical – the notorious mimeticism and all the games with mirrors and reflections so often criticized by Amselle – and sometimes complementary or mutually adapted (such as the relations of domination–submission, voyeurism–exhibitionism, assistance–dependence, highlighted by Bateson).

These various feedback processes not only favoured the triumph of ‘ethnological reason’ on both sides of the relationship, but they also changed the dominant axis of identity constructions. For a long time, in fact, such constructions favoured horizontality by integrating themselves – in a dialogic, even polemical, way – into networks or ‘chains of societies’ involving a series of lateral branchings or connections. In this context, the only verticalities stemmed, on the one hand, from the logics of empire or the distinction between ‘encompassed’ and ‘encompassing’ societies, and, on the other hand, from the inevitable class struggles in each society, struggles that could obviously take a racial turn, as in the slave societies of the New World.

But after the end of colonial empires and the fall of the Berlin Wall, and ‘in the post-Cold War situation’, ‘vertical clashes’, according to Amselle, were soon reconfigured: the historicist and Marxist paradigm of class struggle was abandoned, even though this struggle stemmed directly from ‘race struggle’. The vertical paradigm was reinvigorated and decisively assumed greater importance than