

IN MEMORIAM

“We need to open our doors and windows and breathe the fresh air of the ocean”: Hountondji on Suffocation and the Need to Liberate the Philosophical Mind

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Paulin Jidenu Hountondji, generally a very concise and rigorous thinker, sometimes became almost lyrical in his texts when he spoke forcefully with metaphors: He recurrently points to the prison, in which a certain kind of African thought is confined and must finally free itself. African intellectuals should open their doors and windows and “breathe the fresh air of the ocean”, he urges in one of his last texts published before his death, entitled “Constructing the Universal: A Transcultural Challenge” (2017, 165).¹ Hountondji associates a certain kind of philosophizing with a form of breathlessness (French: *essoufflement*) that urgently needs to be overcome. What is the prison from which philosophy should finally be freed, and what is the fresh air he demands to breathe?

Hountondji’s critique, for which he became famous as an intellectual, was directed in particular at the “ethnophilosophy” in the first half of the twentieth century as well as at the subsequent identitarian currents of anticolonial and postindependence thought in Africa. According to his analysis, these intellectual currents had immunized themselves against criticism from outside and, therefore, suppressed change and plurality from within. He combined the fresh air that needs to be breathed with the call to create a counter-hegemonic universalism: “We need ... to start breathing again, despite everything, trying to construct the universal” (2016, 165).

To better understand Hountondji’s critique of the brevity of thought, it is helpful to recall his understanding of culture as he developed it at the beginning of his career as a philosopher, politician, and activist in the 1970s. In a 1973 article entitled “Pluralism—True and False,”² he addressed the question of what culture actually is. He began with the thesis that every culture is internally plural. This is not only true of Western modern societies, but also of supposedly African traditional societies: “Culture ... is a perpetual invention, a contradictory

debate between men chained to one and the same destiny, men who are each and all anxious to make that destiny as bright as possible" (1973, 113).

This internal dynamic, the controversy within a community, is what drives a society forward and is necessary for it to flourish. Not the convergences but the divergences are in need to be studied and actively revitalized. The pluralism that is valuable for a society is not (only) to be found in the confrontation with other continents and foreign cultures, but rather in the heterogeneity within. He therefore concluded: "The decisive meeting is not that between all Africa and all Europe, but that which Africa has always maintained and will continue to maintain with herself" (1973, 114). In saying this, Hountondji was certainly not suggesting that African intellectuals cannot benefit from a dialogue with scholars from other countries in the Global South. Rather, what he seemed to be resisting is its recurring oppositional confrontation with Europe and African knowledge formation being primarily directed at a Euro-Atlantic readership.

According to Hountondji, one problem of both the neo-traditionalists and the postindependence nationalists was, hence, that they did not sufficiently value the cultural plurality within African societies. He designated this process of oversimplification and homogenization as "culturalism" and described it as follows: "Culture is fixed fast in a synchronic, horizontal, strangely simple and single-voiced picture" (1973, 107).

Culturalism, however, has earlier roots than postindependence African theory: It needs to be traced back to European ethnological research on Africa, whose power-strategic calculation was to depict the continent and its inhabitants in their supposed unanimity and to use this clichéd image for its own civilizing and colonizing projects. Africa was stylized as the Other and inserted into a hierarchical image under the pretext of understanding it better through empathy³ from without than African inhabitants did themselves from within.⁴ Hountondji voiced his fundamental critique of ethnophilosophy by making reference to Aimé Césaire, who had already scandalized the supposed appreciation of a culture against the background of massive economic and human exploitation in his pertinent essay "Discourse on Colonialism" (2000 [1950]).⁵

Instead of relying on tradition and a society marked by unanimity, Hountondji advocated exploring the cultural diversity of one's own continent and drawing productively from its richness. This includes, for example, the many languages and manifold archives of knowledge in North Africa, as well as sub-Saharan Africa. In quite this sense, Hountondji warned the field of African studies that its subdisciplines such as "African Philosophy," "African History," and "African Literature" always run the risk of barricading themselves in a "prison." He demanded that African cultures should not be treated "as something to be stared at, not to be dissected medically." Rather, they should be lived, appropriated, and transformed from within. For example, rather than simply studying African languages, they should be used as a vehicle to advance the mind and the sciences (1973, 117).

Moreover, Hountondji's view of liberating thought in Africa consisted in a twofold movement. On the one hand, he called for critically reappropriating endogenous knowledge. On the other hand, he pledged for intellectually

transgressing borders, in the sense of appropriating modern scientific knowledge and archives of knowledge from elsewhere that could be useful for African societies. Unlike representatives of decolonial approaches who today advocate for a departure from European modernity, Hountondji considered such a radical rupture with Western knowledge production (conceived all too often as a monolithic bloc) to be strategically misleading and epistemically inappropriate. In addition, due to his dynamic notion of culture, Hountondji envisioned transcultural debates not as striving for a harmonious synthesis, but rather, he conceived of them as “an extension of the debate about a universal” (1973, 115). What actually unites humanity, he argued, is that all societies inhabit certain cultural fault lines that need to be brought into conversation with one another.

In his later works, he took up his early thoughts on universalism from the 1970s and developed them further. In doing so, he argued for an understanding of universalism as an ongoing transcultural task (Dübgen and Skupien 2019, 147–59). Although its horizon remained sketchy, he hinted that it must be the antithesis to the “unjustifiable” phenomena existing in our present world—such as injustice, cynicism, cruelty, and the perversion of the rule of law (2016, 164).

Hountondji strived for a new universalism, yet to be constructed, that will overcome the fraudulent universalism of European Enlightenment philosophy, which often remained stuck in a narrow sense of superiority and arrogance (2016, 157). With a deceitful sense of self-assurance, European Enlightenment philosophy believed itself immune to outside criticism. However, the answer to this false universalism is not a rejection of universalism altogether or a withdrawal into relativism. Rather, Hountondji maintained, the search for universality is itself universal: The demand for truth and universality can be found in any language or culture. It is implicit in our speech acts as a shared horizon of truth claims that we, as human beings, must trust in order to have sincere conversations with one another.⁶ The specific task of philosophy remains taking the step in the debate about universalism toward a transcultural conversation: Hountondji urged us to release (*désenclaver*) the idea of humanity and, in so doing—using Frantz Fanon’s words—to “set man free” (2016, 167).⁷

One might object to such a discursive orientation, arguing that transcultural conversations never take place in a power-free zone of ideal speech acts. Yet, with this objection in mind, Hountondji advocated for transcultural debates against the backdrop of a neo-Marxist critique of structural power asymmetries in scientific knowledge production. He reminded academics in the Global North, such as myself, that the transcultural process of opening up doors and windows is always co-dependent on a fundamental change of the material and structural conditions of academic knowledge production. The blatant asymmetries that still exist today in the production of knowledge need to be overcome, including inequalities in the publishing industry and extraverted research designs that are not oriented towards local needs but to foreign expectations (1995, 2002). According to Hountondji, it is crucial to address these basic conditions of academic thinking in order to lay the foundation for a respectful transcultural dialogue for tomorrow.

Hountondji concluded his thoughts on breathing the ocean's fresh air with a tribute to the novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1988) by the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah: "Beauty exists nowhere. But if we can at least brush in front of our doors and assure a minimum of decency, this would already be a considerable achievement. And beauty, inevitably, will finally flourish" (2016, 164). Let us humbly worship this encouragement.

Author Biographies. Franziska Dübgen is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Münster. After completing her doctorate on critical theory from a postcolonial perspective at Goethe University Frankfurt, she held several fellowships in international research groups. Her current research focuses on contemporary political philosophy, philosophy of law and transcultural philosophy with a special focus on African philosophy. Together with Stefan Skupien, she extensively researched and published on the oeuvre of Paulin Hountondji.

Notes

1. In 2023, Hountondji was asked by several journals to translate this article into English to have it published. To my knowledge, this did not materialize before his departure in February 2024. However, an English version, translated by Graham Wetherall (referring, however, to my German translation and without complete references) is available at the following website: <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/d/5576/files/2021/06/Constructing-the-Universal-1.pdf>. All translations in this text are by myself, based on the original French text.
2. Reprinted in his monograph *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1983).
3. Placide Tempels (1969), the founder of ethnophilosophy, methodologically followed in the footsteps of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and his method of empathy, that he developed in his ethnographic account *Primitive Mentality* (1966 [1923]).
4. Hountondji's critique has interesting parallels with Mudimbe's (1988) thesis of the epistemological ethnocentrism entailed in the anthropological discipline, which was uncritically adopted by many philosophical trends after independence. However, the two thinkers differ on the question of what we should understand by "philosophy" in the postcolonial age. While Mudimbe makes a strong case for the broader concept of "gnosis" in order to prevent academic exclusions of differing kinds of knowledge formation, Hountondji argues for a narrower conception of the discipline in order to preserve its critical potency.
5. Césaire harshly criticizes Tempels' ethnophilosophy as follows: "[L]et them plunder and torture in the Congo, let the Belgian colonizer seize all the natural resources, let him stamp out all freedom, let him crush all pride—let him go in peace, the Reverend Father Tempels consents to all that. But take care! You are going to the Congo? Respect—I do not say native property (the great Belgian companies might take that as a dig at them), I do not say the freedom of the natives (the Belgian colonists might think that was subversive talk), I do not say the Congolese nation (the Belgian government might take it much amiss)—I say: You are going to the Congo? Respect the Bantu philosophy!" (Césaire 2000 [1950], 57–58). Other representatives of Négritude, such as Alioune Dioup (editor of *Présence Africaine*), sympathized with ethnophilosophy and considered it primarily as an appreciation of African systems of thought.
6. In this regard, Hountondji refers to Habermas's theory of communicative reason and his discourse on modernity (Habermas 1987).
7. Hountondji quotes from the introductory chapter in Frantz Fanon's monograph, *Black Skin, White Masks*. The whole passage reads as follows: "To us, the man who adores the Negro is as 'sick' as the man who abominates him. Conversely, the black man who wants to turn his race white is as miserable as he who preaches hatred for the whites. In the absolute, the black is no more to be loved than the Czech, and truly what is to be done is to set man free" (Fanon 1967, 8–9). Despite all his critical engagement with Négritude as providing problematic representations of African civilizations, Hountondji echoes central elements of its foundational thinkers, such as their call for a new humanism.

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