

IN MEMORIAM

Paulin Hountondji: The Struggle for Meaning and the Struggle for Action

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Abstract

Paulin Hountondji is an essential figure in the literary and philosophical world of Africa. Rereading *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa* allowed me to rediscover a man whose theoretical work is indissociable from action. Conscious of the dangers of sterile speculation and above all passionate about improving Africans' conditions of existence, Hountondji develops a way of thinking that leads to action. My reflection foregrounds the priorities of a philosopher whose ultimate aim is human flourishing and the coming of freedom to the continent.

Keywords: Africa; theory; action; extraversion; freedom

Paulin Hountondji belongs to the last generation of Africans who were born and came of age during the colonial period. He engaged passionately in the political and philosophical debates of his time. He belongs among the pioneering producers of a knowledge in confrontation with the paradoxes, challenges, disappointments, and hopes of an Africa in becoming. Shaped by a complex understanding of Africa, Hountondji's philosophy rejects a rigid conception of identity: "African philosophy ... will be fully itself only by taking up positively the historical challenge, by assimilating and, if possible, going beyond, in their application to the [current] problems of Africa, the productive lessons of exogenous theoretical traditions, in the same manner as with those lessons of the African traditions of thought" (1987, 23). Hountondji situates the African continent within the history of humanity. When I was asked to participate in this collective tribute, I plunged back into his writings. *The Struggle for Meaning: Reflections on Philosophy, Culture, and Democracy in Africa* is the book that spoke to me the most. The title underlines the attitude of a thinker and man of action who transcends the opposition between theory and practice. In this book,

Hountondji responds to his critics and explains how, on certain subjects, his thought evolved and indeed changed. He also meditates on his relationship with writing:

Rereading these articles and papers today, I find them strangely repetitive. It all happened as if I was constantly afraid of not being heard. I did not hesitate to repeat entire paragraphs or to use the same expressions from one paper to the other. ... I had to repeat the observation tirelessly, verify it, and compare it, if need be, with other approaches. (2002, 227)

Hountondji is preoccupied with complicated questions that he ceaselessly reexamines. Even though the act of writing is solitary, its ultimate purpose is for another person to read it. The philosopher does not control his work's reception. Yet, by insisting on the repetitive dimension of his writing, he underlines a desire for depth and analytical precision and invites a better understanding of his thought. It was a courageous act during his lifetime to look critically at his own intellectual contribution. Perhaps that was not Hountondji's intention, however. *The Struggle for Meaning* reads like a legacy, bearing witness for posterity. By subtly integrating the story of his parents' deaths in his reflection, Hountondji examines the question of transmission and the duty of maturity. With restraint and dignity, he evokes absence and death, understood not as the disappearance of loved ones but as a moment of eternity, of incompleteness and continuity, of interrupted possibilities that endure: "I never seriously believed that my father was mortal. So when he died ... Things fell apart around me. It took me two years to come to terms with this fact ... In spite of this I have really never believed that he is dead" (2002, 196). Hountondji presents his father's death as something both factual and unreal, since he does not believe it. He concludes his book by evoking his mother's passing: "Mother did not wake up. I will never know what she had wanted to tell me. Or rather, yes, I do! ... I did not tell her that I was writing a poem for her and that I loved her. But she must have known that, obviously ... I did not know you were mortal, Mother" (2002, 270). Paulin Hountondji, we did not know that you were mortal. We do not believe that you are mortal. Your writings remain.

Hountondji distinguishes "Africa-object, Africa *spoken about*, the Africa of Africanists and other Third World specialists" from "Africa-subject, producer ... of a plural and multifarious discourse; a concrete ground where, for millennia, a complex adventure has been taking place of which nobody today can predict the future" (1987, 7–8). The philosopher deepens this distinction through the concept of extraversion, which examines the mechanisms of dependence and control over the production of knowledge in light of the continent's economic situation: "Intellectual extraversion ... seemed to me ... a particular feature of economic extraversion" (2002, 225). The economic domination of Africa influences research, thereby reproducing dynamics of dominance and hegemony within the epistemic field: "a theory is defined more by its problematic, than by the answer that it proposes Yet, what I observed was that in Africa no effort was made to formulate new and original questions. To answer the questions of

others, such seemed to be our destiny” (2002, 231). Access to Western resources also sways research. Responding to a horizon of expectation that is contrary to Africans’ interests proves to be, according to Hountondji, a prerequisite: “If [African scholars] do not do so, they may have no scientific audience at all. ... and only we, as scientists of the Third World, have to resist such a temptation” (2002, 11). Extraversion reflects a relation of convergence between capitalism, exploitation, and ideas. Autonomous research will only become possible at a time when Africa emerges from dependence. The change of audience hoped for by Hountondji requires a change in material and political conditions on the continent. That is doubtless the reason for which, instead of lamenting brain-drain as many do, Hountondji problematizes it by prioritizing the question of structure over that of individual choice:

Brain-drain is not a problem in and for itself. It is merely ... a side-effect of the global extraversion that characterizes contemporary societies. ... The problem must not be posed in terms of individual responsibility, but in terms of global structure, if we expect to understand the underlying problem and to find a solution for it. (2002, 10–11)

In addition to this structural problem, there is no synergy between the struggle for democracy and emergent emancipatory thought. Personal ambition and careerism sometimes preempt critical thought, contributing to a harmful politicization: the teacher-researcher becomes a sycophant of corrupt, authoritarian power. Despite this danger, Hountondji engaged with the political world. His writings overflow with a sense of collective emergency, to which political practice responds: “It must be evident that it is not by philosophy, but by political practice, that the world is transformed, and that this political practice ... always consists of inscribing into the facts practical objectives fixed by will, taking into account existing material conditions ...” (1987, 14). Hountondji participated in the democratic transition movement that allowed Benin to go from a Marxist dictatorship to a pluralist regime. He was Minister of Education, Minister of Culture and Communication, then ministerial adviser to the president, a position that he resigned to return to his role as a teacher-researcher. Hountondji does not divulge many details about the role he played in politics: “I referred only in an allusive manner to my short foray into the corridors of power” (2002, 261). The philosopher describes this moment of his life as an “excursion into politics” (2002, 261). His writings underline, however, how his relationship with philosophy leads to political practice, understood as a necessary mode of action allowing the improvement of living conditions and the development of citizens who actively participate in the construction of a democratic society. The philosopher-minister attempts “getting out of philosophy ... in order to have with reality another type of theoretical and practical relationship, in such a way as to contribute to a positive solution of problems which are masked by the pseudo-problems cloaked in mysticism” (1987, 22). Theorizing Africa’s reality means attempting an analysis whose ultimate aim is social change.

The search for tangible solutions distances the philosopher from speculative discourse on action. Instead, he establishes discourse on action in its implementation: “I must once again raise the huge problem of the shift to action, and the modalities of implementation, in the real world, of the values in which one believes” (2002, 262). This obsession with action, although rooted in the real world, also unfolds through utopia. Hountondji insists on the need to transcend contingency so as to imagine a world in which a surplus of inventiveness alone will lead to social justice: “I defended the right to utopia, ‘the courage to dream... to imagine a possible world beyond the platitudes of the present, to have the horizon cleared wide open’” (2002, 117). Conceiving an ideal society to be constructed makes visible the possibilities that daily life covers with a mourning veil. By revealing what might come to pass, if we gave ourselves the means, a utopian Hountondji says no to defeatism: the becoming of humans in Africa is not finite but infinite. The death of imagination is a form of oppression. Utopia also calls upon our ability to act. Still, action always begins with questioning:

How can civil society be strengthened? How can democracy be anchored in everyday life? ... How can the state be reformed? ... What can be done so that the ordinary man and woman can truly enjoy the liberties that ... are recognized as theirs by the current constitutions, and how can they exercise their right to initiative and control? ... What can be done to enable the small-scale peasant producer ... to live decently off the fruits of his or her work ... and to calmly face the future not feeling crushed ... by the problems of survival and the anguish of an uncertain future? ... What should be done so that our universities cease to be ... huge factories to churn out unemployed youth? (2002, 265–66)

In the postface of *The Struggle for Meaning*, Hountondji hurriedly accumulates difficult questions, thereby formulating once more the inevitable problem of “the transition from research to action” (2002, 161). His insatiable desire to contribute concrete solutions to problems—ones marked by their complexity and a multiplicity of factors—generates an epistemic dread, a vertigo of thought in search of praxis: “How can ...?” “What can be done?” “What should be done?” His questions belong to a teleology and ethics of political action. These interrogative expressions insist on the need to identify modalities of doing that will lead to profound social transformations. On a continent where suffering is made banal, violence normal, and disappointment ordinary, Hountondji continues to believe in a promising future. He gives way neither to cynical pessimism nor blissful optimism cut off from reality. Hountondji takes strength from the love he feels for the land of his ancestors. This transcendental and positive force that humans carry within saves him from despair and fatalism: “In the particular environment of a poor country – of a country that is said to be poor and that has ended up believing itself poor – the stakes of power are so complex, the motives of people so disturbing, that one needs love to continue to believe in the future” (2002, 161).

Thank you, Paulin Hountondji.

Biography. **Nathalie Etoke** is an Associate Professor of Francophone and Africana Studies. She is the author of *Shades of Black*, *Black Existential Freedom*, and *Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition*. In 2011, she directed a documentary titled *Afro Diasporic French Identities*.

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