

Peter Cichon, Reinhart Hosch, Fritz Peter (eds.) (2010), *Der undankbare Kontinent? Afrikanische Antworten auf europäische Bevormundung*, Hamburg: Argument Verlag, ISBN 978-3-88619-474-2, 285 pp.

Troops from twelve African countries marched at the head of this year's Bastille Day parade in Paris. Officially, France celebrated the respective independences of its former colonies, independences won 50 years prior. But the symbolic act of the parade could be interpreted quite differently: The colonial army, the descendants of the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, paraded on 14 July 2010 under the nose of their most superior – French – commander, a further act of allegiance. It's the same as it always was: a far cry from independence.

The book in review, edited by three Austrian professors of Romance languages, is largely a German translation of selected sections of the controversial “L’Afrique répond à Sarkozy” (Gassama Makhily (ed.) 2008, *L’Afrique répond à Sarkozy. Contre le discours de Dakar*, Paris: Philippe Rey), a collection of essays in response to the bizarre speech given by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy at the University of Dakar on 26 July 2007. Sarkozy’s speech was strongly criticised by many observers, African and non-African alike. In their introduction, the editors of “Der undankbare Kontinent” express their sympathy with what they term a radical challenge by the selected contributors to typical European self-assurance (16).

The volume also contains the full text of Sarkozy’s incriminating allocution, both in the original French and in a German translation. Upon re-reading Sarkozy’s speech three years later, I was still surprised that its content and style could have been the work of an official government speech-writer (Henri Guaino), and that such a speech could have been given by a head of state. The style is archaic and melodramatic, repetitive and full of hollow pathos. The content is condescending and patronising, imploring the African “youth” – members of which were few and far between at the occasion – not to let unidentified others rob them of their future. One of the most frequently cited quotes was “The tragedy of Africa is that the African man has not sufficiently entered history.” And that was just the tip of the iceberg.

The editors have selected ten contributions from “L’Afrique répond à Sarkozy” (by Zohra Bourchentouf-Siagh, Musanji Ngalasso-Mwatha, Odile Tobner, Demba Moussa Dembélé, Lya M. Yoka, Mahamadou Siribié, E. H. Ibrahima Sall, Théophile Obenga, Dibril Tamsir Niane and Kettly Mars). Not all of the essays are equally convincing. The best reads are those that focus quite closely on the specific words Sarkozy used, and those that provide a pertinent analysis of the text.

Particularly notable is Bourchentouf-Siagh’s effort to “decode” the “chatty, hollow, indigestible” Dakar speech (76). According to her, Sarkozy

touches on the dark side of European/French involvement in Africa, including the slave-trade and colonial exploitation, but he does this in the most neutral way, while on the other hand he uses very strong words to depict the weakness and backwardness of Africa – always dressed in the “nature versus culture” dichotomy (83), i.e. Africa as the uncivilised nature and Europe/France as the incarnation of civilisation/culture. Her analysis is without ambiguity: Sarkozy’s discourse has a clear ideological aim, which is to downplay the responsibility of France and to blame Africans for their fate. At the same time, in order to characterise the “only way forward”, Sarkozy uses strong words (such as “emancipation”, “justice”, “liberty”, “equality” and “conscience”) – words and concepts that fit the “traditional axiomatic discourse of the West” (81).

Ngalasso-Mwatha’s essay at first focuses on the context of the Dakar speech: a) the general expectation that Sarkozy as the first French president of a new generation would declare a new era of French–African relations, and b) the more direct circumstances at the University of Dakar with its handpicked audience of Senegalese dignitaries, who hardly qualify as the “African youth” at whom the speech was supposedly directed (a few students were however present). The context alone turns the Dakar discourse into an absurd exercise. Sarkozy likes to portray himself as someone who speaks his mind beyond the familiar “wooden language” of traditional French officials. But Ngalasso-Mwatha denounces what he calls the French president’s use of “rubber language” – one that uses many words but has little deeper meaning (109). This shift in discourse can hardly be seen as progress. The author also points to the egomaniacal use of “I”-formulations that Sarkozy used to equate himself with France itself and even Europe (113). In Ngalasso-Mwatha’s view, the attitude of a home-coming Odysseus, rich in experience and without any shame, translates into self-assurance, arrogance and a dominating attitude (114). A close analysis of the expressions used by Sarkozy leads Ngalasso-Mwatha to believe that Sarkozy does not aim to break with past discourses and to construct a new relationship with Senegal/Africa; rather, Sarkozy’s speech demonstrates an old, condescending, colonial mindset.

Some contributions to the book are themselves ideologically inspired. For example, Dembélé uses the opportunity to criticise Sarkozy largely in order to promote his neo-Marxist or dependence-theoretical worldview. Structural adjustment, trade liberalisation, terms of trade – all have their share in Africa’s plight, but it is not entirely clear why they are an essential part of Sarkozy’s performance in Dakar. Obenga draws the attention of the reader to the obvious omissions in the speech: Sarkozy makes no reference to the African Union, Pan-Africanism, the African Renaissance or to Cheikh Anta Diop, the eponym of the University of Dakar. Obenga proposes that

“the colonial governor in former times would have done it better” (235). He cites Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Kant and Hegel as “racist” authors inspiring the Occidental ideology towards Africa, an ideology still alive and kicking in Sarkozy’s speech. Obenga continues by listing the names of African intellectuals who have contributed to the evolution of African consciousness (247). One notices how injured Obenga and other authors in this collection feel by Sarkozy’s ignorance of contemporary African heroes.

Fortunately, the editors have also included in their book one of the earliest reactions to Sarkozy’s speech, which was not part of “L’Afrique répond a Sarkozy”, written by the African intellectual Achille Mbembe. In an article for the Senegalese newspaper *Sud Quotidien* (2 August 2007), Mbembe shows how much the French president’s thoughts are rooted in nineteenth-century thinking (60), somewhere between missionary impetus and outright racism. Ironically, Mbembe manages to portray the French president as a symbol of backwardness and brutality. Sarkozy’s “openness” and “honesty” – in reality his liberty to insult Africans – becomes an act of “verbal rape” (58) in the specific context of the power asymmetry. Mbembe shows how Sarkozy defines “the African human being” negatively by identifying what he/she “does not have, is not and has not achieved” (65). Mbembe also reveals how anachronistic the French president’s stereotypes are on how marginal and rural Africa is: Sorcerers, griots, masks and symbolic forests populate his imagination. In his conclusion Mbembe emphasises that it is evident “even among francophone Africans” that the fate and future of Africa no longer depends on France (71). This statement seems banal, but is highly relevant for a book that could otherwise – against its intentions – corroborate the exceptionality and importance of the French–African connection.

The volume is carefully edited and much energy is devoted to a correct translation of texts that can be highly intellectual and/or polemic. Numerous footnotes by the editors provide background information on classical authors and clarify items not necessarily familiar to the general (German or non-German) public. One wonders, however, why an edition of originally French texts in German has found translators, editors, a publisher and probably also an audience, while an English edition doesn’t seem to be in the making. (An English translation of Mbembe’s text is however available at <<http://www.afri.cultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=6816>>).

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