

SENEGAL: MAY 1968, AFRICA'S REVOLT

Andy Stafford

On May 27, 1968, the Association of Senegalese Students and the Dakar Association of Students in the nation's capital called for a strike of indefinite length and for a boycott of examinations. Police quashed riots on campus, and foreign students were expelled from the country by armed force. In the street fighting that followed, one student was killed and over 900 were arrested. Student demonstrations developed into an opposition against the ideology of the ruling-class Senegalese Progressive Union's (UPS) monopoly of power, and the regime's submission to the former French colonial power when the trade unions went on strike to support the students. Senegalese President Léopold S. Senghor, who was also an award-winning poet, closed the university in Dakar and declared a state of emergency across the nation.

How can we conceive of these events in Senegal in May and June 1968? Were they related to the nearly simultaneous events in the former colonial power, France, or were they more independent? It would seem that the activists, the agents of history in Senegal, and the subsequent explanations given for their revolt have been conditioned in reaction to France, and so we must attempt to understand the complex relations between former colonial master and newly independent African countries across the events of May 1968. How then does the experience of revolt in Senegal affect the French and Francophone memory of '68?

Writing the history of 1968 in Senegal

Senegal is not generally included in histories of events concerning 1968. This exclusion seemed to occur from the very start. Famous posters appeared in Paris in 1968 that linked the revolt with the former colonies ("Brisons les urnes colonialistes" [Smash colonialist vote-rigging]; "Travailleurs français immigrés unis" [French immigrant workers united], etc.), yet the events in Senegal were largely ignored. In the maelstrom in France in May and June 1968, this is not surprising. In Senegal, too, in recent years, there has been no mention whatsoever of the events of May 1968 nor of the subsequent backlash of Senghor's government.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, the revolts in May 1968 in Senegal's capital, Dakar, tend to be characterized as

“internal.” Even a radical critic with internationalist leanings such as Jean-Pierre Ndiaye insisted that Senegal’s May ’68 did not arise in imitation of France’s revolts, which had begun a few weeks earlier. Ndiaye conceded in 1971 that Senegal was the most incorporated of all of France’s former African colonies, heavily dependent on the fortunes of the former colonial master’s economy, but since such a revolt did not take place in other Francophone countries, something else must have been going on in Senegal. Here, ironically, then appear the deeper parallels with France, rather than the simple notion of cause and effect. Like France, argues Ndiaye, Senegal had a working class that, though stymied by intermediaries, had not lost its class hatred. This was the smoldering situation that both French and Senegalese students encountered, becoming the spark in 1968. As in Paris, the uprising surprised Senegalese authorities, who were caught short for forty-eight hours, in part because political power relied heavily on Paris. As May ’68 unfurled in France, President Senghor apparently saw de Gaulle losing his grip in France, and so he reacted more resolutely, barricading himself in as soon as he saw Senegal begin its own revolt.

Crucially for Senghor’s tactic of isolating the Dakar uprising, it was American and Chinese nationals who were swiftly extradited from Senegal as the revolt began to grow. Senghor was adroitly cynical in blaming outside influences for the events in Dakar in May-June 1968. However, when the movement picked up again in May-June 1969 and France showed no signs of a major rerun, Senghor could no longer use these arguments. Ndiaye offers a neocolonial explanation of the absence in France but persistence in Senegal of the movement in 1969, but it merely increases the autarkic nature of his analysis: France could offer workers reforms and carefully marginalize the *gauchistes* and then increase neocolonial exploitation as a payback; but Senghor clearly did not have this last option. So, in order to shore up his one-party rule, he cannily launched a “new society” in 1969, incorporating young intellectuals into the democratic system. In a bid to head off mass political challenge from below, Senghor hoisted many of the intellectuals who had led the movement into government, as he looked to—or made it seem like there was—a fresh start for the newly independent Senegal. In particular, this “new society” made loud noises about the “Senegalization” of the economy, all the while maintaining strong European connections, which, for some, such as radical filmmaker Sembene Ousmane, was merely a shift to a neocolonial policy (see

the opening sequence of Sembene’s 1974 film *Xala*, a film about economic and sexual impotence).

There were a number of further factors that increased the autarky of the events in Dakar. Running a few weeks later than Paris (Dakar’s uprising began May 27, 1968) and ending much more abruptly on June 11, Senegal’s May ’68, like a slicker version of Paris’s but able to straddle two calendar months, ended with the same sorry tale: one demonstrator dead, huge but fragile pay increases, and a perceived “sellout” by pliant and pliable mid-level organizations (just like the French Communist Party) grouped around conservative Islamic leaders.

The longue durée

Naturally, one could always find the origins of May ’68 in Dakar in earlier periods than the final explosion of May 27, 1968: the failed coup of 1962 by Prime Minister Mamadou Dia; the shooting of up to fifty student demonstrators during the 1963 elections; Senghor’s concentration of presidential power after 1964, which now looks very similar to General de Gaulle’s in the 1958 referendum and launch of the Fifth French Republic; the perceived “abuse” of “Negritude” with which to wed all the social classes under the one, national “Senegal” banner. Luckily for Senghor, as a poet and intellectual, he was beholden to none of the (Maoist) cultural-revolutionary suspicion of intellectuals that Sekou Touré might have displayed in neighboring Guinea-Conakry. But Senghor did not see social class as a problem internal to nations, a view that underpinned his version of “African socialism” in which Marx was deemed “anti-nationalist.” This suited Senghor’s autocratic rule but also made him blind to social conflict. Indeed, in a manner not dissimilar to André Gorz in France—who, in 1967, ruled out any hint of a social or political rebellion in France—Senghor misjudged the simmering anger in 1960s Senegal. But this is not to say that Senghor was unaware of challenge.

Senghor had outlawed the most radical parties in Senegal, the African Regroupment Party of Senegal (PRA)—its leaders were arrested during the 1963 elections but then courted and incorporated into his government after 1965—as well as the Party of African Independence (PAI), which articulated a mix of Marxist-Leninism, pan-Africanism and “nationalism.” Abdoulaye Bathily, the only person to have chronicled the events of May ’68 in Senegal in a

book-length study, *Mai 68 à Dakar, ou la révolte universitaire et la démocratie* (1992), had been a key leader of the PAI and a student activist during Senegal's May '68. But like his counterpart in Europe, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Bathily has since reassessed his view of Senegal's May '68.

Though not condemning the events, Bathily has seen them as an escapade designed to win more student rights and to reform the Senghor government into a democracy. Similar to Ndiaye, Bathily has considered the revolt an internal one, and not an extension of that in France. Yet despite this similarity in their analyses, we must not conflate Bathily's later view with Ndiaye's account. For Ndiaye, writing in 1971, Dakar in late May 1968 represented the first direct confrontation between *le pouvoir* and students. It was, after all, workers in solidarity with students in Dakar who triggered the events.

On May 27, 800 workers were arrested after demonstrations following the occupation of the university campus by Senegalese paratroops. Then General Bigeard's nearby French troops were drafted in, which led to more demonstrations, Molotov cocktails, and to 2,500 student arrests. At the same time, Jean Colin, France's interior minister, who had been dispatched to Senegal by France's African "fixer," Jacques Foccart, called the French air force in from its base in Senegal to help out the Senegalese army. At the height of the events, President Senghor gave a radio speech on May 30, 1968, and, using a tactic typical of beleaguered politicians, blamed outside influences for undermining Senegal's independence and accused Dakar's students of merely copying the French students. The tactic seemed to work. Senghor cynically (and selectively) used the practical nonalignment that was Senegal's foreign policy to deflect the movement. With the student movement and trade unions at least partly accepting Senghor's "neocolonial" maneuver, the president succeeded in heading off a more serious challenge to his state power.

The ambivalent relationship to France

Despite the internal causes of Senegal's revolt, we can now see that the links with France and its own uprising were undeniable. One example is the continuously popular figure of Senegalese legend Omar Diop (aka Diop Blondin). Diop Blondin started his militant career as a key Paris activist, having also had a major part in Jean-Luc Godard's

radical 1967 film *La Chinoise*. Returning to Senegal after the 1968–1969 events (apparently deported at Foccart’s behest), Diop was arrested in 1972 for using Molotov cocktails when French president Pompidou visited the Centre Culturel Français in Dakar. Though his comrades supported him in the Maoist “Gauche Prolétarienne” and in the “Révolution Afrique” group in Paris, Diop died in mysterious circumstances in a Gorée jail in 1973.



Georges Pompidou (1911-1974), president of the French Republic, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegalese statesman, in Dakar, February 1971.

Diop’s transcultural experiences and specific targets mirror the interconnectedness of the French and Senegalese culture of protest.

At the same time, Senegal’s revolt expressed a critique of neo-colonialism with respect to France and the wider international community. Much of the political content of the demands from the movement was phrased in anti-French, anti-foreign language. Ironically, Senghor, too, blamed the events on foreigners trying to undermine the national sovereignty that Senegal’s independence from France was enjoying. Senghor and the student movement fell over themselves to be the bigger critics of external influence. Senghor used it to suit his divide-and-rule policy; the students isolated their own struggle by lining up (behind Senghor, ultimately) to decry France and its “neocolonial” project.

Yet the autarky of the movement in Senegal was not endemic. In 1966, when Kwame Nkrumah’s anti-colonial regime fell in Ghana, Dakar students had besieged the British and American embassies for being behind the coup and called Senghor’s “a reactionary, feudal and neocolonial regime.” For the Left in Senegal (and elsewhere), the “Festival d’Arts nègres,” held in a Dakar in 1966, merely confirmed this: supported by the US, France, and the UK, but boycotted by China, Cuba, and the Non-Aligned Movement, the festival marked the beginning of the end of the Négritude movement,

to which Senghor's power in Senegal and his own intellectual and artistic achievements owed so much. If we add this to a long series of student demands for union recognition, for a reform of higher education across 1967, then we can see that the events of May 1968 were well prepared in Senegal. By May 1, 1968, workers and students were demanding lower rice prices, more jobs, an end to the links between Senegalese bosses and Senghor's party, the UPS. This challenge to Senghor and to Négritude was just like the challenge to de Gaulle in France in May 1968: younger, more militant sections no longer accepted that Négritude (or Gaullism in France) was really about liberation (the former from colonialism and racism, the latter from the Nazi Occupation). The revolts in both countries were also concerned with the leader's own person, his beliefs, and use of history.

The radical economist Pierre Jalée pointed out that de Gaulle had to be supported economically, grudgingly bailed out, by the US in June 1968. With the French franc in free fall across the 1968 period, it was finally subjected to devaluation in August 1969. Given that many economies in Africa had their banks and currencies pegged to the French franc, the integration of Francophone Africa into European and North American economies had already begun long before May '68. Thus, May '68 in France had an enormous effect—political, social, economic, and ideological—in parts of Africa. It was a conscious strategy by Senghor to isolate the movement, precisely by blaming outside influence. In other words, Senghor played his last card: using a rhetoric of “the Third World against Europe,” of the new Senegal fighting against French neocolonialism, his tactic worked. Autarky of the Dakar movement from France was used by Senegal's rulers in May '68 in order to “recuperate” (or “negate”) the challenge being made by the masses of students and workers alike. The movement, in turn, followed Senghor's critique of neocolonialism—not that surprising given that only eight years before the Senegalese had fought hard for their independence from the colonial master. The difference between ruler and ruled, however, was that the former, Senghor, was markedly more “dialectical” than his revolting opponents in the students' and workers' movement. That is to say, African rulers like Senghor could at once denounce outside influences, all the while relying on foreign powers (France, the US) to supply the crucial policing and military role. Their opponents—the thousands, millions, radicalized by world and domestic events and local conditions—needed to have been more dialectical in *their*

attitude towards imperialism and class society. For, though it was imperative to denounce France's continued neocolonialist policy in Africa, this critique by the Senegalese Left needed to be linked much more tightly with the revolt in France's May 1968; and more importantly, Senghor's "anti-imperialist" rhetoric needed to be exposed for its opportunist ability to deflect criticism away from the Senegalese ruling class.

Describing the Paris Commune of 1871 as a *trésor perdu*, Bernard Noël could easily have applied the same metaphor to May '68 in Senegal: its "failure," in real and representational terms, merely increases its potential for success in the future. And although France has been slow to adopt postcolonial approaches to history, politics, and literature, it seems that the lost treasure of May '68 is now being reconsidered in this light. The publication of volumes such as Blanchard's *La Fracture coloniale* in 2005 has begun to draw links between "home" and "out there." But more important events in France and its cities since 1995 have encouraged an adjustment of the historiographical picture. Just as in Senegal in the late 1960s, workers, students, and now immigrants (from Africa and from elsewhere) and their children growing up in France risk coming together in a new uprising, for and in which autarky, in France or elsewhere, will not be an option.

Andy Stafford is a senior lecturer in French and Francophone studies at the University of Leeds. A member of the editorial board of *Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, he has taught and published on several Francophone African countries.