

Letter to Maurice Thorez

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To: Maurice Thorez
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It would be easy for me to articulate, as much with respect to the French Communist Party as with respect to the Communist International as sponsored by the Soviet Union, a long list of grievances or disagreements.

Lately, the harvest has been particularly bountiful: Khrushchev's revelations concerning Stalin are enough to have plunged all those who have participated in communist activity, to whatever degree, into an abyss of shock, pain, and shame (or, at least, I hope so).

The dead, the tortured, the executed — no, neither posthumous rehabilitations, nor national funerals, nor official speeches can overcome them. These are not the kind of ghosts that one can ward off with a mechanical phrase.

From now on, they will show up as watermarks in the very substance of the system, as the obsession behind our feelings of failure and humiliation.

And, of course, it is not the attitude of the French Communist Party as it was defined at its Fourteenth Congress — an attitude which seems to have been dictated above all by the pitiful concern of its leaders to save face — that will facilitate the dissipation of our malaise and bring about an end to the festering and bleeding of the wound at the core of our consciences.

The facts are there, in all their immensity.

I will cite at random: the details supplied by Khrushchev on Stalin's methods; the true nature of the relationships between state power and the

working class in too many popular democracies, relationships that lead us to believe in the existence in these countries of a veritable state capitalism, exploiting the working class in a manner not very different from the way the working class is used in capitalist countries; the conception generally held among communist parties of Stalinist orientation of the relationship between brother states and parties, as evidenced by the avalanche of abuse dumped for five years on Yugoslavia for the crime of having asserted its will to independence; the lack of positive signs indicating willingness on the part of the Russian Communist Party and the Soviet state to grant independence to other communist parties or socialist states; or the lack of haste on the part of non-Russian parties, especially the French Communist Party, to seize the offer and declare their independence from Russia. All of this authorizes the statement that, with the exception of Yugoslavia, in numerous European countries—in the name of socialism—usurping bureaucracies that are cut off from the people (bureaucracies from which it is now proven that nothing can be expected) have achieved the pitiable wonder of transforming into a nightmare what humanity has for so long cherished as a dream: socialism.

As for the French Communist Party, one cannot avoid being struck by its reluctance to enter into the path of de-Stalinization; by its unwillingness to condemn Stalin and the methods which led him to his crimes; by its persistent self-satisfaction; by its refusal to renounce, for its own part and relative to its own affairs, the antidemocratic methods dear to Stalin; in short, by everything that allows us to speak of a French Stalinism that has a life more durable than Stalin himself and which, we may conjecture, would have produced in France the same catastrophic effects as in Russia, if chance had permitted it to come to power in France.

In light of all this, how can we suppress our disappointment?

It is very true that, the day after Khrushchev's report, we trembled with hope.

We expected from the French Communist Party an honest self-critique; a disassociation with crimes that would exonerate it; not a renunciation, but a new and solemn departure; something like the Communist Party founded a second time. . . . Instead, at Le Havre, we saw nothing but obstinacy in error; perseverance in lies; the absurd pretension of having never been wrong; in short, among these pontiffs pontificating more than ever before, a senile incapacity to achieve the detachment necessary to rise to the level of the event, and all the childish tricks of a cornered priestly pride.

Well! All the Communist parties are stirring: Italy, Poland, Hungary, China. And the French party, in the middle of the whirlwind, examines itself and claims to be satisfied. Never before have I been so conscious of so great a historical lag afflicting a great people . . .

But as serious as this grievance is—and as sufficient as it is by itself,

since it represents the bankruptcy of an ideal and the pathetic illustration of the failure of a whole generation—I want to add a certain number of considerations related to my position as a man of color.

Let us say it straight out: in light of events (and reflection on the shameful antisemitic practices that have had currency and, it seems, continue to have currency in countries that claim to be socialist), I have become convinced that our paths and the paths of communism as it has been put into practice are not purely and simply indistinguishable, and that they cannot become purely and simply indistinguishable. One fact that is paramount in my eyes is this: we, men of color, at this precise moment in our historical evolution, have come to grasp, in our consciousness, the full breadth of our singularity, and are ready to assume on all levels and in all areas the responsibilities that flow from this coming to consciousness.

The singularity of our “situation in the world,” which cannot be confused with any other. The singularity of our problems, which cannot be reduced to any other problem. The singularity of our history, constructed out of terrible misfortunes that belong to no one else. The singularity of our culture, which we wish to live in a way that is more and more real.

What else can be the result of this but that our paths toward the future—all our paths, political as well as cultural—are not yet charted? That they are yet to be discovered, and that the responsibility for this discovery belongs to no one but us?

Suffice it to say that we are convinced that our questions (or, if you prefer, the colonial question) cannot be treated as a part of a more important whole, a part over which others can negotiate or come to whatever compromise seems appropriate in light of a general situation, of which they alone have the right to take stock.

(Here it is clear that I am alluding to the French Communist Party’s vote on Algeria, by which it granted the Guy Mollet-Lacoste government full powers to carry out its North African policy—a circumstance that we have no guarantee will not be replicated in the future.)

In any case, it is clear that our struggle—the struggle of colonial peoples against colonialism, the struggle of peoples of color against racism—is more complex, or better yet, of a completely different nature than the fight of the French worker against French capitalism, and it cannot in any way be considered a part, a fragment, of that struggle.

I have often asked myself whether, in societies like ours (rural and peasant societies that they are, in which the working class is tiny and, conversely, the middle classes have a political importance out of proportion with their numerical importance), political and social conditions in the current context permit effective action by communist organizations acting in isolation (worse yet, communist organizations federated with or enfeoffed to the communist party in the metropole) and whether—instead

of rejecting, a priori and in the name of an exclusive ideology, men who are nevertheless honest and fundamentally anticolonialist—there was not rather a way to seek a form of organization as broad and as flexible as possible, a form of organization capable of giving impetus to the greatest number (rather than ordering around a small number). A form of organization in which Marxists would not be drowned, but rather play their role of leavening, inspiring, and orienting, as opposed to the role which, objectively, they play at present: of dividing popular forces.

The impasse at which we find ourselves today in the Caribbean, despite our electoral successes, seems to me to settle the matter: I opt for the broader rather than the narrower choice; for the movement that places us shoulder to shoulder with others rather than the one that leaves us by ourselves; for the one that gathers together energies rather than the one that divides them into chapels, sects, churches; for the one that liberates the creative energy of the masses rather than the one that restricts it and ultimately sterilizes it.

In Europe, unity of forces on the left is the order of the day; the disjointed elements of the progressive movement are tending toward welding themselves back together, and there is no doubt that this drive toward unity would become irresistible if the Stalinist communist parties decided to throw overboard the impediments of prejudices, habits, and methods inherited from Stalin. There is no doubt that, in that case, no reason (or better yet, no pretext) for shunning unity would remain for those in other leftist parties who do not want unity and, as a result, the enemies of unity would find themselves isolated and reduced to impotence.

But in our country, where division is most often artificial and brought from outside (piped in as it is by European divisions abusively transplanted into our local politics), how could we not be ready to sacrifice everything (that is, everything secondary) in order to regain that which is essential: that unity with brothers, with comrades, that is the bulwark of our strength and the guarantee of our hope in the future.

Besides, in this context, it is life itself that decides. Look at the great breath of unity passing over all the black countries! Look how, here and there, the torn fabric is being restitched! Experience, harshly acquired experience, has taught us that we have at our disposal but one weapon, one sole efficient and undamaged weapon: the weapon of unity, the weapon of the anticolonial rallying of all who are willing, and the time during which we are dispersed according to the fissures of the metropolitan parties is also the time of our weakness and defeat.

For my part, I believe that black peoples are rich with energy and passion, that they lack neither vigor nor imagination, but that these strengths can only wilt in organizations that are not their own: made for them, made by them, and adapted to ends that they alone can determine.

This is not a desire to fight alone and a disdain for all alliances. It is a desire to distinguish between alliance and subordination, solidarity and resignation. It is exactly the latter of these pairs that threatens us in some of the glaring flaws we find in the members of the French Communist Party: their inveterate assimilationism; their unconscious chauvinism; their fairly simplistic faith, which they share with bourgeois Europeans, in the omnilateral superiority of the West; their belief that evolution as it took place in Europe is the only evolution possible, the only kind desirable, the kind the whole world must undergo; to sum up, their rarely avowed but real belief in civilization with a capital C and progress with a capital P (as evidenced by their hostility to what they disdainfully call “cultural relativism”). All these flaws lead to a literary tribe that, concerning everything and nothing, dogmatizes in the name of the party. It must be said that the French communists have had a good teacher: Stalin. Stalin is indeed the very one who reintroduced the notion of “advanced” and “backward” peoples into socialist thinking.

And if he speaks of the duty of an advanced people (in this case, the Great Russians) to help peoples who are behind to catch up and overcome their delay, I do not know colonialist paternalism to proclaim any other intention.

In the case of Stalin and those of his sect, it is perhaps not paternalism that is at stake. It is, however, definitely something that resembles it so closely as to be mistaken for it. Let us invent a word for it: “fraternalism.” For we are indeed dealing with a brother, a big brother who, full of his own superiority and sure of his experience, takes you by the hand (alas, sometimes roughly) in order to lead you along the path to where he knows Reason and Progress can be found.

Well, that is exactly what we do not want. What we no longer want.

Yes, we want our societies to rise to a higher degree of development, but on their own, by means of internal growth, interior necessity, and organic progress, without anything exterior coming to warp, alter, or compromise this growth.

Under these conditions, it will be understood that we cannot delegate anyone else to think for us, or to make our discoveries for us; that, henceforth, we cannot allow anyone else, even if they are the best of our friends, to vouch for us. If the goal of all progressive politics is to one day restore freedom to colonized peoples, it is at least necessary that the everyday actions of progressive parties not be in contradiction with this desired end by continually destroying the very foundations, organizational as well as psychological, of this future freedom, foundations which can be reduced to a single postulate: the right to initiative.

I believe I have said enough to make it clear that it is neither Marxism nor communism that I am renouncing, and that it is the usage some have

made of Marxism and communism that I condemn. That what I want is that Marxism and communism be placed in the service of black peoples, and not black peoples in the service of Marxism and communism. That the doctrine and the movement would be made to fit men, not men to fit the doctrine or the movement. And, to be clear, this is valid not only for communists. If I were Christian or Muslim, I would say the same thing. I would say that no doctrine is worthwhile unless rethought by us, rethought for us, converted to us. This would seem to go without saying. And yet, as the facts are, it does not go without saying. There is a veritable Copernican revolution to be imposed here, so ingrained in Europe (from the extreme right to the extreme left) is the habit of doing for us, arranging for us, thinking for us—in short, the habit of challenging our possession of this right to initiative of which I have just spoken, which is, at the end of the day, the right to personality.

This is no doubt the essence of the issue.

There exists a Chinese communism. Without being very familiar with it, I have a very strong prejudice in its favor. And I expect it not to slip into the monstrous errors that have disfigured European communism. But I am also interested, and more so, in seeing the budding and blossoming of the African variety of communism. It would undoubtedly offer us useful, valuable, and original variants, and I am sure our older wisdoms would add nuance to or complete them on points of doctrine.

But I say that there will never be an African variant, or a Malagasy one or a Caribbean one, because French communism finds it more convenient to impose theirs upon us. I say that there will never be an African, Malagasy, or Caribbean communism because the French Communist Party conceives of its duties toward colonized peoples in terms of a position of authority to fill, and even the anticolonialism of French communists still bears the marks of the colonialism it is fighting. Or again, amounting to the same thing, I say that there will be no communism unique to each of the colonial countries subject to France as long as the rue St-Georges offices—the offices of the French Communist Party's colonial branch, the perfect counterpart of the Ministry of Overseas France on rue Oudinot—persist in thinking of our countries as mission fields or as countries under mandate.

To return to our main subject, the period through which we are living is characterized by a double failure: one which has been evident for a long time, that of capitalism. But also another: the dreadful failure of that which for too long we took to be socialism, when it was nothing but Stalinism.

The result is that, at the present time, the world is at an impasse.

This can only mean one thing: not that there is no way out, but that the time has come to abandon all the old ways, which have led to fraud, tyranny, and murder.

Suffice it to say that, for our part, we no longer want to remain content with being present while others do politics, while they get nowhere, while they make deals, while they perform makeshift repairs on their consciences and engage in casuistry.

Our time has come.

And what I have said concerning Negroes is not valid only for Negroes.

Indeed, everything can be salvaged, even the pseudo-socialism established here and there in Europe by Stalin, provided that initiative be given over to the peoples that have until now only been subject to it; provided that power descends from on high and becomes rooted in the people (and I will not hide the fact that the ferment currently emerging in Poland, for example, fills me with joy and hope).

At this point, allow me to think more particularly about my own unfortunate country: Martinique.

Thinking about Martinique, I note that the French Communist Party is totally incapable of offering it anything like a perspective that would be anything other than utopian; that the French Communist Party has never bothered itself to offer even that; that it has never thought of us in any way other than in relation to a world strategy that, incidentally, is disconcerting.

Thinking about Martinique, I note that communism has managed to slip the noose of assimilation around its neck; that communism has managed to isolate it in the Caribbean basin; that it has managed to plunge it into a sort of insular ghetto; that it has managed to cut it off from other Caribbean countries whose experience could be both instructive and fruitful (for they have the same problems as us and their democratic evolution is rapid); and, finally, that communism has managed to cut us off from Black Africa, whose evolution is currently taking shape in the opposite direction of ours. And yet it is from this Black Africa, the mother of our Caribbean culture and civilization, that I await the regeneration of the Caribbean—not from Europe who can only perfect our alienation, but from Africa who alone can revitalize, that is, repersonalize the Caribbean.

Yes, I know.

We are offered solidarity with the French people; with the French proletariat and, by means of communism, with the proletariats of the world. I do not reject these solidarities. But I do not want to erect solidarities in metaphysics. There are no allies by divine right. There are allies imposed upon us by place, time, and the nature of things. And if alliance with the French proletariat is exclusive; if it tends to make us forget or resist other alliances which are necessary and natural, legitimate and fertile; if communism destroys our most invigorating friendships—the friendship uniting us with the rest of the Caribbean, the friendship uniting us with

Africa—then I say communism has done us a disservice in making us exchange living fraternity for what risks appearing to be the coldest of cold abstractions.

I shall anticipate an objection.

Provincialism? Not at all. I am not burying myself in a narrow particularism. But neither do I want to lose myself in an emaciated universalism. There are two ways to lose oneself: walled segregation in the particular or dilution in the “universal.”

My conception of the universal is that of a universal enriched by all that is particular, a universal enriched by every particular: the deepening and coexistence of all particulars.

And so? So we need to have the patience to take up the task anew; the strength to redo that which has been undone; the strength to invent instead of follow; the strength to “invent” our path and to clear it of ready-made forms, those petrified forms that obstruct it.

In short, we shall henceforth consider it our duty to combine our efforts with those of all men with a passion for justice and truth, in order to build organizations susceptible of honestly and effectively helping black peoples in their struggle for today and for tomorrow: the struggle for justice, the struggle for culture, the struggle for dignity and freedom. Organizations capable, in sum, of preparing them in all areas to assume in an autonomous manner the heavy responsibilities that, even at this moment, history has caused to weigh heavily on their shoulders.

Under these conditions, I ask you to accept my resignation as a member of the French Communist Party.

Paris, October 24, 1956

Aimé Césaire

—Translated by Chike Jeffers