The historiography of the “School of Dakar”. Between anti-colonial activism and communal memories. The quest for a professional writing of history.

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The involvement of French speaking Africans into the academic writing of history begins right after World War II. For the school of Dakar, the text that introduces this entrance into the academic world was written by Abdoulaye Ly who, in 1955 defended his doctoral thesis at the University of Bordeaux on “the evolution of the French trade in black Africa in the last quarter of the XVIIth century/ La compagnie du Sénégal from 1673 to 1696”. At the same time, Cheikh Anta Diop was proposing, at the Sorbonne, a thesis on Egyptology, published two years later under the title Nations nègres et cultures, in which he lays the groundwork of his theory establishing a genetic parenthood between the pharaonic civilization of the Nil valley and the civilizations of the African societies in South Sahara.

The exclusion of Africa and the African societies from the field of history being fully part of the colonial ideology, the African historians right away engaged their research in anti-colonial fights, making the academic writing of history a project both scientific and openly activist. They were then faced with a greater challenge: writing the history of Africa from the colonial library and according to academic norms conceived from historical trajectories of European societies. The pharaonic Egypt and the dynamic Atlantic are a major part, maybe exclusive, of this historiography.

More than the critic of the academic model established from the History of Europe, the nationalist party's crisis and the highlight of the diversity of interest in its different segments caused the first questionings on the orientation of the school of Dakar’s historiography. They enabled to interrogate the origin and the longevity of the subaltern positions of the continent in the international chessboard. Although, as radical as they were, these questionings remained confined in the horizon of paradigms structuring the ideologies of independencies: main role of the politics and of the State in the historical processes here centered on the construction of the state-nation and the implementation of its development project elaborated as a western make up. Settled in the beliefs of the first postcolonial years, the historians focused their efforts on the content of history more than on the ways to write it.

The sudden arrival of new socio-political protagonists such as the young, the marginal, the women with their specific practices of a more open public space, from the 1980’s, contributed to the renewal of thematics and methods of investigation. The failing of the “development” project from the postcolonial states and of the solutions implemented to resolve it, opens the public space to actors whose trajectories were until then scarcely examined by historians: the young, the women, the marginal from the cities. Now, the professional commitment widely prevails over the political activism among the historians faced with the drastic reduction of means for research and teaching and faced with a chronic instability of the universities which negatively affects the historiographical production.