



AMADOU-MAHTAR M'BOU EVENT-SERIES

KEEPING FAITH WITH OURSELVES AND THE WORLD

A. M. M'Bow and the Question of the Universal

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CORA wishes to hold an event-series of four lectures that explore the place and role of Africa in the modern world.

Nowhere were the questions of our time, knowledge, science, and the arts of living, government, and relations more pronounced than at UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). UNESCO was designed with the unenviable purpose of knowing what was out there (the real world) and stipulating what to do about it (governance) while contending with what actions were permissible (norms) within an international system predicated on hierarchy and hegemony built sovereign systems inherited from empire, colonialism, and imperialism.

It is in this context of uncertain knowledge, morality, and direction that the Honorable M'Bow, in conjunction with like-minded individuals and collectives, had to make two determinations: first, defining the universal, within the context of the determination of world heritage, and, two, shepherding the idea of the commons, defined by the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Sadly, for M'Bow, a moment that should have been one of pluralism, toleration, and democratic governance turned into acrimonies and controversies leading to the departure of the United States and United Kingdom from the organization.

CORA dedicates this inaugural lecture to M'Bow because his own travails are emblematic of those of Africa writ large in international relations: how the continent is perceived; what place hegemonic powers think Africa should have; and the reality that Africa and Africans possessed their own visions of the world, complete with thought, imaginaries, and ideas for their execution. We wish to think along M'Bow a number of central questions of our time:

- 1) what are the commons and how must we govern them?
- 2) what are the universals and how do they come into existence?
- 3) how to conceive of the commons and the universal in the absence of hegemons?
- 4) what was Africa then in international relations and what did it do?
- 5) what is the weight of Africa today in international relations?
- 6) what role should Africa aim to play in the world order?
- 7) how should Africa and Africans organize themselves to get there?

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