



Thinking Political Emancipation and the Social Sciences in Africa: Some Critical Reflections

Michael Neocosmos*

Freedom is not identitarian; it is at the very least an inflexion of, at most a rupture with the identitarian register, insofar as the latter is a prescription of the Other (Alain Badiou Séminaire 2011-12, 18 April 2012. My translation).

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 (Aimé Césaire letter to Maurice Thorez, 24 October 1956).

Abstract

The freedom which Africa was to attain with liberation from colonialism had originally promised to emancipate all the people of the continent from poverty and oppression. Yet anyone can observe that this has not happened. Uhuru is still elusive; freedom seems unattainable. Nationalist, socialist and neo-liberal conceptions of human emancipation have all failed to provide a minimum of freedom for the majority of Africans who are living under conditions which worsen daily as the crisis of capitalism and liberal democracy worsens. All three of these views of freedom were elaborated and theorised as universal by the social sciences. It is these conceptions which still orientate our thought. The fact that freedom has not been achieved evidently means that our thinking has so far been deficient. This article argues that the social sciences have played their part in our inability to think freedom and are consequently in need of fundamental restructuring. Central to their limitations if not their failure to comprehend emancipation in a manner adequate to the problems of the twenty-first century in Africa, has arguably been their inability to take what excluded people say seriously enough. In the past they have been

* Professor and Director, Unit for the Humanities at Rhodes University, South Africa.
Email: michael.neocosmos@yahoo.com

plagued by the notion that only those with knowledge and power are capable of thinking a new way forward, thus aligning their thinking with that of the state (either in its current or forthcoming form). Given the lack of success of the social sciences in thinking human emancipation so far, we should consider alternatives which are open to popular perspectives. The article argues for an expansion of the social sciences to include the idea that ‘people think’ in Africa, and that therefore reason is not exclusively the prerogative of academics and politicians. Marx once observed that ‘the state has need ... of a very stern education by the people’. This remark is even truer today than it was in his time.

Resumé

Après sa libération du colonialisme, l’Afrique à qui l’on avait promis initialement une émancipation de tous les peuples du continent de la pauvreté et de l’oppression, devait atteindre une certaine liberté. Pourtant, n’importe qui peut constater que tel n’est pas le cas. Uhuru est toujours insaisissable ; la liberté semble inaccessible. Les conceptions nationalistes, socialistes et néo-libérales de l’émancipation humaine ont tous échoué à fournir un minimum de liberté à la majorité des Africains qui vivent dans des conditions qui s’empirent tous les jours comme se sont aggravées la crise du capitalisme et la démocratie libérale. Chacun de ces trois points de vue de la liberté a été élaboré et théorisé comme universel par les sciences sociales. Ce sont ces conceptions qui orientent encore nos pensées. Le fait que la liberté n’a pas été vraiment atteinte signifie que notre intelligence a été jusqu’à présent insuffisante. Cet article soutient que les sciences sociales ont joué un rôle dans notre incapacité à penser librement et ont par conséquent besoin d’une restructuration fondamentale. Dominées par leurs limites, sinon leur incapacité à comprendre l’émancipation d’une manière adéquate aux problèmes du XXI^e siècle en Afrique, cela a sans doute été leur incapacité à prendre ce que dit le peuple exclu suffisamment au sérieux. Dans le passé, ils ont été envahis par l’idée que seuls ceux qui ont la connaissance et le pouvoir sont capables de penser autrement, alignant ainsi leur pensée avec celle de l’Etat (soit dans sa forme actuelle soit dans celle à venir). Étant donné l’échec des sciences sociales à la pensée de l’émancipation humaine jusqu’ici, nous devrions envisager des alternatives qui sont de s’ouvrir aux perspectives populaires. L’article plaide pour une extension des sciences sociales afin d’inclure l’idée que « les individus pensent » en Afrique, et que par conséquent la raison n’est pas exclusivement l’apanage des universitaires et des politiciens. Marx a une fois observé que « l’État a besoin ... d’une éducation très sévère par le peuple ». Cette remarque est d’autant plus vraie aujourd’hui qu’elle l’était en son temps.

Introduction

It should be apparent to anyone that the emancipation from authoritarianism in Africa promised by the neo-liberal extolling of the market in the late 1980s has failed. Of course, this was quite predictable; yet, until the mass upsurges in Tunisia and Egypt along with ramifications elsewhere, African intellectuals seemed to believe, however reluctantly, that Fukuyama had been right and that, indeed, we had witnessed at that time the end of history. The fact that these events have returned, since early 2011, to a more recognisable antagonism between authoritarianism and parliamentarianism under the overall aegis of the globalised not-so-new world order, has only confirmed the views of cynics. Make no mistake, the world has changed and is changing. There is a deep yearning both by intellectuals and other people in general for a rethinking of the idea of human emancipation. While there is some renewed interest in the Marxist vision of emancipation, the fear lingers – justifiably so – that while Marxism may have been incredibly successful at enabling a range of popular victories against oppression, it may be inherently prone to authoritarian solutions. Similar points are often made in relation to the nationalist conception of emancipation as it is apparent that even the promises of freedom through the nation have in practice failed to liberate the majority of Africans.

The freedom which Africa was to attain with liberation from colonialism had originally promised to emancipate all the people of the continent from poverty and oppression. Yet anyone can observe this has not happened. Uhuru is still elusive; freedom seems unattainable at least for the majority. Nationalist, socialist and neo-liberal conceptions of human emancipation have all failed to provide a minimum of freedom for the majority of Africans who are living under conditions which worsen daily as the crisis of capitalism deteriorates. All three of these views of freedom were elaborated on and theorised as universal by the social sciences. Yet it is these failed conceptions which still orientate intellectual thought in the social sciences. The fact that freedom has not been achieved evidently means that our thinking has so far been deficient. Either we think that these notions of freedom were ‘misapplied’, ‘betrayed’ and fundamentally flawed, or we begin to think differently, namely: that these modes of politics made sense at the time but are now in many respects redundant, at least in some fundamental respects.

This article argues for the latter view. It suggests that the social sciences have played their part in our inability to think freedom and are consequently in need of fundamental restructuring; to continue in

the manner we have been thinking and doing for the past fifty years is no longer tenable. Central to their limitations if not their failure to comprehend emancipation in a manner adequate to the problems of the twenty-first century, has arguably been their inability to take what excluded people say seriously enough. In the recent past they have been plagued by the notion that only those with knowledge and power think, thus aligning their thinking with that of the state (either in its current or forthcoming form). Given the lack of success of the social sciences in thinking human emancipation so far, we should consider alternatives which are open to popular perspectives. This article argues then for an expansion of the social sciences to include the idea that 'people think' in Africa, and that therefore reason is not exclusively the prerogative of academics and politicians. Marx (1875:329) once observed that 'the state has need ... of very stern education by the people'. This remark is even truer today than it was in his time.

From Thinking Freedom to Thinking Political Identities

The end of 'the end of history' was finally announced on a world scale in February 2011. That announcement took place in North Africa and subsequently in the Middle-East. Popular upsurges of extraordinary vitality occurred which brought back into stark relief what most seemed to have forgotten, namely, that people, particularly those from the Global South, are perfectly capable of making history. The fact that this process was initiated on the African continent before it began to reverberate elsewhere is worthy of note. In this case, what they insisted on was an assertion of their dignity as human beings and not so much their identities. The mass upsurge here was not of religious inspiration but quite secular, contrary to the thinking of the dominant perspective in the social sciences which had been stressing the decline of secular politics in that part of the world since the 1980s. In fact its closest predecessor had arguably been the mass movement in South Africa of the mid-1980s and not the revolution of the Ayattollahs in Iran in the 1970s.² This series of events through their insistence on 'popular power' as the driver of the process have been very much located in a mode of political thought where both religious organizations and established political parties were initially taken totally by surprise. In this sense these events have been illustrative of a new political sequence where struggles for freedom are taking place outside the parameters established during the twentieth century and according to which the party has been the central organiser of political thinking. Of course religion – whether fundamentalist or not

– offers no universal conception of freedom. Only believers are said to benefit; it is only within secularism, therefore, that a truly universal of freedom and equality may be found. As inaugurated by the South African experience in the 1980s, it appears that now, in the twenty-first century, a different mode of thinking emancipatory politics could be seeing the light of day: one founded within the living conditions of people themselves. Whatever the outcome of the mass popular upsurge in North Africa (and counter-revolution in Egypt notwithstanding), it is apparent that popular agency is back on the political and intellectual agendas of the African continent.

A central recurring concern of intellectual thought in Africa since the 1950s has been the necessity precisely to conceptualise political agency and the contribution of Africans to history along with their struggles to achieve emancipation. This is not surprising given hundreds of years of slavery and colonialism during which African agency was not only denied, but seemingly eliminated to the extent that Africa was said by Enlightenment philosophers such as Hegel to have no history worth speaking of.³ This intellectual concern to reassert African agency has been active since the early days of nationalist thought right up to the near present and has informed the study of history on the continent in particular. In its initial phase it emphasized Africans' contribution to world civilizations and to the formation of states, as state formation constituted the subjective horizon of nationalist historians. But the independence movements, born out of pan-Africanism, were also concerned to imagine an emancipatory politics beyond the simple fact of statehood. Yet despite a widespread popular political subjectivity which initially fused the people (and not the state) with the nation, it was the state, its history and its subjectivities which came to lay at the core of intellectual endeavour in the early days of nationalism and independence, and I will argue has remained there, though in a modified form and despite contestation, ever since. It was this state-focussed subjectivity which made possible the fusion between the state and the nation (the nation-state) in consciousness as soon as independence was achieved. In fact, for nationalist leaders, independence was seen as the first step to achieving full emancipation, and control of the state was seen as essential to do so. Freedom was thus a process which was generally conceived as achievable only via the state with the result that the presence of popular democratic politics was said to be unnecessary for development, or 'unaffordable' in Africa (Shivji 1985).

Gradually – among those intellectuals who remained faithful to some idea of emancipation – the emphasis shifted from a sole concern with the state and the elites which staffed it as the makers of history, to the masses and the class struggle as its driving force. After all, it was people and not just intellectual leaders who had played the dominant role in the struggle for independence, even though it may have resulted from a negotiated process. Today, this latter view has been in crisis for some time and has been replaced by an emphasis on parliamentary democracy as the high point of emancipation along with the study of political identities. The latter, despite having been instrumental in resisting authoritarian post-colonial states, are today often seen – particularly in their religious or ethnic forms – as possible threats to democracy as well as retrogressive in their politics, rather than as the bearers of a historical telos; in fact it is not clear whether it is democracy or identity that is the source of the current political crisis on the continent (see, e.g., Sen 2006). In any case, we no longer see identity politics as in any way liberating or ‘progressive’. The thinking of African agency, which has always been bound up with a notion of subjecthood and emancipation is in crisis, given the fact that the overwhelming majority of Africans have remained in poverty and continue to suffer extreme forms of oppression and deprivation. Rather than attempting to contribute to the subjectivation of Africans, intellectuality seems to have reached a dead end. At the same time, the West today simply erects barriers to such subjecthood, either physical in the form of walls against African immigration, for example, or less tangible in the form of the reiteration of the well-worn ideology according to which Africans are incapable of any progressive thought as Africa is an incurable ‘basket case’. Africans, it seems, are still visualised as incapable of making history.

While the modern colonial system had enforced its ‘civilizing mission’ supposedly designed to turn Africans into subjects, it had the contrary effect of denying Africans agency both politically and in thought; modernity was thus tied to colonialism so that Africans could never contribute to it.⁴ Partha Chatterjee has recognised the effects of this well:

... because of the way in which the history of our modernity has been intertwined with the history of colonialism, we have never quite been able to believe that there exists a universal domain of free discourse, unfettered by differences of race or nationality

... from the beginning we had a shrewd guess that ... we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would [we] be taken

seriously as its producers ... Ours is the modernity of the once colonized (Chatterjee 1997:14, 20).

The statist development process which followed upon independence itself, mutated from an emancipatory political conception to a technical neo-colonial one of 'modernization' so that it too ultimately became a 'development mission' asserted and imposed by neo-colonial forms of domination (Neocosmos 2010b). External forms of intervention – whatever their intentions – rather than turning Africans into subjects of their own history have over the years frustrated their agency, and have only enabled it insofar as Africans have resisted and opposed such interventions. In the long run they have systematically transformed most Africans into victims whose main feature has been passivity, not agency. This process continues today as an effect of humanitarianism and human rights discourses (Wa Mutua 2002; Neocosmos 2006a; Mamdani 2009), but it is often prevalent among some African academics themselves (e.g., Ndlhovu-Gatsheni 2013) who, insisting on viewing African history as exclusively one of (neo-) colonial domination, and consequently on seeing Africans as victims and not agents of history, have difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that it was ordinary people who resisted colonialism and made history. Arguably, it is only the most excluded of the continent – the 'Damned of the Earth' in Fanon's terms – who can fundamentally transform it for they have the most to lose by its continuation in new forms. A recovery of African political agency then must begin from a fidelity to past events of African popular resistance and to those historical singularities of emancipation by Africans, however shortlived, which proposed alternatives in practice. In this way the silencing and occlusion of African historical events (Depelchin 2005) will be consequently overthrown and victimhood can be replaced by agency, at least in intellectual thought. For this to happen, I will argue, political subjectivity and agency must be thought in their own terms and not as simple reflections of their objective social location whatever this may be, including a reflection of the historical marginalisation and oppression of Africans.

It was the idea of the nation that lay at the core of independence and post-independence political subjectivities; in times of struggle it was understood as a pure affirmation, but with the advent of state formation it was to be proposed as a social category. The sequence of the National Liberation Struggle (NLS) Mode of politics could be said to have lasted approximately from 1945, the date of the Pan African Congress held in Manchester, up to say 1975; 1973 being the year of the assassination

of Amilcar Cabral and Salvador Allende (Hallward 2005). During this period a particular subjectivity developed through which liberation and freedom were thought of in Africa in a specific manner. Today an anti-imperialist nationalism has disappeared from public discourse with the sole exception of Islamic fundamentalism and its disastrous ethnic nihilism. This is not unconnected with the collapse of the liberatory popular nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s into state authoritarian nationalism. Yet to maintain that nationalism in Africa has failed – or more subtly perhaps that it has deployed disastrous state politics which coerce particular interests, as does Chipkin (2007), for example – in current conditions when imperial domination and its attendant ideologies are still prevalent, and when these have altered their political form to stress a ‘democratizing mission’ and ‘humanitarianism’, is simply to make it impossible to think new forms of nationalism, new forms of (non-identitarian) pan-Africanism, and consequently, to think new forms of emancipatory politics on the continent. It means either a resignation to the propaganda of liberal democracy and to the idea of the ‘end of history’ along with the final admission that ‘capitalist-parliamentarianism’ with its massive levels of poverty and oppression and its constant need for war is the best of all possible worlds with no possibility of change in sight, or a simple retreat into dogmatism which can only reduce nationalism to its statist variety. In actual fact, we need to constantly bear in mind that: ‘we will never understand what constrains us and tries to make us despair, if we do not constantly return to the fact that ours is not a world of democracy but a world of imperial conservatism using democratic phraseology’ (Badiou 2006a:137). For those of us who live in Africa and in the countries of what has become known as the ‘Global South’ there is no path to emancipation which does not confront the power of empire in whatever form it may take, which is only another way of saying that nationalism is not an obsolete emancipatory conception, far from it. The point is to distinguish it analytically and politically from the state itself.

But to affirm this is not sufficient. It is also important to analyse the character of the past sequence for which national liberation was the defining category in order to bring out the singularity of its politics and to understand its limits and decline in terms of its own categories; to make sense of why it became saturated and therefore why the idea of freedom-in-the-nation lost its original emancipatory content. This requires more than is possible to do here but what I wish to suggest is that one reason for the saturation of an emancipatory nationalist politics in Africa was the fact that these politics were not able to sustain an affirmative

conception of the nation and that the latter gradually came to refer – under the hegemony of state subjectivities – to a social category in the thought of politics as it unfolded over time. From a universal notion of national emancipation concerning humanity as a whole, we gradually get to a notion of the nation founded on indigeneity according to political criteria decided by the state. It is through a discussion of the nation in Fanon's work that this transformation of politics can be established at its clearest as he was, with the possible exception of Amilcar Cabral, the most accurate observer and theorist of this sequence on the African continent from within its own subjectivity (Neocosmos 2011a).

The manner in which African political agency in the making of history came to be thought has followed, since the 1950s, a number of important intellectual trajectories. The first such perspective was arguably that of the *Negritude* cultural movement which in its manner of asserting Africans' humanity, was constituted in reaction to the oppression of Africans in its 'assimilationist' form by French colonialism. Unsurprisingly, these ideas resonated with the situation of African Americans as the main threat to their existence was also one of assimilation. *Negritude* consisted largely of an insistence on recovering the 'whole complex of civilized values... which characterize... the Negro-African World' (Senghor 1961:83) and in postmodernist parlance it proposed an 'essentialist' mirror image of the colonial one which had stressed the emptiness or non-existence of African-ness. It did this, for example, in the idea of an 'African Personality'. While this movement was of great importance intellectually and culturally, and totally understandable in a context where assimilation was the main political threat to an independent human and political existence, it reverted to a psychological essence of 'the African' and an essence of 'African culture' (defined of course by intellectual elites) which was unable to focus on the agency of the people of the continent. It was rightly noted by Fanon that it brought together the totally different experiences of Africans in Africa and Africans in the Diaspora under the same umbrella. It thus assumed, despite their variegated experiences, that the main feature they had in common was oppression by Whites (Fanon 1990:173-74). Much as Dependency Theory which was to appear much later in the sixties and seventies, it ended up seeing the core of African history as one of Western domination to which Africans only reacted. Yet out of the African and Afro-American encounter also grew the idea of pan-Africanism which had a much more radical history at least initially when it gave birth to popular African nationalisms before it too was engulfed by the statist politics which persist to this day.

As a popular pan-Africanist subjectivity rapidly disappeared within a context in which state forms of politics asserted their hegemony, political subjectivities became much more state-focused with the result that pan-Africanism collapsed into a notion embodied in a multi-state institution. The Africanist school of history along with the modernisation school which after independence was hegemonic in all of the social sciences, asserted the centrality of the state in thought. The only Africans with agency were said to be great leaders of great kingdoms and civilizations. Yet by the 1970s, the influence of events in the Third World as a whole in which popular struggles had prevailed over repressive states (Cuba, China, Vietnam) as well as changes in intellectual trends in post-1968 France (e.g., the work of Althusser, Poulantzas, Bettleheim, Meillassoux, and others on modes of production and the state) and in the United States (e.g., in the journal *Monthly Review*) had initiated a shift to emphasising the class struggle as the motor of history or in its radical form the view that 'the masses make history'. In other words a sophisticated form of Marxism which stressed the centrality of social relations in the making of history took root in opposition to the vulgar economism of the 'development of the productive forces' inherited from official 'Soviet Marxism' as well as from Western modernisation theory à la W.W. Rostow (e.g., Temu and Swai 1981).

The central concept of what became known as the *Dar-es-Salaam debate* was thus the class struggle and the struggle against neo-colonialism; the two were in fact part of the same process in a neo-colonial country (e.g., Shivji et al 1973; Shivji 1976; Tandon 1982). While this political-economic perspective – which dovetailed nicely with post-colonial notions of development – produced crucially important intellectual work, it tended to remain within a structuralist Marxism and regularly failed to clearly appreciate the fact that in classical Marxism, 'class' had been conceived both as a socio-economic concept and a political category, and that the core issue of political agency concerned the connection between the two. The answer to this question when it was indeed addressed, was still sought in terms of a party – particularly a vanguard party (e.g. Khamisi 1983)⁵ – of intellectuals which was to provide mass movements of workers and peasants with a political perspective, to turn them into political classes 'for themselves'. In other words the idea of agency was still largely conceived within the parameters of the dominance of intellectual possessors of knowledge, of Leninism. Agency then was ultimately still thought in statist terms as parties were and are quite simply state organizations, central component parts of what is sometimes

referred to as ‘political society’; their function after all is the achievement of state power. It followed, as Mahmood Mamdani was to point out soon afterwards, that:

From such a perspective, it was difficult even to glimpse the possibility of working people in Africa becoming a creative force capable of making history. Rather, history was seen as something to be made outside of this force, in lieu of this force and ultimately to be imposed on it (Mamdani 1994:255).

Political thinking was thus still not taking place beyond the subjective parameters provided by the state, and simultaneously political agency was being thought as some kind of complex reflection of the objectively social, as social relations were seen as determinant of consciousness ‘in the last instance’ to use Althusser’s well-known formulation. After all it has been a standard view not only held by Lenin, that political parties ‘represent’ classes in the political arena.

The late 1980s and 1990s in Africa, substituted ‘civil society’ for ‘the state’ (political society) at the centre of intellectual discourse. This subjective transition occurred as an effect of two related processes. On the one hand we witnessed increased resistance ‘from below’ by popular movements of various types (such as nationality, ethnic, religious, gender and youth identity movements yet predominantly urban-based) to an increasingly authoritarian state in several African countries such as Nigeria, Uganda, Congo-Zaire and South Africa *inter alia*. Identity movements seemed to constitute the foundation for an emancipatory politics as they provided part of the resistance to state oppression during this period (Ake 2003). On the other hand, there was a worldwide transformation ‘from above’ as the old bipolar world of the ‘Cold War’ collapsed and the new neo-liberal ‘Washington consensus’ put forward the watchword of ‘liberalization’: ‘de-regulation’ of the African economies and ‘multi-partyism’ in African politics. The entrance of the name ‘civil society’ into the debate within neo-liberal discourse, seemed to presage an alternative to state authoritarianism and the possibility of the defence and extension of human rights and democracy; an optimistic mood developed as a bright future was predicted. We had now finally arrived at the neo-liberal Nirvana of the end of history, so much so that this period was sometimes referred to as the ‘second liberation’ of the continent. Intellectual work now shifted to a sustained critique of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) on African states on the one hand and to extensive studies of political identities and social movements on the other.

Yet neither of the two contested the existence of the capitalist system as such and the idea of emancipation did not feature in their vocabulary.⁶

The neo-liberal critique of the state which found political expression in the new ‘Washington Consensus’ was dismissive of the African state as corrupt, illegitimate and unrepresentative of the general will. The latter was supposedly represented by civil society. This was sometimes empirically false as often it was the state which had opposed ethnic chauvinism and supported communitarianism as, for example, in Nigeria. But in this way the old authoritarian and secular nationalist state was weakened and more easily transformed into a Western-compliant authoritarian state in a democratic shell. Civil society organisations (social movements and NGOs) soon came to work broadly within state political subjectivities; in any case they had to in order to survive. Thus, it soon transpired that the central referent in an attempt to conceptualise African emancipation could not simply be the state-civil society dichotomy. Civil society is a standard domain of neo-liberal capitalism and its politics, the existence of which only varies in intensity according to these organised interests’ ability to operate. As resistance within civil society is founded in thought upon the existence of differences – the organised interests of the division of labour and hierarchy – it is central to modern social organisation, a fact emphasised incidentally by all the founders of Western sociology.

African critical intellectuals were rightly suspicious of the term ‘civil society’ especially as it seemed to imply a Manichean dualism within neo-liberal discourse, the dark side of which was said to be the state. The post-colonial state, it was maintained, had been, despite its authoritarianism, a nationalist state which at least had defended national sovereignty in some important ways as well as provided social subsidies for the needy, features which were now rapidly receding into the mists of time as Western domination increased within a newly globalised World. Neo-liberal conceptions of democracy were also contested and it was hoped that the form of democracy – the missing term of political economy – could be debated as its meaning was being subjected to popular contestation (Mamdani 1987; Anyang’ Nyong’o 1987; Chole and Ibrahim 1995; Ake 2003; Neocosmos 1998).⁷ This was not to happen, at least not at any real depth, as both movements and intellectuals finally all accepted the baptismal nomination of the new state form as the ‘democratic state’. The old political elites, predictably with Western support, embraced the name and were able in most cases to survive the transition to democracy with their power intact. The enthusiasm for a genuine change in which the popular masses would be able to finally be the agents of their own

history gradually faded as mass poverty and political despondency increased. The disappearance of ‘meta-narratives’, we were told, was all for the better as they were ‘essentialist’; the postmodern condition, now written without the hyphen, was fluid, classless and characterised by clashes of identity. The study of identity politics became the order of the day as religious and ethnic identities in particular were said to be core features of the new globalized world as ‘belonging’ provided the only way of accessing scarcer resources: material, cultural and political (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000).

Any Idea of emancipatory politics receded into the distance to be seemingly replaced by atheoretical empiricism in academia and a rapid rise of fundamentalisms – contrary to the predictions of modernisation theory – in politics. It soon became clear that the terms ‘progress’ or ‘progressive’ were no longer part of scientific or political vocabulary, while it soon became impossible to find anyone who did not swear to being a democrat. In such conditions the term ‘democracy’ itself could only become suspect for it no longer implied a better world for the majority – there was no *demos* – but formed the core name of a state and imperial consensus in which vast inequalities and continued oppressive relations were tolerated as largely inevitable. In fact, democracy now characterised the politics of the new form of empire (e.g., Hardt and Negri 2001) as, together with humanitarianism, it became imposed on the World through the exercise of military power if necessary. While the ‘civilising mission’ of empire had ended in the 1960s, we were now witnessing a new ‘democratizing mission’ (Wamba-dia-Wamba 2007) through reference to which Western power was being re-deployed in the rest of the world (ex-Yugoslavia, Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Libya, etc.) as the West faced its newly perceived enemy of ‘Islamic Fundamentalism’. In no case has it been thought necessary to think the importance of a *demos* or popular social foundation for the formation of a democratic state; formal attributes – elections, multi-partyism and the ubiquitous notion of ‘good governance’ – were considered sufficient to qualify for entry into the enchanted world of state democracy and globalised neo-liberalism.

During this period, the most important studies of popular political subjectivity concerned social movements and were, in the best work, given a political inflection. Social movements were seen as the expression of popular political agency, ‘the subjective factor in African development’ (Mamdani, Mkandawire and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1993:112), and regularly counterposed to NGOs often visualised as the bearers of a

neo-colonial culture of clientelism. Yet in all this work, political agency was understood as a reflection of the objectively social, of the specific dimensions of the social division of labour. There was never any attempt to conceive subjectivity in terms of itself, understandably perhaps because of the assumption that this meant a collapse into (social) psychology (and hence into idealism), the only discipline to be understood as attempting an account of the subjective – as after all it is psychology which is said to regulate consciousness.⁸

The justly famous volume on African social movements edited by Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba (1995) was quickly followed by various studies by Mamdani (1996, 2001, 2009) in which the colonial state and the production of political identities were theorised in a manner which rightly detached them from political economy, but which nevertheless focused exclusively on their institutionalisation as an exclusive effect of state politics, while simultaneously assuming a clearly demarcated political realm in African peasant societies governed by tradition. Groups were said to acquire their political identities largely because they were interpellated by the state in an identitarian (or communitarian) manner; we were not told if there was any resistance to such state interpellation by alternative non-identity politics. Little or no space then was devoted to analysing the political contradictions within tradition or popular culture, some sides of which may have exhibited a popular non-statist perspective; thus the impression was given in this body of work that little or no agency had been shown by people in their process of identity formation (Neocosmos 2003). Yet as many studies have indeed convincingly suggested, tradition is always more or less contested from within, invented, reinvented and ‘imagined’, as it is itself the outcome of different political subjectivities which affect power relations, themselves constantly in flux (e.g., Ranger, 1985b, 1993; Vail, 1989). Moreover, a clear-cut domain or sphere of the political is rarely in existence within tradition, as power relations are intimately imbricated within cultural, economic and other relations of domination in African society. Mamdani’s work was concerned with thinking the political but not agency and subjectivity, in other words not with thinking politics as such (Mamdani 1996, 2001, 2009).⁹

The predominant effect of this crisis in thought and of the perceived inadequacies of classism has been the uncritical adoption of neoliberal notions such as those of ‘civil society’, ‘human rights’, ‘modernity’ and ‘identity’ into radical leftist discourse. Of course, this has been facilitated by what has become known as the ‘language turn’ in social

thought worldwide. The idea of ‘political identities’ has been perhaps the dominant intellectual notion here. But discourses and identities are simply reflections of the structure of interests; for Foucault, they are themselves in a sense the structure. Studies of political identities have become overwhelmingly dominant in the social sciences and humanities today in the Global South in general and in Africa in particular within all disciplines. Thinkers as disparate as Ali Mazrui, Achille Mbembe, Mahmood Mamdani, Valentin Mudimbe, Kwame Appiah and Paul Zeleza (not to mention a myriad of feminist writers) have all, in their different ways, thought African society, state and politics in terms of identities: personal, social and political.¹⁰ One of the difficulties they have tried to confront has been termed the ‘essentialism’ of identities which refers all thought to an unchanging kernel or essence of the identity in question which evidently de-historicizes and naturalizes it. Attempts have been made to overcome this difficulty with reference to the relational side of identity but unfortunately these do not overcome the problem, for relations presuppose the existence of differences and only stress their interconnections even though these may be given a central effectiveness; neither does the notion of ‘hybridity’ or the recognition of a complex multiplicity of identities.¹¹

Africans, of course, have been overwhelmingly analysed – by outsiders as well as by themselves – in terms of their social location in Africa and in terms of the latter’s continental place: in ‘human evolution’, in (colonial) history, in the world economy, in its collective culture and identity and even in its ‘personality’ (*inter alia* its ‘darkness’ or its ‘blackness’).¹² The study of identities has simply become pan-disciplinary in Africa today. Displacement – the politics of excess beyond social location – has rarely, if ever, provided the foundation for a history of Africans, and yet it is surely displacement which is the truly universal phenomenon of politics and hence of history. The once common statement that it is people who make history has largely been forgotten; it is time to revive it and to insist that people think. In this context, the consequences for thinking emancipatory politics of recent events in North Africa and the Middle East need to be urgently drawn.

In Africa then the study of political identities largely distinguished itself from an apolitical postmodernism, but remained caught within the parameters of state-centredness as it was the state which was evidently seen as the prime creator of such identities through a process of institutionalisation, exclusion, cooption or whatever. Concurrently, it also gradually became apparent in most African countries that democracy as a

form of state was more oligarchic than democratic, as states (and powerful elites) ignored or bypassed their own democratic rules systematically, and that longstanding popular-national grievances such as access to land (e.g., Zimbabwe, South Africa) or employment and housing (e.g., South Africa) were not adequately addressed by the state or were addressed only in the interests of the few.¹³ These failures have brought forth a contradiction between democratic and national rights, with the result that the issue of freedom remains on the agenda, as the excluded themselves categorically state when they are allowed to express themselves such as in the case of *Abahlali base Mjondolo* who mourn the absence of freedom on ‘Unfreedom day’.¹⁴

Yet this demand to partake in the benefits of democracy and to access the benefits of freedom much trumpeted in the case of South Africa, for example, now often takes place in a situation of political disorientation where the usual ideological signposts are no longer of help as the standard dichotomies – left-right, state-market¹⁵, nationalist-socialist – have become largely meaningless, while the newly-arisen contradiction between nationalism and democracy, characteristic of many countries, remains often subterranean, largely unrecognized and hence under-discussed. As a result of the absence of an emancipatory discourse in the political arena, we are today confronted with a political crisis as the masses turn on themselves in a frenzy of ethnic, religious or xenophobic violence (e.g. Kenya 2007, South Africa 2008, Nigeria 2009/2010, to mention the most evident episodes). We are simultaneously confronted with an intellectual crisis, as those entrusted with the task of asking critical questions and providing an alternative *Idea* to the vacuity of the democratic consensus, seem content to proliferate identity studies and to appeal to statist solutions wringing their hands in intellectual despair.

By the 1980s Mamdani, Mkandawire and Wamba-dia-Wamba (1993:112) were noting in their co-authored brief but important critique of the limits of (Marxist) political economy, that ‘if democratic practice and democratic theory is to be popular it must not only come to terms with the class principle... It must also come to terms with the rights of political minorities in Africa’ whether those of ethnicities, women or youth. But the authors were correct in an empirical sense only. They overlooked the fact that the working-class in the Marxist tradition was not only conceived as a socio-economic category with particularistic interests beloved of sociologists; they forgot that it had also been theorized politically as a universal subject of history, that in its political form, the proletariat was seen by the classics of Marxism as the only social force capable of

emancipating *humanity as a whole*. The political struggles of the workers were thus not only deemed to be self-liberating but also understood to provide the foundation for the liberation of the whole people – the ‘uprooting’ of the class system as such – precisely because, as Jacques Rancière (1995) has put it, the proletariat was in nineteenth century Europe ‘the part of no part’, the collectivity which, because of its exclusion from politics, could only emancipate itself by destroying the whole capitalist system and hence emancipating humanity in the process.¹⁶

None of the other identities subsequently added onto that of the working-class by (largely postmodernist) social analysis (e.g., women’s movements, ethnic and religious movements, youth movements, environmentalism, etc) have ever been said to fulfil in themselves the same universal function. However oppressed the groups they represented may have been, and however radical their struggles, these have not generally been said to have gone beyond the right to be included in the existing capitalist-parliamentary system, the existing framework of power relations from which they had hitherto been excluded. If these identities or movements ever acquired an anti-capitalist character it has largely been due to their incorporating more universalistic ideologies such as nationalism or socialism for example, external to their particular identity politics during periods of mass emancipatory upsurge such as in urban South Africa in the 1980s.

Thus the adding of ‘new identities’ and ‘new’ social movements to ‘old’ class identities and movements could not replace the classist politics of the Marxist tradition with any alternative emancipatory vision; it amounted to a purely additive empiricist observation bereft of no more theory than the assertion of the inclusion of all into an existing democratic state to be ‘radicalised’ by the left (e.g., Laclau and Mouffe 1985). At best we were provided with the liberal idea according to which respect for or tolerance of the ‘Other’ within a ‘multicultural society’ (the South African version of which became known as the ‘Rainbow Nation’) could pretend to be the norm. Unfortunately, such ‘respect for the Other’ it soon became noticeable, meant only tolerance of those others who agreed with one’s own idea of tolerance, not of ‘intolerant cultures’ or of those deemed to be ‘outsiders’ (Badiou 2001). Such an incoherent idea could only provide the foundation for a hypocritical unprincipled politics (Žižek 1999, 2008). Yet the roots of this idea are arguably to be found in the deeply ingrained de-politicising effects of social analysis, a fact which we have great reticence in admitting or even recognising today as we take such effects for granted.

The fundamental problem of identity studies from the perspective of emancipation is that political identities are necessarily derived from social location; they 'represent' such social location or place in what is termed 'the political'. As a result, identities can only reproduce such places subjectively along with their accompanying hierarchy, thereby leaving a universal notion of emancipation (equality, freedom, justice, dignity) unthought and indeed unthinkable outside market-capitalist and state-democratic norms. Simultaneously, the absence of a thought of politics beyond identity, the inability to think a politics of excess, has also had other problematic effects. Central to these has been precisely the inability to break free from state modes of thought, from 'seeing like a state' as James Scott (1998) puts it. It is important to understand that irrespective of which (class or other) interests control it, regardless of the contradictions within it and independently of the form it may take (authoritarian, democratic, colonial, postcolonial, etc.), the state is and remains a set of institutions which create, manage and reproduce differences and hierarchies. It regulates not only the various interests founded on a social division of labour but also manages differences so that any given situation is reproduced. The state can be little more than a machine for creating identities as the latter are simply the subjective representations of interests.

State politics then concern the representation of interests (by parties, interest groups, social movements, ethnicities, NGOs) and the management of such interests thus restricting them to controllable limits. State politics can therefore not be concerned with excess over identities, or change beyond what exists. For state politics, all historical change can only be thought as being natural and objective (economic progress, development, modernisation, etc.) and obviously as linear and teleological. For emancipatory politics, change from the current situation can only be primarily subjective as it has to overcome place on the understanding that there is no end to history or for that matter to difference. In the absence of concepts to enable a thinking of politics, we are invariably drawn into the politics of the state and the tyranny of the objective so that political choices become impossible given that politics becomes guided if not determined by the objective course of history.

What this argument implies also is that there can be no subject of history. There is of course a subject of politics which is always collective, but it is the result of a process of conscious political self-creation or affirmation – a process of subjectivising. Therefore there can be no way of filling a spontaneous immanent Hegelian process of 'in itself-for itself' with other newly invented supposed subjects of history along the lines of

the ‘multitudes’ proposed by Hardt and Negri (2001, 2004) for example. In fact, such immanence denies the necessity to think a political process whereby people can think for themselves and collectively become a political subject; invariably this comes back to thinking politics in terms of representation by parties or movements and to asserting that real change is impossible for people cannot think independently of representation.

Another important consequence of the above argument is that we can no longer think politics as existing exclusively within a clearly demarcated domain, that of ‘the political’, i.e. that of the state and its appendages. The political or the civic or the ‘house of power’ (to use Max Weber’s suggestive phrase¹⁷) is, of course, said to be the domain within which conflicts of interest are deployed, represented and managed. Politics cannot be thought of as concerning power, for to do so is to restrict them to the state. Even more interesting perhaps for the arguments which follow is that the discourses and practices which are to be labelled ‘political’ cannot be so labelled simply because they explicitly deal with identifiable objects of state politics (states, nations, trade unions, movements, citizens, NGOs, etc.). There are two points of note here. The first is that a clearly demarcated domain of the political cannot always be assumed to exist as in the obvious case of ‘traditional society’ in Africa; a second is that the various idioms and discourses deployed by people in affirming their politics, in presenting themselves on the ‘stage of history’ are not always evidently ‘political’ in the sense that they may invoke ‘traditional’, ‘religious’ or other forms of language which do not count as ‘politics’ for the liberal (or Marxist) episteme. In other words, the idea of the political, emanating as it does from liberal roots, has a clear neo-colonial content to it. Moreover, of course, the form of the state today in Africa, as elsewhere, is one where the liberal distinction between the public and the private has not been apparent for some time now. The national or public interest today has largely disappeared, smothered by the (over)weight of the private (Neocosmos 2011b).

Does the fact that we can no longer seriously maintain today that there is a subject of history of whatever kind (the working-class, the people, the masses, the nation, the multitudes), mean that all emancipatory political thought must be simply discarded? Does the extinction of the idea of an emancipatory working-class politics (in other words of ‘classism’) worldwide mean the disappearance of emancipatory thought today? Is the view that people make history dead? These questions clearly seem to be answered in the affirmative in recent thinking regarding the solutions proposed to political crises on the African continent by, for example,

Mahmood Mamdani and Achille Mbembe, two of Africa's best known radical public intellectuals whose works emanate from quite distinct intellectual and theoretical traditions, but who, in the past, had been very much concerned with the thinking of history from the perspective of a popular political subject. In both cases, the idea of popularly-founded solutions, which had been central to African radical thought in the second half of the twentieth century, has been abandoned. The solutions proposed to us today are invariably state-focused with no emancipatory content whatsoever. For Mamdani (2009) it seems to be a question of democratising the state itself or relying on the AU, for Mbembe (2010) it is a matter of appealing to the West. While Fanon (1990:159), for example, had stressed again and again that the people he refers to as 'honest intellectuals' can only come to the conclusion that 'everything depends on [the masses]' and that 'the magic hands [of the demiurge] are finally only the hands of the people', radical intellectuals today have discarded the central tenet of any emancipatory politics which is to 'have confidence in the masses', in whatever way this may be understood, and replaced it by a deeply seated 'demophobia'¹⁸.

People Think

An emancipatory political subjectivity or consciousness can only exist 'in excess' of social relations and of the social division of labour; otherwise any change from the extant cannot possibly be the object of thought; such a politics cannot therefore be understood as a 'reflection' or 'expression' of existing social groupings, their divisions and hierarchies. Without this 'excessive' character which 'interrupts' the reproduction of the extant, politics can only be sought in the social itself and end up being simply conflated with 'the political', with the state and its political community. Badiou (2005d:2) himself enjoins us to begin to understand that a 'political process is not an expression, a singular expression, of the objective reality but it is in some sense separated from this reality. The political process is not a process of expression, but a process of separation'. Yet this process is more accurately described as an exception, as separation can be equated with an intervention from outside the situation (such as divine intervention, colonial power or economic growth for example):

It is very important to distinguish separation from ... an exception. An exception remains internal to the situation (made of legal, regular and structural data). It is an immanent point of transcendence, a point which, from within a general immanence, functions as if it were exterior to the situation. (Badiou 2012-2013, 16 January 2013, my translation).

It is this process of exception which I have called ‘excessive’ here. Emancipatory politics can ultimately only exist ‘in excess’ both of state and of (civil) society, the domain of the organized form of that social division of labour. In fact, such a notion of ‘excess’ is arguably present in Marx’s conception of the political consciousness of ‘communist proletarians’ referred to in the *Communist Manifesto* as, in his words, ‘they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement’ (Marx and Engels, 1848/1972:62). In other words, whereas Marx maintained that it was indeed ‘social being’ that determined ‘social consciousness’, this process was not mechanically or universally applicable; some were able to embody an ‘excess’ in consciousness over their social being in order to think beyond it. Such people were communists who could imagine another world and understand the contradictions of capitalism which gave rise to it.

The overwhelming consequence of the current phase of neo-colonialism known as globalisation in the sphere of politics has been the fetishism of democracy, understood in its hegemonic liberal Western state form. Yet recent popular upsurges in North Africa *inter alia* have shown that the popular demand for democratisation cannot simply be equated with Westernisation. In post-Apartheid South Africa the democratic fetish is so overwhelming today that it has become extremely difficult to question the equation of such state democracy with freedom itself. Yet one courageous popular organisation in particular – Abahlali base Mjondolo – has done so in practice, taking a principled stand not to participate in elections and not to celebrate a non-existing freedom for the poor. In fact, in that country it has been popular organisations and intellectuals emanating from grassroots struggles, not the university variety, who have been at the forefront of a questioning of democracy; academics have so far been overwhelmingly mesmerised by the trappings of state ideology.

It is sometimes quite demoralising to see the extent to which some intellectuals are simply cut off from those sites in which ordinary people – particularly today those living in informal shack settlements, the most ‘lumpen’ according to Mbembe – are themselves attempting to find solutions because, after all, they are the first to suffer the consequences of the crises which intellectuals are analysing from their positions of relative comfort. The work of the people of Abahlali base Mjondolo in South Africa – for example, the shack-dwellers movement based in Durban – who are intellectuals in their own right, has gone in some ways much further in assessing the crisis of the African continent than many professional

academics. What seems to be underlying the thinking of intellectuals today in Africa is fundamentally a ‘fear of the masses’, what Rancière (2005) refers to as ‘demophobia’, a fear which blocks any attempt at understanding the existing world through the evacuation of politics from thought, and which consequently makes it impossible to begin to think an alternative politics in the present. On the other hand, the ‘masses’ themselves are quite capable of thought. As Abahlali affirmed in 2008:

There is only one human race. Our struggle and every real struggle is to put the human being at the centre of society, starting with the worst off (sic). An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person where ever they may find themselves... We hear that the political analysts are saying that the poor must be educated about xenophobia. Always the solution is to ‘educate the poor’. When we get cholera we must be educated about washing our hands when in fact we need clean water. When we get burnt we must be educated about fire when in fact we need electricity. This is just a way of blaming the poor for our suffering. We want land and housing in the cities, we want to go to university, we want water and electricity – we don’t want to be educated to be good at surviving poverty on our own... It is time to ask serious questions about why it is that money and rich people can move freely around the world while everywhere the poor must confront razor wire, corrupt and violent police, queues and relocation or deportation. In South Africa some of us are moved out of the cities to rural human dumping grounds called relocation sites while others are moved all the way out of the country. Some of us are taken to transit camps and some of us are taken to Lindela¹⁹. The destinations might be different but it is the same kind of oppression. Let us all educate ourselves on these questions so that we can all take action. (<http://abahlali.org/node/3582>)

Here is a statement from poor people from the slums which is clear in its politics of equality; the universal Idea of equality is evidently their central concern and the statement is not concerned with ‘interest’ or ‘identity’ both of which are clearly exceeded. It is clear then, as Lazarus (2013:115, *my translation*) insists that ‘the subjective power of people is a thought and not a simple reflection of their social or material conditions’. The importance of making politics thinkable then must be to make appropriate concepts available in order to understand the thought of politics of people and to begin to think emancipatory political subjectivities along with them.

In order to begin to overturn this demophobia and to simultaneously develop critical thinking which also questions past failures in attempts at emancipation I propose to begin from a simple affirmation that ‘people

think'. What I mean is quite simply that people (anyone) inhabiting particular circumstances do not simply 'react' to their social environment through expressing their social location subjectively. In other words collective political agency, which is what concerns me here, and the various political subjectivities (or forms of consciousness) which it deploys is not simply reducible to the social categories within which people live. After all, rationality is an attribute of all without exception. It is possible for people located within social categories to think beyond the confines of these categories and places which are themselves situated within a specific division of labour, hierarchy and social structure. In other words, 'consciousness' does always 'reflect' or 'express' social location; it may transcend it, move beyond it, or even undermine it or 'puncture a hole' in it. That thought or consciousness which is not simply reflective of place can be called 'excessive'. It is the ability which everyone has to reason. In Ranajit Guha's work, for example, peasant rebellions in colonial India are shown to illustrate the rationality of peasants whose consciousness does not simply reflect their social location. In Jacques Rancière's work, workers in France in the 1840s are shown to write philosophy. In C.L.R. James's important work, *The Black Jacobins* (and even more strongly in Carolyn Fick's work), slaves in San Domingo/Haiti show their collective capacity to strategise and reason.²⁰ All these examples show that the excluded can indeed move 'out of place' and act in a manner that is seemingly outside their limited interests and identities. Just because people are workers, it does not mean that they will claim higher wages through a union. Just because people are poor, it does not mean that they have to be led by others who know what is best for them. It was arguably such a collective process of excess which characterised the 1980s as people from all walks of life came together beyond the places allocated to them by the Apartheid state, in order to construct an alternative in practice. It is this process which is sometimes referred to as 'politicization'.

It is possible to understand a process of subjectivation as a process in itself, influenced both by location as well as by 'excess'. Political subjectivities are not simply deducible from the social, although they are always related to the social in one way or another. An 'excessive subjectivity' is always 'exceeding' some local context from which it develops a universal subjectivity beyond interest, such as equality. It is often affirmed by mass popular struggle, as Fanon had noted of national consciousness in Algeria in the 1950s. The crucial point is to emphasise the fact that the complex relations between the socially objective and

the subjective are not to be reduced to an ‘expressive’ relation. It may be ‘expressive’ or ‘excessive’ or both; this is particularly common in periods of mass popular political upsurge such as during the 1980s in South Africa or recently in Egypt.

Political subjectivities based on interest (identity) are clearly the most common as interest governs most of life in society. But the more political subjectivities begin to exceed identity, the more possibility it is for them to take on an emancipatory content, although of course this is never guaranteed. A politics of excess is always founded on universal principles, and appeals to a register which concerns humanity in general, for example the following statement by Toussaint L’Ouverture in 1801:

It is not a circumstantial freedom given as a concession to us alone which we require, but the adoption of the absolute principle that any man born red, black or white cannot be the property of his fellow man (Toussaint L’Ouverture cit., Aimé Césaire 1981:278, my translation)

Edward Saïd (1993:280) has rightly noted that according to C.L.R. James’s account, Toussaint:

appropriates the principles of the Revolution not as a Black man but as a human, and he does so with a dense historical awareness of how in finding the language of Diderot, Rousseau, and Robespierre one follows predecessors creatively, using the same words, employing inflections that transformed rhetoric into actuality.

We can therefore see how identity is transcended in emancipatory political sequences. On the other hand, all struggles for inclusion within the existing system or for a greater share of resources for a particular group are identity politics. There is no normative statement intended here. These may include struggles for (justifiable) increases in wages as well as (unjustifiable) nationalist demands for xenophobic exclusion. One example, worthwhile mentioning is the recent Marikana moment of worker rebellion in South Africa which arguably was constituted by both expressive politics (e.g., a wage demand) and excessive politics (workers can organise themselves independently of union and party representation).²¹

In addition, the expressive and the excessive mutually condition each other, making subjectivity even more complex to understand. The rapidity with which a political subjectivity of non-racialism in the 1980s was replaced by a politics of xenophobia and exclusion from the early 1990s in South Africa may be illustrative of this. It is also worth noting that it is only through the exceptional subjectivity characterised by excess over place that the ‘normal’ or ‘habitual’ can be fully understood. For example, there is no way that slavery could be properly understood

in the absence of the subjectivity of freedom enacted by the slaves of San Domingo/Haiti. At that time, as Trouillot (1995) has pointed out, the existing conceptions of freedom simply could not make sense of those events, a fact which points to some of the limits of Enlightenment thought. When today Abahlali baseMjondolo say that they are not taken seriously as citizens by constituted power in and out of the state, when they say that there is no freedom for the poor and all they experience is ‘unfreedom’, they should be listened to so that we do not make the same mistakes as the Enlightenment thinkers did and limit freedom to narrow parameters defined by power.

From Thinking Political Identities to Re-Thinking Freedom

Central to my argument has been the idea of a notion of alternative politics of emancipation – of freedom – being necessarily a politics ‘at a distance’ from the state, at a distance from identity because the latter simply embodies the former. It is on an elaboration and clarification of this notion that I wish to conclude.

From within the Marxist tradition, it was Lenin who addressed the most forcefully the issue of identifying the subjectivity of popular movements and its limits. It is useful to begin from Lenin’s formulations in order to transcend them. For Lenin, trade union (and by extension social movement) politics were restricted to representing a particular interest in the division of labour, i.e., an identity as we would say today. A universal politics – one with universal appeal because it addresses all forms of state oppression – could only be developed from within a party. Such an emancipatory politics were to be social democratic politics which confront the oppressive system of capitalism as such and all its ramifications represented by the state. The excessive feature of politics (over identity) for Lenin consists precisely in this excess over the particular interests of the division of labour as expressed by social movements. Hence for him, the party which is national (in the first instance and then international) enables a politics of excess over the particularity of workers’ identitarian interests and the ‘leadership’ of the people as a whole in their struggle for freedom.

Workers are socially located; the proletariat on the other hand is a political subject with a universal subjectivity. Constituting the proletariat as a subject is a political process which can only be undertaken by a party opposed to the whole existing order; therefore such subjectivity could not be ‘spontaneous’ in Lenin’s terms. The party is founded on a sophisticated division of labour and made up of professionals (professional

revolutionaries) not amateur part-time ‘craftsmen’ of politics. Following Karl Kautsky, politics is thought of as brought from the outside into the workers’ movement (Lenin 1902:78-9). ‘Trade unionist politics of the working-class is precisely *bourgeois politics* of the working class’ (p.83, *emphasis in original*)—today we would say a form of state politics—because of the fact that they are limited by ‘spontaneity’ which only represents the particularities of the division of labour – i.e. identities in today’s parlance. The political subject – i.e., the proletariat which equals workers imbued with social-democratic consciousness – is produced for Lenin only via a party (Lih 2008). The party is the condition for this subjectification, it both represents class interests and also transforms the objective class into a subjective political agent; there is no Hegelian ‘class in itself/class for itself’ formulation here. Such a party can only be a political vanguard and lead ‘the assault on the government *in the name of the entire people*’ (Lenin 1902:89, *emphasis added*) if it develops independent positions on all the issues of the day. In this way a clear ‘proletarian’ class politics can be demarcated from those of all other classes and such politics can provide ‘leadership’ to the whole people against oppression. The social-democratic organizer then should not be emulating a ‘trade-union secretary but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression...’ (p. 80).

What can be retained from this argument is the particularistic character of social movements (and all organisations of civil society, including NGOs etc.) and the identity politics derived therefrom. Movements normally engage in identity politics, there is no excess over interest or place in an identity politics of interest expressing the social division of labour. Emancipatory politics of necessity must transcend identity politics. Parties, of course, are concerned with attaining state power; that excess over identity which they propose does not, however, consist of an excess over state politics and thought, for they too represent interests, in the case of the RSDLP, those of the proletariat according to Lenin. For Lenin then, and to use contemporary language, party politics is expressive of class interests in ‘political society’ (‘the political’), i.e., within the state, social movements, represent interests within ‘civil society’ where particularisms dominate. The subjective conditions of existence of parties are then state politics – a politics which is concerned precisely with exclusively thinking interests, identities and differences. It follows that parties cannot overcome identities but are fed by them for the state sees itself as the only national universal and sees parties as interest-bearing. At most, the state can only think a national identity, not

an egalitarian universal subjectivity. The notion of an egalitarian state is an oxymoron. State parties (or party-states) do not overcome the problem of excess over interest.

This is precisely what Fanon notes immediately after independence in Africa when he observes the subjective change from pan-Africanism to national chauvinism. The collapse of nationalism into a statist project is accounted for by Fanon with reference primarily to the collapse of liberatory pan-Africanism – ‘African unity, that vague formula, yet one to which the men and women of Africa were passionately attached’ (Fanon 1990:128) – into a vulgar xenophobic chauvinism after independence, thus: ‘we observe a permanent see-saw between African unity which fades quicker and quicker into the mists of oblivion and a heartbreaking return to chauvinism in its most bitter and detestable form’ (p.126). The reason for this process is to be found, for Fanon primarily (but not exclusively), in the politics of economic interest expressed by the national bourgeoisie who wish to move into the posts and the businesses vacated by the departing Europeans. As a result, they assert a form of nationalism based on race and indigeneity in order to exclude; their concern is with access to resources, and a claim to indigeneity is, from their perspective, the only legitimate way of privately accessing such resources ('indigenization'). Fanon notes that ‘the racial prejudice of the young national bourgeoisie is a racism of defence, based on fear’ (p.131). In any case, whether the concern is accumulation or whether it is asserting a ‘narrow’ racially-based nationalism (p.131), ‘the sole slogan of the bourgeoisie is “Replace the foreigner!”’ (p.127). As a result:

The working class of the towns, the masses of the unemployed, the small artisans and craftsmen for their part line up behind this nationalist attitude; but in all justice let it be said, they only follow in the steps of their bourgeoisie. If the national bourgeoisie goes into competition with the Europeans, the artisans and craftsmen start a fight against non-national Africans... the foreigners are called to leave; their shops are burned, their street stalls are wrecked... (1990:125).

The nation now refers to something else than a purely popular subjective affirmation; it refers to a social category founded on indigeneity. Who is and who is not an Algerian, a Ghanaian, an Ivorian, now becomes defined in terms of a state politics founded on emphasising indigeneity: birth, descent, history, race or ethnicity. We should note then that it is not simply a class politics which is at stake here, one representing economic interest, but more broadly a politics associated with ascribing the nation to an objective social category of the indigenous; a politics concerned with maintaining

divisions, hierarchies and boundaries: in sum a state politics. It is thus the state which defines the nation in social terms and which is unable to sustain a purely affirmative polities. The nation is now a representation, no longer a presentation. At the same time, it becomes apparent that this statist way of defining the nation is gradually naturalised in thought, as given by history and communitarian ‘belonging’ (birth, descent, etc). Yet it should be abundantly clear not only that it is the effect of a state form of politics but that such naturalisation is made possible by its social imbeddedness; for it is impossible to naturalise the purely subjective without first locating it in the social, without objectifying it.

In sum then, if an emancipatory politics is again to become thinkable, we must be prepared to move beyond some of the cherished assumptions of the social sciences. In particular, we need to supplement existing analyses of subjectivity as representing social place with an understanding of a politics of excess – in other words, with a politics which transcends the representation of interests as reflected in identities and as reproduced by state politics. Of course, such excessive politics are exceptional; they are not the habitual state of affairs. But in order to think emancipation we need to think beyond the habitual. Political subjectivities, from an emancipatory perspective, must be understood in their own terms as such excess is not reducible to social categories, but is only the product of reason. In this manner a process of subjectivation can be recognised and studied rather than simply assuming that all political subjectivity is simply reflective of the social. For this reason, among others, the social sciences have, in Rancière’s terms, spoken for those who do not speak. For Rancière, it is precisely from the practical exception that one must begin if one wishes to understand political subjectivities, for it is such exceptions which show that people speak for themselves, contrary to much social science which sees itself as speaking for people who do not speak for themselves:

The normal is when people remain in their place and when it all continues as before. Nevertheless everything of note in the history of humanity functions according to the principle that something happens, that people begin to speak.... If we are speaking of the ‘workers’ voice’, we speak from the point of people who speak. That seems to be a truism. Yet it is contrary to a certain scientific method which requires that when we speak of the voice of the people, we are speaking of those who do not speak ... the point essentially is to speak for those who do not speak. This is as a much a strategy of top politicians as it is of historians or sociologists, to say that the voice which counts is the voice of those who do not speak.
(Rancière 2012:194, *my translation*).

Of course, an excessive politics (an excessive subjectivity) is rare and always excessive over something with the result that a politics expressive of interest and an excessive politics always mutually condition each other, one could say in a dialectical way. But if we are to understand that what people fight for is their dignity as human beings and not simply their economic interests, then we must as social scientists begin to listen when people speak and to understand that when they do they do not simply reflect their place, but that they sometimes speak ‘out of place’ for they are capable of thought. ‘To redefine a universe of possibilities is *in fine* to re-insert the possible into the real, to subtract from the idea of necessity’ (Rancière 2012:258, *my translation*).

We need, therefore, to make speech visible when it occurs; we need to open up theoretical space. If the excessive is nonexistent or minimal, only the expressive of the social is visible and appears as reflecting the phenomena in existence. For this subjectivity, what exists is the only thing which can exist, real change and equality are impossible, only some forms of ‘evolution – progress, development, modernization – are possible as the habitual regularisation of social hierarchies by the state remains. With the inclusion of the excess, of the exceptional – when it exists – the extant, the expressive, the habitual becomes visible for what it is: only one possibility among many at the end of a continuum of possibilities which exceed it to various extents. We need to think a Pan-Africanism of peoples, not a ‘Pan-Africanism of states’ (which is also an oxymoron!), a non-identitarian Pan-Africanism ‘at a distance’ from the state – i.e., in excess of state thinking. After all, it was this kind of Pan-Africanism which was at the foundation of popular nationalisms on the continent.

Notes

1. This article is culled from my forthcoming book: *Thinking Freedom in Africa: subjective excess, historical sequences and emancipatory politics* to be published by UKZN Press.
2. The only significant theorist to have drawn a parallel between South Africa and North Africa I know of was Mahmood Mamdani in *Pambazuka News*, see Mamdani (2011b).
3. For those who may be tempted to believe that Hegel’s views of Africans may no longer be in vogue, I can only refer to the outrageously patronising speech which ex-President Sarkozy of France delivered on the 26 July 2007 in Dakar, Senegal and the reactions which followed, for the details of which see Ndiaye, ed.), 2008. Inter alia, he says (p.80): ‘The drama of Africa consists in the fact that African Man did not sufficiently enter history’ (i.e. that of humanity).

- 4 In this context it seems to me that the common reference to 'the colonial subject' is an oxymoron. It is largely an absurdity as the colonial state (and indeed neo-colonialism today), to use an Althusserian expression, did not and could not 'interpellate' the colonised as subjects, but only as non-subjects or partial subjects (sub-humans, children, victims, etc). In the (neo-) colonial context, full subjecthood has only been acquired through opposition to such interpellation, through exceeding this subjectively.
- 5 Lukas Khamisi was the collective pseudonym for some participants in the Dar-es-Salaam debate.
- 6 The studies of these issues in Africa are numerous but see in particular those published under the auspices of the *Nordic Africa Institute* in Uppsala, Sweden in the 1990s and by CODESRIA into the twenty-first century up to the present which have been of high academic quality. The fact that these studies rarely questioned capitalism itself but only its neo-liberal form is probably best summed up in Mkandawire's (2001) contention that Africa can indeed develop under capitalism (or Mbeki's - the second South African president – assertion that Africa can and should appropriate modernity, presumably in the manner his own country has with half of its population living in poverty). Insofar as an alternative was proposed in this literature it was one which argued for a state and a form of capitalism more responsive to the national interest and for a form of democracy which should be more inclusive. The problem to be noted here is not whether or not African economies can develop under capitalism, after all the connection between capitalism and Europe has been definitely and permanently broken with the rise of China, India and Brazil as global economic powers; rather, the horizon of thought in these instances is unjustifiably restrictive to say the least because popular nationalism was always associated with the idea of emancipation, and if only one thing is clear it is that capitalism is the core obstacle to human emancipation.
- 7 Writing in the early 1990s Claude Ake contended that there were 'several democracies vying for preferment in a struggle whose outcome is as yet uncertain' (2003:127); by the mid-1990s, the nature of democracy was no longer the object of contestation as it had become solidified as a form of parliamentary state.
- 8 The discipline of Anthropology was not considered in this context, being anathema to radical nationalist intellectual discourse given its erstwhile association with colonialism especially in Anglophone Africa.
- 9 Mamdani's work has concentrated overwhelmingly on the state construction of ethnic identities which he sees as structurally determined; see for example his analysis of the problems of the DRC in *Pambazuka News*, (2011a). More recently, since his return to Uganda, his writing has arguably been less structuralist and more located and sensitive to the need for popular struggles which eschew the taking of state power (Mamdani, 2012).
- 10 References are too numerous to cite here. It will suffice to note the scholarly work on social movements emanating from the democratic struggles of the 1980s on the continent such as Mamdani, Mkandawire and Wamba-dia-Wamba (1995), Ake (2003), Chole and Ibrahim (1995).

11. Again the list is a long one but one can refer to the works of Appiah, Mbembe, Mudimbe and so on.
12. The idea of 'African personality' has been associated with Senghor. In this regard it is interesting to peruse the collection of nationalist writings edited in the mid-1970s by Mutiso and Rohio, 1975.
13. See the Comaroffs (2006) who mention the controlling function of bureaucracy through the medium of human rights discourse but put this down to 'neoliberalism' or 'postcoloniality' rather than to democracy as such.
14. Abahlali baseMjondolo are the organisation of shack-dwellers which began in Durban, South Africa. See their website www.abahlali.org
15. It is important to note that in our current world sequence there is no 'relative autonomy' to speak of between class interests and the state. The fact that banks get millions pumped into them even though they are the originators of a world crisis is one example; others are that private accumulation is said to be in the national interest and the boundary between economic interest and state position is often impossible to ascertain within so-called democratic states in Africa and elsewhere.
16. Marx puts this point as follows in his analysis of the Paris Commune: 'The Commune ... was to serve as a lever for the uprooting of the economical foundations upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule. With labour emancipated every man becomes a working man, and productive labour ceases to be a class attribute' (Marx 1871:72).
17. See Weber, 1970.
18. See in this context Etienne Balibar's *La crainte des masses* (1996) which tries to deal with the insufficiencies of the Marxist theory of ideology in understanding political subjectivity in life.
19. Lindela is the detention centre outside Johannesburg where migrants to South Africa are kept before repatriation.
20. See Guha, 1992a, 1992b; James, 2001, Fick, 1992, 2000.
21. I discuss this episode in South Africa in chapter 4 of my forthcoming book.

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