Place, Interest and Political Agency:
Some Questions for Michael Neocosmos

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Michael Neocosmos has written *Thinking Freedom in Africa* with "the understanding of political agency" as his "object." (Kindle Locations 334-336). This is more a political manifesto than it is a work of political analysis. At the very start of the journey, Neocosmos declares three imperatives which he says are necessary for a fuller understanding of political agency. The first is to move away from political economy: "… there is nothing in political economy, whether Marxist or otherwise, which enables us to think an emancipatory political practice beyond interest," why "Marxist politics have remained, along with liberal politics, overwhelmingly statist in their practice." [314-316]. Neocosmos calls on Africans to become "part of universal humanity rather than of the animal world of interests." [Kindle Locations 351-53] The second is to think out of context, which means to think and act both out of place and outside of culture: "this book begins from the subversion of place, ... All people are capable of thinking beyond their social place and [the] immediate. Starting from culture merely forces a concentration on identity, ethnicity, authenticity, race, darkness, natives, 'Africanity', periphery, 'coloniality', and so on – on difference and not on universal humanity. [Kindle Locations 342-346]" The third is to think subjectivity outside of identity

politics: "The South African Left, the Tanzanian nationalists and the Zimbabwean landless have all fundamentally understood subjectivity as identity politics: class identity, national identity or whatever. [Kindle Locations 8632 – 8634]"[1]. The challenge is for people to think "beyond their objective social position and interests – beyond identity – simply because they are capable of reason." [Kindle Locations 12393 – 12400] The central problem is that "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."[Kindle Locations 946-950] Neocosmos points to Reason as the way out of the identity trap: "People are able to think beyond their objective social position and interests – beyond identity – simply because they are capable of reason." [Kindle Locations 12393 – 12400]. This is Reason with a capital R, enlightenment Reason, Reason which opposes an acknowledgement of "difference" to an embrace of "universal humanity."

Neocosmos claims no originality in making these arguments. Indeed, at every step, he systematically and proudly references the French philosopher Alain Badiou, as in this instance: "A universal politics of emancipation … is not given by the existence of social movements; if it is to exist, such a politics must step out from its limitations of interest, from its confines of place. Any organisation doing so ceases to be a social movement in the strict sense and transcends place while remaining localised. We can call this process a singular process, to distinguish it from the usual notion of the particular (Badiou, 2004). This collective subject now overtakes its location while its politics have the potential to become universal (to produce a 'truth', in Badiou's terms); it thereby creates itself as a collective subject of politics. Such a process is referred to as subjectivation." [Kindle Locations 931-938]

This is Neocosmos in a didactic mode, translating the thought of the master, Alain Badiou. Neocosmos devotes as much effort and space in his book to an explication of Alain Badiou's work as he does to a critique of *Citizen and Subject*, a work that he claims is marred by a two-fold "theoretical lacunae": a "restriction of popular subjectivity to state interpellation" and a "false reduction of tradition to the state and power." The key problem, argues Neocosmos, is that "… for

him (i.e., Mahmood Mamdani), the mode of resistance in these cases was simply shaped by the mode of rule; no theoretical room is left for the recognition of subjective inventiveness, hence promoting a statist conception of politics." I shall look at these claims in the following order: first (a) custom and tradition and (b) social identity and politics, both in the construction of the indirect rule state, and then (c) militant nationalism and social movement politics as two attempts at a transformative politics.

Custom and Tradition

"In *Citizen and Subject*, "not only is tradition simply despotic, but it is manipulated by the state to create reactionary ethnic identities." (Kindle Locations 12229-12232, 6642-6651).

"Ethnicity and culture, even under colonial domination, were not as rigid as Mamdani makes out, nor indeed as the authorities hoped. There were, and are, regular contradictions within tradition and some of these are popular-democratic in nature." (Kindle Locations 12275-12277).

"The politics of tradition need to be transformed from within the domain of tradition itself, and not from outside in such a neo-colonial manner." (Kindle Locations 11825-11826)".

Citizen and Subject distinguishes between *custom* in the period before colonialism and its transformation into *customary law* in the colonial period. The argument is developed in several steps. *One*, whereas precolonial custom was part of society, informing its capacity to regulate internal tensions, it was harnessed under colonialism as "customary law." No longer a social force for self-regulation from within, it was turned into

an instrument to keep society in check from above: "Customary law thus consolidated the non-customary power of customary chiefs." (Mamdani 1996: 122) *Two*, this did not mean that "custom" became rigid under colonialism: the official language of an authoritative and singular custom in the colonial period both masked a plurality of custom and concealed the fact of a civil war in rural society. That civil war was fueled by diverse and contradictory notions of custom; peasant movements claimed that particular chiefs had "subverted genuine custom."

Three, as Neocosmos notes: "The form of rule shaped the form of revolt against it. Indirect rule at one reinforced ethnically bound institutions of control and led to their explosion from within. Ethnicity (tribalism) thus came to be simultaneously the form of colonial control over natives and the form of revolt against it. It defined the parameters of both the Native Authority in charge of the local state apparatus and of resistance to it." (24)

Four, rather than provide a 'solution' to 'decentralized despo-tism' of indirect rule, peasant mobili-zation against Native Authorities turned into a problem: "Yet tribalism as revolt became the source of a profound dilemma because local populations were usually multi-ethnic Ethnicity, and at times religion, was reproduced as a problem inside every peasant movement. This is why it is not enough simply to separate tribal power organized from above from tribal revolt waged from below so that we may denounce the former and embrace the latter. The revolt from below needs to be problematized, for it carries the seeds of its own fragmentation and possible self-destruction." (24)

It is this fourth step that Neocosmos leaves out of his summary. The introductory chapter of *Citizen and Subject* goes on to weave all parts of the argument into a single proposition: "… every movement against decentralized despotism bore the institutional imprint of that mode of rule. Every movement of resistance was shaped by the very structure of power against which it rebelled. How it came to understand this historical fact, and the capacity it marshalled to transcend it, set the tone and course of the movement." (24)

I go on to devote an entire chapter to identify movements which took on this challenge more or less successfully, such as the Sungu-sungu in independent Tanzania, the Ruwenzururu in independent Uganda and the National Resistance Army (NRA) in the Luwero Triangle in Uganda from 1981-85: "Each example reinforces a common theme: the peasant community is internally divided and reproduced through internal struggles. For this reason, to focus exclusively on the dimension of tribalism as civil war and thereby to present a peasant movement as an unmitigated revolt from below against oppression from above is to indulge in mythmaking by presenting an aspect of reality as its totality. Each example highlights a particular combination of the variety of tensions – class, gender, age, and nationality – that make up the fabric of peasant communities." (Mamdani 1996: 186)

Two attempts at transformative politics: (a) State Nationalism:

"… when it came to forms of state, Nyerere's was perhaps the lesser evil, yet the complete absence of any discussion of alternative political thinking in Mamdani's

work makes it impossible to move subjectively beyond the limits of statism." (Kindle Locations 7363-7369).

"Mamdani's point conforms in all major respects to the state-nationalist argument, which has always seen ethnic divisions as threats to the nation-state in Africa. Nyerere's success in establishing national unity is extolled in this work. … There is no attempt in Mamdani's work, though, to think through the possibility of an alternative popular-democratic politics and its enabling of national unity without coercion. Whereas it could presumably be argued that such an alternative was never on the agenda, the limits of the nationalist thought of the time are not elucidated. (Kindle Locations 7742-7748)

The analysis in *Citizen and Subject* did not turn around one but two social divisions reproduced by colonial rule: inter-ethnic and rural-urban. My critique of nationalism, whether reformist or militant, was that each tried to reform one side of this legacy, with the result that its efforts were undercut by the reproduction of the other side. Nyerere was no exception. My point was neither to "extoll" Nyerere (as Neocosmos alleges) nor to dubunk him: "But for the opposition that must take stock of social fragmentation as its historical starting point, it makes more sense to appropriate critically the experience of militant nationalism of yesteryears than just to debunk it. The strength of that experience lay in its ability to link the urban and the rural – politically. Its Achilles' heel was the failure to ground the link in an ongoing process of democratic reform, one with a focus on reforming the bifurcated state inherited from colonialism. Once

in power, nationalists pursued reform in both civil society and Native Authority, deracializing the former and detribalizing the latter. But they reformed each sphere separately, and they did so from above. As reform from above substituted administration for politics, a bifurcated reform strategy re-created the bifurcated state. That failure corrupted a hitherto political link between the rural and the urban into a coercive one, cutting the ground from under their own feet. The attempt to reform decentralized despotism, then, degenerated into a centralized despotism, the other and more unstable variant of the African state." (p. 300)

Nyerere, I argued in my Du Bois lectures, "needs to be understood foremost as a state-builder and not (as) a democrat or a social visionary." (*Define and Rule*, p. 124) To understand the rationale behind 'forced villagisation,' it would make sense to locate it as part of a coercive 'state-building' project than as a development of Ujamaa. At the same time, Nyerere was not just "the lesser evil" in a region marked by ethnic cleansing and extreme violence, as Neocosmos suggests; he held out the promise of equal citizenship in a region where citizenship had come to be differentiated along lines of race and ethnicity, identities politicized in the colonial period.
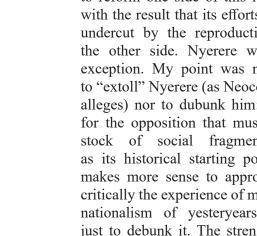
(b) Social Movements and the Politics of Subjectivity

"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 *et al.,* 1993: 112), and regularly counterposed to NGOs, which were 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. [Neocosmos, Kindle Locations 708-712]."

What does Neocosmos mean by "politics as subjectivity" and "subjectivity in itself"? It is a politics unencumbered by interest and location – which he defines broadly to include *'race,' 'native', 'Africanity', 'coloniality'*. Emancipatory politics, he believes, must be the product of an imagination that rides high above any particularistic concern. Neocosmos draws a contrast "between a subjectivity founded on interests and one founded on principles; between a politics that thinks within state categories and assumptions and a politics that absents the state from thought." [kindle locations 9297-9300] So this is not even a politics that nationalists and Marxists defined as alliance-building or building a united front, since both acknowledged particular interests and identities as so many building blocks for an emancipatory politics.

The entire second half of *Citizen and Subject* is devoted to an exploration of social groups and social movements that rose to the colonial challenge, sometimes magnificently, seeking to craft an alternate vision and practice a broader politics of alliance-building. I devoted one chapter to rural peasant movements, and another to urban movements. At no point did these social forces repudiate 'interest' and 'identity' in favor of 'vision.' Rather, they sought to link the two. If we examine the

thought of individuals who shaped the consciousness of these social forces – individuals like Biko, Foster, Erwin – we arrive at the same conclusion. Biko did not repudiate 'race'; nor did Foster or Erwin repudiate 'class.' All imaginative and creative proponents of 'race' and 'class,' they imagined these identities more broadly and creatively than before, turning them into mobilizational vehicles equal to tapping a vast organizational potential. Biko in particular understood identity – race in this case – as historical and political rather than something permanent, to be negotiated rather than repudiated. Their example points to a politics very different from the debunking of 'interest' and 'identity' that Neocosmos would have us embrace in the name of 'vision.'

Migrants constituted an explosive social force in anti-colonial and anti- apartheid politics. They were the backbone of Industrial and Commercial Union in the 1920s and the force that animated the Durban strikes of 1973. Their example suggests a combination of interest and vision rather than the breach between the two that Neocosmos is looking for in his quest for a larger-than-interest endeavor in the name of humanity. Students were an important mobilizing force in places like South Africa and Ethiopia. Temporarily removed from the work place, suspended above the class structure and even social identities, students were particularly prone to thinking the 'universal' – in the process expanding notions of 'race' but without discarding these.

The South African Moment

"Nowhere in his book does Mamdani attempt to move beyond thinking in terms of statist solutions to investigate the possibility that there may be alternative popular solutions to what amounts after all to a major catastrophe for the people involved." [Kindle Locations 822-824] "Mamdani is primarily interested in analyzing the colonial origins of the political in Africa today, the way in which the state exercises its rule, rather than in thinking politics as subjective practice." [Kindle Locations 830-835] "Mamdani's work was concerned with thinking the political, not agency and subjectivity; in other words, not with thinking politics as such. … Mamdani's work has concentrated overwhelmingly on the state construction of ethnic identities, which he sees as structurally determined, while popular struggles are seen as reacting within that existing determination." [Kindle Locations 1253-1258]

In 2014, I was invited to discuss a presentation by Omar Bargouti of the Palestinian group BDS to an audience at Columbia University.[2] I built on my explorations in *Citizen and Subject* to define 'the South African moment,' that time when the anti-apartheid movement broke free of subjectivities nurtured by and under apartheid to produce an alternative politics: "The South African moment involved a triple shift. First was a shift from demanding an end to apartheid to providing an alternative to apartheid. Second was a shift from representing the oppressed, the Black people of South Africa, the majority, to representing the whole people. The third was the turn from resisting within the terms set by apartheid to redefining the very terms of how South Africa should be governed." (153) I underlined the strategic significance of both Durban 1973 and Soweto 1976, products of direct action by anti-apartheid students, white and black: "Both wings of the antiapartheid student movement, white and Black, reached out to mobilize wider sections of society against apartheid. Black consciousness students moved to the township, and white students to organize migrant workers in hostels on the fringe of townships. Out of this two-pronged initiative developed two wings of the labor movement, one based in migrant hostels, the other in the community (the township), the former drawing its intellectual vision from white students, the latter from Black students in townships." (158) Durban and Soweto marked a decisive break in old-style politics, not only the politics of groups mobilized along population lines etched in the apartheid census, but also the politics that drove the armed struggle.   "B e f o r e Soweto, the resistance in South Africa developed within the framework set by apartheid. To understand this framework, one needs to look at the apartheid mode of governance. Apartheid divided the whole population into races: Africans, Indians, Coloureds (a 'mixed race' group), whites – many so-called population groups. In response, each population group organized separately, as a race: Africans as the African National Congress (ANC); Indians as the Natal Indian Congress, first organized by Gandhi; Coloureds as the Coloured Peoples Congress; and Whites as the Congress of Democrats. … This is how the mode of governance of apartheid became naturalized as the mode of resistance against it." (154) The text went on to identify "two major breaches in this mindset." I suggested that the initial impulse came from "the Freedom Charter, adopted by the Congress Alliance in 1955, and its ringing declaration: 'South Africa belongs to all those

who live in it.' … the ANC put forward a meaningful notion of democracy, not a democracy of only one racial group, not even of the majority against the minority, but a democracy for all." (155) But the real blow to apartheid power came with Black Consciousness: "Apartheid power had fragmented the subject population into so many groups, recorded separately in the census: Africans, Indians, Coloureds. The great historical achievement of BC was to pull the rug from under apartheid. Black, said Biko, is not a color, Black is an experience – if you are oppressed, you are Black!" (155) And then followed the umbrella politics of the United Democratic Front (UDF): "The South African moment was when important sections of the liberation camp redefined the enemy as not settlers but the settler state, not whites but white power. By doing so, they provided whites with an alternative- not a democracy for whites only, but a nonracial democracy." (157)

Defining the Problem but not the Solution

In one of his recent books, on the Darfur crisis in the Sudan, Mamdani (2009) rightly attacks the human rights discourse and politics of Western humanitarian solutions to the African crisis as necessarily providing a neo-colonial response to Africa's problems which hides an agenda of recolonisation. Yet his solution, although located in Africa, is to appeal to the African Union (AU), that vulgar simulacrum of pan-African unity, to resolve the problems of Sudan and, by extension, those of the continent as a whole, as it evidently has no direct interest in specific conflicts and can insist on political reconciliation. [Neocosmos, Kindle Locations 815-819]

Nowhere in his book does Mamdani attempt to move beyond thinking in terms of statist solutions to investigate the possibility that there may be alternative popular solutions to what amounts after all to a major catastrophe for the people involved. [Neocosmos, Kindle Locations 822-824]

Neocosmos seems less interested in defining the problem than in formulating a solution. There is reason behind this preference: problems are always particular; solutions often come as a generality, as a 'one size fits all' prescription. Think of how those preoccupied with a solution that will fit 'humanity' prefer to talk of human rights in their generality than to identify and analyze human wrongs in their particularity. Not interested in defining the problem, Neocosmos searches for a solution, not to any particular problem but to every or any problem. That is why he can afford to roam unanchored in any "interest," "locality" or "identity." When he feels generous, he assumes that others must also be animated by the same quest. Failing to find the "solution" in my book on Darfur, Neocosmos grasps at a conjunctural analysis of the African Union's intervention in *Saviors and Survivors* – and presumably the books dedication "to those who seek to make an independent African Union" (and not to the AU as is) – as the hint of a solution.

Humans are not Gods; we are located within history and locality. Even if we are to rise above these – which we must endeavor to – we have no choice but to begin where we are. On what ground can we stand if not location and history? Is to think from the standpoint of interest and location necessarily to be locked into state-defined categories, as Neocosmos claims

is necessarily the case? A political perspective that lacks location and history, that claims to be from everywhere, is actually from nowhere. A critical engagement with militant nationalism over the past few decades has taught us to be wary of a onesided emphasis on any identity – 'tribe,' 'race,' 'nation,' all of which Neocosmos has displaced with 'humanity.' To return to that politics, that universalism, would be to forfeit the ground gained over the past few decades, one based on a sensitivity to *difference*. Failing to identify those extraordinary moments when particular interest connects with broad vison, Neocosmos loses any connection with the ground underneath.

Social movement politics was an attempt to go beyond a materialist understanding of interest and class – but without repudiating these – based on an acknowledgement of different histories, diverse intellectual and political traditions, and so on. At the same time, it was an attempt to negotiate difference, to forge a politics that did not ignore difference and identity, but at the same time did not treat them as unchangeable objects. Those who thought in terms of difference moved to a politics of pluralism, and developed a critical understanding of universalist politics as masking particular ambitions and missions, as in a 'civilizing mission'. From this point of view, 'race,' 'native', 'Africanity', 'coloniality' – all these were real though provisional and thus so many partial understandings of social experience; those like Biko combined a subjective understanding of it as real with a determined endeavor to sublate it. The problem was not thinking in terms of race, or nativity or Africanity or coloniality – as Neocosmos seems to think – but

being so locked into it that one is no longer able to think and act beyond it. In other words, the problem was not identity, but thinking in terms of an unchanging identity. No identity is permanent.

Alternately, we may ask: what location gives Neocosmos the luxury of thinking 'race,' 'native', 'Africanity', 'coloniality' as so many constraints only because thinking makes them so, thus constraints that can be dispensed with through a sheer act of will or imagination. In his lack of interest in a political thought and a political practice that connects interest with vison, Neocosmos betrays a quest more religious than political. No wonder, as he follows Badiou into the world of practice that seeks to transform the present – such as the brilliant Arab Spring – and, for the nth time, leans on the shoulders of Badiou and cites his text: "However brilliant and memorable the historical riots in the Arab World, they finally came up against universal problems of politics that had remained unresolved in the previous period ... at the core of which is ... that of organization." Alain Badiou, *Le Réveil de l'histoire*, 2011 (emphasis in original, translation modified) (Kindle Locations 6214-6218). Looking for a South African referent, he follows with a discussion of the politics of the umbrella movement, UDF (United Democratic Movement), that emerged in the heyday of the 1984-86 popular urban struggle in South Africa – which he sees as a South African version of the Arab Spring, with exactly the same defect: the absence of organization in a sea of spontaneity. UDF, he says, **"**was not a party organisation but a loose confederation of local political affiliates, which all adhered to some common principles and retained their organisational

autonomy." And then laments that this particular feature, "the absence of a controlling 'party line'," which was the UDF's strong point also "turned out to be one of the reasons for its eventual demise, as it gave way, after being seriously weakened by state coercion, to the returning exiled party of the ANC." [Kindle Locations 3752 – 3756, 3834-3836). Not surprisingly, in a book dedicated to the embrace of spontaneity and the search for an all- embracing vision, Neocosmos has no room to discuss the organizational imperative; he recognizes it only when he crashes into it like a Rock of Gibralter.

The Turn to Badiou

The turn to Badiou feeds the search for solutions. Alternately borrowing from and directly citing Badiou, Neocosmos explains that this "process of absenting the state in thought can begin in politics, irrespective of whether the state exists as a set of institutions or not; this 'absenting of the state in thought' is central to a practice of politics that wishes to think an emancipatory future today. Badiou puts this idea as follows: 'What is the moment of freedom in politics? It is that when one distances oneself from the state' (Badiou, 1985: 166, my translation) or, again, 'Politics is about making politics exist, so that the state should no longer exist' (Badiou, 2013e: 115). (Kindle Locations 13414-13419). What does it mean to 'absent the state in thought … *whether the state exists as a state of institutions or not"*? Is it to not think the state or to think outside state categories? The difference, it seems to me, is produced in a series of steps: Neocosmos begins by detaching political analysis from political theory, then turns political theory from a comparative reflection to the pursuit of a singular ahistorical

object, no longer political theory, but "Philosophy, in the abstract, a philosophy of Man."[3] He turns to Badiou for political philosophy, but without political analysis or political theory! To 'absent the state in thought' becomes an excuse for not thinking the state in practice.

When he does think the African state, it is as a generality: "The core problem with the National Liberation Struggle mode of politics was precisely that the struggle for freedom combined a struggle against the state as well as a struggle for a new state." [Kindle Locations 13477-13478] What is the alternative to thinking of solutions in the thick of the problem? There were two critiques of the postcolonial state in Africa. One was from the right, from a neoliberal perspective championed by the Washington Consensus and the human rights movement. It claimed to champion a critique of the state from the point of view of society, a sort of "absenteeing the state in thought," thinking the future outside the present. The CODESRIA social movement project of the late eighties, one for which Neocosmos has a surplus of praise, distanced itself from this kind of right- wing utopianism. We learnt a lesson from that experience: to move away from a one-sided critique of the postcolonial state, instead to think and theorize the relationship between state and society in historical contexts. It is this turn that Neocosmos shuns, because he considers it polluting: remaining "at the level of thinking a state form of nationalism". [Kindle Locations 3675 – 3682]

The leaning on Badiou – usually for support rather than illumination – points to a larger problem with Neocosmos' effort to produce political theory. If the problem, as Neocosmos seems to recognize, this time citing Fanon, is to pro-

duce new concept and categories, is the solution to import these from the outside, or is the challenge to theorize African historical and contemporary realities? Neocosmos writes, "the universality of humanity is thinkable from within African cultures," (Kindle Locations 13111-13114). Was this possibility ever in doubt without regard to any culture – not just African – except in the Enlightenment rendition of Reason? To give Neocosmos his due, let us ask: What does it mean to say that Africans think? I doubt it means what it literally says, for that would be too condescending; more likely, this is a claim that African thought can be folded within the parameters of Enlightenment universalism that claims to be a product of universal Reason. Though not condescending, this latter possibility suggests an inability to think the universal outside the limitations of Enlightenment thought.

Neocosmos has written a book more about Badiou than about the African experience he would like to theorize. Neocosmos is dedicated to summarizing Badiou, to introducing African scholars to Badiou. There have been translations before, of Marx and these days of Foucault. Neocosmos aims to give us a followup, with a new discovery. Endless quotations from Badiou betray the assumption that he is introducing a scholar unknown on this continent. He reads Badiou as a critic of structuralism in Europe, and looks to pinpoint structuralist thinking in Africa so he can translate Badiou and fashion out of it a weapon for the African terrain. At best, the knowledge Neocosmos offers is derivative.

As if anticipating this critique, Neocosmos writes: "Not that this book is 'about' Badiou's thought – it is not – rather, it is about Africans and the manner in which they have thought and currently think freedom." [Kindle Locations 385-386]. An intellectual history of African thought would be most welcome; but the reader will not find anything on African thought in this book. She will not even find a discussion of Badiou as a French or European philosopher. So dedicated a worshipper – rather than student – of Badiou is Neocosmos that we are introduced even to Mao through Badiou: *"The people and the people alone are the makers of universal history. – Alain Badiou, Le Réveil de l'histoire, 2011 (my translation)."* [Kindle Locations 1376-1378]

What, the reader may ask, is wrong with Badiou's thought, other than the identity of the author? Neocosmos says this in praise of Badiou: "until his work … thought was unrecognisable for what it was. This was precisely because politics was thought to be a simple or complex expression of the objective, so that it became reduced to the state, to power or to history. Subjectivity was always determined by something else: social location, social relations, power relations, agency or whatever. Badiou's philosophy is the only one I know of that enables us to think coherently a 'politics of militancy' (or politics as activism, as we would say in the Anglophone world). … Badiou has managed to do that in a completely original manner." [Kindle Locations 6477-6482]

Badiou's target is Althusserian structuralism, and possibly Foucault where the subject is "produced" by power so totally that the subject ceases to exist. In Badiou's alternative, at least as presented to us by Neocosmos, there is no link to the world outside, to the objective. My initial impulse on reading this was that if he was looking for thought unencumbered by the outside, the objective, he should have been reading religious thought. That he did not suggests that Neocosmos operates within a liberal thought world, one which is neatly divided between subject and object. There is no middle ground, as there is in much of religious thought.

I met Badiou at Columbia University last year. I had not read him, and still have not. But I listened to him lecture and then exchanged views at a smaller faculty dinner. In the lecture, Badiou made the claim that Neocosmos advances on his behalf, that Marx's universalism had failed and that we need a new universalism. I told him that the world has not produced one but several universalisms, from multiple vantage points. I cited Ibn Khaldun to the effect that no human subject is capable of producing universal thought, for all human beings are located somewhere. Only one power, God, can make that claim. No human can claim to write, or to speak, from everywhere and thus nowhere. So Ibn Khaldun concluded: when we encounter what we believe to be universal knowledge, we acclaim it as God. We may add that it is successive empires – and not God – that have made the claim to represent universal truth. I said to Badiou that the most we can hope for in the face of competing universalisms, is not a new universalism, but an inclusive pluralism.

I hope Neocosmos will address this question in his next book. If that book is to be from an African vantage point, he would do well to begin with an intellectual history of African thought, not as a claim to a stable formation but as an account of critical African encounters with received modern categories.

Elsewhere, I have offered some examples of intellectual labors – as in the work of historians at the University of Ibadan and Ahmado Bello University – that have gone into rethinking received categories of thought and formulating new categories adequate to under-standing and valorizing particular histories and experiences. I am thinking of historical writing, such as that of the premodern or of ethnic identity, by historians from Kenneth Dike, Abdullahi Smith and Yusufu Bala Usman.[4] Rather than yet again import the latest mode of European thinking into Africa, in time-honored fashion, African scholars need to begin to decolonize thinking, not by avoiding winds of change from outside, but by engaging them critically.

The Utopian Search for a Blueprint

I have never thought that politics could be thought as a blueprint to be drawn up in the study of a professor, not even of a professor who does fieldwork or participates in social movements. I have always thought that the most that radical scholars can do is to understand the practice of real social movements as so many provisional responses to questions of the time. It is precisely from this perspective that I went about understanding the politics of peasant-based movements in Uganda (Ruwenzururu, NRM) and Tanzania (Sungusungu) and of students and migrant labor in South Africa (BC, 'workerist' and 'populist' unions). It was not accidental that the first collection of essays that we put together at MISR at the start of the doctoral program was titled "Getting the Question Right."

Here, then, is a point of difference between us. I do not look for solutions, to Neocosmos' dismay. I look to do two things: understand the problem and look to popular politics as a resource from which to understand elements of a 'solution.' Never have I believed that solutions can be hatched in the study of a professor! Neocosmos may think, and perhaps rightly so, that I lack a utopian streak which he seems to have in abundance. The cost of this utopianism is that he ends up building a Chinese Wall between "politics" and "agency," or what he calls "politics as such," throwing out of the window both interest and location (class, ethnicity, nation, gender, age) so as to let his imagination soar above all particularities in search of a universal. Failing to find that universal in real struggles in a real Africa, he turns to French philosophy for inspiration.

Neocosmos would like to be a philosopher, better still a French philosopher, one who soars above ground and above clouds, to think in world historical terms, unencumbered by facts or relations on the ground. To be an African intellectual, or a scholar in Africa, Neocosmos would have to walk on two legs, both as a scholar and as a public intellectual. We confronted this question when designing the curricular program at MISR: what should we teach? Should we reaffirm the original mission of the modern university, to produce a global intellectual who can be slotted in anywhere, or should our ambition be to produce a local sage? Our response, always provisional, was that we should endeavor to do both. The intellectual in the post-colonial world must learn to walk on two legs, to borrow Mao's metaphor. On the one hand, this person should

aim to be a scholar who engages the world of scholarship globally. This meant we had no option but to teach social and political theory which is necessarily modern and largely Western, male and white – with names like Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and others punctuating that history. On the other hand, the same person should aim to be a public intellectual who engages with the society she lives in – aiming to theorize the encounter between different histories, traditional and modern, non-Western and Western, independent and colonial. This is the theory critical to our times. This dual task will necessarily produce its own tensions given time and place, but these tensions are likely to be productive.

Getting the Question Right: Universalism vs pluralism

One understanding we are likely to gain from this encounter is that we are not all asking the same question. Neocosmos' uncritical and worshipful turn to Badiou is grounded in the assumption that we are all asking more or less the same questions, with some of us being more 'advanced' theoretically. Theory travels, but we also know that theory produced in the West, including the epistemological critique developed by postcolonialism in the context of the Western academe, does not have the same critical purchase when transposed to the postcolonial world, just because the context here has different stakes, questions and power configurations. Rather than look for a single universal, even a new one, a replacement for what we may consider antiquated, we must embrace plurality. It is time to move away from gathering data here and processing it in Europe.

Notes

1. "The undamental problem of iden-tity studies from the per-spective of emanci-pation is that political identities are necessarily derived from social location."

2. Mahmood Mamdani, "The South African Moment," *Apartheid Israel: The Politics of an Analogy*, ed by Jon Soske and Sean Jacobs, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015.

3. email, Suren Pillay, May 15, 2018

4. For a brief discussion, see, Mahmood Mamdani, Define and Rule, ch. 3.