The Thought of Politics: an introduction

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The tenacity, the wisdom and the courage of those who have been fighting for years, for decades, to bring change, or even the whisper of justice to their lives, is something extraordinary ... There is something very disturbing about ... [the] inability to credit ordinary people with being capable of weighing the odds and making their own decisions (Arundhati Roy, 2010).

If you are serious about victory, about succeeding to humanize the world, even a little bit, then your struggle must be a living politics. It must be owned and shaped in thought and in action by ordinary men and women. If every gogo [granny] does not understand your politics then you are on the road to another top-down system. You also run the risk of being on your own in the face of repression (S’bu Zikode, 2011b: p. v).

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, 18th April 2012, my translation).

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 also worthy of note. 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. In fact 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 organisations and established political parties were initially taken totally by surprise. In this sense these events have been illustrative of a new sequence for which struggles for freedom are taking place outside the parameters established during the 20th century, according to which the party has been the central organiser of political thinking. As inaugurated by the South African experience of the 1980s, it appears that now, in the 21st 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.

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1 This paper consists of the Introduction to my forthcoming book Thinking Freedom in Africa: toward a theory of emancipatory politics to be published by Wits University Press in 2016. I have not had the time to list a bibliography. Should anyone wish to refer to any of the texts cited they are welcome to contact me.

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).
A central recurring concern of intellectual thought in Africa 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, racism 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. The fact that racial oppression has been inherent to capitalism from the very beginning is often forgotten. This intellectual concern to reassert African agency has been active from 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; in fact independence was seen as only the first step towards achieving such full emancipation. This was however a process which was conceived as achievable only via the state. It was the state, its history and its subjectivities which lay at the core of intellectual endeavour in the early days of nationalism.

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3 This denial of history in Africa by Hegel took the following forms. After enunciating all sorts of fanciful accounts (mainly from travellers) regarding Africans, including cannibalism, Hegel maintains that the ‘Negro ... exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state ... there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character’ (1952:196, 197). He concludes: ‘Africa ... is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit ... What we properly understand by Africa is the unhistorical undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which has to be presented ... only as on the threshold of the world’s history’ (p.199). His comments are based on the crudest racist prejudices of his times (1820s-30s). Interestingly Hegel dismisses Africa in a section entitled ‘Geographical Basis of History’ where he sees geographical location (place) as fundamental to the growth of ‘spirit’. This argument is thus one of the most important formal assertions of the location of the ‘other’ in Hegel’s philosophy. He maintains that Africa’s natural state is a consequence of its ‘isolated character [and] originates ... in its geographical condition’ (p.196) while he also states that native Africans ‘gradually vanished at the br[...]

4 This intellectual concern from the early days of nationalist thought right up to the near present 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; in fact independence was seen as only the first step towards achieving such full emancipation. This was however a process which was conceived as achievable only via the state. It was the state, its history and its subjectivities which lay at the core of intellectual endeavour in the early days of nationalism.
and independence, and I will argue that this has remained the case, though in a modified form and despite contestation, ever since.

Gradually – among those who remained faithful to some idea of emancipation – the emphasis shifted from a sole concern with the state and the elites which it represented 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 the latter may have resulted from a negotiated process. Today this view has been in crisis for some time and has been replaced by an emphasis on parliamentary democracy as the high point of emancipation which has been accompanied in academia by 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 regressive in their politics, rather than as the bearers of a historical telos; in fact it is not clear whether it is parliamentary democracy or identity that is the source of the current political crisis on the continent (e.g. Sen, 2006). In any case we can 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 thinking of Africans as fully human subjects, intellectuality seems to have reached a dead end. At the same time the West today simply erects barriers to African 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. These points will now be developed at some length.

While the ‘modern’ colonial system 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. Partha Chatterjee has recognized 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 became a ‘development mission’ asserted and imposed by neo-colonial forms of domination (Neocosmos, 2010b). External forms of intervention – whatever their intentions

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5 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 colonized 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 as I shall show below. More generally as will become apparent, I follow the thinking of Badiou and Rancière inter alia in separating political subjectivity from individual consciousness.
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 discourse (Wa Mutua, 2002; Neocosmos, 2006a; Mamdani, 2009) but it is also often prevalent among some Africans intellectuals themselves (e.g. Ndhlovu-Gatcheni, 2013) who, insisting on viewing African history as determined exclusively by (neo-) colonial domination, and seeing Africans as victims and not as agents of history, have difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that it is 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 original meaning - who can fundamentally transform colonial history for they have the most to lose by its continuation in new forms. A recovery of African political agency, then, must begin from the point of the ‘zone of non-being’ as Fanon (1986: 10) calls the place of the politically (and humanly) inexistental and as I shall argue at greater length later, from a fidelity to past events of resistance therein, to those historical singularities of emancipation by Africans, however short-lived, which proposed alternatives in practice and which affirmed the dignity (i.e. the being) of the politically excluded and humiliated. In this way the silencing and occlusion of African historical events (Depelchin, 2005) will be overthrown, and victimhood can begin to be replaced by agency – after all freedom cannot be separated from the struggle to attain it for agency is at the core of being, or to put it another way there can be no thought of politics in the absence of a thought of a collective subject. For this to happen, I will argue at length in this book, 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 reflections of the historical marginalisation and oppression of Africans. This means always adhering to an idea of universal humanity as our guiding principle.

Thinking Political Agency in Africa

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 Négritude cultural movement, which in its manner of asserting African 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 and within the African diaspora more generally, as the main threat to their existence was also one of assimilation with the result that the cultural movement had intellectual influence throughout the African diaspora and in France itself. Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor were its most well-known members. Négritude consisted largely of an insistence on recovering the ‘whole complex of civilized values… which characterize… the Negro-African World’ (Senghor, 1975:83) and in postmodernist parlance it proposed an ‘essentialist’ mirror image of the colonial one which had stressed the emptiness, primitiveness, 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 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 Blacks in the Diaspora under the same umbrella. It thus assumed, despite their clearly disparate experiences, that the main feature they had in common was oppression by Whites (Fanon,
1990:173-74). Much like 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. It had both a more ‘conservative’ wing inclined to stress the racial or cultural similarities of Blacks, and a more ‘radical’ wing keener to emphasize class in anti-colonial struggles by Africans. The name most associated with the former would be that of Senghor, while CLR James, George Padmore and Kwame Nkrumah were perhaps more illustrative of the latter. Both these versions of pan-Africanism eventually saw the capturing of the state as a necessary step towards freedom and were ultimately represented in the opposition between the more ‘moderate’ ‘Monrovia Group’ of states versus the more ‘radical’ ‘Casablanca Group’ which eventually combined to form the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

In fact, 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 multi-state conception (Mamdani, 1991; Neocosmos, 2010b). The Africanist school of history, along with the modernization 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 emphasizing the class struggle as the motor of history, or, in its radical form, the view that ‘it is the masses which make history’ (Althusser, 1976:46). 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 modernization 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 viewed as 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 as both 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 problem when it was indeed addressed, was still sought in terms of a party – particularly a vanguard party (e.g. Lukas Khamisi, 1983) – 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, in other words within those of Leninism. Agency then was ultimately still thought in statist terms, as parties were and are quite simply state

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6 Lukas Khamisi was the collective pseudonym for some participants in the Dar-es-Salaam debate.
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, as we shall see in chapter 7.

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 Programs (SAPs) imposed by The World Bank and the IMF, 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 has not featured in their vocabulary.7

7 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 21st 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 the second South African president Thabo Mbeki’s assertion that Africa can and should appropriate modernity, presumably in the manner in which his own country has done so, 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.
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 communitarianism, for example in Nigeria (Osaghae, 1995). 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 organizations (social movements and NGOs) soon came to work broadly within state political subjectivities; in any case they had to in order to survive. I shall return to a fuller discussion of civil society and the state later in this book, but at this stage it is useful to note that by the 1990s it had soon transpired that the central referent in an attempt to conceptualize 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 organized interests’ ability to operate. As resistance within civil society is founded upon the existence of differences – the organized interests of the division of labour and hierarchy – it is central to modern social organization, a fact emphasized 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 (Mamdani, 1995a, 1995b; Olukoshi, 1998). 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 providing social subsidies for the needy, features which were now rapidly receding into the mists of time as Western domination increased within a newly globalized 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). This was not to happen, at least not in any real depth, as both movements and intellectuals finally 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 characterized 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: ‘belonging’ provided the only way of accessing increasingly scarce resources, whether material, cultural or ‘political’ (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000). It is therefore not too difficult to see, given the resulting silencing of emancipatory thought, that ‘any postmodern conception is only a form of intellectual connivance with the hegemonic decadence of capitalism itself’ (Badiou, 2011e:15, my translation).

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

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8 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.
predictions of modernization theory - in politics. It soon became clear that the terms ‘progress’ or ‘progressive’ were no longer part of political vocabulary, while it 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, 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 characterized the politics of the new form of empire (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2001) as, together with humanitarianism, it was imposed on the world – through the exercise of military power if necessary. While the ‘civilizing mission’ of imperialism had ended in the 1960s, we were now witnessing a new ‘democratising mission’ (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 2007) through reference to which Western power was being re-deployed in the rest of the world (e.g. 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, multipartyism 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 that were often visualized 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 understood as attempting to produce an account of the subjective - as after all it was psychology which was said to regulate consciousness.  

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 theorized 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 analyzing 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

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9 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.
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 seen as the prime creator of such identities through a process of institutionalization, exclusion, co-option or whatever (Mamdani, 1996, 2002; Habib, 2004; Ballard, Habib and Vallodia, 2006). Concurrently, it has also gradually become 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 addressed only in the interests of the few. These failures have brought forth a contradiction between democratic and national rights as the latter are neither addressed nor indeed resolvable by the former which insist on the primacy of the right to private property. The result has been that the issue of freedom remains on the agenda, as the excluded themselves categorically state when they are allowed to express themselves, for example in the case of Abahlali base Mjondolo in South Africa who mark the official Freedom Day public holiday with gatherings to mourn the absence of freedom on what they rename as ‘Unfreedom day’.

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 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-market, 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 brief but important critique of the limits of (Marxist) political economy, that ‘if

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10 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; see for example his analysis of the problems of the DRC in Pambazuka News, (Mamdani, 2011a). More recently, since his return to Uganda, his writing has arguably been less overtly structuralist and seemingly more located and sensitive to the need for popular struggles which eschew the taking of state power; see Mamdani (2012) for example.

11 See Comaroff and Comaroff (2006), who mention the controlling function of bureaucracy through the medium of human rights discourse but put this down to ‘neo-liberalism’ or ‘postcoloniality’ rather than to democracy as such.

12 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. This point has been made by Balibar (1996) inter alia.
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-liberatory 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 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.¹³

None of the other identities 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.¹⁴ 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 capitalo-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 any 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 tolerance only 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, as I shall show throughout this book, in the deeply ingrained de-politicising effects of social analysis.

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ In fact, in South Africa the main reason why urban social movements are so popular on the left has arguably been because they are seen as ‘working class’ movements, an untheorised intellectually lazy appellation which is simply equated with movements of ‘the urban poor’. In this way a vulgar form of ‘classism’ still lingers on in thought as activists and academics adhere to a crude sociological rendition of Marx’s political economy, which has been systematically emptied of any political content as a substitute for serious thought. It is also social class (with its clear ‘progressive’ ideological attributes) whose absence is invoked by Mbembe’s ubiquitous use of the term ‘lumpen’ as a descriptor to illustrate the currently ‘de-classed’ character of the African continent at all social levels (Mbembe, 2010b).
fact which we have great reticence in admitting or even recognizing today as we take such effects for granted.

**Can emancipatory politics be thought in Africa today?**

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 regular, the habitual, politics can only be sought within the social itself and end up being simply conflated with ‘the political’, with the state and its ‘political society’. Badiou himself enjoins us to think politics ‘as excess over both the state and civil society’ (1985:20) for ‘dialectical thought does not begin from the rule but from the exception’ (p.90, *my translation*), from the interruption of repetition, of habit; and to understand that a truly ‘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’ (Badiou, 2005d: 2). Yet, he argues, this process is more accurately grasped as an exception, as mere separation can be equated with an intervention from beyond the political situation (such as divine intervention, colonial domination 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, 2013f, 16th January 2013, *my translation, emphasis in original*).

It is this point of exception which I have called ‘excessive’ here. Emancipatory politics therefore can ultimately only exist to some degree ‘in excess’ of both state and civil society, the domain of the organized form of that social division of labour, as I shall show throughout this book. Another way of making the same point is to insist that emancipatory politics is ‘dis-interested’ in other words that it eschews narrow interests in favour of a ‘disinterested interest’ or universal interest beyond social interests and identities – and founded on principles which have been collectively agreed upon. In fact, 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, 1969:62). 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.

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

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15 Rancière prefers to talk in terms of a ‘supplement’ rather than of an ‘excess’ but the basic idea is the same. For Rancière politics only exists when such a supplement – the equality of speaking beings – is effectuated; it enables a particular ‘distribution of the sensible’, i.e. a specific way of framing a sensory space, which is radically distinct from that structured by what he calls ‘the police’ - broadly speaking the state. See Rancière, 1999 in particular.
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 Mahmood Mamdani and Achille Mbembe, two of Africa’s best known radical public intellectuals whose work emanates 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 was 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. While Fanon (1990:159), for example, 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 deep-seated ‘demophobia’.16

In one of his recent books, that 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 re-colonization. Yet his solution, although located in Africa, is to appeal to the African Union, this vulgar simulacrum of pan-African unity, to resolve the problems of Sudan and by extension those of the continent as a whole, as it has evidently no direct interest in specific conflicts and can insist on political reconciliation. But the African Union has not been able to overcome the problems of its predecessor, the OAU, in that it is simply a collection of states which is incapable of any real pan-African conviction, and which can only think statist solutions to continental problems. In at least one clear case, that of Somalia, it has simply followed United States policy which has been totally inimical to the interests of the people of that country (Samatar, 2007). 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. The idea is simply to turn to state power(s) towards find solutions to problems which state politics in whatever form have themselves largely initiated. After all it could be important to ask: how are the social forces within the country to be identified and mobilised to sustain a reconciliation process brokered exclusively from the outside and to which internal forces are only marginally committed at best? Such a sustained mobilisation would imply the commitment of substantial sectors of the population to a politics of peace and hence to an alternative set of political prescriptions which would not simply concern an ‘adequate’ management of power interests (dare one say ‘good governance’?) in the interests of a (re-constituted) oligarchy. Given the lack of legitimacy of African states among their own people such solutions, developed among sectors of the oligarchy, will always be suspect. Mamdani’s search for solutions beyond interest leads him to look in the wrong place because of his reduction of politics to power and the state.

Mamdani is primarily interested in analysing the colonial origins of the political in Africa today, the way in which the state exercises its rule, rather than in thinking politics as

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16 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.
subjective practice. His concerns since the publication of *Citizen and Subject* (1996) have focused on (particularly ethnic) identity state politics and their institutional conditions of existence, while his normative arguments concern the imagining of a truly liberal state form. His liberal conception of the political means however that he cannot provide a way to thinking militancy and, in particular, a subjective politics of emancipation through which a universal politics of equality, rather than a particularistic conception of communitarianism, could be imagined. Emancipation in Africa is not a matter of tinkering with institutions of power under ‘expert’ advice, assuming this would be possible, or of waiting for a philosopher-king to achieve power or for that matter of relying on supra-national state institutions, for these simply reproduce the problem of state power which is by its very nature antithetical to freedom, justice, dignity and equality. For a truly ‘democratic state’ to be established – one responsive to popular needs and which thus is forced to confront its own ‘oxymoronic’ character – a universal egalitarian politics must be continuously affirmed, as I will argue in chapter 5. Thus, we need to move beyond an understanding of state forms of politics, liberalism included, if we are to begin to think an emancipatory way forward. In sum, Mamdani’s concerns are with the political, the anatomy of power so to speak, whereas what I maintain is required today, given the need to enable emancipatory thought in a post-classist period, is a concern with politics as subjectivity, as a thought-practice, more specifically a subjectivity which transcends interest. This is a distinction I maintain rigorously throughout this book: the political concerns power, it is captured and structured by interests; on the other hand politics in its real sense, in other words in the sense that it enables agency and emancipatory change, concerns thought, it is lived, it is affirmed. Moreover if this is so, popular politics cannot be reduced to the ‘politics of civil society’ as this is understood as the domain where organised interests are upheld by rights-bearing citizens.

Mbembe’s perspective is also problematic for he does not seem to be concerned with an analysis of what an emancipatory subjectivity could look like other than referring to the politics of civil society. Reviewing the experience of Africa after fifty years of independence, Mbembe (2010b) laments the absence of a democratic project as well as the absence of a basis for social revolution on the continent, while stressing the ‘irrepressible desire of hundreds of millions to live anywhere else but at home’ and the emergence of a ‘culture of racketeering’ (p.3, *my translation throughout*). Thus bemoaning the absence of any Idea, as both people and governments seem to have been ‘de-classed’ or ‘lumpenised’, the author resurrects old names in the form of some kind of ‘New Deal’ to be ‘negotiated between African states and international powers’ in terms of which the question of democracy in Africa is to be ‘internationalised’ so that ‘rogue states’ can be ‘legitimately deposed by the use of force and the authors of these political crimes arraigned before international courts of justice’ (p.11). For Mbembe, ‘the democratisation of Africa is indeed firstly an African question. It clearly must pass by the constitution of social forces which are capable of giving birth to it, to carry it and to defend it. But it is equally an international affair’ (Mbembe, 2010a:28, *my translation*). Of course the whole idea of solidarity in any democratic and egalitarian struggle is crucially important, yet if this solidarity is not thought independently of the state and its subjectivities, we are likely to fall back into the well-worn paternalistic theme of Africa as a ‘basket case’ which is said to be incapable of sorting out its own problems and which should therefore be re-colonized in one form or another by the West. Given the current prevalence of colonial political subjectivities, these types of

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17 I discuss Mahmood Mamdani’s work in some detail in chapter 12 below.

18 What is particularly disconcerting is that even though Mbembe gestures to the centrality of local forces in democratising the continent, these are seen as currently absent or bereft of an Idea and therefore the need to rely on Western solidarity arises (2010a: 27). At the same time, central to discussions among critical intellectuals
‘solutions’, however humanitarian and democratic they may abstractly seem to be, are in essence simply neo-colonial, as became evident in Libya in 2012 when, after having supported the Libyan ruler Colonel Qaddafi for many years, the so-called ‘International Community’ decided to remove him from power by military means under the pretext of his authoritarianism. Moreover, international courts would have greater legitimacy if only they could also put out arrest warrants for Western leaders (such as Henry Kissinger or Tony Blair) for crimes against humanity, but this of course is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future (see Žižek, 2002: 265).

Thus a dead-end has been reached in thinking emancipation simply because the thinking of freedom is not radically divorced from that of power, of the state. Mbembe wishes for some form of Western regulation of African politics; Mamdani opposes such a position and appeals to the African Union instead. Multinational state solutions – African or Western – are seen as the core prescriptions and the only way out of the crisis of African state politics, much as in the early 1960s when Lumumba had thought that the problems of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) could be resolved by appealing to the United Nations. The result of this deference to the West, reproduced to various extents by African leaders and academic discourse ever since, has been perennial crisis in the Congo where there is still today a UN military presence. There will be no solution to the crisis of the African state unless people themselves – people from all walks of life – are allowed and encouraged to discover the truth of their situation and not to rely on the powerful, whether local or foreign, to solve their problems on their behalf. There can be no progress unless people are able to become again the subjects of their own history rather than its victims. The result of the current poverty of intellectual thought is that ultimately it is the dominant powers of the world (or of the continent) which are simply allowed and encouraged to act in Africa in their own narrow interests; such interventions have a history of having been, and indeed continue to be, totally contemptuous of the working people of the continent. The outcomes of such ‘solutions’ have been there for all to see in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, yet this failure of the imagination is allowed to continue uncontested simply because popularly founded solutions are no longer considered relevant, or more accurately do not even enter within the parameters of thought. The core problem with both Mbembe’s and Mamdani’s recent work, whatever their specific arguments and the undoubted value of their theoretical innovations, concerns the orientation of their thought. For Mbembe, intellectual thought and therefore the thought of any emancipatory experiment is unable to distance itself clearly from conceiving change in state terms despite its Fanonian humanist influences, while for

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19 For which he was heavily criticised by his friend Fanon; see Fanon, 1967:194-95.
20 Here I mean ‘people’ (les gens, la gente, abantu) as opposed to ‘the people’ (le peuple, el pueblo, il popolo, etc).
21 There is evidence that recently Mbembe’s thinking on Africa has been changing, as in his recent work (e.g. Mbembe, 2013) it is African intellectuals’ mimetic relationship to the West which is criticized. His commentary on Fanon has also led him to stress a process of becoming and the idea of ‘indifference to difference’ particularly in
Mamdani it is clearly focussed on thinking changes to the state in Africa; in both cases we remain within the habitual account of power and hence we have difficulty in overcoming the fundamental obstacles to a new thought of emancipation. In this book I focus on explicating a politics ‘at a distance’ from the state and attempt to open a space for thinking the exceptional rather than the habitual in order precisely to make emancipation thinkable again in Africa.

The predominant effect of this crisis in thought has often been the uncritical absorption of neoliberal and historicist notions such as those of ‘civil society’, ‘human rights’, ‘(post)modernity’ and ‘identity’ into a discourse which purports to be emancipatory, as I have noted. Of course this has been facilitated by what has become known as the ‘language turn’ in social thought worldwide although it has simultaneously led to a welcome emphasis on the subjective. The idea of ‘political identities’ has been perhaps the dominant intellectual notion here. But discourses and identities are simply seen as effects of the structure of interests and power; for Foucault, they are themselves a ‘subjective structure’ so to speak and they constitute the essence of the culture of modernity (2003a: 54). 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, so much so that they are consensual. Thinkers as disparate as Ali Mazrui, 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. One of the difficulties they have tried to confront has been termed the ‘essentialism’ of identities that refers all thought to an unchanging kernel or essence of the identity in question which evidently de-historicises and naturalises it. Attempts have been made to overcome this difficulty with reference to the relational side of identity – the idea that there is no ‘self’ without the ‘other’ – but unfortunately this does not overcome the problem for relations presuppose the existence of differences and only stress their interconnections, even though these may be given a central effectivity; neither does the notion of ‘hybridity’ or the recognition of a complex multiplicity of identities get us very far in thinking a politics of emancipation.

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’). The core of the discourse of African identity has been the African as victim. For Mbembe ‘modern African reflection on identity is essentially a matter of liturgical construction and incantation rather than criticism’ (Mbembe, 2001:2); such reflection, he adds, reduces an extraordinary history to three tragic acts: ‘slavery, colonization and apartheid’ (p.3). The placing of subjectivity within location was of course an Enlightenment conception. For Hegel (1952: 196) for example, the supposed absence of history in Africa was to be

relation to race and racism, although this is understood as a future ideal to be attained rather than a current practice.

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.

It may be worth recalling here in the context of class identities that, considered as a political subject, the ‘other’ of the proletariat was not the bourgeoisie but the state and the whole political edifice of capitalism. This was, it will be remembered, the core of Lenin’s argument in What is to be Done?

Again the list of references is a long one but one can refer to the works of Appiah, Mudimbe and many others.

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 Mutisio and Rohio, 1975.
accounted for by its geographical location. Today the study of identities and place have simply become pan-disciplinary in Africa. Displacement – the politics of excess beyond social location and identity – has rarely provided the theoretical 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 can think beyond their social place. In this context, the consequences of recent events in North Africa and the Middle East for thinking emancipatory politics need to be urgently drawn.

Transcending political identities and identity politics

The dominance post-1980s of a concept of ‘civil society’ provided a boost to the sociology of social movements as well as to a left critique of African state parties, as various dictatorships were replaced by parliamentary democracies partly as a result of popular protests, partly as a result of external pressure from the neo-liberal consensus. Throughout the continent but in post-apartheid South Africa in particular, there has been a dramatic increase in the study of so-called organisations of civil society. Yet what is important to note as regards politics is that social movements as well as NGOs are always organised interests. In other words as they invariably represent interests of various sorts, their politics are overwhelmingly the politics of representation, with the result that their mere existence (however much they may ‘resist’, ‘protest’ or ‘critique’) provides us usually with little more than popular examples of state politics. This of course is precisely how the sociology of social movements analyses them, even in cases when movements may have been able to invent a politics of excess over their social location. Actually existing sociology has not been able to transcend the view of consciousness as representation. A universal politics of emancipation on the other hand 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, 2004b). 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.

Another difficulty with identity studies has been precisely their inability to conceptualise politics beyond the particular, with the consequence that a universal politics of emancipation, which people are evidently clearly crying out for, remains un-theorised. Identity politics, which vary from the totally reactionary (in the case of ethnic or xenophobic politics) to the state-focused liberalism of multiculturalism, workerism and of currently dominant feminisms, are incapable of providing a basis for the thinking of a politics beyond state democracy and hence beyond current configurations of neoliberal capitalism. As a result one

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26 See footnote 2 above.
27 One such attempt constrained by a classist framework was provided by Temu and Swai, 1981.
28 This process has begun: see especially Badiou, 2011b.
29 The extensive rise of social movements of ‘civil society’ in South Africa has, in Gillian Hart’s (2010:90) accurate words, ‘pulled masses of researchers along in [its] wake’ much as the rise of independent trade unions in the early 1970s did to a previous generation of academics. These researchers have not been concerned with understanding people’s own political thought but with what they see a priori as people’s responses to various dimensions of their structural poverty and to neoliberal economic policies. As people are poor, it follows for this logic that their protests must be demanding government provisioning or ‘delivery’ in South African state parlance. For a recent example of this thinking see Alexander, 2010.
30 This was particularly the case with the student and workers’ movements of May ’68; see Ross, 2002.
31 See Badiou 2009, 2011b as well as his 2011-2012.
is left with a theoretical vacuum which is desperately demanding to be filled. The question crudely put is: given the demise and evident irrelevance of past theoretical perspectives for thinking emancipation today, how is the latter to be thought – assuming that it is indeed to be thought, something which is here taken for granted? The social sciences as currently constituted, given as they are to reducing consciousness to social location or place, are subjectively constrained by their current episteme – in Foucault’s sense of the term – and thus unable to theorise a necessary notion of excess over interest such as the idea of dignity, for example.

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. In contrast, any ‘politics of emancipation attempts to supersede (outrepasser) questions of identity’ (Badiou, 2010b:37). 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, NGOs, etc.) 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 natural and objective (as in the notions of ‘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; hence such a politics can only be ‘indifferent to difference’ or ‘disinterested interest’ (Badiou, 2001). In the absence of concepts to enable a thinking of politics on its own terms, 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 (the proletariat, the nation, the multitude and so on). There is of course a subject of politics which for writers like Rancière and Badiou is always collective, but it is the result of a process of conscious political self-creation or affirmation – a process of subjectivation. 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

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32 The notion of dignity was central to the popular upsurge in Tunisia in late 2010; see Khiari, 2011; it is perhaps the most prevalent name for freedom today.
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 phrase (Weber, 1970b:194) – 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 linguistic tropes 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).

The overwhelming consequence of the current phase of neo-colonialism known as globalisation in the sphere of politics has been the fetishization 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 baseMjondolo, the shackdwellers movement based in Durban – has done so in practice, taking a principled stand (at least between 2005 and 2014) 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 mesmerized by the trappings of state ideology.

It is indeed quite demoralising to see the extent to which intellectuals today are simply cut off from those sites in which ordinary people – particularly those living in informal shack settlements, the most ‘lumpen’ according to Mbembe (2010b) – are themselves attempting to find solutions because, after all, they are the first to suffer the consequences of the crises which intellectuals are analyzing from their positions of relative comfort. The work of the people of Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa for example (to which I shall have occasion to refer in various parts of this book), 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’, 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 Lindela. 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 shacks 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 apparent 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 people’s thought of politics and to begin to think emancipatory and exceptional political subjectivities along with them. There is unfortunately nothing in the proposals of either Mamdani or Mbembe to make one hesitate to reassert the fundamental necessity of rethinking emancipatory politics on the continent. Neither is there anything to suggest that popularly founded solutions are irrelevant simply because earlier emancipatory experiments have tragically failed (Badiou, 2009d). One needs to start by proposing the basic axiom which must form the point of departure of any such reassertion, namely that, as Abahlali show in the extract above written during the xenophobic violence in South Africa of May 2008, people are capable of thought and that therefore we need to rekindle fidelity to the old slogan of ‘confidence in the masses’ which should never be abandoned. The issue here does not concern an ‘empty signifier’ or a blind faith in whatever poor people choose to do, but a simple statement of fact. No emancipatory project founded on liberty, equality, dignity and justice for all can possibly be brought to fruition without genuine political agency by people themselves. That itself should be self-evident. Moreover political emancipation can only be a

33 In particular Abahlali have insisted on their thought of politics being governed by an axiom of equality; they have maintained their organisational autonomy, insisting on running their own affairs as well as founding their politics on what they call a ‘living communism’ which detaches itself from state ways of conceiving politics. See www.abahlali.org. However by mid 2014 there were indications that this sequence may be in the process of ending as a result of repression.

34 Lindela is the detention centre outside Johannesburg where migrants to South Africa are kept before repatriation.
universal project, not one restricted to certain strata, classes, races or groups, thought and undertaken by leaders in power with or without popular support.

Of course this necessarily implies that the contradictions between intellectual and manual labour, leaders and led inherent in the capitalist mode of production itself, be addressed. In particular it should be stressed that contrary to the dominant conception of theory in social and human science, and as Ranajit Guha (1992a) in particular has pointed out, people who resist oppression politically are not simply bearers of their social location (class, gender, ethnicity, nationality or whatever) or of a universal conception of ‘Man’, but reasoning beings with varying degrees of political agency who exist within specific contexts (I discuss Guha’s work in chapter 2). Rancière’s notion of ‘symbolic rupture’, as he puts it, ‘when people start talking about things that were not supposed to be their business’ is precisely meant to capture this point. In any case, as will be shown at length below, people in Africa when left to their own devices have been quite capable historically of providing solutions to their own problems, including the thinking of a politics beyond their apparent material interests.

**Thinking a politics of disinterested interest**

It has become quite clear, and we shall see cases of this throughout this book, that there exists, at certain times in certain sites, a politics beyond interest and that this politics is the core idea behind a politics of emancipation, as emancipation is always ‘for all’ and never ‘for some’, as Badiou (2001) has put it. Such subjectivity can therefore not be understood as ‘reflective’ or ‘representative’ of any dimension of the social division of labour. It has also become clear that interest or identity politics as such are, in one way or other, always the foundation of state political subjectivity, as it is always the state that manages interests and resists emancipation precisely by denying the existence of a universal politics beyond interest. For modes of thought located within state thinking, all politics is founded on interests or identities, it is ultimately the same thing. What is required in Africa is indeed a universal Idea, as Mbembe recognizes, but clearly such an Idea must be thought outside the constraints of the social and must simultaneously be able to ‘cut through’ the social, as for it to have an emancipatory content it must consist of a singular anobjective ‘pure affirmation’ (Badiou, 2009c), independent of social referents and ‘in excess’ of them, much as Fanon (1990) showed ‘national consciousness’ to be in the 1950s in Algeria. This kind of singularity is central to such a politics and hence to its recognition. Finally, it thus becomes clear, as will be shown in the following chapters, that universal political singularities of emancipation have existed in the past in Africa at different times within specific historical sequences, and that such singularities may also exist in the present in some specific sites which today can only be found not just beyond the state but also beyond civil society itself, as I shall show in chapters 3 and 4 in particular.

As I have noted, in the 19th century Marx recognized that the European proletariat embodied a notion of universal emancipation. Yet that proletariat, while obviously existing as a socio-economic grouping in the guise of a working class, had to be constituted politically (i.e. subjectively), meaning that it had to unify itself around the acquiring of a common consciousness of its own objective location and universal political role in society. As Marx

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35 One of the few major intellectuals in Africa to retain such a confidence in the masses is Wamba-Dia-Wamba, his written work has not been produced within academia and largely takes the form of political interventions in various singular contexts.

understood it, the process of class constitution was ultimately a political process, in other words it concerned a specific political subjectivity, a communist subjectivity in his terms. All classes had to constitute themselves politically as such and were not simply given by production relations. This process could only be one of constitution in relation to other class forces. The European bourgeoisies, for example, constituted themselves in relation to a feudal aristocracy, in relation to the working people and eventually the working class, and in relation to each other through wars. The state and hence state politics was central to this process of ruling class constitution and national unification. Marx and Engels indeed insisted in the *German Ideology* (1846:47) that as the bourgeoisie had to constitute itself as a class through conquering state power, so must the proletariat; but after the failure of the Paris Commune their view changed and they stressed that the existing state had first to be ‘smashed’ before an alternative could be constructed (Marx and Engels, 1872:32). These European bourgeoisies were not simply given with an already existing national character as the African literature often repeats in order to emphasise a contrast with the African bourgeoisies, which are said to be ‘compradorial’ in nature (i.e. linked to colonial interests). There are countless instances in European history of bourgeoisies caving in to the pressures of their foreign adversaries or of ‘calling in’ these bourgeois adversaries to help in putting down popular resistance, most notoriously in 1871 during the Paris Commune itself. Marx’s concept of the proletariat as a political subject follows precisely from its political constitution in Europe through the workers’ movements of the 19th century (1830, 1848 and 1871).

Badiou (1985: 26-30) emphasizes the fact that the singular importance of Marxism as a mode of thought does not reside in its analytical power or its ‘meta-narrative’ of history. Rather out of all the revolutionary (i.e. emancipatory) doctrines emanating from the 19th century, Marxism was the only ideology which achieved extraordinary historical credit in the 20th; a validation which was reflected in three major areas. The first of these was the existence of a series of states which played an emblematic role as actually achieved revolutionary transformations and not simply as imagined ones. Marxism was actually lived as that subjectivity through which the oppressed (workers, peasants, national minorities, colonised, etc) could really vanquish the military might of their oppressors, if not for the first time in modern history – that honour belongs to the slaves in Saint Domingue, as we shall see – at least for the first time in the 20th century. This resulted not only in Marxism becoming a state ideology – and in the vanguard party becoming a state party – but also in the creation of a beacon to which popular forces all over the world could refer and be inspired by. Second, this credit was reflected in the struggles (and wars) of national liberation where the ideas of the nation and the people were often fused (as in China, Algeria, Cuba, etc.) under the direction of a party and of Marxist ideological hegemony. These national liberation struggles in turn had a major ideological impact on youth struggles elsewhere, such as during May ’68 in Europe for example. Finally it was reflected within the working class movement in the West itself, where Marxism had a major ideological effect on trade unions and parties which became a permanent feature of state politics. These three cases proved the exceptional and successful character of Marxism as an emancipatory discourse during the previous century. The crisis of Marxism was occasioned by the gradual collapse of these three referents, while

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37 It should also be recalled that simultaneously with the Paris Commune, the people of Kabylia in Algeria rebelled against French colonialism. The Cheikh Moqrani Uprising of 1871–72 was put down with equal if not greater ferocity than that used against the revolutionaries in Paris, while rebels from both Paris and Kabylia were often sent on the same ships in exile to New Caledonia. In fact the Third Republic which followed after the defeat of the Commune opened up a major sequence of extremely violent colonial expansion by the French state. The uprising in Kabylia has generally been occluded by the left in France. For attempts to redress the balance see Liauzu (2012) and Blanchard et al. (2005).
the failure of socialism as well as that of national liberation to enable popular emancipation was a failure of a politics focussed entirely on the state and its capture. The state in fact cannot emancipate anyone; its fundamental reason for existence is precisely to reproduce at most a continuity with the extant; it is opposed to discontinuous (i.e. real) change as such. Yet this failure has not meant the disappearance of the need to think human emancipation or indeed implied the end of history. The difficulty consists in identifying precisely the source of that subjective problem and in beginning to overcome it without abandoning an emancipatory politics. The thought of emancipatory politics must then be developed from within Marxism itself and must be a politics of activism and militancy, not one focussed on state power and the problematic of state capture.

In this context it is crucial to insist on the fact that political subjectivities can be analysed, explained and understood rationally as much as any objective factor can, and that this can be done without any collapse into idealism. We must therefore have the courage to move beyond Marx’s statement in his famous 1859 Preface and to assert that the ‘ideological forms in which men become conscious of this [class] conflict and fight it out’ can indeed be explained rationally without reducing them to ‘the existing conflict between social productive forces and the relations of production’ (1859:182). In fact Badiou shows quite clearly that subjectivity itself is part of the real, and not expressive of it in a distinct domain; it is this which allows for a rational investigation of political subjectivities. As a result, Badiou argues, the core concept in an analysis of politics must be that of ‘practice’; politics therefore must be understood as a ‘thought-practice’. It is this that makes it real:

I do not think it pertinent to oppose idealism to materialism on the basis of the distinction between thought and the real (primacy of the first over the second for idealism, and the opposite for materialism). Because this very common conception misunderstands the fundamental (materialist) point that thought is part of the real. To define materialism in terms of the primacy of the real over thought is already to have taken an idealist position ... Materialist, dialectical thought (dialectical materialism) itself begins with the notion of practice. What does ‘practice’ mean? For me it means that the finitude of objective conditions allows for the development of an immanent exception (Badiou, Seminaire 2012-13, 24th October, 14th November, 2012, my translation, emphasis in original).

For Rancière also it is 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 perspective 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

38 Not as a ‘thought in practice’ a formulation which would fall into the abstract-concrete distinction; the point being that thought and practice are inseparable in politics. Lazarus (1996: 113) formulates this point as ‘politics is a thought-relation-of-the-real’ as opposed to history which is a ‘thought-relation-of-the-state’ and philosophy which is a ‘thought-relation-of-thought’.

39 Incidentally, if it were thought necessary, textual support for the centrality of a notion of practice can also be found in Marx’s own work. It is simply that the 1859 Preface has come to be the core ‘historical materialist’ reference for vulgar Marxism. See the following well-known statement from the 3rd thesis on Feuerbach for example: ‘The coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionising practice’ (Marx, 1845: 29, emphasis in original). It should be recalled further that the 3rd thesis is concerned with a critique of vulgar materialism which ‘arrives at dividing society into two parts of which one is superior to the other’ (p.28).
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)

In conclusion

In sum then, ‘politics is thought’, ‘thought is real’ and ‘people think’ are to be seen as the three fundamental axioms of this book. Today in the 21st century, it is apparent that emancipatory politics is not necessarily constituted around class, although it invariably is around the politically ‘inexistent’ in Badiou’s sense of the term (Badiou, 2011c)40. The social categories of the people, the poor, the youth (and during certain periods, women) have equally provided the basis for the thought of emancipation, yet however excessive that thought of politics may have been at times, in most instances emancipation has been thought via access in one form or other to the state, a fact which has had the effect of reversing emancipatory gains. The reduction of emancipatory political subjectivity to class (as indeed to any other social location or identity) is today redundant because the thought of politics as expressive of social location is the foundation of state politics, for it is the state which thinks location, hierarchy, interests and identities as it must ensure their reproduction. For emancipation to be adequately thought, social reductionism must be replaced with an understanding of the politically subjective, which, while in some way marked by the objectively social, recognises its excessive – and hence its irreducible – character. It is not just a matter of critiquing neo-liberalism, socialism or nationalism as such. Rather an alternative vision of freedom must also be affirmed and it is the old notions of emancipation and freedom which need to be critiqued. In order to do this we need new categories and concepts to propose as part of a new vision of freedom. It follows that without opening up political subjectivities – including those of freedom – to rigorous study, making them visible, recognising their existence as worthy of analysis, we will be stuck within the past ways of thinking freedom (liberalism, Marxism, nationalism) which could not move beyond state thinking.

The way forward intellectually must be to think emancipatory politics, to think subjectivities as such, not simply as expressive of the social which amounts to state thinking, but by detaching them from their current anchor in identity politics in general and from (social) psychology or morality in particular. This is a complex enterprise, but part of it must consist in a re-thinking of history beyond historicism and of politics beyond the state; not as determined ‘in the last instance’ by the social (economy, state, nation, and so on), a conception which is always founded on ‘material’ interests, but to refashion Althusser’s insight that history has no subject. In this manner politics can also become thinkable outside the party form, as the party represented the subject of history in radical thought because it was said to represent the working class, the masses, the people or the nation in the political sphere. Subjects – which according to Badiou (2009a) are in politics always collective subjects – can therefore be rigorously understood as produced and not as given; they can in fact be conceived as produced through a politics, as the products of subjectivities (through a process of ‘subjectivation’) and not the other way round, thus avoiding a collapse into idealism.

40 By the ‘inexistent’ Badiou means those who do not exist or who only minimally exist within a particular world, e.g. the proletariat for Marx in 19th c Europe. The concept is similar to the ‘zone of non-being’ in Fanon’s work. For both it is among these people that emancipatory politics is likely to be found when it exists. For a brief definition of this term in Badiou’s philosophy which is not restricted to politics see his 2009a: 587.
As Lazarus (1996:67f) insists, the foundation statement for the thinking of politics today must be ‘people think’. The foundational axiom of the thought of emancipatory politics must be that people are capable of thinking a different ‘possible’ – in other words ‘what could be’ – in the present: ‘to say “people think” is to say that they are capable, under a name, of prescribing a possible which is irreducible to the repetition or continuation of what exists’ and thus to become component parts of a collective political subject (Badiou, 2005:32). They are in other words capable of reason, of thinking beyond their social location and conditions, of thinking an excess beyond the simply given extant of the social division of labour and its corresponding social identities. Politics as thought in practice – emancipatory politics – must thus exist in excess of social relations and of social identities, otherwise any change from the existing matrix of social relations and power cannot possibly be the object of thought and people are not considered to be beings who reason; it cannot therefore be understood as a ‘reflection’ or ‘representation’ of existing socio-economic groupings and their hierarchies. Without this ‘excessive’ character, politics is simply conflated with ‘the political’, with party, the state and political community. This has been the core problem of previous attempts to understand emancipation in Africa and national emancipatory politics in particular. At the same time it must be noted that excess is always excess over something, namely the extant, with the result that there is always a relationship between the thought of what is and the thought of what could be. The ‘excessive’ and the ‘expressive’ are always related in some dialectical way in political subjectivity and it is the dialectical relation between the two which provides the thread of this book. Finally it should perhaps also be stressed that the idea of ‘excess’ must not be understood in any simple ‘additive’ sense, for it may overturn the thought of the extant completely, or ‘puncture a hole in it’, yet such a politics of separation is sufficiently linked to the extant, to identities, interests and the state, for it to ultimately be arguably the most appropriate term available. Therefore, the objective and the subjective must not be thought as related exclusively in an expressive manner, with the latter at most reacting back onto the former. They may be so related ‘normally’ or ‘habitually’, within what Badiou (1988) refers to as ‘the state of the situation’ and within society itself, although even in this case the expressive may take the form of specific idioms and discourses themselves not immediately reducible to social place, as we shall see in later chapters. But an emancipatory subjectivity can only find its roots within a relation of excess, wherein the expression of the objective is transcended or ‘punctured’ in many different ways depending on circumstances. The excessive-expressive dialectic is thus what structures the thought of emancipation.

References