

The Political Conditions of Social Thought and the Politics of Emancipation: an introduction to the work of Sylvain Lazarus

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. . . neither Marx nor Engels ever came close to developing a theory of history, in the sense of an unpredictable historical event, unique and aleatory, nor indeed to developing a theory of political practice. I refer here to the politico-ideologico-social practice of political activism, of mass movements and of their eventual organisations, for which we possess no concepts and even less a coherent theory, in order for it to be apprehended in thought. Lenin, Gramsci and Mao were only able to partially think such a practice. The only theorist to think the political history of political practice in the present, was Machiavelli. There is here another huge deficit to overcome, the importance of which is decisive, and which, once again, sends us back to philosophy. (Althusser 1994: 48.)

Public apathy and political ignorance are a fundamental fact today, beyond any possible dispute; decisions are made by political leaders, not by popular vote, which at best has only an occasional veto power after the fact. The issue is whether this state of affairs is, under modern conditions, a necessary and desirable one, or whether new forms of popular participation, in the Athenian spirit . . . need to be *invented* (Moses Finley 1985: 36, *emphasis added*)

To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man (M. Ghandi 1958: 40 cit. Chatterjee 1989: 167)

Introduction

Social science today appears to exist in the absence of any emancipatory project. We are confronted today with the absence of any thought of a better world. Either

we have to accept the crassness and absolute injustice and oppression of what Badiou (2006b) terms the 'capitalo-parliamentary' system with its bastardised notion of 'democracy', or we have to support rabid communitarianisms. Half the world thinks along one single line (what Francophones call *la pensée unique*): capitalism and liberal democracy signal the end of history; or else capitalism may be oppressive but through human rights people can ameliorate their conditions. What we need therefore, it is said, is a culture of rights and everything will be fine. The problem is that it is this same culture which considers people especially non-westerners as pathetic victims, incapable of thinking for themselves, in need of help through whatever means necessary (the 'trusteeship' of power) and which ultimately ends up justifying imperialism (yes imperialism, not 'globalisation') as the spreading of the democratic ideal (Chatterjee 2004; Wa Mutua 2002). The main opponent to this mode of thought today seems to be militant Islam with its religious communitarian dogmas. It is the absence of thought beyond what Wamba-dia-Wamba (2007) refers to as the 'democratising mission' of the West which I believe lies at the root of the crisis of the social sciences today.

We are currently living in a period of theoretical and political disorientation: theoretical disorientation because of the worldwide decline in the reference to theory (political economy in particular) and its replacement with the post-modernist trend, and political disorientation because of the gradual disappearance of our traditional political referents. In particular, the decline of Marxist political economy and its replacement by the relativistic trend of post-modernism, while important in drawing attention to the autonomy of the subjective, has provided few guidelines for the development of theoretical categories which would help us think an emancipatory future. Its eschewing of universality and theory as a matter of principle, has been its fundamental problem. How is one to think beyond the deploring of the capitalo-parliamentary *status quo*, to think an emancipatory politics given the failure of statist models of emancipation - socialist, social-democratic and nationalist in persuasion? The absence of alternative thought to the systems of the twentieth century, has led either to the clinging to dogmas, or to the capitulation to the view that neo-liberal economics and politics is the best thing on offer.

In South Africa the total disappointment in the absence of any emancipatory politics after the (admittedly contradictory) optimism of the popular upsurge of the 1980s, and its replacement by the crassest forms of accumulation and corruption in elite politics, has led to a cynicism which is reflected in both social science and in politics. In politics it has led to the gradual abandonment of any form of emancipatory thought and in social science to a collapse into empirical work or verbal gymnastics derived from a 'language turn' which is gradually losing its appeal. Clearly the emphasis on social or political 'identities' has been useful, but has merely reinforced the stress on difference given ultimately by the state of things as they are. For example, Francis Nyamnjoh's (2006) stress on the fact that citizenship must be understood as variable and flexible, rather than as a rigid 'yes or no' affair, while usefully enabling a move beyond rigid state notions, still disables a conception of citizenship as agency as it still assumes citizenship to be given - this time by culture and power rather than by the state – and not politically produced.

The decline in the use of class categories is also reflective of the reality of social relations as, while inequalities have increased throughout the globalised World in general and in Africa in particular, the number of 'productive workers' – Marx's classical category – has drastically declined in South Africa for example, as subcontracting and casualisation as well as the shedding of 'non-core' workers has drastically increased. The absence of political alternatives to statist conceptions of citizenship founded on indigeneity have so-gripped the consciousness of the poor generally in South Africa, that generalised pogroms of others among the poor - such as those witnessed during the xenophobic violence of May 2008 - have only been challenged in a minority of cases¹. The working-class can no longer be considered as a subject of history, and neither can 'the multitudes' (Hardt and Negri 2001). In fact there is no subject of history, so much should be clear from the failure of the statist emancipatory experiments of the twentieth century. To think an emancipatory politics without thinking a historical subject is precisely what social theory must help us to achieve today.

What post-apartheid state politics in South Africa unfortunately also represents is a systematic political disorientation. Our usual political signposts (left-right, capitalist-

socialist, state-market) seem no longer to operate, as familiar political distinctions have become blurred. When there is no distinction to speak of between state and market, when private accumulation is said to be in the public interest, when all parties adhere consensually to the norms of neo-liberal economics and politics, it becomes difficult if not impossible to use those categories as subjective pointers for the orientation of political thought. Given the absence of clearly defined alternatives, it is not then surprising to find that 'the working class' of the townships is engaging in crypto-fascist political actions against outsiders.

Along with political disorientation, social thought has largely been moribund. The problem, contrary to what Michael Burawoy has asserted has little to do with reasserting a 'public' socially conscious social science². The private-public distinction has been so thoroughly subjected to critique by Feminists and others that it is surprising that it should still be invoked in these circumstances. After all the domain of 'the public' is the domain of the state, the 'public sphere' and 'public opinion' to name only two of its common names, refer evidently to state hegemonic conceptions of politics. The private-public dichotomy simply occludes many popular forms of politics which take place beyond both³. This is precisely the case with an emancipatory politics which is always founded on universals of justice, freedom and equality, rather than on interest politics which are always the purview of state subjectivity. Emancipatory politics as Badiou explains is always *for all* and not only *for some* (Badiou 2006b). State forms of political subjectivity (as opposed to any specific policy or action) are only reflective of interests, usually those of a minority.

A critical social science, a social science which is alive rather than moribund, has not always existed historically. When it has, it has only existed as a result of the imagining of an emancipatory project. At least from the rationalist project of the Enlightenment which wished to liberate thought from religious dogma, to the critique of capitalism and the imagining of an alternative to it in the 19th century, to the critique of 'actually existing socialism' in May 1968, to the imagining of freedom and development in the Third World, to the struggle for equality between men and women, to the anti-apartheid struggle for an Africa without racism, in all these political moments, social thought and social science (not all social sciences to the

same extent to be sure) was able to rise to a critical analysis of what existed and its structuring by power in order to clear the ground for a better alternative. Today the absence of an emancipatory political project is reflected in the inability of social science in most of the world to transcend the descriptive and the given. Today in post-apartheid South Africa in particular, this is expressed in the mainstream intellectual praise-singing of state power through a continuous celebration of our peaceful transition and our supposedly wonderful democracy and constitution. One wonders indeed how the systematic slaughter of supposedly 'foreign' others (62 in total in the short space of one month in May 2008) could possibly happen.

Social science today is unable to rise beyond a description or analysis of what exists and seems incapable of thinking what could be. This is why it is in crisis. This, I would suggest, is not primarily a question of epistemology, but because one of its political conditions of existence is lacking. It is in crisis because it has evacuated politics from its domain of thought; and politics has been evacuated from social science because it is absent from life. It is absent from life, as I have argued at length elsewhere (Neocosmos 2006), because it is systematically removed by liberal democracy which statifies and technicises political agency (or reduces it to juridical agency) with the sole exception of the casting of the vote every quinquennium. The liberal state is a 'de-politicising machine' to paraphrase the anthropologist James Ferguson, a fact which Rousseau in the *Social Contract* had understood long ago⁴. People then become politically illiterate and lose their *politike technē* as the ancient Greeks knew full well. In a sense they then lose their freedom properly understood (as this *technē* was an exclusive attribute of free people) - i.e. their capacity to exercise political agency over their immediate social environment. In this context, human emancipation can no longer be an object for thought. The system we have we are told, is the best there is, not perfect to be sure, but better than any alternative which can only be 'totalitarian' (see Žižek 2002). This amounts to a fundamentally conservative viewpoint which asserts that there is no better world than that which exists. Perhaps this should be loudly repeated to the fifty percent in South Africa who live below the poverty line and to the majority of the world's population in order to gauge their reaction. It should be the object of social thought to debunk this nonsense.

Yet in the absence of an emancipatory project, social science is simply vacuous, a slave to modes of thought which simply fall into a conception of politics which is reduced to the state, (or to class, history or nation) and disables an understanding of politics as independent practice. In the absence of an ability to think politics as subjective practice, as consciousness, as choice, as a possible alternative to what exists, social science will always understand politics as state politics, as the state is what structures and ensures the continuation of what exists. This is true even of the most 'radical' of political economies such as those of David Harvey, Samir Amin or Patrick Bond, for no conclusions regarding the content of emancipatory practice can be deduced from such objective political economies, however necessary these analyses may be in order to elucidate the mechanisms of exploitation, oppression and resistance. On the contrary in the absence of a theory of politics as subjectivity, of categories which enable us to grasp politics as subjectivity, all politics ends up being thought in terms of a state subjectivity, the 'automatic' way of thinking politics today, and all politics ends up being conceived as objectively determined. As Peter Hallward puts it, without the freedom to make political choices, 'we cannot say that people make their own history; we can merely contemplate the forms of their constraint' (Hallward 2005: 781).

At least contemporary social science in the countries of the South has had a closer connection with thinking politics than it has had in the West for a number of reasons. Witness for example the school of *Subaltern Studies* in India, which at its inception was centrally concerned with the subalterns' agency in making their own history, for example with the popular politics of peasant movements, apparent in the work of Ranajit Guha. However its more recent trajectory seems to have been one of de-politicisation (*inter alia*) as 'the subaltern seems to speak less and less'¹⁵ in this work as it has become more directly part of the postcolonial (without the hyphen) academy. Sadly, even Partha Chatterjee's most recent book seems less concerned with understanding *The Politics of the Governed* and more with the structural limits which state modes of rule ('sovereignty' and 'governmentality') impose on such politics. With the end of 'classism' (both Marxist and Keynesian) as a mode of thinking politics, I would argue that emancipatory politics has to be thought

fundamentally differently today. Classism may still be taking its time to die in South Africa, but it has been redundant as a mode of conceiving emancipatory politics in the world for some time now. It strikes me as problematic, as Barchiesi (2005) has rightly observed, that we still cling to explanatory *productivist* theories in conditions where 43 percent of the population (or thereabouts) is said to be formally unemployed, not counting the number of subcontracted and casualized workers. The obsession of seeing South Africa as exceptional in Africa because of its 'industrial base' and more recently because of its apparent 'democratic stability' so that our main intellectual reference point remains in the West as under apartheid, is to my mind, a major obstacle to thought, particularly to thinking politically.

Human Rights Discourse a Political Alternative?

With the collapse of the 'social-democratic consensus' and 'actually existing socialism', the two twentieth century variants of the 'classist state', human rights discourse has replaced 'classism' as a way of thinking alternatives. I have argued at length elsewhere that human rights discourse (HRD) cannot help us conceive human emancipation (Neocosmos 2006). Here I only wish to re-iterate some points briefly which show the close link between HRD and the most recent form of imperialism. Chatterjee has rightly noted the role of international NGOs in spreading human rights discourse which, he argues, forms one of the main pillars of imperialism today. It is important to emphasise this point here as it is constitutive of the currently hegemonic conception of democracy and human rights. It is crucial to recognise that in the new form of imperialism - which we are told does not have a clear centre (Hardt and Negri 2001) - it is not simply that the power of governments to make decisions on their own economies is undermined; even perhaps more importantly, national sovereignty is being undermined by human rights discourse. This takes a number of forms including the trial of gross violators by the International Criminal Court in The Hague (so that they are not accountable to their own people) and the propagating by international NGOs (Oxfam, MSF etc) of Western conceptions of human rights; it is clearly in this way that the foundations of empire are being laid. The connection between imperialism and human rights is explained extremely well by Chatterjee:

Liberals are now saying that . . . international law and human rights must be established all over the world. Where these are violated, the guilty must be punished, without undue regard for the privileges of national sovereignty. If the leaders of states themselves have little concern for the law, if they themselves ride roughshod over the human rights of people, then why should the excuse of national sovereignty be allowed to come to their rescue? In that case human rights would never be established. What is needed, therefore, is the drafting of a global code of state practice and the creation of international institutions to monitor and implement this code . . . The liberal democratic countries must come forward to accept their responsibility in creating the institutional space for the operation of an ideal global sovereignty. The name for this sovereign sphere . . . is empire. (2004: 98).

Of course, if the responsibility of 'Western democracies' extends to ensuring that democracy and the rule of human rights is to be accepted throughout the world and if there is any (obviously misguided) resistance to such acceptance, then democracy and human rights must be imposed by force if necessary. Chatterjee (2004: 100) continues:

The theorists of the new empire have talked of still more wonderful things. This empire is democratic. It is an empire without an emperor. The people are sovereign here, as it should be in a democracy. That is precisely why this empire has no geographical limits. This is not like the empires of old where territories have to be conquered by war to add to the size of the empire. Now empire expands because more and more people, and even governments, looking for peace and for the lure of economic prosperity, want to come under its sheltering umbrella. Thus empire does not conquer territory or destroy property; rather, it encompasses new countries within its web of power, makes room for them in its network. The key to empire is not force but control. There is always a limit to force; there is no limit to control. Hence empire's vision is a global democracy . . . We can see the exercise of control right in front of our eyes . . . Even such a deeply political matter as punishment for alleged violations of human rights has now become the jurisdiction of new

international judicial institutions. The trial of Milosevic is the most dramatic example of this⁶.

However this is not all, 'if the protection of human rights is a function of Empire, then that task is being carried out not simply by the international courts. It is being done daily, and diligently, by numerous international NGOs . . . whose able and committed activists probably have never suspected that they are, like little squirrels, carrying the sand and pebbles that go into the building of the great bridgehead of empire. But that is where the ideological foundations of empire are being laid' (ibid.: 100-1).

As Wa Mutua stresses, 'although the human rights movement arose in Europe, with the express purpose of containing European savagery, it is today a civilizing crusade aimed primarily at the Third World . . . Rarely is the victim conceived as white' (op.cit.: 19, 30). And Badiou continues:

Since the barbarity of the situation [of victims in the Third World - MN] is considered only in terms of 'human rights' - whereas in fact we are always dealing with a political situation, one that calls for a political thought-practice, one that is peopled by its own authentic actors - it is perceived, from the heights of our apparent civil peace, as the uncivilized that demands of the civilized a civilizing intervention. Every intervention in the name of a civilisation *requires* an initial contempt for the situation as a whole, including its victims. And this is why the reign of 'ethics' coincides, after decades of courageous critiques of colonialism and imperialism, with today's sordid self-satisfaction in the 'West', with the insistent argument according to which the misery of the Third World is the result of its own incompetence, its own inanity - in short, of its *subhumanity* (Badiou, 2001: 13).

The politics of human rights is thus state-liberal politics; human rights discourse cannot enable the thinking of emancipatory politics simply because it is founded on a notion of the trusteeship of power for helpless victims who lack the capacity to be political agents, to think for themselves. The metaphor of 'Savage - Victim - Saviour'

stressed by Wa Mutua (2002) seems to be clearly dominant under present conditions. In this triple metaphor, the 'savage' refers to the African state and behind it to African culture as, of course, the state is authoritarian by virtue of being 'neo-patrimonial' or expressive of a 'belly politics' etc, all of which find their roots implicitly or explicitly within culture. The victims of the savage, the people of Africa, must be saved by a saviour which can be any institution from NGOs to NATO including dominant states and international courts as I have noted above⁷. The politics of the latter are founded on colonial conceptions of 'trusteeship' stressed by Cowen and Shenton (1996) in their analysis of doctrines of development. Finally, I have shown elsewhere at length how liberalism today, through its technicisation of politics, systematically produces a politically ignorant passive citizenship, not an active citizen with political knowledge (Neocosmos 2006). Because of such political ignorance, when popular agency is indeed unleashed it operates within the confines of state subjectivity, as shown in an extreme way by the pogroms of 'foreigners' in May 2008 (Neocosmos 2009).

We need therefore to conceive of emancipatory politics outside HRD. The work of Žižek is a useful starting point here. He has noted that in thinking emancipation, 'political conflict designates the tension between the structured social body in which each part has its place, and 'the part of no part' which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality' (1999: 188). This is what Balibar (1994: 47) refers to as 'equaliberty', the absolute equality of men as thinking beings, or the 'equation of man and citizen'. Žižek (loc.cit.) continues:

This identification of the non-part with the Whole, of the part of society with no properly defined place within it . . . with the Universal, is the elementary gesture of politicisation, discernable in all great democratic events from the French Revolution . . . to the demise of ex-European Socialism . . . In this precise sense, politics and democracy are synonymous: the basic aim of anti-democratic politics always and by definition is and was de-politicisation - that is, the unconditional demand that 'things should go back to normal'.

If this is the elementary gesture of politics, then politics refers to something specific, not to a realm, instance or domain understood as 'the political' but rather to a specific practice or singular occurrence.

Lazarus on Moses Finley and the invention of politics and history

Lazarus (1996: 121ff) helps us to expand on this understanding. For him, the ancient Greeks invented politics, not just democracy; the two were in fact the same thing as Žižek makes clear above. He argues that this was the condition for the invention of history as a reflection on social life – i.e. as what we would today call social thought. His argument is founded on a study of the work of Moses Finley one of the foremost authorities on Greek antiquity⁸. I would like to outline this argument briefly.

For Finley, we can speak of the 'invention' of history by the Greeks⁹, and this invention cannot be grasped as a passage from a mythical conception of the past to a rationalist conception of the past. This supposed break or rupture from mythical conceptions to rationalist ones which forms the basis of the positivist account, is unsustainable as the rise of history does not supplant mythology but operates in parallel with it. Even in Herodotus (held to be one of the first scientific historians along with Thucydides) references to myths continue. Lazarus reads Finley as suggesting that history is a capacity, and a provisional capacity at that; a capacity which Lazarus names 'sequential' for it corresponds to a provisional subjective capacity which follows a specific sequence. For Finley, history is not an invariant, any society or period does not necessarily have a history. There are societies which do not produce history and not just those without states and without writing. The absence of history is not indicative of an absence of historical sources. Rather, in order for history to exist there should be a generation which has thought its own situation, its own conditions of life. In this case, the history of this generation is possible both for itself and for future historians. There is therefore not always a capacity for history, this refers to a specific mode of thought contemporaneous with itself.

Two theses follow for Lazarus: first there can only be history contemporaneous with itself and a specific consciousness is necessary for it to exist, second the existence of a contemporaneous history is not always given. Not all generations possess this capacity or consciousness. In sum history exists only under the condition of such a consciousness. Only under such conditions can statements, formulations and generalisations be constructed with regard to the particular situation. For Finley the condition of this capacity of an epoch to produce a history is nothing else than the existence of politics. The invention of history for Finley is contemporaneous to the invention of the 'polis', and particularly to the invention of politics. History is not connected to the state as such, but to the existence of *politike techne*, to active citizenship. It is not possible to explain the discovery of history by the Greeks as a matter of moving from the irrational mode of thinking to the rational, but of 'invention'. Politics is also an invention, irreducible to the state, to classes, to the management of the social, to power. A specific subjective invention, politics is not permanent, it is in Lazarus' terms, sequential and rare. History, and by inference social science do not always exist as independent novel thought distinguished from myth¹⁰. They require politics for their existence, politics as a thought of something different from what exists. We need therefore to say something about politics in this sense.

Theorising emancipatory politics after classism

If the social sciences are to be revived as critical thought which can enable the thinking of new 'possibles', we need, *inter alia*, an understanding of politics as practice, as enabling the thought of universals (freedom, equality, justice) to be achieved, as a capacity to think what should be fought *for*, not only what should be fought *against* (hence the limit of the idea of 'critique' as in 'critical political economy' or 'critical social science'). The new should emerge out of a critique of the old, but this critique is not enough as it is destructive, not creative. For the new to be capable of being thought, Lazarus suggests, politics needs to be understood as purely of the order of thought, as purely subjective in this sense:

To say that politics is of the order of thought is an attempt to conceive of politics after the end of classism and within another space than that of

the state; but first and foremost, it is to say that politics is not given in the space of an object, be it that of the 'state' or that of 'revolution' . . . The enterprise of conceiving politics from elsewhere than from the state or from the economy is an enterprise of freedom and of a domain proper to decision (Lazarus 1996:13).

Politics as subjectivity: modes of politics, political prescriptions, the extant and the possible.

I cannot at this juncture outline in detail what is an incredibly original and complex theory, this will have to wait for another time. For the present, it will suffice to provide a sketch of some of the core ideas put forward in Lazarus' work. In order to make sense of his work, we need to begin with an understanding of the fact that Lazarus is interested in making intelligible, not just the existing configuration or structure of social situations of various types, but the existence of possible alternatives to the manner in which these situations are configured. In other words he is interested in theorising the subjective and the objective, not only as distinct, but as at a distance from each other. Not only is there no 'correspondence' between the two, but there is in many cases a distinct distance between them. In such cases the possibility exists that people's subjectivities - thought - can assert something different from what is, an alternative to the existing. In fact he argues that the 'extant' is identified via the possible:

In people's thought, the real is identified via the possible. The investigation of what exists takes place but is subordinated to the investigation of what could be. The methods of investigation differ according to whether they are linked to the category of the 'possible' or to that of the extant'. (Lazarus, 2001: 8, unless otherwise indicated all translations from the French are mine - MN).

Politics is of the order of thought

It is politics as doing, (he rejects the term 'practice'), politics as 'prescription' as he puts it, which denotes the distance between what *is* and what *could be*. What this

means is that what is required is an understanding of politics as concerning thought exclusively, as remaining purely within the domain of the subjective. Like Badiou, who relies on him heavily (see particularly Badiou 2005, ch. 2), Lazarus is interested in theorising politics as a militant 'practice' while remaining consistent with rationalism/materialism. What he attempts is no less than a materialist theory of the subjective. This theory he calls an anthropology (after all anthropology has generally been precisely the study of the subjective, culture, belief etc), more specifically what he calls an 'Anthropology of the Name'. It is this anthropology he argues, which makes politics thinkable as thought. But in order to think thought purely within thought, all scientific assumptions must be dropped as these assume some correspondence between thought and object, between subjective and objective; the 'concept' then becoming a more or less accurate expression/representation of the real. This axiom is then pursued to its logical conclusion building a system of names and categories which help to identify the real. If the relation between the real and the subjective is not the issue, how are we sure that we are indeed investigating the real? This requires a rigorous consistency to two foundational statements/axioms which Lazarus sees as the core of his theoretical system, these are: 1. People think (*les gens pensent*); and 2. Thought is a relation of the real (*la pensée est rapport du réel*).

To maintain that politics is subjective, is simply to say that it is 'of the order of thought' as Lazarus (op.cit.) puts it. 'To say "people think" is to say that they are capable . . . of prescribing a possible that is irreducible to the repetition or the continuation of what exists' (Badiou 2005: 32). Anyone is able to think politically, and such thought is not the preserve of experts. At the same time, such thought is itself a real relation because that prescriptive thought is indeed material (in its effects). In this manner politics can be comprehended in terms of itself and not in terms of some other entity (or 'invariant') external to it (Badiou 1985). Politics is thus irreducible to the economy, to the state, to ethnicity, to society, to history or to any entity outside itself:

As soon as the conceptual categories in operation are those of consciousness . . . there can no longer be an expressive dialectic between relations of

production and forms of consciousness, otherwise this dialectic remains that of history, that of the state or of the economy and no longer possesses a prescriptive character (Lazarus 1996: 57).

In actual fact for Lazarus, it is not all politics which is capable of fulfilling the criterion of irreducibility, only (various modes of) emancipatory politics do so. As a result such politics do not always exist. Lazarus (op.cit.: 53) refers to the example of Lenin's thought for which the existence of a working class as a social class is distinguished from its existence as a political class. The existence of the latter cannot be deduced from the former in Lenin's thought. In fact in Lenin, 'class' is no longer a historico-political category as in Marx - after the failure of the Paris Commune, the historical certainty stressed in the Communist Manifesto is no longer sustainable - but is rather replaced by a category of 'organised political consciousness' (Lazarus 1996: 25). With Lenin, 'politics must possess its own specific terms . . . as it passes from the certain to the possible' (ibid.:26). Thus, in Lenin's terms, the proletariat must 'demarcate itself' politically from other classes by its party acquiring a unique set of ideological positions on the issues of the day. This means that politics is not an 'expression' of social conditions or of history, but that the relations between politics and history are much more complex (Neocosmos 1993, part 1). This perspective is clearly apparent, for example, in Lenin's analyses of the 'national question', where he argues, against Luxemburg in particular, and 'imperialist economism' in general, that the national question is not reducible to class (the right of nations to self-determination is not a bourgeois demand) but is a 'democratic' issue – i.e. a political issue - of concern to the people as a whole (see e.g. Lenin 1986).

In Marx's thought, the issue is treated differently. For him, 'scientific notions are also notions of political consciousness, they are realisable . . . from this perspective, human emancipation is not a utopia but a real possibility'. For Marx the science of history and the politically prescriptive are fused into one unique conception (ibid.: 55). It should be noted in passing that when we study politics as 'practice', there is no such thing as a unified 'Marxism'; the politics expressed and practised by Marx, Lenin, Mao, Stalin, Gramsci, Lukaçs, Cabral, Che Guevara, etc are crucially all distinct, they (may) formulate different modes of politics.

Modes of Politics and their Sites

For Lazarus, 'there is no politics in general, only specific political sequences. Politics is not a permanent instance of society' (ibid.: 89). Different kinds of politics are distinguished by their historicity, in other words they have a history, they arise and then they pass on. Lazarus refers to these as *historical modes of politics* or 'the relation of a politics to its thought' (loc.cit.). They are identified by different sites (*lieux*) and have their own activists (*militants*). The former refer to the sites in the concrete situation where that particular mode exists, the latter to those who most clearly embody, express and represent that mode in thought. Politics does not always exist, it is rare and is always sequential. Lazarus outlines different historical modes of politics with their own sequences, some of which have been emancipatory due to the fact that they conceive of politics 'internally' and others which reduce politics to an 'external invariant'. Clearly, these are not the only modes of politics which have developed historically, and others remain to be elucidated and analysed; however a brief recapitulation of these different modes serves to illuminate his form of reasoning¹¹.

Lazarus includes four examples of emancipatory modes of politics which he has identified. The first of these is what he calls the 'revolutionary mode of politics' associated with the experience of the French revolution between the summer of 1792 to July 1794. Its main site was the Jacobin Convention and its main militants and theoreticians were Robespierre and Saint-Just, the co-authors of the 1793 constitution. Its conception of politics was one which proclaimed that 'a people has only one dangerous enemy: its government' (Saint-Just 2004: 630) and which understood politics as a form of moral consciousness or 'virtue,' to be combined with 'terror' against the revolution's enemies (Zizek 2007). For Saint-Just, 'it is leaders who must be disciplined because all evil results from the abuse of power' (op.cit.: 758). Thus, 'Saint-Just regularly proposes analyses and policies which, although they concern the state and the government, are thought outside of and are explicitly directed against a statist logic' (Lazarus op.cit.: 225ff).

The second he terms the 'classist mode of politics' whose sequence is opened up in 1848 by working-class revolutionary movements throughout Europe, and which closes with the failure of the Paris Commune of 1871. Clearly the main figures here were Marx and Engels and its sites were the working class movements of the nineteenth century. It is not here a question of politics within a party, but of politics within a mass movement, as modern political parties only develop in the period following 1871. For Marx as noted above, history and politics are fused into one unique conception mediated by class.

The third is termed the 'Bolshevik mode'. Its sites were the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party) and the soviets (People's Councils), and Lenin was its militant figure and theoretician. 'Proletarian political capacity is seen here not as spontaneous, neither is it historically or socially determined but it is obliged to specify its own conditions of existence' (ibid.: 90). The party mediates between consciousness and history. This political sequence opens up in 1902 (year of the publication of Lenin's *What is to be Done?*), reaches a peak in 1905 and closes in 1917. After that date the party becomes 'statised' as no solution is found to Lenin's contradictory conception that the party must be both the state as well as the defender of the masses against the state; and the soviets which disappear, cease to be the sites of an emancipatory politics (ibid.: 91).

The fourth mode Lazarus terms the 'dialectical mode of politics'. Its main theoretician is Mao Zedong and history is here subordinated to the masses, as the influence of the former disappears behind subjective notions such as an 'enthusiasm for socialism'. Political consciousness develops in leaps and bounds and 'there exists an exclusively political knowledge because such a knowledge is dialectical without being historical. Even if the party exists it does not identify the mode of politics.' The sites of this mode are those of the revolutionary war: the party, the army, the United Front; its limits extend from 1928 to 1958 (ibid.: 91).

The above modes of politics conceive of politics internally, in terms of each one's specificity, without reference to what Lazarus calls 'external invariants'. In fact it was

only in the Bolshevik mode that the party had a central role. In all cases there was a multiplicity of sites, and there is maintained a political distance from the state. In Wamba-dia-Wamba's (1993: 98) terms: 'it is the existence of an independent (emancipative) politics which makes the destructive transformation of the state possible'. This emancipative consciousness is purely political and exists under conditions of a subjective break with spontaneous forms of consciousness.

In addition, two modes of politics are identified by Lazarus which each make reference to an 'external invariant'. These are the Parliamentary mode of politics and the Stalinist mode of politics; both of these have been dominant in twentieth century world history. For both these modes, political consciousness is subordinated to a consciousness of the state. The principle of parliamentary politics is not that 'people think' but rather that people have opinions regarding government (Lazarus op.cit.: 93). 'The so-called "political" parties of the parliamentary mode, far from representing the diversity of opinions, are the subjective organisers of the fact that the only thought deemed possible is an opinion regarding the government'. It follows that parties are not so much political organisations, but rather state organisations which distribute state positions. Thus for the parliamentary mode there is only one recognised site of politics and that is the state (loc.cit.). Similar functions are fulfilled in this mode by trade unions, which are also very much state organisations. Voting, as the institutional articulation between the subjective side of opinion and the objective character of government, is the essential political act of parliamentarianism. Voting does not so much serve to represent opinions but to produce a majority of professional politicians who are provided by parties; 'it transforms the plural subjectivity of opinions on government into a functioning unity' founded on consensus. 'Voting transforms vague "programmes" or promises of parties into the authority of a consensus' (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1993: 117; 1994: 249). In other words, voting amounts to a legitimising principle of the state consensus, and 'politics' is ultimately reduced to a question of numbers.

The Stalinist mode of politics refers to a political subjectivity which existed not just in the Soviet Union, but also throughout parties linked to the 'Third International'. 'The party is viewed as the condition of revolutionary political consciousness. Politics, in

this mode, is thus referred to the party; the party is finally revolutionary politics and revolutionary politics is the party' (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1994: 250). Politics is confined to the party and the party is understood to be the very embodiment of that consciousness. 'As the party is presented as the source of all political truth', the Stalinist mode 'requires the credibility of the party' (ibid.). The party-state is the only political datum provided to subjectivity and the only practical domain of that subjectivity. The only site of politics is the state-party. The sequence of this mode begins during the early 1930s and ends with Gorbachov's accession to power (Lazarus op.cit.: 94).

Where does all this leave the conceptualisation of contemporary politics on the African continent? The answer provided by Wamba-dia-Wamba is that one must identify modes of politics historically present in Africa which he attempts in the case of Zaire/ DR Congo (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1993), and also, more importantly, specify the basic characteristics of an emancipatory mode of politics on the continent (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1994). The latter project is, in his writings, highly informed by the analysis of Lazarus so I shall continue to briefly outline them together.

Politics (political capacity, political consciousness), the active prescriptive relationship to reality, exists under the condition of people who believe that politics must exist . . . Generally in Africa, the tendency has been to assign it [this political capacity] to the state (including the party and liberation movements functioning really as state structures) *per se*. Unfortunately, the state cannot transform or redress itself: it kills this prescriptive relationship to reality by imposing consensual unanimity . . . the thrust of progressive politics is to be separated from the state. It is not possible to achieve a democratic state, ie. a state that is transparent to, rather than destructive of, people's viewpoints, if people only 'think' state, internalize state and thus self-censor themselves (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1994: 258).

In post-colonial Africa therefore, it is noted that one form or other of state-fetishism has been the dominant way of conceiving the political capacity to transform reality. If the problem in Africa has been the state, then a new way of conceiving politics must

be developed. For Lazarus, three fundamental conceptions have to be put forward here: first it has to be understood that there are or can be multiple sites of politics including especially sites outside and beyond the state, and second that emancipatory politics concerns democratic prescriptions on the state; finally, of course an organisation of activists is required, but this cannot be a state organisation as the state today is not concerned with (popular or emancipatory) politics, and rather suffocates all political prescriptions. Rather, this must be an emancipatory political organisation, which is consistently democratic in its practices and which thereby enables the development of democratic political prescriptions on the state.

Sites of emancipatory politics in Africa are varied and they *may* include the factory (which is not just a place for producing commodities), 'traditional' and popular institutions such the palaver, village assemblies, the sovereign national conferences in several Francophone African countries in the early nineties (all mentioned in *ibid.*) as well as social institutions such as educational institutions, neighbourhood groups, social movements and so on, in sum all organisations in which the possibility of democratic politics exists. Clearly, such sites do not always exist, as emancipatory politics is not always present in them. For example, street committees, area committees and trade union 'locals' were all sites of emancipatory politics in the townships of South Africa of the 1980s, but this is no longer the case. They have either disappeared as political structures completely or have been incorporated into the state domain of politics (Neocosmos 1998). Parties on the other hand, incarnate a state project of one form or another as they propose the state as the exclusive reference of consciousness. Currently these are not sites of emancipatory politics in Africa, which means that extending the number of parties in existence (from single to multi-partyism) will not, of itself, enable the development of democratic-emancipatory politics on the continent (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1994 : 258-9).

While possible sites of politics can be found anywhere where state and society relate, emancipatory politics only exists when democratic prescriptions on the state emanate from such sites. Democratic political prescriptions are possible only when distancing oneself politically from the state. This idea corresponds, in essence, to the possibility of a domain of politics beyond the state and civil society, which I have

detailed elsewhere (Neocosmos, 1997); but this domain must now not be understood spatially or institutionally as defined by the form of state rule as in Chatterjee (2004), but fundamentally as distinctly political-subjective. It must be stressed that: 'one can prescribe to the state only on condition of being independent of it, by placing oneself precisely in a political position clearly distinct and separate from it' (*La Distance Politique*, no 14, July 1995, p. 9)¹². Thus 'distance' here refers to political distance rather than to occupational distance for example, although clearly these are by no means unconnected. This signifies in particular that a democratic political practice must be clearly distinct from a state practice. 'Democracy' here no longer refers to a set of state institutions.

Political Prescriptions

What does prescribing to the state actually mean for Lazarus? It is easiest to outline this with reference to one specific example. To argue publically and consistently that everyone must be treated equally by state laws and practices under conditions where this is evidently not the case, is to make a democratic prescription on the state, according to this perspective. This is particularly of relevance to the modern state in both Europe and Africa, because this state systematically practices various forms of discrimination against a number of people living within its boundaries on the basis of gender, ethnicity and nationality as well as social class. 'Any state which is founded on ethnic or communitarian distinctions is a state producing civil tensions and war' (LDP, no 14, p. 9). It is thus imperative to uphold the view politically that the country is made up of 'people of all origins' (*les gens de partout*), and that no single individual should count for any more or less than any other. This would be in Badiou's terms an indication of fidelity to the axiom of equality. New categories and terms should be thought up to transcend such differences. If this view is not consistently upheld, then the door is left open to various forms of state discrimination with disastrous results (LDP op.cit., pp.9-10). To make democratic prescriptions on the state is precisely to assert such a position for example, from a multitude of sites where it is of relevance; in addition 'to make democratic prescriptions on the state . . . is to view the latter not only as a juridical and formal structure but also as being the

object of prescriptions' (ibid.). In other words that the state can be prescribed to with important results for politics:

[In politics] there always exists an ensemble of possibles more or less open depending on the issues, but rarely completely closed. It is here that what we call "prescriptions on the state" can take root. *To prescribe to the state is to assert as possible a different thing from what is said and done by the state . . . our idea of democracy is to sustain point by point democratic prescriptions in relation to the state* (LDP, op.cit., pp. 10-11, emphasis in original).

Clearly the argument here is that alternatives and choices are always possible and that it is imperative to force the state, from sites within civil society, to treat all people living within its boundaries equally and not to discriminate against some for whatever reason. Today in Africa, the main bases for such discrimination are gender, nationality and ethnicity, although other social divisions based on class, age, rural-urban differences and so on are also transformed into discriminatory distinctions by state practices and ideologies.

For Hallward (2005: 770) following Badiou, prescription is 'first and foremost an anticipation of its subsequent power, a commitment to its consequences, a wager on its eventual strength'. It is fundamentally the divisive application of a universal axiom or principle which serves to demarcate a partisan position with the result that 'politics is the aspect of public life that falls under the consequences of a prescription' (ibid.: 773). Politics is thus not reducible to 'the art of the possible' in the usual sense. It is indifferent to interests and to their compromises, as a prescription is of a universal character. Prescription implies freedom to make political choices. However, we still remain here at a relatively high level of abstraction. It is important to descend to what this means in more concrete terms.

The Extant and the Possible

In his most recent work, Lazarus (2001) uses the notion of prescription to distinguish the understanding resulting from the thought of people, from that developed by a

scientific approach. All social science comes down in one way or another to a matter of definition in order to resolve the 'polysemic' contradictions between meanings attributed to words in life. Contrary to this, Lazarus insists that this discursive polysemy is a reflection of different prescriptions attached to the word in question, some of which may contest what exists (the extant) in terms of possible alternatives. 'It is through prescriptions - for there is not only one - that the word is submitted to something other than a definition' (Lazarus 2001: 7).

An approach via the objective evaluation of things can end up with predictions, scenarios, tendencies or determinations. It is not in this way that the possible must be understood. For the first approach, the objective of thought is to isolate the logic of the real. For the second, the objective is not to articulate theses on what exists. The field of intellectuality presents itself differently: the question regarding what exists is only given in relation to what could be (ibid.).

A definition is scientific and only proposes a unique conception of the real. On the other hand, because a number of prescriptions may exist on the meaning of words, the possibility exists of conflicts between prescriptions, each one sustaining a distinct order of the real. Because of this confrontation between prescriptions amounting to conflicts between different theses on the real, 'knowledge is confronted by a choice which is not that between the true and the false, the imaginary and the rational, but that between different orders of the real' (ibid.). For example if an interlocutor says: 'at the factory they call me a worker, outside they call me an immigrant because they have forgotten that I am a worker', the figure of the worker is maintained in the context of the factory and denied in society. There are here two orders of the real founded on two prescriptions, one for which the 'figure of the worker' is asserted and another for which it has disappeared. It can thus be seen how prescriptions resolve the polysemic multiplicity in a manner which is in no way definitional (ibid.). As a result a number of possibles are apparent. It is thus the question of the possible which specifies people's thought.

That a situation can be apprehended by 'possibles' is an overturning of historicist and scientific thought, for which it is a precise investigation of what

exists, in terms of determinations, causes and laws, which may then permit an answer to the question of what may come. The possible here is totally subordinated to the extant. In people's thought [on the other hand], the real is identified through the possible. The investigation of what exists is also involved, but is subordinated to the investigation of what could be. The investigation differs according to whether it relates to the category of the 'possible' or to that of the 'extant' . . . We are confronted with two different modes of thought: the first is analytical and descriptive, it asks questions regarding what exists; irrespective of the eventual complexity of its research protocols and discoveries, it proposes the scientific character of sites (lieux). The second is prescriptive and has as its principal point of entry the question of the possible (ibid.: 8).

While the former perspective proposes to apprehend reality as extant, the latter maintains that in order to access what exists now, the 'now' can only be grasped as a conjunction of different 'possibles'. 'Knowledge of a situation is grasped by people in terms of the identification of its possibles. The possible is not of the order of what is to come but of the order of the now'. (ibid.: 9). The investigation utilising categories such as 'present' and 'possible' 'works through words . . . on the thought of people which is outlined in singular intellectualities, to which one can accede from the words used and the singular theses which they constitute' (ibid.: 11).

Lazarus develops a new theory and detailed methodology for understanding the possible in the extant, the 'what could be' in the 'what is'. There is no space to develop all the details here, but enough has been said to suggest the originality and inventiveness of the whole perspective, which opens up a whole new manner of investigating politics precisely because this is about conceiving a situation other than what exists. It has the advantage vis-a-vis Badiou's work, of moving beyond the extremely abstract ontological statements which characterise that discourse, to enable the thinking of precise concrete investigations of the possible in the extant, in other words of people's political thought. I have tried to expand on these ideas in a recent paper where I try to develop a category of the National Liberation Struggle mode of politics in Africa and where I argue that the period 1984-86 in South Africa

constituted a subjective break in many important respects from that mode (Neocosmos 2007).

Concluding remarks

Descriptions and analyses of what exists are important but certainly not sufficient. We also need to understand what could be. This is imperative if we do not wish to continue celebrating what exists. If we do not do so we will always be restricted to thinking within the parameters of a state politics, for it is state prescriptions which maintain the essential characteristics of the system, even though capitalism has shown itself to be eminently adaptable. I have tried to show here how Lazarus attempts to think political practice as subjectivity. For him, politics does not 'represent' anything be it class, nation, state or history. It only presents itself in the form of prescriptions. Given the evacuation of militant politics from the social sciences in recent years, it seems to me that this is one way in which 'politics can be brought back in' to adapt a hackneyed phrase. My point is simply this: if no way is found to develop categories to a) re-politicise social science and to b) rethink popular and militant politics as practice, then there is little in terms of a future for social science other than a description/analysis of what exists and a universalising of state politics in its various forms.

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Endnotes

¹ See Neocosmos (2008) and Neocosmos (2009 forthcoming), for a detailed argument on this point.

² See Burawoy's notion of a "public sociology" in Burawoy, (2004).

³ This is precisely the case with the notion of the 'public sphere' which only allow for one domain of politics. Recently, a distinction between state or elite domain of politics (which he terms 'civil society') and a popular domain of politics (which he terms 'political society') has been theorized by Chatterjee (2004) following on from debates in *Subaltern Studies*. This distinction transcends the idea of a single 'public sphere' as it suggests the possibility of exclusion of popular politics from a state domain of politics.

⁴ See Ferguson (1990). See Rousseau's comments on the English electoral system in *The Social Contract* p.141.

⁵ This is a reference to Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she famously concluded that s/he could not. See Spivak (1988).

⁶ Incidentally Milosevic was found not guilty in 2007. After the 'trial' of Saddam Hussein, we now have the one of Charles Taylor. It should be recalled that the United States government does not recognise the court at The Hague and refuses to submit itself to its jurisdiction with the result that some of the most important mass murderers today such as Kissinger, Blair and Bush are not subject to the 'democratic laws of Empire'.

⁷ Examples are legion but see the recent cases (December 2007) of the French NGO (Arche de Zoe) which it seems had been saving (read kidnapping) children in Chad to 'resell' to French families. There have been big protest demonstrations in Chad rightly comparing this activity to the slave trade. Parents have been lining up outside government offices to find their children who had been promised free education by NGOs. See also the Amnesty International call on the Arusha Tribunal not to send suspects of genocide to be tried in Rwanda on the grounds that Rwandan legal institutions (Gacaça) do not measure up to European standards. Both are recent examples of ongoing colonial politics involving NGOs in Africa which have made it into the Western media, but similar political practices are the norm rather than the exception. See BBC online reports.

⁸ Lazarus refers in particular to an essay called "Myth, Memory and History" in Finley (1975).

⁹ The idea of 'invention' here is similar to the one used by Ranger, Vail *et al* in the notion of the 'invention' of tradition or ethnicity; i.e. it refers to a subjectivity that is being thought for the first time. The difference with Ranger's notion consists primarily in the fact that Ranger's understanding of 'ethnic politics' is a state politics, what could be named the 'communitarian mode of politics' which is a mode which fuses state and culture. See Ranger (1985), (1993), Vail (1989). For Finley the political subjectivity of the Greeks is thought separately from the state. According to Moses Finley, it was precisely this 'sense of community' founded on active citizenship which was the idea at the core of Athenian democracy: "it was that sense of community . . . fortified by the state religion, by their myths and their traditions, which was an essential element in the pragmatic success of the Athenian democracy" (1985: 29). Finley cites Pericles (from Thucydides) as saying: "we consider anyone who does not share in the life of the citizen not as minding his own business but as useless" (ibid.: 30). In other words citizenship is only conceivable as active citizenship, as the attribute of a free political agent.

¹⁰ One is tempted to see 'the invisible hand of the market' as one such contemporary myth.

¹¹ As far as I am aware, these different modes of politics were first briefly outlined in English in an appendix to Wamba-dia-Wamba (1993). They can also be found in chapter 2 of Badiou (2005).

¹² *La Distance Politique (LDP)* is one of the publications of *L'Organisation Politique*, the organisation to which both Lazarus and Badiou belong. This organisation has so far stressed the importance of developing political prescriptions concerning undocumented migrants (*les sans papiers*) and stresses that they must be conceived primarily as workers and not immigrants.