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A Plea for Synthesis

*Michael Neocosmos*

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# The Creolization of Political Theory and the Dialectic of Emancipatory Thought

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A Plea for Synthesis

*Michael Neocosmos*

Rhodes University, South Africa

We ought to scrutinize the act by which people become *a* people.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*

A ... people must prove, by its fighting power, its ability to set  
itself up as a nation.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

To meet the challenge of a new stage of cognition, one has to  
have full confidence in the masses, not only as force but as  
Reason—that is to say, confidence that their movement from  
practice as a form of theory does, indeed, signify that they can  
participate in the working out of a new theory.

—Raya Dunayevskaya, *Nationalism, Communism, Marxist  
Humanism and the Afro-Asian Revolutions*

## The Thought of Politics

A political subject—by which I mean primarily the subject of a politics of general emancipation—is always collective. As such it has to be constituted for it is never given. Moreover, it is always self-constituted as its concern is humanity in the generic sense; in other words, it is oriented toward what humans have in common. While always grounded in the particular, it therefore also possesses a universal quality distinct from all

particular interests. The political subject is constitutive of politics itself. No subject, no politics. In other words, politics in this fundamental sense does not always exist; it is purely subjective and located in practice. It is in fact a collective thought-practice. Moreover, as the political subject is not given, it must be constituted in a process of becoming which suggests various states of non-existence and a changing state of existence. "It was not; now it is," so to speak.

Given that this process is self-generated, it is not an expression of a general principle beyond itself: whether "Man," the class struggle, history, state-power, discourses or whatever invariant external to it. In other words, at the core of this subjective process of becoming is always a dialectic with the consequence that it must be understood in dialectical terms. Finally, given that the process is a collective one, all component parts participate in this process; it is founded on the affirmation that all people think, which is to say that all people without exception are capable of reason. Politics is not the prerogative of professional politicians or academics or other "representatives" formal or informal of the people who are constituting themselves.

For Rousseau the name of the political subject is precisely "the people," while for Fanon its name is "the nation", or as Sekyi-Otu puts it, the "national-popular" or what I have preferred to call "the people-nation"<sup>1</sup> "which achieves the common good even as it attends to particular interests."<sup>2</sup> The foundation of the self-formation and hence of the existence of the people is for Rousseau the "general will," for Fanon it is "national consciousness"; in either case they are concerned with the common good. The people may not always exist and when they do they may ultimately disappear in one way or another, thereby signaling the end of politics. "Either the will is general or it is not," says Rousseau.<sup>3</sup> As it is concerned with generic humanity, this, the core conception of politics, is concerned with universal freedom; the thought of politics is the thought of collective emancipation. Rousseau explains: "to renounce freedom is to renounce one's humanity ... if you take away all freedom of the will, you strip a man's actions of all moral significance."<sup>4</sup> For Fanon, "...optimism in Africa is the direct product of the revolutionary action of the masses ... The enemy of the African ... is the manifestations of colonialism, whatever be the flag under which it asserts itself."<sup>5</sup> It is impossible to talk of human freedom when colonialism in whatever form exists. While Rousseau has been dismissed as proposing a totalitarian politics, Fanon similarly has been reduced to an advocate of violence. The fear of popular politics that these conceptions express should not surprise us given the close affinity established in the West between colonialism on the one hand and freedom on the other.<sup>6</sup> The complacent freedom of the West having been born out of imperialism, colonialism, genocide, slavery and racism, it is not surprising that resistance to it in whatever form should be feared. This fear has contributed to the

absence of a thought of politics in the world today, particularly after the collapse of the Marxist political alternative.

Today the absence of a thought of politics in this its fundamental emancipatory sense is palpable. The thinking of politics in academia, principally but not exclusively, is reduced to the state while its practice consists in asserting interests and identities. Whether organisations in “civil society” or institutions in “political society” none are concerned with the common good but solely with identitarian interests. The idea of the common good has largely disappeared from public discourse worldwide and fascistic identitarian nationalisms are more and more in evidence from Asia to Europe, Africa and North America. Such trends are obviously totally antithetical to any conceptions of the universal while the globalization of Western liberal democracy, relentlessly pursued as a zealous mission even to the extent of its imposition through military means, has evidently enabled this state of affairs. It is in this context that Jane Anna Gordon and several of her colleagues in the Caribbean Philosophical Association have attempted to re-direct political theory through a re-centring of the common good precisely via a conceptualization of what they term the “creolization” of political theory.<sup>7</sup> Creolization here denotes not only the admixture of conceptual apparatuses (Foucault’s *dispositif*) but predominantly a perspective from the Global South which re-interprets Western thought within a new context: that of the colonial and the neo-colonial.<sup>8</sup>

This is a crucially important initiative which contributes precisely to “shifting the geography of reason” from its erstwhile centres in the North in order not only to give more prominence to voices from the Global South, but also to begin to construct a more productive intersubjectivity at the level of thought between those who identify with the excluded wherever their Global location may be. Creolization then forces us to think beyond the mere “application” of theory emanating from among colonial conceptions and in opposition to them, to the victims of the colonial. Gordon is at pains to distinguish creolization from currently fashionable multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary perspectives founded as these are on multiculturalism thus retaining a conception of discreet and self-contained cultures that simply tolerate each other. Even more accurately these non-Western cultures are tolerated by the dominant West so long as they are not themselves intolerant, much as the British colonial power in Africa had insisted on non-interference in indigenous cultures so long as these were not considered “repugnant” to Western sensibilities.<sup>9</sup>

Gordon’s argument then is directed against United States academic political science not least in its form of comparative political theory, which, by contributing to an expansion of the thinkers who are now considered of universal theoretical significance, has expanded the academic canon. Yet

she laments “but for a few important exceptions, comparative political theory has revolved almost exclusively around discussion between Euro-America and the East Asian, East Indian, and Muslim worlds”, suggesting that it has been reformulated as an “inter-civilizational” dialogue which confirms Huntington’s and indeed Hegel’s “geographical estimations of political value and distinctive impact in the realm of historic thought.”<sup>10</sup> Creolizing is then developed as a “transdisciplinary alternative” to the claimed intellectual legitimacy of the “normal scientific community” by turning “to the ways in which creole languages revealed the insufficiency of prior academic linguistic models by demonstrating that the multilinguistic, multiracial, and multinational region out of which they came was prototypical rather than exceptional.”<sup>11</sup>

### The Analytic and the Dialectic

Gordon’s concern is clearly with addressing the Eurocentrism and racism of the political science academy in the United States. This is a vital endeavour; at the same time I would like to suggest that in order not to limit the innovative potential of creolization for the thinking of universal political emancipation, we build on it and expand it to include a dialectical dimension. In order to make a case for this let me first outline what I see as the limits of analytic thought where Gordon locates creolization, and then turn to why I consider both Rousseau and Fanon, the core theorists examined “in conversation” by Gordon, as exceeding these limits. I shall then end by assessing how the thought of politics can be immeasurably expanded by briefly considering two instances of popular thought as themselves inherently theoretical in the manner described by Dunayevskaya above.

There are arguably two theoretical or philosophical visions of the world: the analytical and the dialectical. For the analytical vision prevalent in universities, all thought is equated with knowledge of an object. This is scientific thinking and it is equated with the production of knowledge, itself always seen as a thought of the objective, in other words of what objectively exists. Clearly the objects of scientific academic enquiry differ according to the discipline in question. There are two major features of analytic thought that are worth noting.

The first such feature is classificatory or taxonomic on the foundations of which it becomes possible to base a comparative analysis. The world itself is divided into segments to be studied by various disciplines staffed by professionals. The problematic character of this procedure is particularly apparent in the social sciences where attempts at overcoming its evident limitations have taken the form of multi- or interdisciplinarity that has always ended in failure given precisely the taxonomic character of analytic thought. Further, the reference point for any taxonomy and comparison has been the colonizer: the West and the white man. Unsurprisingly, the

reactions by the excluded or those peripheral to the reference point and frequently to the general idea of scientificity that underpins it consist of an attempt to dethrone the reference point. Hence the references to decoloniality, black thought, feminist thought, and in this instance creolization. The appropriate term for this procedure is probably the “de-centering” of the reference point or in the expression made famous by Dipesh Chakrabarty the “provincializing” of Europe.<sup>12</sup>

The second feature of analytical thought as it currently exists within the academy is less frequently noted. This is the fact that it is held that all knowledge is limited by experience; that is to say all thought must be verifiable by reference to empirical facts. This is because all thought is knowledge and all knowledge is a thought of the objective with the result that only that which can be considered to exist or to have existed can be thought. The result is a theoretical conservatism that limits knowledge to the thought of the extant. That which does not exist empirically cannot be thought because it simply is not objective.

Dialectical thought overcomes this limitation by combining in a contradictory manner the thought of the extant with the thought of the apparently impossible or in-existent that may come to exist through a process of becoming. It does not reduce all thought to the knowledge of an object. In Alain Badiou’s words:

The dialectical nature of philosophy is not to be reducible to the question of the knowledge of an object, but to introduce the possibility of the beginning of something which does not exist, which is not in the form of an object and which can be affirmed in its presence, in its being outside the form of knowledge of an object.<sup>13</sup>

The central concept of Badiou’s thinking in this regard is the “immanent exception” which I have discussed at some length elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Briefly put, for Badiou, “dialectical thought does not begin from the rule but from the exception,”<sup>15</sup> from the interruption of repetition, of habit; and it makes it possible 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.”<sup>16</sup> This concept of the “immanent exception” encapsulates the dialectical linking of the world as lived and its subjectivities expressive of social location with the asocial thought of universal equality that prevails to a greater or lesser extent within any emancipatory politics. One way of understanding this idea is to grasp emancipatory politics as exceptional, in other words as “excessive” of the social; but this excess is always excessive of the thought of social place; hence it can only be thought as located in the particular. As a result all experiences of emancipatory politics form a dialectic combination of expressive and excessive thought. This dialectic

explains both the sequential and thus historically limited character of such subjectivities and also the reason for what Lazarus has called their “saturation,” as political subjectivity tends to reach a point where it finds it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain itself by providing collective solutions to the many problems it faces. The prevalence of an emancipatory politics of the universal tends therefore to be limited in time and to be discontinuous as it exists in the form of discreet political sequences.<sup>17</sup> Politics in its true sense of the emancipatory universalism of the common or the “commune” is thus not only a process of self-becoming but it is also limited in duration. The problem central to politics becomes the question of how to sustain its process. Politics understood in this fundamental sense must be grasped as a real subjective process and experienced within a limited time period with a real capacity for subjective effects and I have shown a number of its manifestations in the African continent elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

The expressive-excessive dialectic is apparent in all forms of emancipatory thought whether emanating as theoretical treatises as with Rousseau, or as theorised accounts of popular experiences as with Fanon. The excessive side of the dialectic is mainly present in collective popular political action precisely because the reaction to political exclusion can lead to a thought of the universal through a challenge to the state itself. Yet these theoretical contributions of mass politics are only recognizable for what they are if one understands that the demands of the people are not utopian or impossible but that they grow directly out of their own experiences. Therefore any thought of emancipatory politics must find a way of incorporating the thought of the masses when they act collectively to change their world, otherwise it will rarely achieve a dialectical quality. Moreover the dialectic of thought enables precisely the recognition of popular thought by people who speak in their own name as it is opposed to the process of representation which contributes systematically to reducing all popular thought to the social.<sup>19</sup> Emancipatory politics is dialectical or it is not. This is precisely what Fanon recognizes in his writings on Algeria.

We can therefore see that there is a clear connection between the two proposed alternatives to analytical logic: the process of de-centring of thought and the idea of a thought that is not immediately reducible to the knowledge of an object. Creolization as proposed by Gordon is an extraordinarily important response to the first feature of analytical thought yet it does not address the second, which requires an additional shift to the dialectical.

## The Emergence of the Real of Politics and its Demise: The People, the Nation, and the State

Rousseau's intention is to think the existence of politics as such. Politics exists when a subject of politics exists. He enables us to think a real political subject as a dialectical process of becoming. "The people" as a political subject does not exist in the world of Durkheimian social facts. This is why Rousseau discards an empiricist methodology and why he begins "by laying all facts aside."<sup>20</sup> There is no absolute necessity for the people to exist even as a result of a social contract. In fact in most instances "the people" does not exist precisely because the general will does not or has not been formed or has dissipated. As Badiou puts it, "politics is a *creation*, local and fragile, of collective humanity."<sup>21</sup>

"Each one of us puts into the community his person and all his powers under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body we incorporate every member as an indivisible part of the whole.".. The public person thus formed by the union of all other persons was once called the city and is now known as the republic or the body politic.... Those who are associated in it take collectively the name of a people and call themselves individually citizens, in so far as they share in the sovereign power ... *that man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations.*<sup>22</sup>

It is the exercise of reason that enables politics through the formation of a collective subject or "political community." As I have argued elsewhere it forms the basis of the thought of emancipatory politics and is open to everyone without exception as all people without exception are capable of thought, in other words of thinking beyond their interests.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time "the body politic, no less than the body of a man begins to die as soon as it is born, and bears within itself the causes of its own destruction."<sup>24</sup> Thus the existence of politics is both contingent and limited in life; it is only a possibility as for Rousseau "necessity is always a-political, either beforehand (the state of nature), or afterwards (dissolved State)."<sup>25</sup> The general will tends to equality because inequality would gradually put greater emphasis on sectional interests thus tending to undermine the general interest and the common good. Politics for Rousseau does not concern the organised representation or expression of sectional interests in a domain of power that reflects the social.

Finally it is important to stress that Rousseau clearly demarcates politics from the state by distinguishing the collective general will from power: "the power indeed may be delegated, but the will cannot be."<sup>26</sup> Moreover laws can only be the product of the general will otherwise they are mere decrees. The general will and thus the sovereignty of the people is therefore

inalienable. It follows that “sovereignty cannot be represented...[;] its essence is the general will, and will cannot be represented—either it is the general will or it is something else; there is no intermediate possibility. Thus the people’s deputies are not, and could not be, its representatives; they are merely its agents; and they cannot decide anything finally.”<sup>27</sup> Thus under what turns out to be contemporary representative democracy “as soon as Members (of Parliament) are elected, the people is enslaved; it is nothing” for the simple reason that the alienation of one’s will is quite simply slavery.<sup>28</sup> “The general will derives its generality less from the number of voices than from the common interest which unites them.”<sup>29</sup> The general will is then not a numerical majority. Rousseau is critical of what we conceive as parliamentary democracy, and it is quite apparent that in periods of popular emancipatory politics the people simply deputize some of their members to speak on their behalf and expect to be briefed by them afterwards. In South Africa, for example, during the mass popular upsurge of the 1980s, what were known as “report-backs” by delegates were insisted upon as it was maintained that people should have direct control over their own lives.<sup>30</sup>

While I have argued that the formation of the people for Rousseau can be understood as an immanent exception and hence as a dialectical process, the same can be maintained (*mutatis mutandis*) for Fanon’s conception of the nation and indeed this is why Gordon can see them both as open to creolization. The only fundamental difference is that Fanon experiences this becoming not as an abstraction but as a real event, hence Sekyi-Otu’s reference to Fanon’s “dialectics of experience.”<sup>31</sup> Gordon is absolutely correct to see Fanon as thinking the formation of a national consciousness as a concrete instantiation of Rousseau’s general will. Where I think she is mistaken is to visualize the formation of this national consciousness as a “normative ideal” or simply “an evocative or challenging idea” to be pursued but presumably never attained.<sup>32</sup> To my mind, the formation of a national consciousness was an absolutely real process that Fanon directly experienced and it must be understood as such. It arises from overcoming differences and uniting people politically around a common conception of the nation. It is a process that was systematically fought for only later to be undermined as the dialectic of politics collapsed within itself from an emancipatory vision of the people-nation into a (not so new because neocolonial) nation-state. The dialectic of political struggle began by stressing the universal and ended in the formation of a particularistic nationalism propounded by state ideology; it began as the becoming of an inclusive creolized national consciousness guided by a pan-African ideology *inter alia* and ended, through a process of de-politicization, in a xenophobic statist particularism. This real process illustrates precisely the historically sequential and therefore limited character of all emancipatory politics and has been replicated elsewhere, notably in South Africa.<sup>33</sup>

To briefly resume an argument which I have made at length elsewhere<sup>34</sup>, Fanon shows that the given social relations in the colonial setting which he terms “Manichean” are transformed in struggle by the people themselves and the militants who guide the process through their work among the rural masses primarily. The subjective dualism organised around the dichotomy colonizer-colonized is transformed in struggle. “The idyllic, unreal clarity of the beginning is followed by a penumbra which dislocates consciousness.... The people find out that the iniquitous fact of exploitation can assume a black face, or an Arab one” and that “many members of the mass of colonialists reveal themselves to be much, much closer to the national struggle than certain sons of the nation.”<sup>35</sup> The outcome of the process is thus the rise of a purely political national consciousness: “The living expression of the nation is the moving consciousness of the whole of the people; it is the coherent and enlightened praxis of men and women. The collective construction of a destiny is the assumption of responsibility on a historical scale.”<sup>36</sup>

This is indeed a real process of becoming. For Fanon the reality of the self-becoming of the nation is stated absolutely unambiguously (although his words have been distorted by the translator). He says: “*This new reality* which the colonized will now come to know exists only in action.”<sup>37</sup> It being a dialectical political process, its reality can only be experienced as practice. It should perhaps be recalled that Fanon’s is not a narrative after the event. It is a description of the real of emancipatory politics. I can affirm this with all the more confidence because I had the privilege of having exactly the same experience as Fanon in South Africa during the 1980s. There also a “New Nation” was formed as a direct result of popular mass politics.<sup>38</sup> Moreover the same kind of experience has been recounted more recently for example in Haiti with the experience of the popular enthusiasm enabled by *Lavalas* (2000), in Tahrir Square in Cairo (2011), and with Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban (2005). The reality of the formation of a new nation is also made visible not only by the overcoming of various ethnic, gender, and other divisions (Badiou refers to this as “movement communism,”)<sup>39</sup> but the nation thus constructed includes many non-indigenous people simply because its conception is not identitarian. If I were to make the point in a more philosophical manner I would say that the real is precisely what is considered impossible by the world as it exists; in other words the movement beyond place through the unification of a nation in popular practice names the possibility of the impossible. People were only “things” under colonial domination<sup>40</sup>, now they form themselves as a people and thus declare: “We the people ....”<sup>41</sup>

Gordon is entirely correct to see this process as a process of creolization.<sup>42</sup> It is a similar idea to that which Saint-Just captured in 1793 when he stated that “the homeland of a free people is open to all men of the

world.”<sup>43</sup> Fanon and others among the non-indigenous were able to see themselves as Algerian precisely because the idea of the nation was non-identitarian but purely composed of those politically committed to freedom. Yet at the same time this process of creolization was not to last, and was to lose its inclusive character, to become what could be called a creolized particular culture rather than a creolized universal politics.

In order to account for the end of the process and its reversal, Fanon tends to rely on objective factors external to the people, namely the character of the national bourgeoisie (by which he means the native bourgeoisie and not an anti-imperialist bourgeoisie) and the nationalist party which it controls. While the former’s interests ultimately lead to xenophobic nationalism, the latter “which used to call itself the servant of the people, which used to claim that it worked for the full *expression of the people’s will*, as soon as the colonial power puts the country into its control hastens to send the people back to their caves.”<sup>44</sup>

Simultaneously the national bourgeoisie excludes itself from the nation; it is unable “to comprehend popular praxis, in other words to understand its rationality”<sup>45</sup> so that finally it excludes itself from the people themselves, as it is “only a sort of greedy caste, avid and voracious, with the mind of a huckster, only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hands out to it. This get-rich-quick bourgeoisie shows itself incapable of great ideas or inventiveness. It remembers what it has read in European textbooks and imperceptibly it becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature....”<sup>46</sup>

For Fanon the core reasons for the collapse of popular national consciousness are to be found in the economic interests of the national bourgeoisie who wish to move into the posts and the businesses vacated by the departing Europeans. As a result, they assert a form of nationalism (he calls it “narrow”) based on race and indigeneity in order to exclude; their concern is with access to resources, and a claim to indigeneity and racism is from their perspective the only legitimate way of privately accessing such resources. Fanon notes that “the racial prejudice of the young national bourgeoisie is a racism of defence, based on fear.”<sup>47</sup> In any case, whether the concern is accumulation or whether it is asserting a “narrow” racially based nationalism, “the sole slogan of the bourgeoisie is ‘Replace the foreigner!’.”<sup>48</sup> As a result: “the working class of the towns, the masses of the unemployed, the small artisans and craftsmen for their part line up behind this nationalist attitude; but in all justice let it be said, they only follow in the steps of their bourgeoisie. If the national bourgeoisie goes into competition with the Europeans, the artisans and craftsmen start a fight against non-national Africans... the foreigners are called to leave; their shops are burned, their street stalls are wrecked.”<sup>49</sup>

In sum, it is the national bourgeoisie that is, for Fanon, at the basis of the formation of an exclusionary conception of the nation-state now founded on conceptions of indigeneity or autochthony. The simultaneous depoliticization of the masses ensures the success of this process. Ultimately this is an argument of “betrayal,” which is simply a statement of fact. Yet it would be more accurate to note the fact that the national bourgeoisie can only become a political subject (and thus act politically) through its control of the state via the party, itself a state institution. Amílcar Cabral in this instance was more theoretically accurate than Fanon when he noted that “*the problem of the nature of the state created after independence is perhaps the secret of the failure of African independence.*”<sup>50</sup> Clearly Fanon recognizes that there has then been an obvious political shift from the idea of the people-nation central to a universalistic politics of freedom and embodied in an inclusive national consciousness, to that of the nation-state where the thought of the nation as an ethnic particularism predominates. However, this return to a Manichean conception requires an end to the dialectic and its replacement by a purely expressive subjectivity. The answer to the problem must then be a subjective one and not simply an objective one. Fanon’s argument in this regard is therefore limited.

What is the subjective operator that enables the end of the dialectic? That makes the saturation of an emancipatory political subjectivity possible, and hence that enables a return to a purely expressive subjectivity typical of state thinking? This operator is inherent in popular subjectivity itself and the collapse of the expressive-excessive dialectic is not simply reducible to an external cause such as the state or the national bourgeoisie as Fanon maintains. Rather we can follow Lazarus in describing it as a saturation of a mode of politics, as a crisis in thought.<sup>51</sup> It can be seen as the inability of the dialectic to sustain a commitment to universality thus reverting to an expressive subjectivity. As Rousseau clearly tells us, the answer to the above question is to be found within the people itself, in the idea of “representation,” for a represented people is no longer a people; it has transferred its will to the state via the medium of a party. Whether we refer to the FLN in Algeria or to the ANC in South Africa, they each saw themselves and were seen as “the unique representatives of their people” to use the formulation made famous by the United Nations in its resolutions. The fact that the people also saw them as their representatives is not in doubt either, but by so doing it lost its independent existence as a political subject and reverted to passivity. In South Africa the emancipatory self-formation of a national consciousness was also gradually replaced, from the late 1980s onward, by conceptions of politics founded on representation. The result has been the growth and ideological dominance since then of an exclusionary xenophobic state nationalism.<sup>52</sup>

In sum, if we admit that this process of becoming of a universal subjectivity is a real one forming an expressive-excessive dialectic and not a normative ideal, then we are led to recognize that it cannot be conceived as forming part of a (linear) process of state formation (as the post-independence state never tires of repeating) but indeed quite the opposite—a process of popular emancipatory politics. Moreover, it then becomes absolutely clear why the post-independence state must engage in a process of de-politicization of the people in order to sustain its rule and in the process react to the emancipatory subjectivity by insisting (through the deployment of ideology, law and state violence) that it must be seen as its sole agent. In the process it turns a genuine politics of universal emancipation into a simulacrum of itself for now, under the hegemony of state identitarian subjectivities, it loses its universal character in favour of autochthony. Thus, it seems to me, that to visualise egalitarian universal politics as simply a normative ideal is to overlook the fundamental reality of the dialectic.

### The Popular Masses as Producers of Theory in Practice

Here I will be concerned to illustrate two points. First the idea that if, as Dunayevskaya insists, all emancipatory politics must have confidence in the masses as creators of theory and not solely as sources of force, then dialectical thought is an absolute requirement. Second and following from this, the important idea that the creolization of culture must be rigorously distinguished from the creolization of politics as the former is concerned with the formation of a new particularity and the latter with universality. In particular, we must be careful not to apprehend the latter as an expression of the former; emancipatory politics could in fact be central to the formation of culture.

The theoretical inventions of the popular masses do not often take a written form but it is important to attempt an elucidation of their theoretical content while also saving them from the limitations of anthropological discourse. Moreover, I would suggest that an understanding of popular political inventions is absolutely crucial, as an emancipatory future cannot be thought without an overcoming of the intellectual divisions of labour. In what follows I draw on two examples that I have discussed at greater length elsewhere in order to illustrate briefly what I mean.<sup>53</sup>

In a rather romantic but nevertheless very pertinent observation Rousseau states: “When we see among the happiest people in the world bands of peasants regulating the affairs of state under an oak tree, and always acting wisely, can we help feeling a certain contempt for the refinement of other nations...?”<sup>54</sup> An example of the popular formation of a universal politics of freedom is the palaver or *Mbongi* as it has existed among BaKongo people in particular. Dismissed by colonial power as a waste of time, the popular assembly of the palaver (from *palavra* in Portuguese) was

directly concerned with the political problem of the (re-)creation of unity in the community particularly after periods of crisis. This particular example illustrates a totally participatory popular process which emphasizes egalitarianism as the political solution to contradictions within African communities: the “true essence ... [of the palaver is] freedom.”<sup>55</sup> The palaver, when run in a truly free manner, can be said to be a site of excessive politics at the local level, as it occurs at a distance from state thinking (both colonial and postcolonial) and embodies a concept of universal humanity. The following points stressed by Wamba-dia-Wamba should be particularly noted. A palaver:

is a collective/individual cleaning-up of people as community (physically, biologically, anthropologically, sociologically and spiritually) . . . The palaver appears as a mass bursting of active involvement in matters of the entire community and of “free” or “liberated” (i.e. with no taboos, no restrictions, no diplomacy, etc.) speaking . . . When a palaver is *artificially* organised by oppressive ruling powers, however, it degenerates into a *formal* exercise without life and (de)void of mass spontaneous creativity: people speak, as it is said, with “tied tongues” or with “tongues in the cheek.”<sup>56</sup>

The description is clear: a palaver involves everyone equally; otherwise, if organized under the aegis of the powerful, a politics of interest is practised in order not to offend them and the palaver fails to resolve contradictions. A palaver is egalitarian and democratic, or not at all. The palaver requires of and provides to each community member the right to carry out, and the obligation to be subjected to, an *integral critique* of/by everyone without exception.<sup>57</sup> Important “conflicts, emerging in, and threatening the life/existence of the community qua community, need to be resolved with appropriate methods.”<sup>58</sup> To resolve contradictions elicited by both internal and external forces, a struggle takes place over whom the ancestors represent. The dominant members of the community “present themselves as the real servants ... of the powers of the ancestors.... It is claimed that ... the ancestors [speak] through them, and the masses of the community must obey them without question and reservation.”<sup>59</sup> Other members of the community oppose this, and invoke the view of the ancestors through visions and dreams that affirm that “the community has deviated from the ancestral line.”<sup>60</sup> They do this because “to evoke the ancestors is to re-affirm their line, the one which allowed the community to reproduce.”<sup>61</sup> The ancestral line is, for them, founded on equality. The palaver, therefore, through its struggle around the meaning of the ancestral line, helps to resolve social conflicts and re-establish social egalitarian balance. To do so, it combines political processes with cultural representations, forms and rituals

that constitute a complex language through which the palaver can be understood and, therefore, succeed. It may take place over a long period of several weeks, whatever is necessary for contradictions to be resolved and for the 'body politic' of the community to be healed.

It is not surprising that the palaver was seen as a threat to the colonial power as well as to those aiming to set themselves above the people; both wished to undermine the institution. The eventual infrequency in the calling of palavers has been a symptom of the failure to sustain a universal politics and the consequent gradual decline of excessive thought within popular African communities. Palavers exist in various forms still in Africa and express the hard fought-over democratic politics that enable the sustaining of a people.<sup>62</sup> A politics of equality must nevertheless be fought for in its process of doing. In the words of Jacques Rancière, "equality is not given, it is processual. And it is not quantitative, it is qualitative."<sup>63</sup> Even though culture may embody it as a potential, there is no given necessity for this potential to be realized and such a realization is impossible outside collective political action. The theoretical innovations of palaver politics include not only the thinking of politics as the democratic formation of a people through an egalitarian process along with the rituals and activities which necessarily surround the process, but also of a distinct conception of time more attuned to human existence than to the market. As Badiou puts it: "There is a necessary slowness, both democratic and popular in nature, which is particular to the time of the correct handling of contradictions among the people."<sup>64</sup>

The complex interplay between culture and politics can also be observed in relation to the egalitarian struggles of the Haitian *Bossales* (who originated overwhelmingly from among the BaKongo) as opposed to the *Créoles* in the period following independence in 1804. Writing in the tradition of rural culture inaugurated by Jean Price-Mars, Gérard Barthélemy shows how a specifically egalitarian society was fought for by the ex-slaves and their descendants founded on family land holdings.<sup>65</sup> According to Barthélemy, it is precisely the exceptional character of a society of freed ex-slaves that explains the "egalitarian system without a state" that gradually emerged in rural Haiti after independence.<sup>66</sup> The African-born *bossales* managed to acquire ownership of peasant parcels and the plantation estate system was largely destroyed. The process began in 1809 and was initiated by Pétion, who ruled the south of the country while (King) Christophe ruled the north. The forced-labor system was abandoned and large private estates were broken up and leased to peasant sharecroppers.<sup>67</sup> As a result, no *latifundia* developed in Haiti, unlike in most of post-independence Latin America and the Caribbean. The masses of Haitians (*bossales*) insisted on establishing a parcel-owning peasantry to anchor their political independence in economic independence—largely successfully as it turns out—so that the new bourgeoisie (*créoles*) was deprived of direct access

to surplus labour. A merchant bourgeoisie then developed that extracted surplus from beyond the peasant system, and it is on this class that the state was founded.<sup>68</sup>

Within peasant society itself, a number of methods of self-regulation—largely of African origin—enabled the restriction of socio-economic differentiation and the prevalence of a system of equality that remained at a subjective distance from state and capitalist individualist subjectivities. These methods included unpaid collective forms of work, witchcraft and secret societies, a common religious ideology, and family socialization.<sup>69</sup> In fact Barthélemy makes the point that, from 1804 onward, it gradually became understood by the *bossales* that “the only alternative to the colonial hierarchical system is that of equality, more so than that of liberty, as while the latter enables freedom from external oppression, it is not able to take on board the ideological content of the system.”<sup>70</sup> He insists that, while Haitian rural society is generally understood as a failure, as wedded to traditions and poverty, it is in fact a highly organized social system that is self-regulating *without an institutionalized state structure*. In order to achieve this, it had to keep hierarchical Creole society and the formal state at a distance, to block all attempts at individual enrichment and power-seeking, and to harmonize the group through a kind of automatic regulation of individual behavior; “all this outside any ‘political’ dimension’ of state control.”<sup>71</sup> In this way the Haitian *bossales* constituted themselves as a distinct country: *le pays endeyo* (the country outside). It has been noted that this egalitarian system, “functioned ... from the late 1790s to the 1960s until the destruction of the Haitian (natural and social) environment under the regime of Papa Doc (Duvalier) undermined its viability,” through the re-installing of colonial domination and the systematic use of terror.<sup>72</sup>

Barthélemy refers to this kind of politics as a new form of “marronage, a counter-culture, a structural and collective reaction of flight.”<sup>73</sup> But these politics actually invented a new creolized culture through distancing its thought from any form of state while simultaneously being rooted in local traditions of resistance to oppression. It can be maintained that, in this case, a creolized politics of universality preceded a creolized culture which it is important to realize is always a particularity. Commonly, this new subjectivity was expressed in proverbs or sayings, the most important of which was *Tout moun se moun men ce pa memn moun*, which, loosely translated, means “Every person is a person even though they are not the same person.” Barthélemy explains this as a statement governing the worldview of the Haitian rural people, for it is more than a simple proverb and reflects a fought-for rule of social and political practice.<sup>74</sup> The point is that equality cannot exist without difference and that, correspondingly, difference makes no sense without equality. “In order to be different, not to be *memn moun*, each man must begin by identifying what he has in common

with others; what is the basic identity from which variations can be felt, interpreted and used.”<sup>75</sup> While these variations obviously exist, they are restricted from becoming hierarchical through group reactions that limit the entrenchment of these forms of behaviour; these reactions include “the attribution to one person of various statuses in different contexts.”<sup>76</sup> “A good reputation, [social] behaviour, personal relations, all contribute to balancing out the purely quantitative [differences],” and consequently identification is sought with the reference point of a “middle-peasant” (*moun mouayen*).<sup>77</sup>

The *bossales* collectively (i.e. politically) invented new forms of living; they corroborated the view that emancipation, as Jacques Rancière has argued, is not a future to be attained but an inventive way of doing. As he has put it recently: “Emancipation has always been a way of inventing, amidst the ‘normal’ course of time another time, another manner of inhabiting the sensible world in common. It has always been a way of living in the present in another world instead of deferring its possibility.”<sup>78</sup>

### Concluding Remark

The theoretical inventions in Africa and Haiti help to corroborate the view argued here that in order for an emancipatory politics to be thinkable we need to synthesize the insights of an approach to the thought of politics founded on creolization with a dialectic. Gordon’s impassioned plea for the creolization of theory is of immeasurable value, but in the absence of the explicit inclusion of a dialectic it may limit itself unduly to an analytical vision. I have tried to suggest here that such a limitation affects two main features of thought: the real of a politics of universal freedom, however limited its duration, and the theoretical inventions of popular actions. My plea for synthesis between the creolization of theory and the dialectic is then founded on nothing else but the necessity to make emancipatory thought possible today.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom in Africa: Toward a Theory of Emancipatory Politics* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016), 125.

<sup>2</sup> Atu Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 118.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 55.

<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 171.

<sup>6</sup> See Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-history* (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See Jane Anna Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: reading Rousseau through Fanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Jane Anna Gordon, "Creolizing Political Identity and Social Scientific Method," *Africa Development*, Vol. 34, No.1, (2014): 65-80; Jane Anna Gordon, "Creolizing as the Transdisciplinary Alternative to Intellectual Legitimacy on the Model of the 'Normal Scientific' Community," *Quaderna: revue transdisciplinaire multilingue*, No 3 (6 avril 2016): <http://quaderna.org/creolizing-as-the-transdisciplinary-alternative-to-intellectual-legitimacy-on-the-model-of-the-normal-scientific-community/>; Jane Anna Gordon and Neil Roberts, eds. *Creolizing Rousseau* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> See Paget Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London: James Currey, 1996), 115.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 208, 209, 211.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, "Creolizing as the Transdisciplinary Alternative."

<sup>12</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou "What is Philosophy?" *A Lecture by Alain Badiou*, Cvjeticanin Srdjan, ed. (New York, Dresden: Atropos Press, 97).

<sup>14</sup> Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*, 37ff. and Michael Neocosmos, "The Dialectic of Emancipatory Politics and African Subjective Potentiality," *The C.L.R. James Journal* (forthcoming 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985) 90, *my translation*.

<sup>16</sup> Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Verso, 2012), 34.

<sup>17</sup> See Sylvain Lazarus, *Anthropology of the Name* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> See Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*.

<sup>19</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

- <sup>20</sup> See Jean-Jacques Rousseau *Discourse on Inequality*, trans. G.D.H. Cole, (<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/rousseau/inequality/index.htm>)
- <sup>21</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 345 ; *emphasis in the original*.
- <sup>22</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 61-62, 64, *emphasis added*.
- <sup>23</sup> See Neocosmos, “Are Those-Who-Do-Not-Count Capable of Reason? Thinking Political Subjectivity in the (Neo-)Colonial World and the Limits of History,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 47, no. 5 (October): 530-547 <http://jas.sagepub.com/content/47/5/530.full.pdf+html>.
- <sup>24</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 134.
- <sup>25</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 345.
- <sup>26</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 69.
- <sup>27</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 141.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>29</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 76.
- <sup>30</sup> See Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*, chapter 5.
- <sup>31</sup> See Sekkyi-Out, *Fanon’s Dialectic*.
- <sup>32</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 131, 132, 134, 146 *inter alia*.
- <sup>33</sup> See Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*.
- <sup>34</sup> See Michael Neocosmos, “The Nation and Its Politics: Fanon, Emancipatory Nationalism and Political Sequences,” in *Living Fanon*, ed. Nigel Gibson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 187-199; and Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*.
- <sup>35</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 116, *translation modified*.
- <sup>36</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 165 *translation modified*.
- <sup>37</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 117, *translation modified and emphasis added*.
- <sup>38</sup> See Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*, 134ff.
- <sup>39</sup> See Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott. (London: Verso, 2012).
- <sup>40</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).
- <sup>41</sup> See, for example, the formulations in the South African *Freedom Charter* of 1954 in Suttner and Cronin, *30 Years of the Freedom Charter* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986).
- <sup>42</sup> Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory*, 134.

- <sup>43</sup> Antoine-Louis de Saint-Just, *Œuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 551; *my translation*.
- <sup>44</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 149; *emphasis added*.
- <sup>45</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 119; *translation modified*.
- <sup>46</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 141; *translation modified*
- <sup>47</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 131.
- <sup>48</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 127.
- <sup>49</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched*, 125.
- <sup>50</sup> Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amilcar Cabral* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 840; *emphasis in original*.
- <sup>51</sup> Lazarus, *Anthropology*.
- <sup>52</sup> See Michael Neocosmos, *From “Foreign Natives” to “Native Foreigners”:  
Explaining Xenophobia in Post-apartheid South Africa*. (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2010)  
[http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/Neocosmos\\_From\\_Foreign\\_Native\\_to-2.pdf](http://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/Neocosmos_From_Foreign_Native_to-2.pdf) and  
Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*, 157-188.
- <sup>53</sup> See Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*.
- <sup>54</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract* 149.
- <sup>55</sup> B. K. Diong “The Palaver in Zaire,” in UNESCO (ed.), *Socio-political Aspects of  
the Palaver in Some African Countries* (Paris: UNESCO), 83.
- <sup>56</sup> Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, “Experience of Democracy in Africa: Reflections on  
the Practice of Communalist Palaver as a Method of Resolving Contradictions among  
the People” in *Philosophy and Social Action* XI, 3 (July-September 1985)  
(<http://otabenga.org/files/wamba1.pdf>): 3, 4; *emphases in original*.
- <sup>57</sup> Wamba-dia-Wamba, “Experience of Democracy in Africa,” 7.
- <sup>58</sup> Wamba-dia-Wamba, “Experience of Democracy in Africa,” 4.
- <sup>59</sup> Wamba-dia-Wamba, “Experience of Democracy in Africa,” 5-6.
- <sup>60</sup> Wamba-dia-Wamba, “Experience of Democracy in Africa,” 6.
- <sup>61</sup> Wamba-dia-Wamba, “Experience of Democracy in Africa,” 11.
- <sup>62</sup> Neocosmos, *Thinking Freedom*.
- <sup>63</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Democracy, Equality, Emancipation in a Changing World,”  
2017, [https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3395-democracy-equality-emancipation-  
in-a-changing-world](https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3395-democracy-equality-emancipation-in-a-changing-world).
- <sup>64</sup> Alain Badiou, “The Communist Idea and the Question of Terror,” in *The Idea of  
Communism 2: The New York Conference*, ed. S. Zizek (London: Verso, 2013), 11.

- <sup>65</sup> See Gérard Barthélémy *L'Univers Rural Haïtien: le pays en dehors* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990) and *Créoles–Bossales: Conflit en Haïti* (Petit Bourg, Guadeloupe: Ibis Rouge Editions, 2000).
- <sup>66</sup> Barthélémy *L'Univers Rural Haïtien*, 28
- <sup>67</sup> Mats Lundhal, *Peasants and Poverty: A Study of Haiti* (London: St Martin's Press, 1979), 262.
- <sup>68</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Review of M. Lundhal, *Peasants and Poverty: A Study of Haiti*," *Journal of Peasant Studies* Vol. 8, no.1 (October 1980).
- <sup>69</sup> Barthélémy, *L'Univers rural*, 30-44.
- <sup>70</sup> Barthélémy, *L'Univers rural*, 30; *my translation*.
- <sup>71</sup> Barthélémy, *L'Univers rural*, 29; *my translation*.
- <sup>72</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 171.
- <sup>73</sup> Barthélémy, *Créoles–Bossales*, 379; *my translation*.
- <sup>74</sup> Barthélémy, *Créoles–Bossales*, 293-294.
- <sup>75</sup> Barthélémy, *Créoles–Bossales*, 293; *my translation*.
- <sup>76</sup> Barthélémy, *Créoles–Bossales*, 302; *my translation*.
- <sup>77</sup> Barthélémy, *Créoles–Bossales*, 303; *my translation*.
- <sup>78</sup> Rancière, "Democracy, Equality, Emancipation in a Changing World."