Development as Human Emancipation: Reflections on Development and Politics Today

Michael Neocosmos
About the South-South Tri-Continental Collaborative Programme

The South-South Tri-continental Programme is a scholarly collaboration for Research, Training, Publishing, and Dissemination, between the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA); the Asian Political and International Studies Association (APISA); and the Latin American Council of Social Science (CLACSO). The Programme was established as a reaction to the need, identified by scholars in the South, to reorient theoretical and methodological frameworks of the dominant development discourses; and to improve the organization of Southern research infrastructures. The Programme aims at reviving cooperation and collaboration among scholars of the global South working in the broad field of the social sciences. The collaboration was entered into with the specific aim of sustaining knowledge exchange between scholars on the three continents as a long-term initiative. At the core of this collaboration are the objectives of

- deepening intra-South networking
- contributing a South perspective towards the transformation of the Social Sciences on a global scale
- producing alternative theoretical and methodological approaches of knowledge building

Networking and dialoguing take place in the different International Comparative Seminars that the partners set up annually on a rotational basis. For each International Seminar, CODESRIA, CLACSO and APISA select representatives from their respective continents. Each themed Seminar brings together a total of no more than twelve senior scholars who have been working on the thematic area identified for the Seminar, and are recognized as leaders in such area of scholarship. The small number of participants is meant to enable close, thorough discussion of issues, with a view to producing scholarly publications that not only make audible the voices of the South in the global arena, but effectively advance scientific scholarship.

The CODESRIA-APISA-CLACSO Occasional Paper Series disseminates work discussed at the South-South International Comparative Seminars. The Occasional Papers are written by participants from the three continents, and are designed to provide an opportunity for a sustained South-South dialogue, and to enhance the understanding of the current research issues that scholars of the South are actively engaged in. The papers offer reflections emerging from issues that are pertinent to the South; and are informed by experiences from the South, as well as from South-South and South-North contact as viewed from the perspective of the South.
1. Introduction

Despite the form it eventually took, namely that of a neo-colonial process, development was understood and fought for in Africa as [part of] an emancipatory project central to the liberatory vision of the pan-African nationalism which emerged victorious at independence. Indeed independence was always seen, by radical nationalism in particular, as only the first step towards freedom and liberation from oppression, the second being economic development. It was after all Kwame Nkrumah who had noted that ‘true liberation’ would only finally come with national economic independence from imperial domination.

The failure of development to emancipate the people of Africa was not the result of a betrayal or a con trick, it was rather the effect of a common worldwide conception in the twentieth century, a view according to which human emancipation could only be achieved through one form or other of state politics. Indeed economism and statism were mirror images of each other: it was believed that only the economy could liberate humanity and that only the state could drive the economy to progress. Today, the first proposition has been retained but the second has been dropped from hegemonic discourse. Yet the two are inseparable twins; it is in fact the case that just as the latter is false so is the former, for human emancipation is and can only be a political project. To maintain that human emancipation is essentially an economic question, is to necessarily collapse into statism and to foreclose the possibility of political agency as the state substitutes itself for such agency.

Today, the interests of capital are simply managed by the state in different ways than they were prior to the mid-seventies. Today, such state management simply means the management of the economy by the state in the interests of capital in a manner which is in all essentials equivalent to ‘private sector management’. Such management is primarily biased towards financial interests, while restraining, incorporating and otherwise softening the impact of popular responses so as not to threaten these interests. The shift from a dominant so-called Fordist ‘regime of accumulation’ to a more ‘flexible’ regime in a globalized economy is a dimension of this change, not its supersession (Harvey, 1990). Imperialism and neocolonialism have taken different more complex and more diverse forms in today’s globalized world, they have not disappeared. It follows that if we are to consider development as a dimension of human emancipation, it must be thought differently today, and not
abandoned to the market which can only ‘emancipate the few’ - an obvious contradiction in terms as the idea of emancipation has to be universal to have any meaning.

If neither the state nor the market are emancipatory, the challenge then is to help to rethink development in a non-statist and non-economistic manner, and perforce to rethink politics in a manner that is not state-focussed, despite the unavoidable importance of the state and its institutions in the field of politics. To detach development conceptually from its foundations in both the state and in the economy, to think it as truly political - ie. as emancipatory - this is the major yet necessary challenge without which we cannot move forward in Africa today. The following reflections constitute an attempt to contribute to the development of such thinking.

2. Development and Freedom

The idea of an economic prerequisite for freedom, was of course central to the notion of progress in whichever ideological configuration it took, liberal, social-democratic or ‘marxist-leninist’ (where it took the form of the “primacy of the productive forces”). The corollary of this ideology of the primacy of economic development was the central role of the state in the process. In capitalist societies, the state was either to manage change so as to maintain order as in the case of the various forms of liberalism, or to mitigate the unequalising effects of the market as in the case of social-democracy, or both (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). The ‘progress’ which nineteenth century thought maintained could be realised through the teleological unfolding of history, was held by twentieth century thought to be realisable in the ‘here and now’ via an act of will through control of the state (or the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy or a number of variations on the same theme). This overwhelmingly voluntarist perspective was therefore not unique to developmentalism (whether in Africa or elsewhere in the Third World), but permeated the whole of twentieth century thought, even beyond the confines of development theory as Badiou (2005) has recently shown.

Today, the temptation often exists to re-varnish the tarnished slogans of social democracy, to bring back (perhaps a slightly modified version of) the post-war European social democratic model. The South African state is currently refurbishing the
‘developmental state’ model and seeing Malaysia as its new model. Notions of the ‘public good’ or ‘social citizenship’ are resurfacing along with arguments on the need to spend state resources on infrastructural projects, while the ‘social responsibility’ of big capital is touted as an important component in ‘public-private’ partnerships. While neo-liberalism has not yet been abandoned, there seems to be a serious seduction of many by these formulations, as they seem to presage some kind of alternative to the extreme crassness and highly exploitative character of Western neo-liberalism. However, an economic critique of this liberalism is clearly insufficient; if a critique of its politics is not undertaken, such purported alternatives could end up being an expensive error for thinking/developing an emancipatory alternative. While there have been detailed critiques of neo-liberalism and its ‘structural adjustment programmes’ in various parts of the South, very few have been prepared to critique the political support for liberal capitalism in neo-liberal politics (Ake, 2003). This politics is, in Badiou’s observation, “the true subjective principle, everywhere in the world, of the support for liberal capitalism” (Badiou, 2004: 3, 15, my translation). Badiou refers to the “capitalo-parliamentary” system to denote a symbiosis between such politics and economics. We know, and have known for a long time, that development is not just simply an economic question, but rather that economic improvement for the majority is contingent on people themselves being able to improve their position in society. It is not here a matter of ‘participation’ (a notoriously vague notion) but rather one of the conditions for developing/enabling political agency among the oppressed. I propose here to argue for critical reflection on this question. I therefore propose here some pointers towards such a critique and also suggest alternative ways of thinking politics in order to try to enable an emancipatory conception of development appropriate to the twenty-first century.

3. Development, Emancipation and the State

In both Europe and in Africa (and probably worldwide), the politics of the twentieth century were the politics of states and parties and the dominance of economic thought over politics, while the latter was usually reduced to (class) interests expressed by political parties and the state. While the colonial state attempted to overcome its economic problems at home by ‘developing’ its colonies, especially post 1945 (Cowen and Shenton, op.cit.), in post-colonial Africa the
same colonial statist practices were continued paradoxically in order to overcome economic dependence. The same coercive and exclusive politics against the working people were now justified in terms of building a nation. In very few cases were attempts made to free and encourage the creative possibilities inherent in the people.

Not only did the state dominate development, it did so by subsuming popular-national interests to western ones and thus reproducing neo-colonial structures and practices. Capital accumulation did not only take place via the plunder of state resources, it did so in compradorial ways (Shivji, 1985). While the state managed class (and other) struggles either through outright coercion (forced removals, labour, cultivation, dispossession etc) the idea was either for the state or market to ‘capture’, in the formulation made famous by Hyden, those beyond their power in order to increase the rate of exploitation. Development then was thus contradictory from the very start, it was concerned to increase the welfare of the population through achieving economic growth, but that growth could only be achieved fundamentally through what Marx had referred to as the ‘formal subordination’ of labour to capital; in other words an increase in exploitation through physical means. It increased capital accumulation primarily through dispossession (Harvey, 2005), therefore as has been mentioned on numerous occasions, the state took a direct part in the coercive character of production relations (Mamdani, 1987).

Today the state has delegated (or perhaps better sub-contracted) its development management functions to external bodies such as NGOs. These are frequently simply new parastatals and simultaneously vehicles for social entrepreneurship for a ‘new’ middle-class of development professionals. The activists of yesterday have joined the state in large numbers, not necessarily directly, but by becoming subsumed within the new mode of rule through ‘civil society’. Activism has been replaced by professionalism. ‘Feminism’ and ‘empowerment’ for example, have often been transformed from being popular struggles and demands, to being professions. We have now a new mode of state rule which forms the context for re-thinking development on the continent. Central to this new mode of rule is the hegemony of human rights discourse and the incorporation of NGOs into the state either directly by turning them into parastatals, or by subsuming them within a state domain of politics. It is important to unpack the
modern basis for human rights discourse, particularly as this affected citizenship in the second half of the twentieth century, the half-century of ‘development’. We all know about the Truman speech and the recognition of the rights of nations to self-determination. This along with the transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism at a world level has been commented upon at length. What has been less the subject of debate has been the political side of the process. If we attempt to analyse the process of transformation and development from an emancipatory perspective, which is what I am arguing we should do, a crucial lesson has become apparent today, namely that the state cannot emancipate anybody, or at least no more than a select few (eg. Scott, 1998). Why? For a number of reasons of which I only wish to mention three core ones here.

First, because state subjectivity is invariably bureaucratic and founded on a managerialist ideology. Today that managerialist ideology is identical to that of private corporate interests (so-called ‘private sector management’) and a specific ‘public sector management’ (or ‘public administration’), which had suggested some specificity in particular concerning a certain social responsibility by the ‘public service’ towards ‘the public’ seems to have been pushed aside. Irrespective of the specific character of managerialism today, the latter is a feature of the state in general, of all states without exception and therefore has, in truly democratic conditions to be counterbalanced by popular democratic pressure. This feature is simply the result of the fact that the foundation of the state is precisely control and regulation, and that the state sees itself as the monopoly of power and knowledge and not only of the deployment of violence (as in Weber). At best therefore in its management of social change, all the state can do is to substitute itself for popular struggles and independent popular organisations, all in the name of the monopoly of knowledge and/or the maintenance of social stability. To avoid misunderstanding, it should be stressed that I am referring here to state ‘modes of thought’, in simpler terms to ‘subjectivities’. All this is to be clearly distinguished from possible structural or other contradictions within the state between different institutional or other interests, or indeed from state provisioning or the enactment of progressive social legislation. Moreover it should perhaps be re-iterated that the state (institutionalised power) is in no way, either conceptually or politically, to be reduced to the government. Sociologically, I would include private security firms as well as the mainstream press

PAGE 8
within the state, the former within the repressive and the latter within the ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971, Poulantzas, 1978).

Second, because the state systematically transforms an often pre-existing emancipatory politics into a technical process to be run by professionals (planners, economists, lawyers, judges, administrators, etc) under its ambit within bureaucratic structures and subjectivities. This amounts to a process of de-politicization of say a popular nationalist or revolutionary politics. In sum, the state systematically evacuates politics from state life in favour of technique. In addition, under liberal democratic systems, politics is reduced to voting which itself becomes simply a question of numbers to be predicted, counted and analysed by professionals. This process is a highly complex one but ultimately universal in its fundamentals. It also includes, in today’s parlance, the institutionalization of rights fought for by people and their transformation into ‘human rights’ to be defended and delivered by the state itself (Neocosmos, 2005). While this is obviously a historical process contiguous with the achievement of independence/ liberation in Africa, it is also an ongoing process. Popular demands for democratisation are gradually incorporated by the state into the system of power and de-radicalised in the process; for example some feminist and environmentalist demands have been embraced by names such as ‘empowerment’, ‘good governance’ and ‘sustainability’.

Third, because evidence overwhelmingly suggests that it is the state (along with corporate, bureaucratic or communitarian interests) in whatever form and irrespective of ideology, which is and has universally been the main threat to genuine democracy; and that the latter has only been won by hard fought popular struggles by workers, peasants, women and all the multitudes of the oppressed throughout the world. Thus, while it is important for state power to be divided between various mutually controlling institutions and ‘powers’, it is ultimately only the people who can be the fundamental guarantors of freedom and democracy, not a constitution or the judiciary. In the last instance then, it is only the politically organised people who are to fight for freedom justice and equality. In Africa the examples are legion of cases whereby the people never rose to defend democratic constitutions subverted, undermined and finally overthrown by rulers in search of uncontrolled power. This because the people had been de-
politicized, or because constitutions had lost support due to their evident manipulation and corruption by politicians, or simply because of their gradual exclusion of popular concerns.

To stress that the state cannot emancipate anyone does not mean either that the state is not of use in the development process or indeed that it is absent from the sphere of politics altogether. In actual fact, during the first phase of the post-colonial state (1960s - 1970s), that of developmentalism, although a national emancipation project may have failed because of its exclusion of large sections of the population, at least some state project was in existence, a fact which is no longer the case today. Despite its problems the necessity of supporting that programme at the time cannot be denied, while in fact its origins were precisely in an emancipatory vision. The best way of stating this point is simply to note that state-led emancipatory projects are simply obsolete today. In fact, today we have to completely re-invent an emancipatory politics, as such a conception has simply disappeared from thought. Thus, to remind ourselves of the emancipatory vision of pan-Africanist struggles for development in the early life of nationalism, is crucially important for the recapturing of such a vision. It is to this vision that we must be faithful, and not to a fetishism of state power. In sum then, the question we have to pose ourselves is: if indeed the state cannot emancipate anybody how is emancipation and perforce emancipatory development to happen? Clearly the market cannot do so and no one believes it can. Therefore can development be thought as an emancipatory project today?

4. Active citizenship and emancipatory politics

As already noted above, development is and has always been at its core a political process. In Africa in particular it was part of an emancipatory process which included the liberation of the continent from colonial oppression. Such an emancipatory process was seen as realisable through the state. Since then we know that the reason for the failure of this emancipatory process, despite popular struggles, was precisely its statism, along with all the other emancipatory projects of the 20th century. Today the state has been removed from the centrality of development in favour of the market, civil society and human rights. It is understood that the market itself is not emancipatory, after all we are told poverty is unavoidable, yet its negative effects can be softened by a vibrant’ civil society and a
human rights culture. These together form the parameters within which development is understood today. The state is seen as bad, civil society as good. The logic of this discourse must be unpacked. To do this I wish to emphasise three points:

- The state civil society distinction must be superceded in order to emphasise the point that politics can exist beyond both the state and civil society.
- The hegemony of Human Rights Discourse (human rights culture) cannot provide the basis for an emancipatory politics.
- An active citizenship manifested in social movements is the necessary condition for the development of popular-democratic politics, although such a politics are not automatically prevalent in such movements.

4.1 State and Civil Society

An alternative to the state-civil society distinction can be developed by stressing a distinction between different forms and domains of politics characteristic of the state and of the elite/ruling class who are associated with it on the one hand (elite politics, state politics, dominant/hegemonic politics, etc), and those domains and forms of politics practised by those excluded from and oppressed/coerced by it on the other (popular politics, subaltern politics etc). This distinction must be undertaken on the basis of the social relations, cultural practices and discourses within which each exists. This is the view taken for example by Partha Chatterjee and his colleagues in India who have analysed the relations between state politics and subaltern politics, and it is the view taken here (eg. Chatterjee and Pandey, 1992). Chatterjee (1993:12) notes for example that, in the case of India, “each domain [of politics] has not only acted in opposition to and as a limit upon the other but, through this process of struggle, has also shaped the emergent form of the other”. Elsewhere (Neocosmos, 1998, 1999) I have argued that different forms of politics characterised the party of state nationalism in South Africa in the 1990s from those which were apparent in the popular nationalist movement of the 1980s. The latter included elements of, but were not reducible to, a democratic-emancipatory mode of politics. Although, both in the 1980s and in the 1990s, popular organisations of civil society can be said to have entered
political society, in the first period they did so within a subaltern domain of politics, while in the second they became part and parcel of the state domain of politics. It was this latter process which required a systematic political ‘demobilization’, as entry into the state domain of politics, or into what Gramsci termed “bourgeois civil society”, generally presupposes the absence (if not the fundamental defeat) of both popular activism and of the cultural attributes which accompany it. The central points are that the state along with its officially sanctioned ‘civil society’ (together forming a ‘public sphere’) does not constitute the exclusive domain of politics, and that state forms of politics are not necessarily the only ones in existence.

‘Civil society’ in fact is society as visualised from the perspective/viewpoint of the state. It is society (ie. a realm of activity) as seen by the state, ie made up of interest groups and NGOs which ‘lobby’ or otherwise address/confront the state to satisfy their particular interests. In this conception, such organised interests cannot be universal. Only the state is universal. If they (organisations in society) begin to express universal values and demands, then the tendency is for the state to exclude them from civil society (ie de-legitimise them eg in law). The state sees itself as the monopoly of universality in society (not just the monopoly of legitimate violence - as Weber stressed). The concept of civil society must thus be transcended. Politics can and often do exist outside civil society. One must grasp the idea of a society and politics (and not just an economy) beyond the ‘formal’ liberal one, which exhibits different relations with the state, different modes of survival and different modes of thought.

Chatterjee (2004) uses Foucault’s notion of ‘governmetality to suggest that there are in the contemporary South two different forms of relating to the state. Chatterjee argues then that in the post-colonial context there are two sets of connections to power: the relations connecting a civil society of citizens to the nation-state founded on popular sovereignty, and those linking “populations to governmental agencies pursuing multiple policies of security and welfare” (2004: 37). Each of these he argues points to a distinct domain of politics. There is no need to go into details here other than to note that Chatterjee (ibid.: 60) makes the point that it is not in civil society that politics is to be found because here, claims follow legal and administrative (ie. technical) procedures whose access is limited to middle-class professionals; rather politics are to
be found in what he calls a “political society” of the poor where “claims are irreducibly political”. Although this understanding of a realm beyond civil society in which politics may exist is absolutely crucial for understanding Africa today, Chatterjee’s claim that it constitutes a “political society” is problematic, not only because the term is usually used to refer to the state, but more importantly because it gives the mistaken impression that politics is always in existence within that realm, something which cannot be shown. Rather it makes more sense to suggest that politics may or may not exist within various sites (Lazarus, 1996).

4.2 Human Rights discourse and Emancipation

I have argued elsewhere that human rights discourse (HRD) cannot provide the vehicle for an emancipatory politics. The reason is not simply because HRD is a western imposed humanism, but because of conditions in the South today. In particular, HRD discourse is ultimately a state discourse of passive citizenship which interpellates people as juridical subjects while what are required as a precondition for emancipation are active citizens. Moreover HRD forms one of the main features of the new form of imperialism. Human Rights are seen today as the only possible condition for enabling alternatives yet they do not enable political agency, but rather start from the assumption of people as victims who have to be helped by power rather than enabled to become their own political agents. HRD interpellates people as legal subjects, or alternatively HRD enables people to make claims of the state via the judicial system. Agency is thus restricted to a legal process and whatever political pressure exercised is done in order for the judiciary to ‘deliver’ such rights to people. For this view, people are seen as politically passive, not as political agents who prescribe to the state (eg in the manner of the Freedom Charter in South Africa as it was used in the 1980s especially). This view is basically dominant in UN and NGO discourse and is restrictive of emancipatory thought; its concerns are with multiplying the number of rights in international conventions to be adhered to by states. It is important to stress that HR politics are a) state politics as indicated above and moreover b) that they are the politics of the new imperialism. This connection between HRD and the new form of imperialism must be discussed at length and Chatterjee (2004) is particularly helpful on this issue. The ‘politics’ of powerlessness, passivity and victimhood are linked to the politics of empire. The metaphor of Savage -
Victim - Saviour stressed by Mutua (2002) seems to be clearly dominant under present conditions.

It is important to recognise that in the new form of imperialism, - which does not have a clear centre - 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 Human Rights 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 led. 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. Mutua explains, “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” (2002: 19, 30).

The fundamental problem here is HRD which necessarily opposes state and civil society, even though to my mind - as argued largely by ‘subaltern studies’ - ‘civil society’ and the state must be understood as part of the same domain of politics (with exceptions ‘at the margin’ so to speak) and HRD is (perhaps paradoxically) a state discourse. We need to develop a systematic ongoing critique of HRD and civil society; the two go together (human rights are realised in ‘civil society’ for neo-liberal thought). The current conception of Africa from within this paradigm from the West systemically distorts and disables an understanding of social processes on the continent as it invariably starts from the preconception that the state is ‘bad’ and civil society is ‘good’.

The reason that in neo-liberal political discourse civil society is seen as ‘good’ and the state as ‘bad’, is fundamentally because civil society is said to be the domain of human rights (while the state is seen as invariably restricting/undermining such rights). We are told of course that rights are all ‘good’ by definition (including the right to own property) as to be human is good (even though such humanity is regularly reduced to biological bodies and their suffering in the South, while bodies need to be free to enjoy the benefits of the
market!). Humanity is seen to be under threat if humans have apparently lost their healthy bodies and are victims that the West can feel sorry for (victims of the state, of the market, of AIDS and other pandemics, of earth tremors, tsunamis etc). The West can defend them and stand up against their suffering by invading and destroying the ‘bad guys’ in the state who are responsible for their victimhood (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq and now possibly Iran). Moreover, NGOs are, for this discourse, the expression of the goodness of humanity. It is primarily the state then that is seen to threaten that goodness. And behind the state lies a culture (after all the state is ‘neo-patrimonial’, the expression of traditional anti-democratic cultural norms), a culture which we are told is terribly backward, traditional and oppressive especially of women. The fundamental point underlying all this ‘argument’ is clearly racism within the context of the new empire as Zizek (1999: 216) makes clear. In contradiction to this what should be conceived as the core of the ‘human’ is political agency, the understanding that the world can be changed for the better by people themselves and the ability to act on that knowledge. This is not possible for victims. People in the South must develop the confidence to propose alternatives to what exists and therefore we need to transcend such political discourse. Therefore another development must be constructed on another politics, another practice and another mode of thought.

4.3 Active citizenship

The problem concerns how to think of politics as a practice, emancipatory politics as popular democratic practice. The practice of HRD is not in and of itself emancipatory. It is statist although it may possibly be transformable. Worldwide, there has been a decline of politics within political parties as these have become more and more obviously state institutions for distributing the elite in power. Parties have largely abandoned popular concerns so that today politics seem to exist mainly within social movements (inside or outside ‘civil society). There are two distinct sides to citizenship and rights. The first concerns claims and demands on the state (on state provisioning); here citizenship is essentially passive. Claims are made for delivery of human rights, which have been institutionalised, from the judicial system (usually but also NGOs and other state institutions may also be involved). Here one is fundamentally a juridical subject which does not preclude any group from organising around issues to pressurise the state for such
delivery; i.e it does not in itself preclude some form of semi- or pre-
political activity; yet such activity is limited through a channelling of
it via the judicial system where it is de-politicized. The second does
not concern claims from the state but prescriptions on the state.
The idea here is that a) one is not pleading for state delivery but
rather one is demanding that the state address rights as a result of
political pressure, b) this becomes a truly political activity when
such demands exhibit a feature of universality, when one is
prescribing to the state a form of universalism. This is form of
citizenship is essentially active not passive. The problem with HRD
is that it reduces the latter to the former, ie it maintains that the
limits of active citizenship, if it is indeed to exist, are governed by
state politics, ie by pleas from the state, by reducing citizenship to
passive citizenship, so that citizenship is equated with being a legal
subject not a political subject. The distinction here can be
illustrated by comparing the Bill of rights in RSA to the Freedom
Charter. The former is concerned with ‘delivering’ and ‘protecting’
such rights, the latter is concerned with prescribing them: “the
people shall govern”. South Africa belongs to all who live there”…

South Africa is the one African country where the study of social
movements is the most developed today. Yet for the most part,
these movements seem to be concerned above all to protest the
slow pace of state ‘delivery’ of housing, land, water, electricity,
along with the commercialisation of these resources, rather than
with providing an alternative vision of society. The argument of
these movements therefore seems to be one which stresses the lack
of integration of communities into the capitalist system rather than
an alternative to that system. At the same time the economic
character of their demands seems to lend these movements a class
character. The South Africa literature still seems to either
romanticise social movements (eg. Desai and Pithouse, 2003), or to
maintain that to have so far failed to organise a political party is an
indication of the lack of progress of such movements (eg. Ballard et
al., 2005). On the other hand, Barchiesi (2005: 237) notes much
more accurately that traditional “class-based discourses and
practices retain a crucial relevance for community movements that
are contesting the neo-liberalisation of the South African
transition”. Yet he observes that, given the context of a collapse in
wage-employment, “organizations, emancipatory visions and social
claims based on wage-labour are in crisis”. We should add
“sociological theories” to this list. Given this economic situation,
and given the growing cynicism with regard to the incumbents of
state power, ‘classism’ has lost much of its explanatory and political relevance. The difficulty has been that there is as yet little to replace it with.

5. Conclusion

While the statism of twentieth century development discourses is clear to us today, not far from the surface of this discourse also lurked a humanism for which there was nothing which ‘Man’ was incapable of. A better world could be built by ‘Man’ through the state. This was a humanism with a project, people were given as subjects and realised as such through the medium of the state. Today no one denies the importance of the relationship between development and democracy. But in the overwhelming majority of cases, democracy is reduced to its liberal hegemonic type, or a variant of it. Development as a national emancipatory project has been replaced in Africa and most of the South by human rights discourse, a humanism for which the people of Africa are no longer subjects but only pathetic victims (of authoritarianism, of the market, of natural disasters). Thus humanism in the twenty-first century has so far been a humanism without a project (statist or otherwise). People are not conceived as political agents but as victims, at best they are supposed to make claims from the state for their rights to be delivered, including the ‘right to development’, not to act on their own behalf. In fact today, citizenship is regularly reduced to being a client of NGOs. Thinking the meaning of an active citizenship today and the possibility of development as an emancipatory process is the core question for debate. Without a critique of this political neo-liberalism and its attendant neo-imperial forms, there can be no emancipatory development, no human emancipation at all. At best, struggles for human rights today seem concerned with incorporation into the existing system, and do not at first glance, provide a way to transform it. This critique therefore requires both the re-appropriation of a notion of ‘active citizenship’ as well as a new theorisation of a political subject.

From this must follow a different relationship between organised society/communities and the state. It is only from the South that such new thinking can arise, although there is no guarantee that it will do so. If successful, I propose to write a paper integrating a more detailed elucidation of the above reflections, with systematic
references to social movements possibly even in different parts of the South on the basis of existing empirical studies.
References


