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Reviews

Thinking Freedom in Africa: Toward a Theory Of Emancipatory Politics
by Michael Neocosmos
Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016. Pp. 674, $45 (pbk).
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It is rare that an academic text escapes the page and infiltrates your daily life. That you find yourself unwittingly referencing it as you go about your professional and even personal activities. That your well-formulated assessment of what you thought you knew begins to crack, and you find yourself revisiting passages to help make sense of things that once appeared settled. It is even rarer when this text is a 600+ page tome that blends sociology, history, philosophy and Africana Studies in a seamless mix without any regard for the conventions that most such works mechanistically cling to.

Michael Neocosmos's magnum opus, *Thinking Freedom in Africa*, was my steady companion during the summer of 2018. I leaned on it when addressing a gathering of African social movements in Dakar, Senegal. In Jaffna, Sri Lanka I drew on it as I spoke with graduate students who were trying to make sense of the failure of revolutionary nationalism. Back in the USA, I shamelessly cribbed part of the title, 'Thinking Freedom', for a conversation on race, class and popular movements.

Neocosmos's tome contains multitudes. Attempting to review a work that ranges from the 13th century Mandé Charter to the Haitian Revolution on through the history of 20th century Marxist thought, anti-colonial struggles and all the way to contemporary South African social movements in a few paragraphs feels petty. So I won't. Instead, I want to pose a series of questions for the author. Hopefully, they provide you, the reader, with a sense of both the depth and range of this work. And ideally, they motivate you to wade through it yourself as I believe any scholar of African politics and popular movements from now on must.

1. Your book is a rejection of the cliché that 'politics is the art of the possible'. Instead, you are interested in 'emancipatory politics', by which you are referring to the ways in which politics can exceed the possible, introducing new ways of being beyond state-centric and ideological conventions. 'Empiricism' cannot account for such moments since it privileges structure over agency with its focus on objective events over subjective consciousness. In simple terms, for you, emancipatory politics is about the moments in which people think beyond the constrictions of the past and imagine future alternatives that go beyond what has happened before. In this way, it shares some metaphysical ground with the work of afrofuturists like Felwin Sarr who builds on Aime Cesaire in his book, *Afrotopia*. Yet you don't address this in your analysis, focusing instead on Marxist theory. How do you see your work in relation to thinkers like Cesaire and Sarr who have always centred the role of subjectivity and imagination in their political analysis?

2. You challenge the tendency to treat Africa as devoid of philosophical thinking. Instead, you argue, building on Alain Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus, that 'politics is thought', 'thought is real' and that 'people think'. This allows you to consider the work of non-professionals, or ordinary Africans, as political philosophy. You explore moments such as the Haitian Revolution, anti-colonial struggles or the work of Abahlali baseMjondolo, a shack dwellers' association in Durban, in which activists articulate political objectives that exceed the boundaries of statist politics. Why should these be the preferred site of African philosophical thinking over that produced by African academics, professional intellectuals or even traditional or spiritual leaders?
3. The stories you tell do not end with the triumphant victory of the popular will. More commonly, such emancipatory moments are followed by a reassertion of state logics of rule. Yet, the book is optimistic in its formulation, stressing how emancipatory political thought always persists since people always think, and the poor always think about ending their subjugation. My question then is how do you retain faith in the metaphysical power of thought over the objective material superiority possessed by those in structural positions of power? In other words, does the relative failure of these disparate projects suggest a limitation of the type of ordinary philosophy that you champion?
4. Throughout the text you dismiss 'identity politics' for its narrow focus on making gains for a specific group, what you refer to as a 'politics of interest'. You suggest instead that progressives must transcend identity politics and push towards more emancipatory, universal visions. Yet those who champion identity politics would push back and say that such universalising projects tend to elide the specific challenges of disenfranchised groups. Women, sexual, religious and ethnic minorities, people of lower caste status and so on may simultaneously share low income status with larger groups, but face distinct challenges due to their particular identities. Should they be forced into a uniform emancipatory project or is there a form of universal politics that can simultaneously recognise and uplift specific identities?
5. You develop the concept of 'uncivil society' to speak of the different modes of state politics in Africa today. Drawing on Partha Chatterjee and others, you show how it exists alongside civil and traditional society which are differentiated by distinct subjectivities. Facile talk of 'democratisation' in Africa often fails to appreciate this distinction and hence is increasingly viewed by ordinary people as a method for elite consolidation. Instead, you suggest popular movements have the potential to articulate a different, more people-centric form of democracy that is more in line with the lived experiences of the marginalised. Ultimately, you suggest, this could lead to a withering away of the state or at least a diminishing of the notion that only the state can bring emancipation. But democratic institutions retain value despite their flaws precisely because an amorphous 'people' can be vehicles for both democratic and fascistic sentiments, as you acknowledge. Is there no argument for this notion of the state as the guarantor of a

democratic rules and norms even as we acknowledge the limitations of electoral democracy?

6. Your work draws on Marx, Lenin and Mao arguing that all were incapable of theorising peasant consciousness favouring instead state-led development projects that would transform the peasantry into the theoretically more revolutionary proletariat. In Africa, you suggest this 'agrarian question' merges with the 'national question' and even revolutionary regimes such as Julius Nyerere's Tanzania cannot escape the statist logic of nation-building. African intellectuals such as Mahmood Mamdani and Achille Mbembe similarly warrant critique, in your view, for their incapacity to see politics beyond the state. Ultimately, you suggest this is a limitation of political-economy approaches in which the subjectivity of marginalised groups is reduced to their position within a capitalist economic system. You raise this as an epistemological question about how social science is practiced today. The focus is on 'a priori scientific categories' (xvii) that impute people's thought rather than engaging with them directly, thereby denying them the ability to articulate their own subjectivities. But such critiques of both statism and positivist epistemologies raise the methodological issue of the limits of understanding the consciousness of the oppressed, one that has bedevilled left-wing political thinkers for generations. How does your work go beyond that of other thinkers, such as Fanon, a clear inspiration for you, who have tried to centre the thought of the oppressed in their own analyses?

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Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Tanzania by LAURA FAIR.
Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2018. Pp. 472, $34.95 (pbk).
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East Africans were among the first people in the world to develop a love for going to the movies. Laura Fair's new book uncovers this remarkable story, beginning with the arrival of hand-cranked moving picture displays of the early 1900s, followed by the emergence of cinemas as fixtures of East African cities in the 1950s, the construction of a massive drive-in cinema by Tanzania's socialist government in the late 1960s, and ending with the proliferation of exurban multiplex cinemas in the shopping malls on the outskirts of Dar es Salaam in more recent years. She explores what Tanzanian audiences thought and felt about their favourite films, showing how Bollywood films resonated within regional understandings of love and comportment, and how in the 1970s, Bruce Lee and kung fu films inspired a public steeped in socialist ideologies of self-reliance and a political agenda of Third World solidarity and non-alignment. Fair argues that, while the vast majority of films screened in Tanzanian cinemas over the years were foreign imports from Hollywood and Bollywood, the films themselves are only one aspect of a rich and distinctly East African movie-going culture, rooted in regional cultures of urbanism, consumerism, leisure, affect and enterprise.