

Development, Social Citizenship and Human Rights: rethinking the political core of an emancipatory project in Africa

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The paper begins from the axiomatic point that, 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 political* 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 Nkrumah who had noted that ‘true liberation’ would only finally come with national economic independence from imperial domination. Up to this day Africa is seen by many nationalists as unfree because of its economic dependence, and not so much because of its politics, as if the road to freedom, justice and equality was not necessarily a political one.

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 hegemonic 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.

While development today is said to be guided by the (not so invisible) “hand of the market”, the state has simultaneously delegated (or perhaps better sub-contracted) many of its development management functions to external bodies such as NGOs. These are frequently simply new parastatals as well as vehicles for social entrepreneurship for a ‘new’ middle-class of development professionals. The activists of yesterday have largely joined the state, 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 Activism has been replaced by professionalism.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 form of state rule which forms the context for re-thinking development and politics. Central to this new form of rule is the hegemony of human rights discourse. This paper will begin by reviewing the political assumptions of the nature of citizenship underlying T.H. Marshall’s argument for ‘social rights’; it will provide a critique of human rights discourse and civil society from an emancipatory perspective (situating these within the new forms of imperialism and statism) and will briefly comment on the character of political parties and social movements in understanding political emancipation today. It will argue that in Africa, if one is to think an emancipatory project, citizenship must be thought as (a moral community of) active citizenship, and political subjectivity must be thought not as management or opinions but, following the work of Badiou and Lazarus, as the freedom to think new possibilities.

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