

Keynote Address

African Potentials and the Thought of Universal Humanity

Michael NEOCOSMOS
Unit for the Humanities at Rhodes University

Humanity currently finds itself at the edge of an abyss. If there is no change in the manner politics are being thought worldwide, the world could easily tip over into nuclear annihilation. I am not being dramatic here; this is fast becoming a distinct possibility. In this context it is absolutely imperative to re-introduce the idea of universal humanity at the centre of intellectual thought. Western liberalism has failed lamentably to establish a real universal thought of the human. While violence is now slowly entering middle-class consciousness, it is also becoming apparent that the obscene inequalities and colonial domination – both occasioned by capitalism – that currently prevail, are directly connected to a spurious liberal idea of universality from which the overwhelming majority of humanity is excluded. In fact it is gradually being understood that the liberal conception of “Man” has no universal validity whatsoever. The idea of “African Potentials”, although it began as an innocuous slogan, has proven to be an important conceptual innovation that provides intellectual access to an alternative conception of the universal. My address will review and comment on the innovative character of this concept with reference to the thinking of the dialectic between the particularity of culture and the universality of humanity.