

The thought of the universal and the rarity of emancipatory dialectical thought: some African examples. (Abstract)

Michael Neocosmos

How is it possible for a text written about 6000 years ago in ancient Egypt to mean something to us today? How is it possible for statements on equality, freedom, justice and truth to have been written in such a manner that we recognise their meaning despite problems of translation? If the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* speaks to us today it must surely mean that its thinking is not reducible to culture. That particular human culture so completely different from our own was able to produce statements which we recognise and agree with. They therefore have a validity independent of cultural and historical location. In other words it can be maintained that a particular kind of thought can exist which is quite simply irreducible to the culture that produces it because it is universal. This suggests that there is something universal in humanity which can be thought from within all cultures. It also suggests that this idea of the universal is an exception in inegalitarian (Neolithic) cultures. Such thought is not always present. Indeed if an idea of universal human equality is constantly present within an inegalitarian culture this would imply its falsity. The Western idea of the universal is of this type. It also means that, given that an idea of universality insists on the equality of all humans, that this thought is not only dialectical for it combines in contradiction both cultural and transcultural features, but that it is also rare. There is only one idea of universal humanity and that concerns the equality of all humans. But this idea is expressed in different ways according to its location in history and culture. This seminar will discuss these ideas with reference to various examples of dialectical political thought in Africa.