DEMOCRACY AND THE STATE-SOCIETY PARADIGM
REFLECTIONS ON S. ADELMAN'S PAPER

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In his contribution, Adelman provides us with a well-argued critique of what he terms 'constitutional fetishism', the notion that the adoption of the appropriate (read: liberal) constitution is a prerogative for democratic development. According to him the notion of liberal democracy is itself a chimera in the African context, for it is exclusive, and at odds with Africa's history, traditions, culture and social relations (for example in its use of the Western liberal concept of the individual). In Adelman's view, therefore, democratic theory, often hailed as "a turning point in the political analysis of post-colonial Africa" (Chabal 1994: 29), is just another paradigm lost. In his view, the ideology of liberal democracy more often than not blocks the possibility of a democratic movement from the bottom up, starting at the grassroots level. Frequently, he states, talk of liberalisation and good governance has nothing to do with giving power to the people, but with the incorporation of the African masses into a wider capitalist system that basically benefits the west, both politically and economically. According to Adelman (who echoes Davidson here), real democracy can only come about through mass participation, and through the construction of forms of governance that originate at the grassroots rather than at the top, in a politics that is closely tuned to the social relations that are really living in society. What people seek, according to Davidson and Adelman, is a strong state, but one that is 'democratic', that promotes civil society and is in tune with the aspirations that live at the grassroots level.

With Adelman, I can only agree that the ideology of liberal democracy is a western fetish that does not necessarily fit the realities of African political life (although, since Bayart (1989) we also know that Africans have been remarkably inventive in capturing imposed state structures and turning them into their own, in various processes of retraditionalisation and 'political Africanisation'; cf Chabal 1994: chapter 12). In my view, however, the terms and dichotomies which Adelman uses

to give form to his critique, are far too static and therefore somewhat outdated, most particularly with regard to his use of the dichotomy between state and (civil) society and, related to this dichotomy, the tropes of 'high politics' and 'low politics' or the politics from above and below. As Mbembe, in a seminal essay, rightly remarked:

> [I]t would be wrong to continue to interpret postcolonial relationships in terms of resistance or absolute domination, or as a function of the binary oppositions usually adduced in conventional analyses of movements of indiscipline and revolt (e.g. counter-discourse, counter-society, counter-hegemony, 'the second society', etc.) (Mbembe 1992: 5).

In uncritically adopting the state-society dichotomy Adelman, rather like the democracy theorists, runs the risk of failing to understand the complexities of the dynamics between the individual and the collectivity in contemporary postcolonial Africa.

It seems to me that, in the current African context, tropes of the 'above' and the 'below' are becoming increasingly costly, for very often they do no longer seem to overlap with the realities of the African sociopolitical scene; they seem, on the contrary, to conceal more than they reveal. It is not at all easy, for example, to determine what, in Africa today, is 'above' and what 'below'. Although Bayart's approach, for example, deals with the *praxis* of the postcolonial state and stresses processes of *mediation* between 'the above' and 'the below' (e.g. Bayart 1992), it does not, in my view, sufficiently problematize the (too monolithic) concepts of the state, of civil society, or the dichotomy itself between state and society, or the specific dynamics and complexities of the interaction between the postcolonial state and the various levels of what is called 'civil society'. Neither does the use of this general framework allow for a sufficient problematization of the key notions used by Adelman: 'constitutionalism' and 'democracy' (and in their wake, concepts such as 'state', or [capitalist] 'development').

First of all, the use of the state/society dichotomy is problematic because the (African) state is rarely the sole harbinger of power, and those in power rarely exert their authority exclusively through the formal state structures inherited from their colonial predecessors, as a quick glance at the extensive literature on patronage and socially-based political networks in Africa reveals. The structure of the state is itself often reduced to competing factions that follow their own "pathways to accumulation" (Geschiere and Konings 1993). At the same time the public realm in Africa tends to be weak: "Individuals see nothing wrong in using public resources for private or communal purposes. This attitude extends to a wider set of institutions than those we officially call the state" (Hyden 1992: 6). The shifting boundaries

between legality and illegality are susceptible to constant political pressures. One of the problems in this respect is not only to determine where the state begins and where it ends, but also what precisely 'legality' and 'illegality', or 'constitutional' and 'non-constitutional' in the African context mean. Increasingly, the lines between the illicit, the illegal and the illegitimate are extremely difficult to draw. In varying degrees, one could say that, paradoxically, unlawfulness, arrogant arbitrariness and illegality are the only elements that put an increasingly fictional 'state' in evidence and continue to make it visible.

Secondly, in many cases it is no longer sure whether the 'illegality' is *still* and *uniquely* defined by the nation-state. In this respect Adelman is absolutely right when he states that African political reality today cannot be understood fully without taking into account Africa's integration into the global economy. This economy, however, is very often located outside the 'official' economy; similarly, Africa's integration in the world market often takes place in economic circuits that are situated outside or alongside the official world economy (cf De Boeck n.d.). In the current situation, the illegality that was often initiated by the state (and the example of Zaire[1] comes to mind) seems to have spread from the centre to broader layers of society, as well as to an international but largely invisible network that surpasses by far the national 'mafias' and the level of national politics, and that is active in the arms trade, the diamond, gold, petrol and uranium traffic, the laundering of narco-dollars and other similar activities. These two different but at some levels interconnected localized and globalized 'informal' economies develop according to a dynamic which increasingly escapes the mechanisms of state control as such. The uncontrolled and uncontrollable development of international informal economic circuits inevitably leads to a rapid criminalization of the state and of politics. On the more localized level, on the other hand, the increasingly blurred boundaries of the state apparatus provide people on the local urban and rural levels of society with the opportunity to penetrate the spaces previously occupied by the state or the regime that forms the state's "domestic structure of repression" (Fatton 1992: 129). This naturally leads to the implosion of the classic hierarchical state-society picture, and inevitably also of the concept and indeed the whole framework of the state itself (and most of us still seem to find it incredibly difficult to imagine society outside of this familiar framework of the state). Simultaneously, the implosion of the state leads to the creation of a new dynamic 'model' of interaction, the contour of which is still

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[1]   As the article - in connection with Zaire/Congo - deals primarily with the Mobutu era, the country's former name of Zaire has been used throughout the text.

only vaguely outlined, between multiple, dialectically interdependent, sociopolitical and cultural spaces and groups, linked to one another in constantly shifting hierarchies that are defined by the personalistic strategies of social actors on the local and the global level, and that also lead, for example, to local reinventions and reinterpretations of notions of capitalism and indeed of development. These networks, although largely based on personal links, cannot be defined by ties of patronage and clientelism alone. In order to understand this one has not only to take into account the ruptures of Africa's colonial past and the complexities of the current postcolonial reality but also the *longue durée* of precolonial continuities. My own recent experiences as an anthropologist working in Zaire/Congo have taught me how traditional élites and their power bases redefine the transactions with the regime in terms of, for example, tributary relations. For them, the interaction with the state thus becomes a way to introduce and handle tribute, and thus a 'traditional' morality of exchange, in the space of the state, thereby redefining in totally different terms what appears at first as a mere patron-client relationship. Rather than instituting a form of political prebendalism and patronage, tributary relationships imply a political economy of gift exchange as well as the making of political relations that re-institutionalize the personalized and enable a redefinition of the status difference between the local and the national elites involved, a redefinition that opens up the possibility of mutual and reciprocal assimilation (De Boeck 1996).

Within the African context, I therefore think that the concept of the state should be problematized even more than is the case today; it should be redefined in terms of political hybridities and strategies which cannot simply be described as forms of political 'decay' or pathological dysfunctioning, but which aim at the creation of networks and spaces of contact, palaver, (asymmetric) exchange, solidarity and complicity between élites and subalterns, enabling the intervention in the political space of the other, as well as the circulation of commodities, money, and wealth in people between these different but interconnected spaces. What we are ultimately faced with here is a radically new phase of identity politics between the different levels involved in this exchange.

Such a redefinition of the state, and of politics in general, also problematizes another aspect stressed in Adelman's and many other contemporary analyses of the (African) political scene: that of conflict and/or opposition. Most often, and this applies to Adelman's analysis as well, the state-society relations are seen in antagonistic terms, in terms of a 'big brother'-like state or in terms of a struggle against the state, analyzed in the usual Gramscian terms of hegemony and counterhegemonic practices, in which the predatory rule of the dominant national structures erodes local cultures. Echoing Mbembe's statement, however, I would contend that the ongoing dialectics of power between the local and the global is played out in much

more dynamic and complex ways, in which notions of *interrelation* play as important a role as elements of opposition. The basic attitude of many local communities and power bases, certainly outside of the urban locale, is not so much one of contest or conflict with the state. Rather, these local (and invariably subaltern) communities try to use the 'state', collaborate with it and invade its space in order to further, amongst other things, their own political and economic agendas. They often do so by means of local strategies of resilience (and ethnicity is only one such a strategy) that are not only directed *against* the state or in opposition with the state, but are also, perhaps even in the first place, inspired by the desire or the necessity to transcend the constraints of the local level and to *participate* in economic and political spheres that are under the influence or control of the merchant and political capital. Undoubtedly, it is in this sense that one must understand the post-1991 complaints (heard in the Zairian hinterland more often than in Kinshasa) that everything was better before *la démocratie* arrived. Because the collapsing totalitarian Zairian state has failed to fully extend central control over more traditional local power structures, it has shaped an arena in which 'tributary' interdependencies have been created, and in which there is room to manoeuvre. In the quotidian praxis of governance and politics, conflict and opposition against the state have therefore often been transformed into a specific mode of negotiation and compromise which can be referred to as *l'arrangement*; as Zairians like to say: *tout finit par s'arranger*. Local actors have access to these spaces of negotiation and mediation; it provides them with a possibility to strive for the existence of their version of *démocratie*, which, indeed, may not reflect the pluralist aspirations of the western democratic ideology, but which will be cast, as I have argued above, in terms of personalized, 'feudal' structures of decision making, deliberation, sharing of power and distributing of wealth. In order to understand these processes, and to expand our own analytical tools and academic metalogue beyond the Gramscian dichotomies, I believe it is absolutely necessary to devote attention to the dynamics of the interaction between local and global spheres of sociopolitical, economical and cultural interaction, as well as to the particularities of the (political) praxis that situates itself at the hinge-joints between 'traditional' and 'modern' worlds, concepts, beliefs and practices. This implies that we should work towards an explanation of such processes of interaction through an analysis of cultural entities as forms, not only of hegemony and resistance, but also of adaptation, accommodation and collaboration.

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