

Theorizing African Political and Social Thought for Knowledge Production

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The current global socio-political conjuncture is arguably characterized by narrow forms of nationalism and exclusionary notions of belonging often derived from theoretical outlooks that foreground the exceptionalism of sections of the world. As such, the counter to such closure ought to be an opening that is inclusive and open. A search for this opening is indeed a global imperative. The historical processes and counter hegemonic ideas about society and polity that led to the making of society on the African continent, point to notions of intellectual, social and political inclusiveness that is open to difference while aspiring for an all-inclusive unity. While the idea of an African Political Thought cannot be subsumed under a single rubric, certain elements can be traced across some of the major intellectual traditions on the Continent and its diaspora. Pan-Africanism, liberation, freedom and humanism have been dominant in these imaginaries which attempt to create open and egalitarian societies in Africa. In this workshop we seek to delve into the history of social and political thought in Africa as a way of making sense of the present moment on the Continent, and by extension globally. There is a recognition, that such an effort is articulated in a context where the enunciation of Global Africa is often regulated by the power relations of western canonized modes of knowledge production. These models closely linked to the subjugation (materially and intellectually of the Continent) determine usefulness of knowledge. Global Africa's political and social thought is often a direct challenge to these models.

Historically, the material conditions that heralded knowledge production in Africa was mediated by resistance and the search for alternative sociality. Social and political theory is often assumed to spring from the reflections and meditations of individuals and their intellectual genius. What is seldom recognized are the social roots, contingencies and formations that underline ideas and social theory. Moreover, conventional approaches to social and political theory in Africa are dominated by a center-periphery paradigm in which African theorists occupy the periphery and therefore remain marginal voices in conversations about Africa. The workshop will center African knowledge production, not in an insular manner, but as a starting point of taking seriously where we find ourselves. The workshop will accordingly use a decolonial and gendered analysis, deploying concepts and theories that are grounded in African realities. The workshop hopes to contribute to the body of knowledge around African political and social thought by answering the following questions:

1. How can a rethinking of the contributions of known and unknown Pan-African social and political theorists as occupying the center lead to the re-conceptualization of knowledge production and intellectual history?
2. How can such an approach, which interrogates questions of representation, legacy, resistance and resilience, lead to the decolonization of knowledge production in Africa?
3. Identify and create African-centered theories that can be used to examine political, social, economic and cultural life and resistance in Global Africa.

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