

THOUGHTS ON THEORIZING FROM THE SOUTH: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN COMAROFF

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*Lisandro Claudio and John Comaroff discuss the Comaroff's recent publication *Theory from the South* and its implications for rethinking global relations through the praxis of critical scholarship.*

NOTE: The following interview, conducted by Lisandro Claudio, took place in Copenhagen in November 2015. Its content arises largely out of the recent publication of *Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa*, Jean and John Comaroff (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

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LC: How do you define the Global South?

JC: This is not an easy question to answer. The Global South has multiple referents, multiple meanings. In ordinary conversation, of course, its primary denotation is geographical: it signifies, hemispherically, the lower half of the planet, its underside. But this is a grotesque simplification, a realist – and often racist – conceit. The term has a far more complex fan of significata. Superficially, it describes those reaches of the planet that were formerly colonized, although not always at the same time; those parts of the world that European imperial metropolises “discovered,” conquered by means of one

or another form of violence, exploited for economic and political purposes, and took to be part of their so-called overseas “possessions.” A more subtle conceptualization treats the Global South less as a geopolitical or even an historical entity – in spatio-temporal terms, that is – than as a relational term that takes on its substance by virtue of its contrast, be it binary or complementary or orthogonal or even at times rhizomatic, to the global north. Because it is a relational sign, a “shifter” if you prefer the technical linguistic designation, its content is constantly shifting. In some contexts, its connotation is largely imaginative: it stands as a loose, and quite plastic, rhetorical trope of otherness to EuroAmerica. In others, it takes on a hard-edged materiality, as in the formation of BRICS (a geo-economic axis that brings together Brazil, India, South Africa, China, and Russia); or, in the world of finance, as a zone in which credit ratings are low, labile, and carefully regulated, and toward which G8 policies require regularly to be negotiated. For the critical scholar, however – and here is the point – our theory-work requires that we do not take “the global south” as an analytic category in or for itself. Our task is to interrogate and explain the various ways in which the term is understood, deployed, commissioned, and contested. In *Theory from the South*, Jean Comaroff and I make the argument that, whatever else it might be taken to denote, geopolitically or imaginatively or economically, “the global south” alludes to any ex-centric location – a location external to self-appointed, historical centers, that is, in a world of metamorphosing relations among, even deconstructions of, centers-and-peripheries – from which to look at the contemporary planetary order



Source: Cuny.edu.

in its totality; note that “ex-centric” here, itself a felicitous conceptual pun, is owed to Homi Bhabha. What is more, we argue, it is those ex-centric locations that, in the here-and-now, have become frontiers in the history of the present, the unfolding history of global capitalism; hence the notion that they are harbingers of the economic, political, and social future/s of EuroAmerica.

LC: How would you distinguish it from concepts such as the developing world or the Third World?

JC: This is an interesting question. The global south has gone by several such terms in times past, among them, the premodern world, the colonial world, the underdeveloped world, the developing world, and, most recently, the Third World. However, few people talk about the Third World anymore. It is difficult to track the political etymology of “the Global South”; clearly, it dates to the demise of the Cold War era, an era in which “First,” “Second,” and “Third” Worlds signified the bloc alignments, and the ideological antinomies, of the long Twentieth Century. With the end of that era, and with the globalization of neoliberal capitalism in its late modernist form, the

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so-called center-periphery relations on which Cold War geopolitics were founded began to give way. In that sense, “the Global South” is a term that conjures with the ghosts of an historical epoch now visible primarily in its turbulent wake, its material and social after-effects. Because the empire has struck back, so to speak; because Africa and Latin America and South Asia are no longer merely the margins of an industrial capitalist World System of the sort so acutely captured for the twentieth-century by the likes of Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, Walter Rodney, and dependency theorists of various stripes; because both capital and labor now flow in all directions – with EuroAmerican workers seeking employment in their former colonies, northern capital investing south of the equator, and ex-colonial wealth buying up the corporations of their former colonizers – the world, as it is commonplace to observe these days, is caught up in irretrievable entanglements. Thus it is that one of the biggest beer manufacturers in the USA, Miller, is owned by South African Breweries. And that much of the British motor industry, including its signature names, is owned by Indian firms; well, sort-of Indian firms. Like many corporations of global reach today, they are highly complex structures consisting of holding companies, investment arms, subsidiaries, and the like, often registered in offshore tax-havens with production sites that offer financial incentives, lax labor laws, and few environmental constraints

– sites often in former colonies, where the legacy of the past, those ghosts that I mentioned a moment ago, makes the present highly congenial to the exigencies of capital. And because these places, by and large, cluster in the antipodes, old archetypes, anachronistic imaginaries, continue to animate the translation of the Third World into the Global South.

At the same time, despite (or because of) the fact that EuroAmerican capital invests so heavily in Africa, Asia, and Latin America these days – foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa, for example, has risen dramatically in the past decade or so – and despite the emergence of new markets and new home-grown corporations in those places, the dystopic undersides of the global economy are felt most acutely in them: Poverty and unemployment, crime, illness, and Gini-coefficients are all on the rise; this in spite of the tendency of free market fundamentalists to stress the growing gross wealth of the continent, a faith-based tendency that ignores the bitter harvest sown by the neoliberal policies of the Washington consensus in the cause of “structural adjustment.”

Of course, given that Africa, Asia, and Latin America have become harbingers of the future history of the Global North, note how much more “like Africa” – or, at least, like Africa-as-archetypically-imagined – the “new normal” of America and Europe are becoming. EuroAmerica is suffering rapid urban decay, social unrest, environment degradation, and *real* unemployment. By *real* here, I do not intend simply the number of people who do not have jobs – in the USA, the prison population and those who have given up seeking work are not counted as unemployed; if they were, the country would have a rate that looks distinctly African. My intention, rather, is to point to the unremarked distinction between

jobs and incomes: because a very large number of people in the USA and Europe who have formal jobs do not, in the wake of the deliberate depression of wages and the removal of benefits, earn sufficient to support themselves and their families, employment figures have become effectively meaningless. A much more realistic figure if we really wished to measure the social health of economies is an “economic viability ratio,” if I may be forgiven a neologism, a ratio that measures level of net income against cost-of-living; only if the former were equal or greater than the latter might an individual be said to be economically viable. National economic health, then, ought to be rated according to the proportion of economically viable citizens (or families, if one wanted to render the equation slightly more complex) to the total population. That, at least, would yield a more sensible economic anthropology of the Wealth of Nations than does our current fetishism of un/employment figures. Comparing global southern cities with those of the global north is not always flattering to EuroAmerica: even the poorest citizens of Johannesburg or Lagos would find urban Detroit or the southside of Chicago an edifying place to live.

What is more, the World-Formerly Known-as-First, in which the cutting of state budgets has become a competitive imperative for most political parties, is often slower than the global south these days to develop or reproduce infrastructure: *vide* its rotting inner cities, their housing estates and *banlieus*; its over-burdened, reduced transportation systems; its withering support of public culture and tertiary education. Nor is it quick to experiment with post-neoliberal forms of redistribution or new kinds of public-private investments in social welfare -- like the *Bolsa Familia* in Brazil or the social grants and

housing programs of South Africa that have abetted the regeneration, or slowed the degeneration, of local economies. Interestingly, in a recent *New Yorker*, James Surowiecki notes that some US cities are, for the first time, building homes for the unemployed, largely because it is cheaper to deal with homelessness before than after the fact. This is basically a welfare program by another name – “welfare” being a word currently unutterable in the US public sphere – that resembles post-apartheid South Africa’s huge effort, now almost twenty-years old, to house its immiserated population; a striking instance, this, of the global north following behind the history of the global south. The irony is obvious. There is often a strong cost-benefit rationale to the state for this sort of intervention, but the culture of neoliberalism, despite its obsession with cost-benefit calculation, makes any social policy that is not market-driven, any policy that involves a proactive state, unthinkable – even if it has clear economic returns. Global South-like social conditions, however, are compelling global northern nations to mimic many of the socioeconomic strategies developed in the antipodes, albeit under different, less charged labels. The pity of it is that, while such things – the historical effects of neoliberalism, I mean, and the politics required to address them -- are openly argued about in places like South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, and India, they are rendered non-negotiable in most of the ideologically-riven, toxic, de-democratizing polities of EuroAmerica.

LC: Where does your interest in thinking about the Global South come from?

JC: I am a South African by birth and affinity, a long displaced white South African. I grew up in Cape Town in the bad old days. My wife and I left because we could not stay, in all conscience, after 1967, when we graduated from the University of Cape Town. But we retained our roots there. When we could not work or live in South Africa – we were resident for ten years in the UK before moving to the USA – we spent extended periods in Botswana. Since 1990, although we have continued to live in the U.S.A., we have spent between three and six months every year back home; in 2000-1, we returned for fifteen months, most of it spent in the North West Province, where we have done the bulk of our fieldwork. In 2015, once again, we shall be doing new research for much of the year in South Africa.

As this makes clear, we spend much of our lives moving between America and Africa, with regular if shorter sojourns in Europe. In doing so, we try constantly to see each of these places through the eyes of the other/s, thus to facilitate the critical process of estrangement – which is the essential gesture of all theoretically-principled, methodologically-sensitive anthropology. In short, our optic on the world, the angles of vision from which we interrogate it, has a great deal to do with biography. But it also owed to something else, to an epistemic consideration. Lenin once said that social formations – he had industrial capitalism in mind – are often best understood from what we think of, autonomically, as peripheries; that life at those peripheries makes visible forces and faces and facts often unseen, or disregarded, at metropolises. This is another way of making an argument for treating ex-centric locations as critical vantages for theory-work in the social sciences. We have repeatedly been struck by this in South Africa: much of its public

intellectual life is situated in its large cities, as a result of which many of the contradictions at the heart of its postcolonial political economy, most acutely evident in its rural reaches, go unremarked, unseen, unanalyzed.

LC: You have mentioned your most recent book, *Theory from the South*. Can you summarize its argument?

JC: As I have already intimated, its argument is complex, and is applied to a wide range of phenomena, from contemporary personhood, citizenship, and democracy, through history and the judicialization of memory, the crisis of liberalism, nationhood and borders, and the law, to the politics of life itself. Unfortunately the commentary literature that it has accrued – almost all of it based on a rather superficial reading of its introduction – has simplified it a great deal, and confused it with what has come to be labelled “southern theory”; theory, that is, written in the south by scholars from the south. There is huge value in southern theory, of course. Apart from all else, it opens the academy to voices long ignored, often for reasons that are flatly racist, reasons that have to do with the fundamental incompleteness of processes of decolonization. We, however, do not claim to be “southern theorists,” nor do we speak for “them,” which, patently, would be a blatant act of colonial paternalism. Our work, rather, derives precisely from the triangulated, estranged perspectives, the multifocality, of which I spoke a moment ago; it is a north-south co-production, neither one thing nor the other, but grounded simultaneously in the in-between, in a both-and. (This is true, of course, of many southern scholars as well,

but that is another story. If antipodean authenticity requires the mono-spatialization of positioning, voice, and conceptual repertoire, few could claim it. And why would one want to anyway?)

The central argument of the book is founded on a doubling, on a counterpoint of two theses. The first is anything but new, although many continue to dispute it; we do not claim its authorship, only a particular version of its enunciation. It is that African modernity ought not to be seen as a derivative, a *doppelganger*, or a degenerate variant of the European original; that all modernities, plural, are vernacular ideological formations, formations that, in valorizing contemporaneity, posit their own notions of personhood, history, and world-making in the here-and-now; that, despite its claims to universal Enlightenment, to a monopoly on the production of truth, philosophy, forensic knowledge, science, theory, EuroAmerican modernity is a parochial cultural formation like any other, and subject to the same cultural relativism; that Afromodernity has deep roots in the past and, like its northern counterparts, has long been the object of endogenous contention and contestation. Which is why modernity, *sui generis*, has multiple forms, multiple narratives, multiple sources, multiple origin mythologies; to wit, as Jack Goody recently pointed out in *The Theft of History*, many things that the West believes itself to have invented – among them, democracy, capitalism, individualism, and love – had precursors which were “borrowed” from elsewhere, particularly Asia.

The second argument of the book, to which I alluded earlier, is much more controversial, much more open to contestation. It is that, in this, the latest chapter in the history of global capitalism, the effects of its so-called “neoliberal” turn have been

felt first and most acutely in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, thence to manifest themselves in EuroAmerica; “neoliberal” is rendered here in scare quotes since, as an adjective, it describes a mutating formation with many variants, most of them unstable, labile, still under construction, often under-theorized. North and South, I stress, are caught up in the *same* meta-process of contemporary world-making. But it is a meta-process of multiple temporalities: not all parts of the planet are coeval in the here-and-now. The fact that the history of the Global South is running ahead of that of the Global North, a harbinger of the EuroAmerican future, has its origins in the *long duree* of the past two centuries. Partly it has to do with the residual effects of the political economy of colonialism, and, in particular, with the non-sedimentation of liberal democracy in former colonies, itself a legacy of the divisive technologies of European overrule. But it is also because, more recently, experimentation in deregulated capitalism – in its labor relations, in its collaboration with (or, in extremis, its seizure of) the state, in its financial gerrymandering, in eco-destruction, and the like – has been allowed to occur in the Global South without the same ethico-legal constraints it has faced in the Global North. The South has always been a laboratory for capitalist development. But it is now more than that: it is also a site of the production of some of its new, more inventive ways and means; this because it has seized and re-commissioned the knowledge and expertise yielded by that experimentation, frequently with unintended consequences. As a result, the frontiers of the global economy have left the north and begun to move southward, often, as I have said, prefiguring historical processes that would gain force

later in EuroAmerica – often unanticipated, with costly consequences.

Take, for example, the economic recession of 2008. It is clear, in retrospect, that earlier crises in Asia, Latin America, and Asia, as George Stiglitz has observed, were caused by basically the same conditions, the same “structural” adjustments, the same fetishism of the “free” market. But Western economists – driven by an ideology they misperceive, misconstrue, and misrepresent as science – saw no lesson for themselves in this precursor; in the fact, that is, that their prescribed policies were responsible for that catastrophe and would be responsible for one later in EuroAmerica. It is telling that those economies of the Global South that did not buy into the Washington Consensus, and were most heavily state regulated, suffered 2008 least and recovered fastest. This, of course, flies in the face of American neoliberal ideology and economic orthodoxy, which is deeply anti-*etatist*. What is more, even now, when the US speaks as though its economy has recovered from the implosion of six years ago, it is deluding itself. Wealth may have returned to its traditional homes and havens, so to speak. It always does. 21st century capitalism, famously, is risk free for its upper reaches. But inequality continues to deepen, more Americans are alienated from both civil society and the economy, redistribution is unthinkable, infrastructure is rusting and withering, and the commonweal has been looted to the point of bare existence. And the idea that unemployment rates are dropping, as my comments above make clear, is pure myth, a mendacious figment of statistical mystification.

The “new normal” of the USA and Europe, in short, recalls the recent pasts of Africa, Latin America, and, if briefly, Asia. Hence Adriana Huffington’s

pungent *Third World America*. The US, oddly – or perhaps predictably, given that its curious fusion of provincialism and imperialism prevents it learning from the history of others – has responded either by reproducing the economic theology that got it into trouble in the first place, or by attempting to reindustrialize; this, ironically by reimporting the modes of production that it exported to the exploitable edges of the global economy – which makes no practical sense under contemporary conditions. For their part, many states in the South are seeking new solutions, ones that avoid the excesses of market fundamentalism and anti-*etatism*.

Take another example of history running from Africa towards the Global North. It pertains to the law, and, again, has several dimensions. One of them involves constitutions, of which more than thirty-five new ones have been promulgated since 1989; this on a continent stereotypically, and wrongly, said to have little respect for constitutionalism *tout court*. Most notable among those constitutions, perhaps, is that of South Africa, which melds European liberal theory with an Afrocentric sensibility to create a creolized legal culture whose recognition of rights – especially economic, social, and cultural rights – is among the most capacious, most advanced in the world today. Not only has become a model for other nation-states; it has also drawn the avid attention of EuroAmerican constitutional scholars, for many of whom it has become a paradigm case for the jurisprudence of the future. What is more, the South African Constitutional Court sees itself – as does its Indian counterpart, another paradigmatic instance from the Global South – as an institution whose function is actively to produce a more just and equal society, a society less bedeviled by racism or sexism. It is, in other words,

makes the case for judicial activism, one in which civil society has a strong democratic voice. By contrast, the US Supreme Court pretends to avoid judicial activism. But the opposite is true. in its *de facto* practices, it is rapidly catching up to South Africa in this respect, but with a quite different ideological agenda: it is wilfully producing an ever more unequal, ever more unjust, ever more racially differentiated society, one effectively governed by the corporate sector.

Another register in which the same historical trajectory is visible is the deconstruction, or demise, of the idea of absolute property. In precolonial and colonial – and, by genealogical turn, postcolonial – Africa, there was no such idea. All property was conditional, held in trust under long-term, heritable usufruct arrangements of one kind or another. What is more, most assets were socially embedded in relations of (often) kin-based mutuality; wealth, in sum, lay in people and the links of generalized reciprocity among them. Thus, for instance, in many African contexts, the bridewealth received for a woman at her marriage was used to enable her brother to take a wife, thus weaving a complex tapestry of material-inscribed ties; similarly, the inheritance that devolved to a man on his father's death came with the responsibility to use it in care of his siblings, his mother, and other relatives. Even so-called tribal territory was held by chiefs in trust for his (occasionally her) subjects, under the final authority of ancestors. Of course, thanks to colonialism, Euromodernist concepts of ownership have insinuated themselves deeply into Africa. Interestingly, however, under contemporary conditions of economic stringency, the appeal to received forms of social exchange as insurance against immiseration appears to be as significant as

it was in the past, perhaps even more so. Although EuroAmerica has not yet evolved sufficiently to socialize property in such a way as to make its institutionalized exchange the basis of universal insurance – I am being ironic, obviously – there is a burgeoning body of legal theory, some of it quite technical, to the effect that the concept of “absolute dominion” in the Global North is coming to an end; that property is being held ever more conditionally, ever more partially and partibly, less “privately,” in the literal sense of that term; that it is increasingly abstract, less concrete, less permanent, more subject to extinction or incursion under the terms of such things as eminent domain. In this respect, at least, EuroAmerica seems to be headed toward the

conditionalities of the African past. And the past-in-the-present.

Economy, law, property... I could go on giving example after example – as I said, the book, offers many – but the point will be clear.

LC: Are you wary though of how anti-Western or “anti-imperial” discourse can be co-opted within the Global South towards ends that are very destructive. For example when Lee Kuan Yew, uses the critique of the West to say, “we have Asian values here” and then moves on to suppress basic freedoms.

JC: Of course those are dangers. They exist in Africa as well, where autocratic, conservative chiefs subvert the rule of law, and basic rights, under the sign of “tradition.” The potential to appropriate, expropriate, re-appropriate difference in the name of power is infinite, from both the left and the right. The case of Lee Kuan Yew provides an interesting inflection on

Theory from the South. The “Singaporean model” of governance – one which fetishizes the rule *of* law, although it rules *by* law, and a very coercive law at that – is becoming a global aspiration, widely imitated in the Global North, whose states are effectively de-democratizing under the sign of technical efficiency and economic growth. What is more, Lee’s appeal to Asian values has been mimicked in the UK, which has taken to celebrating “Britishness” as a national trope, and has inserted it into national school curricula, thus to reassert a national imagining founded – perhaps laughably – on cultural homogeneity. It is no coincidence that, during the 1970’s, Lee Kuan Yew was probably the most respected non-British ruler in the Commonwealth and was held up, in Britain, as *the* icon of strong, development-oriented, no nonsense authority. His ghost lives on as a sublime object of desire for those in power across the global north and as a nightmare for those who yearn for a more equitable, more social-democratic world.

LC: Okay, so let me flip the question. If the North has learned or should learn from the South, what does the South still left to learn from the North?

JC: People in the South learn from the North all the time – again, taking these to refer less to geopolitical hemispheres than to imaginative, relational loci – as they have been doing since early colonial times. Sometimes they do so under compulsion, sometimes on their own terms, sometimes in mimicry, sometimes creatively, often redeploying what they learn to their own ends by recourse to their own means. The contemporary world, I repeat, is one of almost infinite entanglements, collaborations, co-dependencies, co-determinations, displacements,

multi-centricities. And exclusions. In this respect, we are undergoing an epistemic revolution in our very idea of geography, whose modernist lineaments – after Kant and von Humboldt and sixth grade school textbooks – have been overlaid by new coordinates, new geometries, new realities. Received connections between space, place/ment, temporality, and subjectivity (both individual and collective) are being radically ruptured and refigured. At the most banal, the most self-evident, this is this due to the space-time compression built into the planetary electronic commons. When I was growing up, to indulge in a cliché, my residential address determined my entitlements of citizenship, my social and affective identities, and much else besides. Only criminals and mad people, it was presumed, had no fixed abode. Now my most important address is my email, which travels with me wherever I go, and situates me not in a physical place but in cyberspace; when I use it, I could be in anywhere, and often am. Now, moreover, my legal persona – which effectively marks out my humanity, my rights, my being – is, in large part, genetically constituted, biometrically defined, digitally inscribed, infinitely mobile, and stored in an iCloud, whose existence is, for all practical purposes, pure abstraction; so, too, of course, is much of the money I spend and many of the transactions in which I engage, although all of them have material consequences. And, as we all know, any individual can create any number of personas, avatars, for conducting a social and an economic life situated nowhere in particular. In the South, the construction of purpose-driven, labile, place-defying identities – identities-on-the-move, in every sense of the term, that remake received geographies and their relationship to subjectivities -- is a commonplace, even in the face of increasingly

intrusive technologies of governance in countries like India, South Africa, and Brazil.

But this, as I said, is only one, rather obvious, symptom of the epistemic shift in our geographic reason. The terms of modernist geography are also undergoing reconstruction at the behest of shifts in the material space-time of global capitalism, which play havoc with long-standing categories, concepts, and distinctions.

Take, for example, the South Korean agricultural industry. It is, in large part, now located in Africa, where South Korea has purchased huge swathes of arable. If we were to write an economic geography of that country today, how would we do it in such a way as to represent the fact that it conducts a significant proportion of its primary production and feeds its population by extending its effective territorial domain onto another continent in the form of privately-owned real estate? What is more, the cost of its seed and the global price of agri-goods, which affect the Koreans as much as they do everyone else, are heavily determined by commodity futures markets, notably situated in Chicago, many of whose traders are expatriates, operating with foreign or offshore capital. Again, think about this as a conundrum in cartography. Wherein lies the thing that we commonly call “South Korea?” Or the “South Korean economy?”

Similarly, what are we to make of situations, like that of Iceland, in which the entire fiscus of one state has been effectively purchased by another, in that instance, by Russia? Or, as I noted earlier, ones in which a nation’s signature industry has been bought up by corporations from elsewhere, as has happened with the purchase of British auto manufacture by Indian businesses? Or the invasive takeover, by Singaporean sovereign funds – note the term – of

major banks associated with the economies of other countries? Or, to take an African case, how ought we to describe, in geographical terms, the Senegalese cultural economy when so much of its famed “world music” is performed, produced, financed, and distributed from Paris: while it remains emphatically Senegalese in branding itself, and in asserting an affective connection to its nationality, it also centers itself on another continent – but unlike South Korea, in the Global North and circulates, unbounded by international borders, on the Internet, whence it draws most of its income. In short, it lives in multiple spatio-temporal dimensions, which, taken together, resist ordinary mapping. And this is not to mention another sector of the Senegalese cultural economy that flies under the radar: its faith-based global trading networks, conducted by Mourides, who ply their wares on an huge scale as they move among cities abroad, and whose remittances, moved through supra-territorial Islamic banking practices, have a major, if largely unrecorded, impact at home.

All this becomes infinitely more complicated when we add legal jurisdictions into the mix, since they transcend and transect national borders, continents, hemispheres, even the limits of the terrestrial. Since a growing proportion of all political conflict is pursued nowadays through the courts, both intra- and international politics often play themselves out along axes that override received geographies, received sovereignties. Thus, for example, some years ago, the legal struggle for gender equality in respect of the retirement age in England, unsuccessful in Britain itself, was fought against the Whitehall government, and won, in the European Court, thus rupturing both the *de facto* and the *de jure* sovereignty of the United Kingdom, and resituating its terrain of political

contestation in another jurisdiction, another lawscape, outside the British Isles. In our earlier volume *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Jean Comaroff and I document any number of other instances from the Global South. What they point to is the fact that, if we are to understand the global order of the 21st century at all well, we require to write a new, post-Kantian geography, one which recognizes that economics, politics, and the law have come to take on quite different dimensions from those with which we lived and in terms of which we made sense of the world in the 19th and 20th centuries.

LC: Final question: In a world like this which is in flux and where geographies are unclear, what becomes of those ideas that have been traditionally associated with “Western Enlightenment,” such as say, liberalism? Or socialism?

JC: Both liberalism and socialism are deeply in crisis under the impact of global capitalism and the neoliberal turn; in particular, of their effects on political economy, identity and subjectivity, governance, civil society, the workings of the law, even religiosity. This is a large and complicated issue, of course, one that deserves to be dealt with at greater length, not as a coda or an afterthought. But a point or two here. With this turn, we are seeing a fundamental unraveling of the human being imagined as *social* subject; indeed, of the presumptive existence of society itself. S/he, more than ever before, is a fusion, at once cold and hot, of *homo economicus* and *homo juralis*, an economic and jural person, radically-individuated and rights-bearing. Genetically endowed, s/he is, above all else, sentient human (bio)capital to be mobilized, invested, commissioned, enriched,

circulated, consumed, alienated, disposed of – by herself or himself, or by others, or by some mix of both – all in proportion to the lottery of life chances, a lottery heavily inflected by race, class, gender, generation, sexual orientation, physical endowment, and a host of other things.

Under these conditions, the liberal social contract has given way to the legal contract, society to the digitized network, sociality to the market, the Hobbesian Leviathan to the corporate state. A new post-social theology increasingly governs our lives, albeit with elements of the modern still there; uneasily, unevenly, often under challenge. In the upshot, concepts like class become more-or-less unthinkable, just as race becomes unspeakable, as explanations for anything; this in spite of the fact that we live in a world riven by grotesque inequities of class and race. Which, in part, is why socialism, indeed why thinking from the left, is so deeply in crisis; it has provided little by way of an antithesis to the social and material effects of neoliberal orthodoxy. *Vide* the extent to which social democratic, labor, and socialist political parties in Europe, instead of offering a strong counter to that orthodoxy, have compromised themselves heavily in bowing to the forces of the deregulated market.

But even more, the liberal idea of the commonweal, of the public sphere, is being eroded by the florescence of identity politics, especially by what we have called elsewhere *Ethnicity, Inc.* and *Religion, Inc.* The rise of identitarianism based on culture, its emergence as a pervasive form of political mobilization, derives in part from the geneticization of being; itself, as I have said, a corollary of the alleged demise of the social under neoliberal hegemony. Because genetics appears – note, *appears* to hold the

key to “life itself,” those putatively with the same bio-substance presume a “natural,” ineffably shared interest in claiming legal rights and entitlements for themselves and for their distinctive life-ways. And so the radically individuated “me” becomes aggregated as the biogenetic “we,” whose cultural practices, by extension, derive from what it is that makes them different, *sui generis*. Increasingly, these days – in which few other principles of common cause are recognized – cultural identity comes with a demand not merely for recognition, but for sovereign self-determination. Which violates the very essence of classic liberalism, whose tolerance extends only to difference exercised in the private domain, not to sovereignty over any public, or to its different ways and means, exercised within the political community by an authority other than the state. At least in theory. In practice, as we have long seen in the Global South, and are seeing with gathering pace in the Global North, that theory is fast losing its purchase on reality.

“The “new normal” of the USA and Europe, in short, recalls the recent pasts of Africa, Latin America, and, if briefly, Asia. Hence Adriana Huffington’s pungent Third World America”.

Similarly with identities embedded in faith, which assert themselves against the commonweal in the name of one or more divinity whose word takes precedence over all other authorities, including that of the state, and under whose suzerainty a Schmittian world of good and evil is imagined – often in the face of other rationalities, including those of Western enlightenment. Both faith-based and ethnic groups tacitly treat liberal modernity – and often contest

it as though it were just another culture, another ideology, another episteme, *pace* enlightenment notions of universal, i.e. secular, knowledge and truth. No wonder, then, that we are witnessing a world of hardening difference, of more belligerent claims to transcendent sovereignty, sometimes to the point of death-dealing, or less dramatically, by resort to lawfare against those who would subsume differences of culture and faith within an all-embracing, worldly civility.

The challenge for critical scholarship in this, the second decade of the new century, it seems to me, is to begin to theorize these shifts, to make sense of our post-liberal, post-socialist, even post-humanist world. I am aware that this is a controversial call in an age in which the social sciences – echoing the phenomenal incoherence, the sheer complexity, of the contemporary order of things, its tendency toward the anti-systemic, the contingent, rupture, and disorder – have tended to turn their back on theory. And to seek succor in ever more exquisite forms of neo-empiricism; in anthropology, my own discipline, this has been accompanied by a return to the search for pristine, dehistoricized cultures, now rebranded as the “ontological turn,” which we wisely gave up on some decades ago. But to give up on “doing theory” in this way, to suffice ourselves by merely describing the world as we and/or our “natives” see it, is to give up on the essential gesture of critical social knowledge: namely, to account for the connections between the visible and the invisible, to plumb the forces that lie unseen behind the tumult, the cacophony, the contingent in the phenomenology of our everyday lives, forces that make that world at once inequitable, violent, and catastrophe-prone, at once obscenely rich in its

benevolence and punishingly poor in withholding its bounty, at once progressive and retrogressive, at once remarkably stable and wildly labile. It is to this endeavor that *Theory from the South* sought, modestly, to join itself.

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