

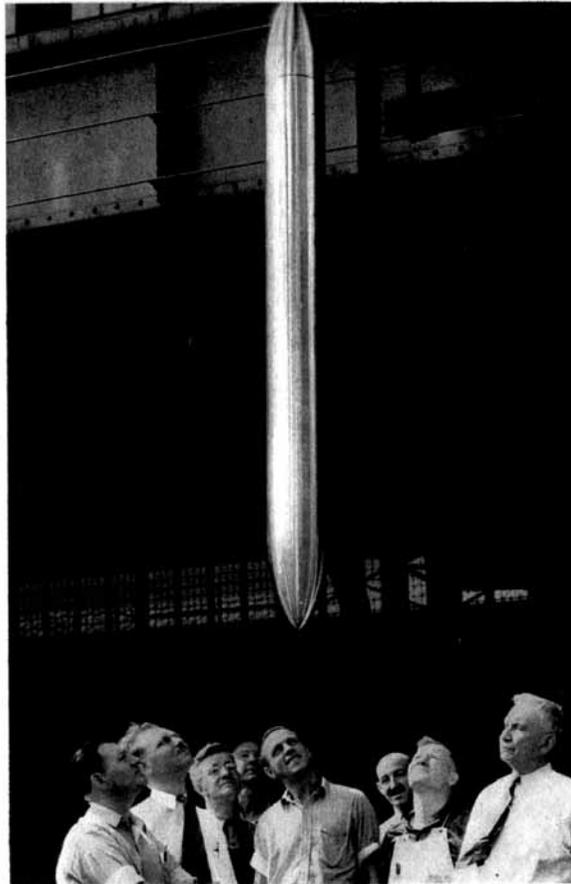
THEORY FROM THE COMAROFFS, OR HOW TO KNOW THE WORLD UP, DOWN, BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS

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I remain wary of “evolving-toward” sorts of story-lines, no matter how cannily and self-consciously they may be deployed in the service of strategic disruption. If taken too literally, some of the Comaroff’s startling claims about who is “evolving toward” whom risk obscuring more than they reveal about the inequalities of our inter-connected world, argues James Ferguson. But of course the Comaroffs know all this, he concludes.

You are flying into Johannesburg, in the late 1970s. The pilot’s authoritative voice comes over the intercom. “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to South Africa. We will shortly be landing at Jan Smuts International Airport. To adjust to local time, please set your watches back 30 years”. It is an apartheid joke—one of a particular genre of jokes that flourished in those dark times, playing with apartheid’s anomalous temporality, its status as exception, aberration, and (most of all) anachronism.

South Africa has long been out of step with the rest of the world’s time. It was colonized in the 17th century, more than two centuries too soon, in relation to the history of European colonization of the rest of the continent. In 1948, when the rest of the world was giving up on the color bar, South Africa’s apartheid government declared color the very basis of their society, and set about a concerted effort to segregate, rather than integrate, the society in racial



Scan of the frontispiece from The book of record of the time capsule of cupaloy, deemed capable of resisting the effects of time for five thousand years, preserving an account of universal achievements, embedded in the grounds of the New York World’s fair, 1939 The caption reads “The Envelope For A Message To The Future Begins Its Epic Journey”
Cygnis insignis 

terms. While most of the rest of Africa gained independence in the early 1960s, South Africa had its decolonization moment only in 1994, and went through a kind of post-independence politics in the 1990s that recalled, to many elsewhere in Africa, nothing

so much as the 1960s. Little wonder then, that many South Africans responded to the 1990s academic critiques of modernism and enlightenment with the dismayed objection: “You all are ready to abandon it before we’ve even gotten to try it!”

But South Africa’s anomalous temporality has never just been a matter of “belatedness”. Monica Wilson, the undisputed queen of South African social anthropology, and influential teacher of Jean and John, was reputed to have told foreign visitors in the 1970s that coming to South Africa was like going 30 years backward in time and 30 years forward—all at the same time. Her insight was sustained, in important ways, by later developments, as we have seen the rest of the world increasingly wrestling with conditions South Africans have long been familiar with—including such things as the spectacularly multicultural make-up of the nation-state, massive inequalities within a single country, the geographic juxtaposition of socioeconomic conditions once associated with “the Third world” with those of the “First world”, and running battles between regimes of legal prohibition and processes of spontaneous but illegal urbanization and migration.

In starting in this way, I mean only to point out that South Africa has long been a place not just to experience historical time but to think about it—even to play with it. I take “Theory from the South” (and its deliberately outrageous claim that “EuroAmerica is evolving toward Africa”) in that experimental (and indeed playful) spirit.

The move to invoke “the South” as a kind of historical actor moving through time, “ahead of” another actor called “the North” is, of course, a rhetorical shock tactic rather than an analytic strategy. Indeed, both the structure of the essay and the structure of

Jean and John's own lives require us to understand the structures and hierarchies we gloss with terms like "south" and "north" in their constitutive relation rather than in a teleological race. For those who would really conceive of "the south" and "the north" as separate or literal places of authentic belonging, it will be troubling that the Comaroffs are in fact writing as much "from" the "Northern" places where they have been trained and held academic positions as they are writing "from" the South Africa where they were born and raised and now spend much of their time. (One colleague encapsulated the reflexive suspicion of Northern-based academics who would speak for the South with this snarky response to "Theory from the South": "Oh great—we finally get theory from the South and it turns out to be two white people from the University of Chicago".) But of course many if not most of what we think of as the key works of "southern" or "post-colonial" theory have emerged not from a pure and autochthonous "South" but from points of juncture and crossing, often involving the intersection of the institutional support of Northern universities with the personal and political commitments of lives lived at least partly elsewhere. (Consider the roll call: Said, Spivak, Bhaba, Mamdani, Chatterjee, Chakrabarty, Mbembe—like all of these key global intellectuals, the Comaroffs, too, write from a South that is also the North and a North that is also a South). Nor should this be surprising. Transnational circuits are no less central to intellectual production than they are to every other kind, and "Southern" theory is no more made "in the South" than "American" cars are made in Detroit.

With that said, I must say that I remain wary of "evolving-toward" sorts of story-lines, no matter

how cannily and self-consciously they may be deployed in the service of strategic disruption. Even when used in play, these kinds of tropes of "ahead and behind" have their dangers, and I am especially worried about the way that a subtly playful argument such as the one made by the Comaroffs here is likely to fare in the readings of less subtle readers. Clearly some of the Comaroffs' more startling claims about who is "evolving toward" whom, if taken too literally, risk obscuring more than they reveal about the inequalities of our inter-connected world. Do we really think that in matters of, say, per capita income, or life expectancy, that Europe and North America are evolving toward Africa? In a host of very significant areas, it is manifestly still the South that is, or ought to be, "catching up" to the North, a fact whose acknowledgment seems essential if we are to recognize key claims for global justice in domains as various as immigration, climate change, and food security. And the idea that Montreal (say) will soon come to resemble Lagos is, on a little reflection, as least as implausible as the old modernization idea that Lagos would soon look like London.

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Then, too, we don't really want to conceive of nations or continents moving like bounded individuals through a linear historical time—surely we've learned our lessons on that one. Eurocentric modernization theory turned upside-down has all the same faults as the original, allowing a fairy tale race between discrete protagonists to obscure the constitutive relationality of the global political economy

within which regions and nation-states find their ranked positions.

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But of course the Comaroffs know all this. No sooner have they said, in the bluntest of terms, that "the South" is "ahead" of the North—that it is a literal geographical place ("Africa, Asia, and Latin America") that serves as "the vanguard of the epoch" (p. 19) and may "prefigure the history of the global north" (p.12)—than they go on to insist that "the south" isn't actually a substantive thing or place at all, but "a relation"—a window onto a world of flows and connections "transcendent of the very dualism of north and south" (p. 47). In projecting a familiar progressivist tale in a startlingly inverted form, they knowingly take the risk of being misunderstood, indeed (as true provocateurs) almost invite it, in order to disrupt the conventional time lines and world maps that so often constrain our thinking about the world and how it is ordered. But if we can understand their mock-evolutionist provocations as (like Monica Wilson's quip) a kind of playing with time, a mental stretching exercise, if you will, then the Comaroff's figure of "theory from the South" can perform a great service. That service would be to call our attention to conceptual and institutional innovations linked to specific social sites, and specific problems and struggles, in parts of the world long assumed to be marginal but now increasingly ascendant, in both economic and demographic terms. And by explicitly identifying their "partially parodic", "counter-evolutionary" perspective (as they term it) as coming "from the South" (another

deliberate provocation), they provide a useful reminder, too, that thinking is always thinking-from.

On this point (the “where”, rather than the “when” of theory), it is worth recalling that South Africa is also usefully anomalous. As is commonly observed, it is a place that seems to be of the South and of the North at the same time—First World and Third World conditions lie cheek by jowl, and colony and metropole seem curiously to have ended up, almost by mistake, in the same country. Indeed, South Africans have never even been sure if they are Africans (and if so, what that might mean)—the same white supremacists who created separate public facilities and national homelands for the disparaged category, “Africans”, proudly called themselves Afrikaners (which of course simply meant “Africans” in their own language), while today black South African xenophobes disparage immigrants from north of the Limpopo as useless and unwanted (you guessed it) “Africans”. Today’s South Africa mixes north and south just as relentlessly (and promiscuously) as it mixes past and future (and so, too, many other familiar binaries—white and black, African and Western, traditional and modern, and so on). Perhaps, then, we need to recognize that Jean and John are asking us to see the world, not just from 30 years ahead and behind at the same time, but also, in the same way, from plus or minus 30 degrees of latitude. This is not just thinking-from a place—it is thinking-from more than one place at the same time.

Theory is for use, so I want to take a moment to use the provocation the Comaroffs have provided us to reflect on the historicity of theory itself and to suggest how new developments in the Global South are opening up intriguing new ways of thinking about both social policy and social theory (a subject

that has been central to my own current research). Social theory has always both reflected and participated in the construction of something called “the social” (the domain of social policy, social work, social assistance, etc. and also, of course, social science). Indeed, mid-20th century Euro-American social theory and the welfare state could be fairly described as co-constitutive of each other, with key theoretical concepts (such as “solidarity”) doing double duty through their use as central concepts in social theory, and key organizing principles in the construction of programs of social policy.

Today, social assistance is being fundamentally reconfigured as a host of developing countries (from South Africa, to Brazil, to India, and beyond) have confounded the by-now standard scholarly narratives of a triumphant neoliberalism by morphing into various new kinds of welfare states. And they have not modeled these new welfare states on Northern exemplars (Sweden or what have you). Instead, they have developed new mechanisms of social assistance, and new conceptions of society, that rely less on insurance mechanisms and the pooling of risk among a population of wage-earners and more on non-contributory schemes anchored in citizenship and operating via the payment of small “cash transfers” (often to women and children). An influential recent book documents these new schemes, and celebrates their achievements, even as it registers, in its title, the fact that the new programs of direct distribution are an affront to the old rules of the development game. (The title -- another deliberate provocation—is *Just Give Money to the Poor*. [Hanlon, Barrientos, and Hulme 2010])

And interestingly (for our purposes here), the subtitle reads: “The Development Revolution from the Global South”.

The rise of the new welfare states usefully illustrates Jean and John’s argument about global innovation today often emerging first in the South. For the conditions to which they are a response—persistent and “normal” high unemployment, growing informalization, the coexistence of mass poverty and mass democracy—no longer seem specific to a form of experience that could be cordoned off within a “Third World”, but instead seem almost shockingly relevant to the news of the day in places like the United States. And if existing conceptions of “society” seem increasingly to have lost their critical and political force (“that decaying monster”, as Latour has referred to “society”), these emergent new empirical configurations of the social may perhaps provide us with clues for thinking about how we might re-imagine “the social” as object both of theory (“social theory) and of politics (“socialism”—the meaning of which has perhaps never, in its long, contested history, been less clear). If nothing else, it does seem likely that countries like Brazil and South Africa are serving as early laboratories for social experiments likely to be of wider significance in the future, in ways that Jean and John’s essay alerts us to.

But if innovations of this sort in social policy do end up constituting a “development revolution” (something that is not yet at all clear), it is not entirely obvious that it is really (as that book title proudly proclaims) “from the Global South”. Tracing intellectual origins has not been central to my project to date, but it is difficult not to notice that many of the most interesting and radical ideas and arguments that have made up this “revolution from the South”

were originally developed in the ILO, for instance, in places like Switzerland, while a key agent of their dissemination has been a labor economist (Guy Standing) who has spent his career at Australian and British universities, working in strategic alliance with a Brazilian senator who did his graduate work at Michigan State, and an American college professor who is married to a South African who spends part of the year in Cape Town—and so on. In short, we are dealing, once again, with crossings and conversations, not stable geographical points of origin. Yet the larger point is simply that the grey, technocratic world of social policy in southern Africa has emerged as a site of conceptual and institutional invention, in ways that may indeed have much to teach the rest of the world. This sustains the Comaroffs' key insight that sites conventionally thought of as lagging or catching up may in fact be places where interesting things often emerge first.

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But what is key here, I would insist, is not really who is ahead and who is behind, or whether conceptual and institutional innovations are well described in hemispheric terms. Instead, what I think is of lasting value in this work of counter-evolutionary sabotage is the very act of denaturalizing taken-for-granted ideas about time and space. And that, the defamiliarization of habitual ways of thinking—whether it comes from the North, the South, or, indeed, both at once—is what theory, at its best, is all about.

REFERENCES

Hanlon, Joseph, Armando Barrientos, and David Hulme 2010 *Just Give Money to the Poor: The Development Revolution from the Global South*. Sterling, Virginia: Kumarian Press.