

THEORY FROM THE ANTIPODES NOTES ON JEAN & JOHN COMAROFFS' TFS

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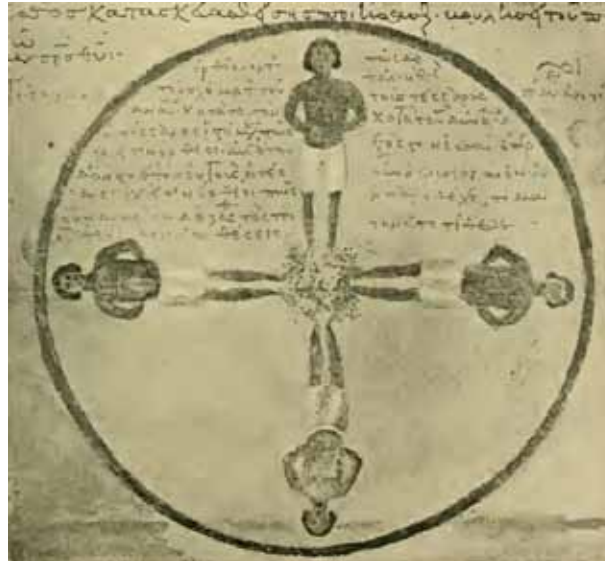
A theory from the Antipodes will attend not only to “how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa”, but also to the conditions under which Africa (the South) and China (the East) are trying to weave the paths that tie both regions in the present and in the future, writes Achille Mbembe.

First of all, I would like to acknowledge how difficult it is, in this noisy age of ours – an age of yelling rather than argument and an age that gives a premium to distraction and distortion rather than to the virtues of listening together – to nurture a scholarly and public voice that can be legitimately regarded as daring, original and authentic.

Yet, this is exactly what Jean and John Comaroff have achieved not only throughout their previous scholarly works (the depth and breadth of which have been widely lauded¹), but specifically in this new book. I read *Theory From the South* as their dialogue with their own journey through places, times, problems and disciplines. The voice in this new book is unmistakably theirs—the eloquence, the prose, a certain kind of rhetorical style, a new lexicon that makes new thought, even moments of polyphony, possible.

Theirs is also an effort to work from, within, through, and at times against the archive of their first love, anthropology. Time and again, in this book

¹ See in particular the two volumes of *Revelation ...*



The antipodes.
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as in *Rules and Processes, Body of Power, Ethnicity Inc., Millennial Capitalism, Law and Disorder* and countless other essays, they return to the centers of their discipline while, at the same time, mining its peripheries. They play the peripheries of the discipline against its centers and other bodies of knowledge against anthropology itself. This is because theirs is a mode of thought whose primary object is to delineate the crucial fault lines and turbulences that constitute our world today as well as the world of contemporary criticism. Reading this many-faceted book, a complicated tapestry threaded with multiple strands and sub-themes but with one master thesis, we are faced once again with what we have come to expect from them – a generosity of spirit and a polymorphous intelligence capable of sweeping claims, starting with the seemingly outrageous

(and yet plausible) idea that “Euro-America is evolving toward Africa”; or the more heuristically productive one that “in the present moment, it is the Global South that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large”, which is why, in accounting for these workings of the world, “our theory-making” ought to be coming from there, “at least in significant part” (1).

Although their claims warrant substantial empirical evidence, a proper response to Jean and John Comaroff’s new book might not be to ask whether what they say—especially in this “provocative”, “parodic” and “counter-evolutionary” sub-title, *Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*—is true or false. Of course in more than one instance, they do back with facts the claims that “the global north is becoming more like the south” (13); that we can read the future of the north in what is happening in the south (12); that “the global south is running ahead of the global north” (19); or that the south can be taken as the “frontier in the unfolding history of neoliberalism” (38). To be sure, these different claims are not exactly the same. Nor do they carry the same weight in this book, and each, taken separately, would warrant a specific treatment. But besides chapter 1, the rest of the book (which concerns itself with questions of personhood, identity, difference and belonging, sovereignty and governmentality, citizenship and borders, law, liberalism and democracy, history, memory, labor and the politics of life) is less about actually tracing the lineaments of Euro-America’s “evolution” toward Africa than it is about “inverting” and “subverting” the standpoints from which we read both Africa and the world at large or what they call “the contemporary order of things” (2).

In this risky and quasi-Herculean task, they are the first to recognize the dangers inherent to this gesture – especially the danger of the turning of the story “upside down” leaving intact “the Manichean dualism that holds Euro-America and its others in the same fixed embrace” (7) – and I would add the all too familiar danger, whenever the sign “Africa” is mobilized in modern theory, that any trace of historicity will be effaced in favor of images of regression and dystopian collapse. They also know very well that “displacing” the established telos with its opposite might not be enough if this operation ends up “leaving teleology itself intact” (7). “What we suggest, they say, is that contemporary world-historical processes are disrupting received geographies of core and periphery, relocating southward – and, of course, eastward as well – some of the most innovative and energetic modes of producing value” (7). And this, they add, “cuts to the very heart of contemporary capitalism” (13).

ON “THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF GLOBAL CAPITALISM”

As we can see, a major goal of *Theory From the South* is therefore to take Africa as a window from which “to interrogate the present and future of global capitalism and its many mediations” (19). This implies bringing “Africa” to perform a radically new kind of work **in theory**—a work radically different, in its nature and scope, from the one “Africa” has always been historically assigned to perform. This is a project I fully support.

Now, to interrogate the present and future of global capitalism in terms of “Euro-America “evolving” toward Africa” will undoubtedly scandalize

many if only because, in the eyes of many, Africa has simply dropped out of history, written off as a hopeless and terminal case of—as I have just suggested—dystopian collapse. With its “failed states”, archaic “ethnic hatreds”, famine, human-made catastrophes and pestilence, it is at best ministered to by NGOs and not by capital as such, at least not in its incarnation as global finance—a thesis that can be critiqued of course. One might expect that many might want to dismiss the Comaroffs thesis simply by restating the old Hegelian myth the Comaroffs are precisely trying to subvert—the myth according to which strictly speaking Africa, this living vessel of global and historical misery and debt has nothing to say about the current condition of our world, let alone its future.

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Yet, in spite of its uneven incorporation into the world economy, this region does tell us a lot more than we might want to think or we might want to hear about the histories of market societies and commercial cultures². It tells us about the future of global capitalism—and not only of the kind that lies close to, but is not always coincident with, the vast global shadow economy dependent on illegal activities like smuggling, drug and people trafficking and

² Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains ...*

money-laundering through which trillions of dollars circulate around the globe outside formal legal reckoning. Let’s call this extractive economy of unprocessed raw materials *the raw economy*. It has been the source of growth in Africa over the last decade. This growth has been largely the result of a tremendous demand for export commodities and the resulting high price of crude oil and minerals. Africa today supplies the world economy with more than half its diamonds, platinum and cobalt and more than a third of strategic minerals like Vanadium.

The logic of *extraction* that underpins this *raw economy* might not be the same as the logic of de-industrialization that seems to partly characterize Northern economies. But both seem to have quickened the accumulation of surplus populations. Marx used to divide “surplus populations” into three categories: *latent* (made up of those with insecure employment); *floating* (composed of those cycling rapidly in and out of the labor force; and *stagnant* (comprised of those only rarely employed)³. To these three categories we should add a fourth composed of those who *will never* be formally employed. The expansion of capitalism in this new phase of globalization and its transformation into a financial system significantly intensifies this process. In fact, it confirms global unemployment, un-employability (?) and the rise of surplus or *superfluous* populations as part of what Marx called its “absolute general law”. Such a rise itself points toward the growing *crisis of reproduction* going on worldwide—a crisis of reproduction Africa has, to use one of Comaroffs terms, “prefigured”. Whether old categories of

³ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume 1, New York, Vintage Books, 1976, ch. 25.

“production”, “work”, “exploitation” and “domination” —and more recent ones of “bare life” or “naked life” inherited from recent theorizations of sovereignty and the state of exception—suffice to write into theory such planetary recodings of situations of misery, debt and enforced idleness is open to question.

Second, the Continent’s historical experience shows that in order to expand, capitalism paradoxically does not need to absorb everything in its path. It does not need to interiorize everything that was hitherto exterior to it. In fact, it needs to keep producing or generating an exterior. And for this to happen, it needs to do two things. On the one hand, it needs to keep jumping from place to place— “hopping”, as Jim Ferguson puts it⁴. In Africa in particular, the machine might be constantly “breaking down”. Whether from the perspective of the “longue duree” it is repairing itself remains to be seen. What is evident is that whenever it undertakes to solve its local problems, it is usually either by mutation onto larger and larger scales or by a singular concatenation of profit-making and, where necessary, war-making activities and the militarization of trade. This is how the dynamic of primitive accumulation has historically been able to produce its full effects.

Third, Africa also teaches us that global capitalism cannot expand without what we should call massive *racial subsidies* or *discounts*. It needs to work through and across different scales of race as it attempts to mark people either as disposable or as waste. It needs to produce, order, segment and racialize surplus or superfluous populations to strategic effect. This takes various forms throughout our

contemporary world. One of these is their incorporation into military markets. Significant in this regard is the fact that today white working class masculinity has been alienated in the de-industrializing contexts of Euro-America, allowing for an accumulation of “excess masculinity” upon which the military complex is drawing. To maintain military numbers, unemployed or under-employed whites are not enough. Vast reserves of the racially disenfranchised men have been recruited. It hardly matters that some are uneducated. Those with criminal(ized) pasts are granted “moral waivers” that allow them for the first time to join the lower rungs of military ranks and to, hence, gain a semblance of enfranchisement and citizenry. Those who are marked as waste are disenfranchised, or simply spatially confined within the prison-industrial gulag⁵. Another form is through cross-border migrant labor. Labor operating in the interstices or the entrails of the global economy is hyper-exploited. The racial subsidy is precisely what allows global capital to feel no sense of responsibility for its actions, the crimes against humanity, the horrendous damage done not only in Euro-America, but to the rest of the world as well.

Finally - significant, too, is the increasing conflict between market forces and democracy. Democracy should normally imply the rule of the majority. Since the rich in any given society are almost always a minority, democracy in the form of majority rule should—taken to its logical consequences—imply the rule of the poor over the rich. It is also the idea that people have rights that take precedence over the outcomes of market exchanges and one of the roles of a democratic government is to honor,

to some extent, this most human expectation of a life outside the law of the market and the right of property. Historically, the biggest fear of capital has always been that the rule of the poor over the rich would ultimately do away with private property and the “free” play of market forces. Faced with this dilemma, capital would rather abolish democracy in order to save capitalism from a majority dedicated to economic and social redistribution. Today, we have reached a stage where it is increasingly apparent that *capitalism is not naturally compatible with democracy*. For capitalism to be compatible with democracy, capitalism would have to be subjected to extensive political control and democracy protected from being restrained in the name of market power. The collapse of the international credit pyramid on which the prosperity of the late 1990s and early 2000s had rested only highlights this fact. Under the emerging international politics of public debt, global capital increasingly requires that the “average citizen” pays—for the consolidation of public finances, the bankruptcy of foreign states, the rising rates of interest on public debt, and if necessary the rescue of national and international banks—with his or her private savings, cuts in public entitlements, reduced public services and higher taxation⁶.

The capacity of national states to mediate between the rights of citizens and the requirements of capital accumulation is severely affected. The tensions between economy and society, between market power and democracy, can no longer be handled exclusively inside national political communities (see recent events in Greece, Italy, Ireland). They have

4 James Ferguson, *Global Shadows ...*

5 Ruth Gilmore, *The Golden Gulag ...*

6 Wolfgang Streeck, “The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism”, *New Left Review* 71, Sept.-Oct. 2011.

become internationalized. Markets are dictating in unprecedented ways what presumably sovereign and democratic states may still do or not for their citizens. *The pre-emption—or even suspension—of democracy* by market forces is now propounded as the only rational and responsible behavior in a world in which individual debt, public deficits and public debt have resulted in the mortgaging of the future of entire nations and the quasi-expropriation of their citizens. Euro-American democratic states—just like African states during the long years of structural adjustment programs—are in danger of being “turned into debt-collecting agencies on behalf of a global oligarchy of investors” and the propertied classes now firmly entrenched in what looks like “a politically unassailable stronghold, the international financial industry” (Streck, 29).

The arguments sketched above clearly indicate that the Comaroffs’ master thesis is not without foundation.

EURO-AMERICA/AFRICA/CHINA

I would now like to turn to another important dimension of their project, which is to turn their back to the Western ethnocentric tendency to re-interpret the world and all its socio-economic, political and cultural processes from a Euro-American perspective. This epistemic re-orientation has been attempted in a number of disciplines (world history in particular) where it has raised various methodological questions not unlike those implied by the Comaroffs’ “counter-evolutionary” and “prefigurative” approach⁷. For instance, should the global sys-

tem be studied as a single world system? Should it better be described in terms of its many nodes and edges or as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? Should we rather understand regions of the world in their own terms, mindful of the fact that they experience separate models of development which may overlap in various ways but that are nonetheless essentially independent? Or is it that what we need is a horizontally integrative macro-history, one that seeks for the connections between the various events that are happening in regions that have traditionally been considered separate? To what extent does our ability to link events in one region to subsequent events in those regions connected with it depend on a close identification of the series of paths that tie the various regions of the world? Is it true that simultaneous and momentous events triggered in different regions or contexts do necessarily lead to similar outcomes and similar implications elsewhere?

This brings me to Giovanni Arrighi’s *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty First Century*. As he himself said in an interview by David Harvey before his death⁸, Arrighi’s variety of world-systems analysis had deep African roots—just as, I must add, some of the most powerful social theories of the twentieth-century (a story—that of the work Africa does in 20th-century theory—that still needs to be

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989; Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998; G. Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*, London, Verso, 2007.

⁸ Giovanni Arrighi, “The Winding Paths of Capital. Interview by David Harvey”, *New Left Review* 56, March-April 2009.

properly written!). In fact, some of the key categories Arrighi will later deploy in his work were forged during his African experience—especially his encounter with “the Africa of the labor reserves” (Samir Amin), i.e., the trajectories of accumulation through racialized dispossession in the context of white settler colonialism in Southern Africa⁹. It is in Southern Africa that he discovered that the full dispossession of much of the African peasantry (so as to provide low cost migrant labor for agriculture, the mines and manufacturing industry) not only ended up raising labor costs, it hindered the development of capitalism there by eliminating the ability of the rural labor force to subsidize its own reproduction and capital accumulation. In this sense, the Southern African experience stands in marked contrast to accumulation without dispossession and associated rural development and industrialization throughout much of East Asia.

Examples taken from other parts of Africa might very well contradict the validity of this thesis. Nevertheless significant to me is that, having started his attempt to account for the *longue durée* of capitalism and its current crises in Africa, Arrighi ended in East Asia, and in particular in Beijing. To be sure, his project was not necessarily to de-center

⁹ See, “Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A study of the Proletarianization of the African peasantry in Rhodesia”, *Journal of Development Studies* 6, 1970; “The Political Economy of Rhodesia”, *NLR* ...; with John Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1973; “The African Crisis. World Systemic and Regional Aspects”, *NLR* 15, May-June 2002; and, with Nicole Ashoff and Ben Scully, “Accumulation by Dispossession and Its Limits: The Southern African Paradigm Revisited” (Unpublished Paper, 2009)

⁷ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*,

Euro-American theory or to highlight the plurality of theories that emerge out of the processes of decolonization¹⁰. He ended up in Beijing because *China has become the workshop of the world*. He ended up in China because Euro-America is no longer where the most advanced production facilities are located although Euro-America is still able to cream off a substantial part of the super-profits created elsewhere. He ended up in China because Euro-America depends, more than at any time in its history and nowadays in an increasingly parasitic manner, on the productive labor of others.

The Comaroffs did not end in China although they agree that some of the most energetic and innovative modes of producing value are increasingly relocated southward and eastward. The production of value is one thing. The capture or appropriation of value physically produced elsewhere is another. How surplus-value created in newly industrializing nations is captured by de-industrializing ones through transnational production networks, foreign trade and international finance is key to our understanding of the future of global capitalism. They did not end in China, and I think they should have—or maybe not in China as such but in that space of new material relations being formed between China and Africa in particular. Indeed, it might be that if “Euro-America is evolving toward Africa”, Africa in turn is “evolving” toward China rather than toward Euro-America. The need to feed a vast and growing productive capacity compels Chinese capital to source raw materials all over the world, especially in Africa. China is now the world’s largest consumer

¹⁰ For a recent attempt, see Françoise Lionnet & Shumei Shih, *The Creolization of Theory*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

of Africa’s copper, tin, zinc, platinum, and iron ore; a large consumer of Africa’s petroleum, aluminium and lead, nickel and gold.

[The ongoing acceleration and redistribution of global productive forces China is leading will not by-pass Africa forever.](#)

The ongoing acceleration and redistribution of global productive forces China is leading will not by-pass Africa forever. Without Africa, China will not be able to indefinitely lend so that America (the globe’s most parasitic nation) can buy Chinese and other Asian products and see a sizeable portion of its enormous debt written off through the fall of the value of the dollars and Treasury bills China holds. If America’s irrecoverable debt to China is the price China pays for the enlargement of her own productive base, then for America to be put in a position where she can no longer exact this right of seigniorage, China will need to build a stronger domestic economy of her own. But this she cannot do without Africa.

A theory from the South will therefore attend not only to “How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa”, but also to the conditions under which Africa (the South) and China (the East) are trying to weave the paths that tie both regions in the present and in the future. For us in Africa, one of the implications of China’s (and for that matter India’s) ascent for the future of theory is that it forces us to reflect anew on the multiple ways to grow the wealth of a nation. Prior to the arrival of capitalism, Africa may not have known models of growth based on labor-intensive forms of production and husbanding of natural resources. The region’s subordinate incorporation into the Euro-American centered regime of

accumulation did not simply erase the historical matrixes that governed the production of wealth prior to the arrival of capitalism. One such matrix is the existence of a long tradition of market economy and long-distance trading diasporas which mobilized human rather than non-human resources and protected rather than destroyed the economic independence and welfare of agricultural producers. Under what conditions could these historical matrixes re-emerge or be reshaped as resources as Africa tries to formulate a place for herself in a world where the power of the West has begun to decline is certainly a question the rise of China and India poses to the future of theory from Africa.

ON THEORY AS SUCH

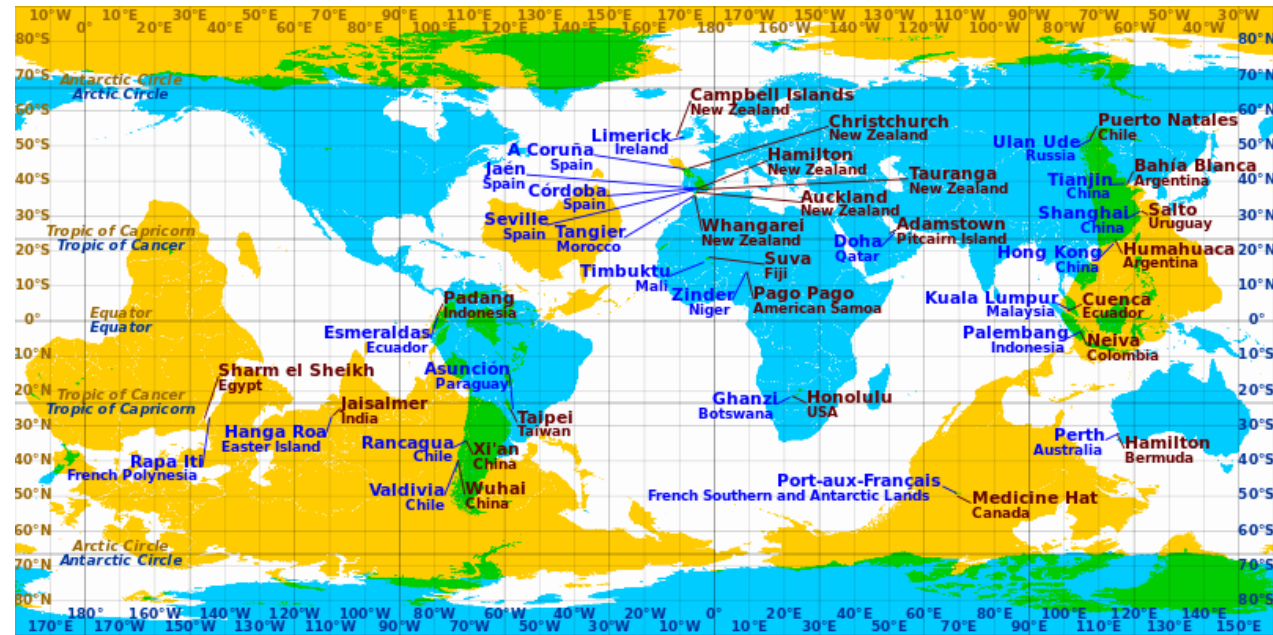
Let me finally turn to the question of theory itself which, after all, is at the center of this book. The question here is whether the kind of “reflexive theorization” Jean and John propose—and which they call **grounded theory**—helps us, in any way, to make sense of the times we live in; whether it helps us to assess with some degree of plausibility various intuitions about what is going on, what is possible, and the odds against it. I say “what is possible” because for the Comaroffs themselves, “to theorize” only makes sense if theory is part of a broader design: to make *“the history of the future different from the history of the present”* (48). Whether they are examining questions of personhood, of liberalism, citizenship and democracy, of boundaries and modes of belonging, or questions of memory and alien-nation, capitalism and bare life, theirs is as much an anthropology of the present as it is an anthropology of the future—the future as that unique,

singular creation resulting from the encounter between difference and repetition.

And here, I think Jean and John are not necessarily saying that Euro-America has hit an impasse (although others have made such an argument here and elsewhere). Nor are they saying that the Euro-American archive has, after a thousand years of world ascendancy, finally run dry and has nothing new to offer in our struggles to perceive the world anew. I hear them saying that we are witnessing a situation in which something that will perhaps matter (or that already matters) is *unfolding* amidst the usual activity of life—something in the present that may become an event (that is already an event), something of a drama that shocks us (and for that matter theory itself) into radically open situations. This is how I understand the controversial expression “Euro-America is evolving toward Africa”—as an audacious attempt to solve a historical, sociological, but also philosophical and representational problem. They are trying to solve this representational problem in a very peculiar context for theory. Indeed, I would characterize the current theoretical moment as one of *cacophony*.

Cacophony for four reasons—*first*, because there is no agreement today about the state of “theory”, what it is all about and what distinguishes it from “criticism”.¹¹ Just like the term “critique”, theory today covers a wide variety of acephalic, segmentary practices from methods to question the truth of authority to techniques to reveal the figures of power that operate in dominant discourses, institutions

11 Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?”, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 2nd ed, 2007; Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”, *The Political*, ed. David Ingram, 2002.



Cities and towns which are near antipodes in equirectangular projection. Blue labels correspond to the cyan areas and brown labels correspond to the yellow areas. Areas where blue and yellow overlap (coloured green) are land antipodes.

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or social processes to investigating the limits of human reason and judgment.¹² Cacophony, too, for a reason Jean and John themselves single out in their book. There have been, they say, “*something of a flight from theory, a re-embrace both of methodological empiricism and born-again realism; also a return to the ethical and the theological*” (47) to which I would add biology, or the growth of a kind of popular science that has produced a ready public for arguments that seek to reduce human nature to biology. The increasing theoretical confidence of

12 Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?”, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 2nd ed, 2007; Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”, *The Political*, ed. David Ingram, 2002.

theology and biology has resulted in the story of “being human” becoming more and more conflated with the story of “human nature”.¹³ What the Comaroffs call “the flight from theory” has left a vacuum in which sociobiology, genetic reductionism, neurosciences and cognitive sciences have flourished. These disciplines are annexing core humanities questions of intentionality, agency, memory, sexuality, cognition, and language.

In this context, I understand the kind of **grounded theory** advocated by the Comaroffs as a conscious effort to reassert a domain of inquiry which

13 Roger Smith, *Being human: Historical knowledge and the creation of human nature* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

focuses not so much on “the place of human beings in the universe” as on the modes of production of the historical and the social. Grounded theory, they suggest, is “historically contextualized”, a “problem-driven effort to account for the production of social and cultural “facts” in the world by recourse to an imaginative methodological counterpoint between the inductive and the deductive, the concrete and the concept”, “the epic and the everyday, the meaningful and the material” (48). In other words, it is a reflexive theory, a theory of how “history” is humanly produced not as an essence, but as openness-to-contingency. This is indeed what the term “evolving” of their title (“Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa”) signifies—*openness-to-contingency*, rather than the domestication of contingency (which can be said to have been the project of theory for most of the twentieth-century). I also understand “grounded theory” to be a process—a process whereby *the theory of what is human changes what it is to be human*, that is, contributes to creating the conditions for the emergence of the sort of world we want to live in and the sort of life we wish to pursue, the sort of imaginative ways in which human self-assertion manifests and expresses itself.

Third, cacophony because in the US especially, or at least in certain sectors of the US academy, theory is still understood or represented as literature. But more importantly—an after effect of deconstruction and psychoanalysis in particular (?)—theory is constantly *haunted either by melancholia or by hysteria*. Of the melancholic affect surrounding theory now, Wendy Brown has written some remarkable pages.¹⁴ She has not gone as far as to argue that

¹⁴ Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy”,

... theory, like hysteria, is a strange discourse that is never satisfied with a neat answer. It is always asking for more.

what we call theory is not an object but a mediated affect. What passes for theory is itself, in some way, “hystericizing” in the sense that it always tends to provoke or produce effects that, for better or worse, are hysterical.¹⁵ This is the case because theory, like hysteria, is a strange discourse that is never satisfied with a neat answer. It is always asking for more. It is asking for more in the name of a certain notion of truth, at a time precisely when, thanks partly to deconstruction and psychoanalysis in particular, the idea that *there is no truth* has gained a lot of traction. This is a time, too, when history as such has become a problem of representation; interrogations of truth now turn around the question of representation. And the problem of representation has destabilized the dimensions of language, reference, and even thought itself. And this idea that there is no truth is filling some of us with a certain kind of real terror. In such a context, theory is nothing but the discourse of a relation to a missing Master/Mistress. And as we know all too well, where the Master/Mistress is missing, the discourse of hysteria always tends to mask—or to compensate, or substitute for—his/her absence.

As we know, historically, theory among the Western Left has always been many things at the same time. It has always been, of course, an investigation into the conditions and limits of knowledge.

boundary 2, 26.3, 1999. See, too, Brown, “Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times”, in *Edgework...*

¹⁵ Jean Michel Rabaté, *The Future of Theory ...*

But the task of theory has also always been to ask “what characterizes our present and our age”—a “construction of the intelligibility of our time” as Barthes said—and of “who is the collective subject that belongs to it”.¹⁶ Even more so, Theory was always conceived as a political intervention, something somewhat *beyond critique* as such. What gave it its power was its presupposed capacity both to transform the existing structures of power and to create alternative social arrangements. In this sense, Theory was always understood to be a means of struggle—which allows Michael Hardt to define it as a form of “philosophical and political militancy”.

But the feeling today is that critique has run out of steam.¹⁷ We keep making the same gestures when everything else has changed around us, says Bruno Latour. We keep fighting enemies long gone, wars that are no longer possible, and we are ill-equipped in the face of threats we have not anticipated and for which we are thoroughly unprepared. In short, we are on the ready but one war late. How should we get out of this impasse? Says Latour, by “renewing empiricism” (231), getting closer to facts, cultivating a “stubbornly realist attitude”—realism in relation to what he calls “matters of concern”. As we can surmise, Latour’s crusade is mainly directed against “deconstruction” which he would like to replace with something he calls “constructivism” (232)—a franco-French war, therefore (?). For Mary Poovey on the other hand, “we now need to move beyond theories of representation” (what she calls “language-based theories”) to “consideration of social

¹⁶ Michael Hardt, “The Militancy of Theory”, 20.

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, *CI*, 30, winter 2004.

processes” (same volume of CI)—a project which requires, according to her, forming “alliances with practitioners in the social and natural sciences”—as if the human and natural worlds were not, to a large extent, organized into discrete series of signals and messages that invite recognition and interpretation, a certain way of coming to terms with language and with representation.

On the other hand, if we look carefully around us, beyond the ivory tower of the humanities, we can make two observations, both of which profoundly contradict most of recent assumptions concerning the death of theory.

The first is that *abstract theory has never had such a hold on the material and social reality of the world as today*. The particular power of economic abstraction is a case in point.

Theory is always a particular theory of the world. Increasingly, that world is being constructed by invisible entities like finance capital and abstract singularities like derivatives—a business, says Nigel Thrift, “that uses theory as an instrumental *method*, as a source of expertise and as an *affective register* to inform an everyday life that is increasingly built from that theory”.¹⁸ The power and effectivity of abstractions depends not so much on whether their depiction of the world is accurate as on their capacity to *constitute a world*. This is indeed the case when “idealized apprehensions of the world produced through theory” end up being held up “as desirable states of being” to which social, economic, political or cultural life should conform.¹⁹ As a practice that

flows from abstraction to action, theory becomes a guideline or a template that operates on different scales and registers.

On the other hand, a myriad of critical practices are flourishing, alongside new forms of public and politically committed intellectual work. Practice plays a role in the construction of a wide range of abstractions. Some of these critical practices are direct responses to an emphatic moment of urgency, which itself seems to have rekindled the utopia of the radically new. They are also facilitated by the rapid transformations in contemporary media. Here, I do not simply refer to the arts of transmission of knowledge but also to the fact that the sensibilities, ethos, interior and public life of most people today are determined more and more by television, cinema, DVDs, the internet, computer games, and technologies of instant communication. Critical intellectual practices today are those that are capable of writing themselves within a frame of immediacy and presence; those that are able to locate themselves in nodes that attract other texts; and forms of discourses that have the potential of being forwarded, redistributed, quoted and translated in other languages and texts, including video and audio. The result is not only a transformation in the language of knowledge itself, but also a *displacement* of theory, the kind of *disarray* in which it finds itself these days.

CONCLUSION

Theory From the South suggests that global capitalism today seems to be moving in many directions

at once. It is moving towards increasing exploitation of large parts of the Southern world through what Marx called “primitive accumulation”, which, as suggested earlier, is increasingly taking the form of a raw economy. Worldwide, it is attempting to squeeze every last drop of value out of the planet by increasing the rate of innovation and invention or through an active refiguring of space, currencies, resources and time itself. By boosting difference and by reinserting this difference into the cycles of its reproduction, contemporary global capitalism, as with its earlier incarnations, relies more than ever before on a reconfigured version of the “racial subsidy”. This is probably what explains its renewed violence and the extreme disorders it is engendering worldwide.

A great book is, first and foremost, a creative and imaginative act. It is a book that formulates better questions which can reveal aspects of the world that have hitherto been neglected or, in this case, un-imagined; a book that is likely to shape the discourse of an age; a book that carves out an entirely new domain of inquiry; a book that creates a space for interaction among different forms of knowledge while striving to keep such a space open. And on all these counts, this new book is not only compelling. It powerfully advances contemporary debates about the place of theory in cultural criticism in the aftermath of postmodernism, decolonization and globalization.

¹⁸ Nigel Thrift, “Re-inventing invention: new tendencies in capitalist commodification”, *Economy & Society*, vol. 35, no 2, 2006, 301.

¹⁹ Andrew Leyson and al., “Accounting for

e-commerce: abstractions, virtualism and the cultural circuit of capital”, *Economy and Society*, vol. 34, no 3, 2005, 431.