

SYMPOSIUM THEORY FROM THE SOUTH

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THE EVENT

The essays that follow were originally presented at a round table on Jean and John Comaroff's latest book, *Theory from the South. Or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa* (Paradigm 2012) held at the American Anthropology Association annual meeting (Montreal, November 2011). They represent the spirit of collegial yet critical engagement in which the event was organized¹.

The panel was planned over months of communication and shared reading as the final galley proofs of the book became available. A few events held during the Southern winter of 2011 anticipated the arguments that are part of this dossier. In July, a book launch debate between John Comaroff and Ato Quayson, convened by Achille Mbembe, took place in the context of the Johannesburg Workshop for Theory and Criticism (WITS University). In August, a series of public lectures given by Jean and

¹ Thanks are due to Achille Mbembe and Charles Piot for all the joint work in co-organizing the event; to Jean and John Comaroff for their participation and response, to the critics who discussed the book from the viewpoint of the humanities, literary criticism, political theory and anthropology, as well as various perspectives on and from the South; and to Anne Allison and Charles Piot, editors of *Cultural Anthropology*, for hosting this publication. Fernando Coronil was originally scheduled to participate at the round table in Montreal. His untimely death is a tragic loss for anthropology and Latin American studies.



Budapest, II. Weltfestspiele, Festumzug
German Federal Archives 

John Comaroff in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires (the latter hosted by the University of San Martín) bridged various linguistic and intellectual gaps often present in South-South critical dialogues. Local intellectuals and large public audiences discussed the book; many of its arguments translated well and others were critically dissected from various local perspectives.

These exchanges in South Africa, Brazil and Argentina proved that the book's main themes resonate in different ways in distinct parts of the South, constructing a diversified picture of the general category of "Global South". The book's arguments reveal how multiple, diverse post-totalitarian and post-colonial trajectories seem to converge in the neoliberal present into an imagined single territory that links Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The events held in the South began to answer a few implicit questions. How will *Theory from the South*—the book—be read in places outside Anglophone areas? Will other theories from the South produced in languages other than English also

be read in the North? Where is the book's potential readership located? Where is timely anthropological theory being produced after the end of the "ethnographic present"? The text provides insight into the supposed divergence between the sites of production of theory and ethnographic sites and how those two are being re-combined at present.

The book must be also contextualized within the discussion on current intellectual production in the South, where the relations between state, public sphere and academic institutions are much more intricate than in the North. Due to new configurations of funding, flows of information and other constraints, many Southern-based research centers can only function as concessionary companies of knowledge, while in an opposing trend, political and social movements in the South are producing their own theory and not just importing Northern academic conceptualizations.

The Southern public talks and discussions gave a preview of the thrust of the round table held at a very different location: the AAA meetings in November. The event's impact already anticipates other similar debates elsewhere. The notes that follow are a critical introduction of the book's themes and the scope of the discussion. The first short section is on "Theory" and the "South". The second and last is on "Africa".

THE SOUTHERN QUESTION

The introduction develops the book's title theme as a gateway to various ethnographic chapters (some of which were published earlier). The essays are aimed at constituting both an empirical analysis of Africa and "theory from the South", one not oriented

toward the local exotica or the past nor aimed at an anthropological enterprise of salvaging the strangely precious and the vanishing. Instead, in consonance with the book's surprising sub-title, the analysis situates these materials in the future as an anthropology of anticipations of the socio-political reality of the West (or, in this case, Euro-America, the "Global North").

One of the book's central arguments revolves around an old sophism about universals and particulars, reframing it as a question of invention and mimesis. It revisits the notion that, from the Enlightenment to modernization and development discourse, Western modernity has been posed as the true, original model and parameter of progress. All other modernist processes in the South have been regarded as mere degraded copies or imperfect, unfinished imitations. In the linear teleologies of reason, the South (the Orient, the Third World, the Other) has always been depicted as being deferred: historical change understood as a late arrival.

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It is an argument that reminds the reader of the debate between Aijaz Ahmad and Fredric Jameson on the Northern critic's demand that Southern aesthetic production should represent "national allegories". Indeed, the book's first chapter references Coetzee on the problem of the "African novel" having to be re-translated into what could be called a simulacrum or an authenticated, more or less exotic, copy of Western liberal universalism. Similar

arguments had been prefigured in a more radical way by African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka. Also, Borges already proposed in his essay "The Argentine writer and tradition", from 1951, a reversal of literary centers and traditions. The result was not a Deleuzian "minor literature" but the (naïve?) hope in the availability for the Southern writer of the "whole of Western tradition" as his or her own mythology and genealogy.

And yet the book does not rehearse this argument in the usual simplistic, reactive or resistant manner. It provides a new twist to it, such that the South is not analyzed as the mere receiving end of colonial subjection or modernization's designs but rather emerges as a space of experimentation that prefigures the near future of the West. Whereas the colonies might have always been the first laboratory of modernity, there is allegedly something new in the political, economic, and cultural ways in which the South anticipates the contours of the Euro-American future.

The book offers powerful diagnostics of a zeitgeist, if not a final conclusion. It brings epistemic and socio-economic considerations of the scope of modernity back into conversation with political economy by means of several related analogies. For instance, the raw materials from an older colonial world or from today's South that become value-added commodities in the North are equated here with the raw, unprocessed data from today's postcolony or "Global South", which becomes Theory after being analytically processed by Northern authors. In fact, at times, a deeper implicit analogy seems to be operating in the text where "Theory" can be replaced by "Capital" itself. The argument on value moves back and forth from assemblages of production to

machineries of information.

The text rescues the discussion on modernity, or "multiple, alternative modernities", from the linear reductionisms of an older modernization theory. Thus, it could be set in conversation with the most sophisticated contemporary theorization on the global neoliberal moment, from time-space compression (Harvey) and absolute real subsumption (Negri, Deleuze) to financescapes and ethnoscapes (Appadurai) and from hybridity and difference (Bhabha) to "nostalgia for the present" (Jameson) and modernity as a Neverland (Latour).

Beyond the discourses of development and modernization which gave their objects different names—"Third world" or "underdeveloped world"—the book aims to develop theory "on and from" the "South". The term "South" is deployed on the book as a set of relations and not as a place, in order to emphasize multiple causalities and the non-linear directionality of global flows and vectors. It is rather a space of lines of flight, formations and informations, which re-locates the discussion on Enlightenment and modernity, or on state and capital, in a new light. The category of the South seems to be a heuristic tool of great potential, but is also a problematic all-encompassing term, which might occlude difference².

² Consider, for instance, the case of Latin America. The region saw the first implementation of neoliberal policies in the early 1970s and is the central site for rehearsal of alternatives to these policies today. In the last 4 years some indicators of reduction of inequality and growth have shown positive signs while in 2011 Brazil became the sixth largest economy in the world, passing Great Britain. Indeed, the West might become more like South America, in a near future of multiple vectors and local nodes of production. The region merits its own, particular, discussion vis-à-vis the arguments of

At the time during which the seminars on *Theory from the South* were held, the USA was entering into a deeper round of its economic crisis and was for the first time in its history on the brink of default on its sovereign debt. Almost at the same time, race riots and looting in London and other British towns projected a grim view of a UK in cultural and economic recession. The images resembled those seen in Argentina during the financial and political collapse of 2001 when the connected strictures of structural adjustment and restrained democracy generated an almost absolute dead-end. In that context, the publication of *Theory from the South* appeared timely, closely in sync with the processes through which “Euro-America” indeed was moving toward Southern paths and schemes. The future of modernization seemed to be located one or two decades ago. And yet, what the North resembled, whether due to questions of state formation, citizenship or the economy, was more like Argentina than Nigeria or Ghana, more Latin American than West African

this book. The region that produced advanced analysis of the social such as dependency theory, social movements theory and the first studies of democratic transitions constitutes still at present an immense laboratory of futurity and potential. The Latin American context makes the picture of a single “global South” more complex in terms of state, class, ethnicity, land and resources, or finance capital. The differentiated types of settler colonialism that unfolded in the region provide a particular perspective on the shape of a postcolonial or neo-colonial “South”. Also, the type of neo-populist governance currently in place in most of the region—which some analysts label “post-neoliberal”—and its deep connections with some of the largest social movements in the world, highlights the need to consider the renewed relevance of Latin American politics and culture.

or South Asian. The main arguments of the book are not refuted in the light of current processes from other Southern regions. If anything, the case study approach on Africa presented in this book provides a comparative framework that enriches South-South conversations on parallel historical trajectories.

The book represents a timely provocation. It is as though the urgency of the materials collected here and the themes they address dictate a certain format and perspective. This intervention at the heart of the contemporary moment takes the pulse of current events, apparently disdaining a historical perspective. Despite the authors’ exemplary previous work on historical process and the archives of colonial modernity, here the emphasis seems more on event than on structure, on diacritics more than dialectics.

Yet, reading between the lines of the textured ethnographic analysis, a certain “history of the present” emerges as a genealogy of the multiple origins and causalities of the global condition described in the text. Underlying the flow of detail and flurry of categories, the ethnography develops an argument on genealogical inventions and effects and about the flattening of history in contemporary sociality. As a sub-text, this ethnographic analysis follows the contemporary fate of various senses of the classical concept of “culture”, its potentials and pitfalls, in one of the classical loci of anthropology: African cultural politics and political cultures.

AFRICA, IN THEORY

In examining the connections between a sub-continent and the global order, the book explores reversals and foreshadowings occurring between a world region and a planetary context.

There are various genealogies that inform the specific perspective of this book, including anti-colonial thought and postcolonial studies, dependency theory and world systems approaches, not to mention the critique of area studies promoted by post-Orientalist humanities. While those theories were firmly rooted in the schemes of nation-states and regional borders, this approach follows the flux of trans-national capital and knowledge (what others have described as “cognitive capitalism” and “information society”). “Africa” is here the name of a regional space where flows of trade, finance, knowledge, cultural identification are inflected in a specific, vernacular way.

The text is in conversation with the trans-disciplinary field of postcolonial theory (Spivak, Bhabha, Mbembe), updating some of its main assumptions. It represents as well a revision (post-turn of the century and post-9/11) of the authors’ dialogue with globalization theory, to which they crucially contributed with their earlier essays on “millennial capitalism”. To be sure, this kind of engagement could only come from anthropology, (its disciplinary history, predicaments, potentials) and be developed on, and from, one of its original key field-sites, such as Africa. Indeed, paradoxically, in order to illustrate the aporetic nature of the contemporary global moment, the text responds to the command to “provincialize Europe” (Chakrabarty) with a provocation to “universalize Africa”. This perspective explores the colonial background of current Empire and various global patterns and structures, reversing the previous colonial (and now global/(neo)liberal) system of knowledge production and its teleological reason.

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Through deeply textured and localized ethnography the chapters theorize “Africa”, also deconstructing it as a single locatable place. Some of the previously published essays address classical issues in Africanist anthropology from personhood, labor, identity, custom and health to zombies and the occult. Other chapters develop questions of millennial capital, citizenship in relation to liberalism and multiculturalism, the uses of history and memory in ways that recast the debate on interconnections between global flows and local, or regional, formations.

The (“counter evolutionary”) subtitle points out toward a global scheme where “Africa” is a point of resonance which progressively acquires more predominance as a particular laboratory of political, economic and cultural processes. The sentence seems to be more spatial than temporal, more geopolitical than historical, in sum, more about directionality and dispersion than about teleology. It is not predicated upon a scheme of centers and peripheries. It alludes to a global order that is a multiple-entry scheme, a variegated, textured canvass, where “global” “regional” and “local” are not scales but rather various interrelated entangled dimensions and folds.

While in the book “Africa” stands for the whole Global South, the essays that follow pave the way for comparative South-South discussions. Some key intuitions about the future might emerge in other regions, and not only in a sub-continent that politically, to say it with a Comaroffian reference, is moving from revolution to revelation. That is, going

from politics and warfare as a source for liberation to an evangelical quest for wisdom and redemption. Various types of conversion—economic and religious—are currently at stake in the continent, appearing as possible modes of escape from the recent political and cultural impasse. To what extent this text refers to Africa in general and how much it revolves around the question of South African exceptionalism is also matter for further discussion.

Any attempt that emerges “out of Africa” in order to present the continent as a theoretical construct and not as a mere collection of parochial or bizarre decaying objects is welcome. The jury is still out on the actual meanings of the current African condition as it is on this Theory on and from the South. The following essays open a rich debate and underscore its value.

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