

COEVALNESS, RECURSIVITY AND THE FEET OF LIONEL MESSI

Ato Quayson

(University of Toronto)

*For Ato Quayson, Jean and John Comaroff's *Theory from the Global South* outlines a suggestive agenda for rethinking not just the relations between the Global South and its northern counterparts, but also about the problems we have to robustly confront in thinking of world history as a totality of inter-related processes, contradictions and values.*

The Comaroffs put forward three main propositions in *Theory from the South*. First is that modernity was a north-south collaboration, indeed a “world-historical production”. Thus, rather than the Global South being merely the laboratory for the Global North, it is the co-producer of modernity. To quote them: “To the degree that the making of modernity has been a world-historical process, it can as well be narrated from its undersides as it can from its self-proclaimed centres—like those maps that, as a cosmic joke invert planet Earth to place the south on top, the north below” (7). Despite this statement, the Comaroffs are also at pains to show that theirs is no mere inversion or displacement of an established telos with its opposite.

Their second proposition is that Afromodernity demands to be seen not as a derivate copy or counterfeit of the real thing, but in its own right as “a hydra-headed, polymorphous, mutating ensemble of signs and practices in terms of which people across the continent have long made their



Image from a full-page cartoon by John Tenniel of the 1868 Expedition symbolized as Britannia threatening King Tewodros II as a key-holding jailer.

Caltrop ©

lives” (7). Afromodernity “is a vernacular – just as Euromodernity is a vernacular – wrought in an ongoing, geopolitically situated engagement with the unfolding history of the present” (9).

The third proposition they put forward is that the Global South affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large. They thus attempt to properly subvert the epistemic scaffolding that from the time of the Enlightenment has asserted that the Global South is merely the source of raw materials or unprocessed data for the fashioning of

Euromodernity. As they put it: “[G]iven the unpredictable, under-determined dialectic of capitalism-and-modernity in the here and now, it is the south that often is the first to feel the effects of world-historical forces, the south in which new assemblages of capital and labor are taking shape, thus to prefigure the future of the global north” (12). The highly suggestive header to the section in which this quotation is taken from is *The Global South: Hyper-Extensions of the Present, Harbingers of Future-History*. They provide a number of examples to illustrate this third proposition, including: the seizing of the initiative in innovating the biofuel economy by Brazil, the reach of the Indian auto industry into Britain and the impact of the Hong Kong banking sector on the development of new species of financial market, among various others. Or, in another register, the emergence of South Africa, a major force in the international mineral economy, as the America of Africa, an African-America eager to experiment with constitutional law, populist politics, and, even if hesitatingly, post-neoliberal forms of redistribution. Or, in yet another register, the rise of new forms of urbanism, as in Lagos, where many of the trends of canonical modern, where “Western cities can be seen in hyperbolic guise. . .” (14)

The points about modernity as a world-historical process and the nature of vernacular Afromodernity are both ones that should not raise much disagreement. In fact, the Comaroffs synthesize a vast amount of very good existing literature to assert their views on world-historical processes and Afromodernity. The main point that is likely to raise interest and perhaps controversy is what they assert about the Global South being proleptic of trends in the north, a harbinger, as they put it.

There are a number of what I want to describe as “talking points” for debate that are implied by the overall curvature of the Comaroffs’ argument and not just by the individual propositions in and of themselves.

1 The first is that reading through their model, whether the Global South is conceptualized as victim, vessel or mirror, its agency is implicitly a form of illumination, once again, of the north. True, *Theory from the South* is strongly aligned to a concept of coevalness, but the fact that it commits itself to showing that the Global South is a harbinger of what is to come in the north (note, not in other parts of the south, but in the north) means that the Global South may still be taken as some form of laboratory for the north, despite all the Comaroffs’ best intentions. In fact, one wonders how the argument of the book would have looked if the focus were shifted from a south-north dialectic to a south-south dialogue. Thus, for example, what would it mean to suggest that everything that has and is happening in a place like Nigeria regarding the politics of ethnicity is a harbinger of political trends in South Africa or vice versa?

2 The second talking point derives from the implications of what I want to term the “discourse of aggregation”. This discourse shows itself on at least two levels in *Theory from the South*. In the first instance there are a large number of summative lists that act as shorthands for various economic, social and cultural processes that the Comaroffs want to propose as identificatory markers of the south or of the north. This is an inescapable necessity to avoid the book becoming over-long and unwieldy. One very useful aspect of the summative listing is that it

... the discourse of aggregation extends also into the larger discursive aggregate labeled “the Global South”, with the implication that phenomena in one part of the south (Southeast Asia, South America or Africa) can handily be taken as metonymic of the Global South in general. I think this is a mistake.

provides various possibilities of expansion and further elaboration. However, the discourse of aggregation extends also into the larger discursive aggregate labeled “the Global South”, with the implication that phenomena in one part of the south (Southeast Asia, South America or Africa) can handily be taken as metonymic of the Global South in general. I think this is a mistake. For once we begin to disaggregate the Global South, we see that there are different things that they might signify about modernity. Thus, for example, it is now a well-documented fact that an estimated 26-30% of those who run Silicon Valley in California are born, bred and educated in India. India produces by far the highest number of top-end computer scientists in the entire world. The entry requirements into the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) are so stringent that it is said that all the big firms in Silicon Valley begin recruiting from among this group as soon as the names of successfully admitted candidates are publicly posted in India. It is more difficult to get into say the IIT in Delhi than into MIT. For many years now India has been one of the world’s top producers of small arms and ammunition to the extent that the British Army sources all its small arms and ammunitions from that country. In the case of Brazil it has now overtaken the UK as the world’s 6th largest economy. Brazil has 3 times as much investment in Canada than Canada has in Brazil. Plus it is one of the largest

overseas investors in Angola, second only to China at the present time. Once we disaggregate the Global South and take Africa separately, the argument of Africa being a harbinger of phenomena and processes in the north seems to be quite fragile. And even in the specific case of the African continent it is South Africa that may be taken as providing templates for the future time. However, it might also be argued that South Africa is best compared to Brazil in terms of the transformation of an originally oppressive settler *criollo* colonial society into a multicultural post-colony, with all the features of class hierarchies and contradictions, of labor exploitation and its connection to race, and of the inherently uneven distributive mechanisms for mediating both economic and social value. It would then be seen that South Africa has more in common with Brazil than say with Italy or the UK, to take just two European examples. The class and social structure of the United Kingdom is so different from that of South Africa that whatever insights regarding inter-racial conviviality or racial tension that South Africa generates cannot be easily translated into our understanding the UK. Brixton is just not Soweto. And as for the rest of Africa, despite the praise of Lagos and Accra in *Theory from the South*, what the two cities present does not give much ground for celebration, at least not just yet. Accra and Lagos are multi-ethnic without being multi-cultural, a completely different form of urban heterogeneity altogether. Urban planning in both West African cities has not yet cracked the relationship between the built and natural environments. Finally, the African continent is still riven by preventable diseases, there are still wars and the rumours of war, and the political class are often still



The two elevens (Accra and Sekondi), Coronation Cup Final.
(The soccer teams of Accra and Sekondi as finalists of the
Coronaton Cup in May 1937.)

intent on converting the bureaucratic state apparatus into instruments for private accumulation.

COEVALNESS, ORIGINS AND RECURSIVITY

Let us now turn to some implicit difficulties in the concept of coevalness deployed by the Comaroffs. We can all safely agree with them that coevalness implies that history in the north and the south are not only equal, but deeply interrelated. However, the key problem emerges when we try to identify and differentiate between the concepts of origin and causality. For the fact that something can be shown to have originated in a particular place does not always and necessarily provide us a proper understanding of the relation between origin and causality. In fact, as a general rule, the most remarkable social processes and phenomena can be shown to have multiple origins in different contexts, with one

instantiation often becoming the template for understanding all the avatars of such a point of origin. So, how then do we retain the very useful notion of coevalness and yet avoid the pitfalls of implicit spatial teleologies, south-to-north, north-to-south and south-to-south? I suggest that one way of doing this is to tie coevalness to a model of recursivity. As a literary scholar I am going to robustly resist the strong temptation of drawing my model for recursivity either from Jorge Luis Borges or Gabriel Garcia Marquez and rather want to turn to soccer in today's world. But before that it is necessary to digress into the notion of the spatial fix variously elaborated by Giovanni Arrighi, Ian Baucom and David Harvey in different works of theirs. The version that I wish to work with draws from Harvey's *The Limit of Capital* (1981). There Harvey suggests that understanding global capitalism through the concept of the spatial fix suggests two dimensions: first is in a largely geographical sense of the "fixing" of material infrastructure upon space to create an enabling environment for the processes of capitalist accumulation. For this we might list railroads, schools and central business districts, among other elements. Few people know that the now ubiquitous Western Union, now associated exclusively in the popular imaginary with money transfers, started out life in 1851 as the New York and Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company with the initial aim of creating the most extensive telegraph network for the United States. But the nature of their geographical spatial fix also altered with time and context. Thus, even though Western Union was formed in America in in the mid-nineteenth century initially as a telegraph company, it underwent a series of transformations driven both by the changing financial and technological

landscape until its present incarnation after 2006 as the most significant money transfer engine in the world today. The spatial fix of Western Union would have to be understood in its present configuration as well as in terms of its particular historical unfolding and reconfiguration of space (the telegram and the internet being two such moments of spatial reconfiguration). The second aspect of the spatial fix David Harvey elaborates relates to the inexorable process by which, in its attempts to resolve the cycles of capitalist crises, global capital persistently tries to convert hitherto peripheral zones into the capitalist circuit. However, the incorporation of peripheral zones into the capitalist circuit often produces a complete re-orientation of center and periphery to the extent that the relationship between the two has to be understood more in terms of recursivity as opposed to mere hierarchy. Thus a concept of coevalness would have to be augmented by one of recursivity for an understanding of the relations between origin and causality and the configurations of world historical processes. And so to soccer.

... a concept of coevalness would have to be augmented by one of recursivity for an understanding of the relations between origin and causality and the configurations of world historical processes.

LIONEL MESSI AND THE INFERNAL CAROUSEL

After their defeat to FC Barcelona in the final of the 2009 UEFA Champions League played in Rome, Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson referred to Barcelona's style of play as an infernal carousel of passing, and passing, and passing. The formula was replicated to great effect again in the 2011

final between the two teams played at Wembley, which Barcelona won again 2-1. What Sir Alex referred to as the infernal carousel is also known as Total Football and is based on the soccer training method perfected by the Dutch Wiel Coerver and first dazzlingly displayed to the world by Holland at the 1974 World Cup. Coerver was himself nothing short of a scientific genius: he closely analyzed film footage of some of the best players of his time including Pele and concluded that far from their talents being innate, all their skills could be carefully systematically inculcated into players starting from a young age. This insight and the method he developed proved to be revolutionary and has spread all over the world. Total Football was introduced to FC Barcelona by Johann Cruyff when he managed the team from 1988-1994. Pep Guardiola, the current manager of Barcelona, was a player under Cruyff and clearly fully imbibed his mentor's philosophy. However much we currently admire Barcelona, it has to be remembered that despite their perfection of Total Football and its breathtaking display at the 1974 World Cup, the Holland national team has not managed to win the World Cup yet. Furthermore, most people would be surprised to know that Arsenal FC also play a variant of the infernal carousel. In fact, close students of soccer will quickly point out that Arsenal and Barcelona play an uncannily similar style of soccer. The main difference between them is ultimately one of personnel, to wit the incomparable Lionel Messi. Which takes us to a central qualification to the Comaroffs' implicit focus on origins in the demeanor of coevalness. To put it somewhat polemically: the feet of Lionel Messi are more important for understanding the status of world soccer today than are its origins

in England's Victorian public school system or in the perfections of the Coerver Method. It is a well-known fact that rugby, cricket, and soccer were all products of the English public school system and that they were exported throughout empire to various locations in India, Australia, the Caribbean and Africa. However, the origins of these sports is now a completely banal fact when we want to explain the global reach of soccer and its governing body FIFA today. Rather, it is best to consider the ways in which global TV networks, in collusion with some of the best teams in the sport, exert incredible effort to try and identify new players from the erstwhile global peripheries in order to further incorporate these peripheries into the formidable global advertising and publicity franchises. Thus the injuries to Chelsea's Ghanaian Michael Essien are immediately reported on all global networks while the goal-scoring feats of South Korea's Kim-Jung Park of Manchester United produces endless marketing opportunities in Southeast Asia. Messi, Essien, Kim-Jung Park, Yaya Touré, Sergio Agüero, Luis Suarez and players such as them illustrate the recursive relations between multiple origins of both form and content because ultimately that is what world soccer today really is: the conquest of more and more obscure markets by the identification and marketing of players from various parts of the world. Global soccer may thus be giving us a handy parable of the links among the concepts of coevalness, origins, recursivity, the spatial fix and the complex character of the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of the world today.