

SURPASSING THE NORTH: CAN THE ANTIPODEAN AVANTGARDE TRUMP POSTCOLONIAL BELATEDNESS?

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The Comaroffs want it both ways in that they want the whiff of authenticity and the credit given to proximate knowledge by claiming that the Nuer attitude to friend and enemy precedes Carl Schmitt's theorization of the same; the Tswana practices of being-as-becoming anticipates Western notions of the autonomy of the individual, argues Srinivas Aravamudan.

To start with the subtitle, the geocultural epistemology of this volume brings with it some very precise observations about Africa within the situation of contemporary globalization, even as it does this within a larger set of claims that tend to obscure even while claiming to clarify. A subtitle, such as this volume bears, when read at face value, proposes a novel truth that reverses standard expectations concerning the West's claims of advancement in relation to the imputed benightedness of Africa. Turning the epistemological racism of such an account on its head, and deriving its counterpoint from the Hegelian philosophy of history that began in Africa and ended up in the West, the title suggests the precise reverse of the Hegelian hypothesis. However, this negation of Hegel carries with it the odor of parody. Hegel is not just generally untrue but precisely so. While the general refutation of Hegel would suggest that his reification of the world-spirit was an essentialist ontology carrying the racist overtones of civilizationism,



An early illustrated work dealing with the school of Salerno. The cover shows Constantine the African lecturing to the school. Fredou

the Comaroffs knowingly return to the parodic re-statement of the original proposition in reverse; a two-centuries-old proposition concerning the evolution from Africa to the West is returned with interest by articulating its precise reversal. Hegelian logic lives on, even if Hegel was wrong, and the problematic of civilizational essences is unchanged, even if the thematic is altered. What is at stake is epistemic posture, orientation, or disposition, and this formal attribute of geo-epistemological positioning deliberately exerts pressure on more than a century of social Darwinism by foregrounding “evolution,” or what they call the “counter-evolutionary trope” as they hasten to add, does not simply reverse

the epistemic reflex, but their rhetoric largely belies their intention. While the subtitle is straightforward in its reference to Hegelian epistemology that is both serious and parodic at once, I want to proceed from the subtitle to the main title, that I believe is somewhat more ambiguous, and arguably, less coherent. **Theory:** In their glossing of this term, the authors hasten to explain that by “theory” they mean not “abstract theory” but “grounded theory”: “the historically contextualized, problem-driven effort to account for 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, empirical observation and critical ideation” (48). Theory, in other words, is neither an escape from reality nor an over-ready acceptance of it but the attempt to make sense of it by a process of testing. What is claimed as theory resembles social-science epistemology, not standard philosophy or politics but a kind of unsettling that occurs as facts come into contact with thought, and abstract observation with daily life and praxis. Here I’d suggest two kinds of theory are at work. One is a Marxist critique of political economy that is largely persuasive. Another is an obsessive anxiety about latest fashions in Northern theory (what Achille Mbembe records as a hysterical effect of theory in the absence of the discourse of the missing or defunct master) to record and prove that Southern “symptoms” precede Northern ones in areas of politics, culture, and daily life. That is not so much about the production of value but the theft of experience from the South rendered as intellectual property in the North, a theft the authors want to retribute to rightful owners, just like zombie banks evoke African zombies.

The South: There are at least three meanings to the polythetic category of the “South” in the way that it is used. One is simply hemispherical, connoting as it does the *terra australis* that since classical European terms inverted European anthropological reason, and in this regard, a reversal of the reversal that Hegelian anthropology had conducted on the possibility of native knowledge that preceded and/or surpassed European attempts to know it: Africa as the inverse of modernity, the North’s underside. The second meaning to the “South” is in terms of the developmental category it connotes. The Comaroffs do not mention the initial origin of the term in Willy Brandt’s “North-South” report that attempted to transpose the major developing divide in the world of the 1970s away from the standoff represented by the Cold War that was seen as an “East-West” divide. All the same, as the authors acknowledge, the “South” stands loosely for the “postcolonial” and is a relational term that conjures up with it the idea of the “North.” The old-fashioned epistemology that went along with the power and exploitation represented by colonialism and empire made the “South” into so much empirical data processed by the theoretical tools of the “North,” a region that both explained and appropriated the “South” at the same time. In this regard, “North” and “South” are a direct analogy of what was explored as “West” and “East” in Edward Said’s rendition of Orientalism as a dualist ontology of scapegoating and demonization. However, as indicated earlier, the authors’ predilection is less Manichaeic than it is Hegelian. They are not content with Fabian’s hypothesis of the “coevalness” of metropolis and colony: rather the formal colonies are advanced metropolises that presage the world to come in relation to which it is the North

that is playing catch-up. The “South” and “North” are to be seen as relational and dialectical rather than absolute ontologies, and the reversal of the categories does appear in their exposition to be classically Hegelian, in that it is not so much reversal but supersession in the manner of the lord-bondsman dialectic. Africa is not so much the unperceived origin but the advanced state that is on the other side of European control and purity. However, such a thesis is unable or unwilling to make up its mind about something crucial, which is whether the realization of Africa as the endpoint of late capitalism is truly an advancement in the sense of the nineteenth-century idea of progress, or a trajectory that is an augury of the dystopian outcome of capitalism: in other words this is Marxist tragedy disguised as Hegelian farce, the worst of the worst rather than the best of the best. Africa is ahead not because it is more enlightened in classical terms; it is ahead because it is more familiar with the unprotected experience of various ills that most leftists decry, including neoliberalism, urban blight, the erosion of the welfare state, the postpolitical end of democracy with the judicialization of politics, the rise of xenophobia and the genocidal epidemic of HIV-AIDS, and the entrepreneurialism of self in a world of the commodification of everything: in other words, the African present that is also the world’s future rather than just as was argued before, the underdeveloped future of an Africa that was wrongfully seen as belated and catching up with the achievements of its colonialist master, and should instead now be seen as the world’s dark overlord, prescient of all things to come. If the latter is true, the “evolution” toward Africa—whether serious or parodic—is no evolution at all, but a deterioration, and EuroAmerica’s evolution toward Africa is

the equivalent of the entire world going to hell in a handbasket, where “hell” is “Africa” and the “handbasket” is “late capitalism.”

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The much-vaunted evolutionary advantage that Africa enjoys is a kind of vainglory where in each of its peculiar sufferings under late capitalism, it can claim to have been there first, rather than last, and this arrival is forced, not desired. Furthermore, the greatest incoherence of this volume comes from the unremarked use of the word “from”: in what manner is all this “theory” “from” “the South”? This is neither the classic anticolonial speech of the colonized, the Southern Calibans who theorize their own oppression, nor the deconstructive logic of the Spivakian subaltern who cannot speak. Rather the “from” is a representation where the theory is not any more from the South than it is from the North, as it is the product of the relational interaction between anthropologists such as the Comaroffs who are just as comfortable in South Africa as the United States. This might sound churlish, but there is something a bit over-earnest about needing to claim that the theory is *from* the South, as there is a certain alibi-producing aspect to that claim.

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What is important here—that the theory is accurate? Or that it originates from the classic position of the object? The former position, of accuracy, reeks of Western epistemological imperialism, something that always claimed abstract scientific and clinical superiority over its inert material objects. The latter position, of originality, is one more typically associated with the subject of oppression, who knows through experience what the oppressor could not know because of epistemic distancing. The Comaroffs want it both ways, in that they want the whiff of authenticity and the credit given to proximate knowledge by claiming that the theory is *from* the South: the Nuer attitude to friend and enemy precedes Carl Schmitt’s theorization of the same; the Tswana practice of being-as-becoming anticipates Western notions of the autonomy of the individual. As I said before, the claim bespeaks a fetishism of originality and precedence, i.e. the African lived symptom gazzumps the Western theoretical aperçu. Deep down this is also a disciplinary setting of scores: cultural anthropology trumps Western philosophy, aka literary theory. Africa 1 EuroAmerica 0.

At the same time, the authors want the credit of dialectics by suggesting that North and South are relational categories, in which case any useful theory has to be a mixture of both, from both—and ineluctably bound up with—both. It might be more accurate to say that their book is much less from the South, than it is about the South, and foregrounding its ironic advancement in relation to the North with respect to so many angles and dimensions of late capitalism. There is no shame in admitting to that. Or if it is not just about the South, then it is speaking *for* the South, and it is speaking on behalf of that which theorizes itself mutedly, but that

particular muted situation needs the Comaroffs to provide the academic megaphone that makes that theorizing audible. Then we are more on the classic terrain of “they cannot represent themselves—they must be represented,” and this is not so much about the Northern expropriation of Southern value as it is about the academic recognition, explanation, and advocacy of anthropological life-worlds. In which case, the grandstanding claim by the Comaroffs that their theory is from the South is more window-dressing than it is a new version of epistemological continentalism.

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Evolutionary Advantage?: All the same, the dilemma faced by the authors is a genuine one. Progressive scholars would always want to document the extent to which mechanisms of exploitation and domination have created social death, and at the same time register the extent to which the human subject can escape violence, hope for remedy, or even surmount existing conditions. This is the difficulty of the move from the “is” to the “ought,” but also given their hypothesis, the desire to prove that the case is actually a *paradigm*. As in the manner of Rem Koolhaas on Lagos, there are occasional glimmers where a dystopian landscape yields habits of endurance, survivability, and even futurity, but we are left wondering if there is a mismatch in terms of the scale of the grand claim of the book, which is less successful as opposed to the specific observations within it, that are far more trenchant and

hard-hitting. Maybe the ultimate desire is again one to make Africa the generator rather than object of theory, the ultimate symbolic reversal of colonialism through epistemology, where theory in the South is alive in the minutiae of everyday life rather than, as is more often the case in the North, residing as a product of academic snob value that is deemed inconsequential, irrelevant, or obsolete, in terms of the runaway train of economic value production and the exercise of political power.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the book might be more broadly persuasive if its orientation was wheeled around: rather than theory *from* the south, it could aspire more overtly to answering the question of “whither the south?,” and with that question, presumably, “whither the rest of the world?” for which the authors claim that Africa is the vanguard. However, the authors do let it slip that they have an alternative possibility for the future of the world rather than just the question of origin or symbolic revenge concerning earlier claims of continental vanguardism. It turns out the blind spot in the volume is not so much the North vs. South issue (a shell game if there ever was one) but that the authors are fundamentally uncomfortable with one direction, and that is East. As they say in one very enigmatic sentence, “[China], which profits from playing in the interstices between worlds, has interpolated itself into both north and south without being truly either, all the while promising, some time off into the future, to alter the political economy, and the geo-sociology, of the entire planet” (46). Having said that, they move on, but it is as if they have cursorily acknowledged that even as they are documenting the reversal of the Hegelian trajectory with respect to EuroAmerica and Africa, the

Archimedean leverage of the world-spirit exists now not so much in Africa, but in Asia. China, by competing with Euro-America, even as it turns its face toward Africa, is capable of turning both North and South into its hinterland. In that case, and if that is so, we would need a new geographical information system whereby North, South, West, and East are all empty categories waiting to be respatialized in relation to China as hegemon. What directional categories would be used in a sinocentric world? It is apparent that the authors are indeed apprehensive of that eventual outcome. Who would theorize that world? What about the ironies of China's massive, yet very recent neocolonial involvement in Africa that have yet to be taken up adequately? And what would be the overarching symbolic narrative concerning that world? Would that be Marxist tragedy, Hegelian farce, or Arrighian romance?