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# Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa

Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff

*'The Global South' has become a shorthand for the world of non-European, postcolonial peoples. Synonymous with uncertain development, unorthodox economies, failed states, and nations fraught with corruption, poverty, and strife, it is that half of the world about which the 'Global North' spins theories. Rarely is it seen as a source of theory and explanation for world historical events. Yet, as many nation-states of the Northern Hemisphere experience increasing fiscal meltdown, state privatization, corruption, and ethnic conflict, it seems as though they are evolving southward, so to speak, in both positive and problematic ways. Is this so? In what measure? What might this mean for the very dualism on which such global oppositions rest? Drawing on recent research, primarily in Africa, this paper touches on a range of familiar themes—law, labor, and the contours of contemporary capitalism—in order to ask how we might understand these things with theory developed from an 'ex-centric' vantage. This view renders some key problems of our time at once strange and familiar, giving an ironic twist to the evolutionary pathways long assumed by social scientists.*

*Keywords:* Global South; theory; capitalism; modernity

The idea is very simple really, although its implications could be quite radical. We have essayed it many times over the past two decades. So have many others.<sup>1</sup> Especially 'other' others.

It is this. Western enlightenment thought has, from the first, posited itself as the wellspring of universal learning, of Science and Philosophy, upper case; concomitantly, it has regarded the non-West—variously known as the Ancient World, the

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Orient, the Primitive World, the Third World, the Underdeveloped World, the Developing World, and now the Global South—primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means. Above all, of unprocessed data. These other worlds, in short, are treated less as sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of raw fact: of the minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths. Just as it has long capitalized on non-Western ‘raw materials’ by ostensibly adding value and refinement to them. In some measure, this continues to be the case. But what if, and here is the idea in interrogative form, we invert that Order of Things? What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the so-called ‘Global South’ that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large? That it is from here that our empirical grasp of its lineaments, and our theory-work in accounting for them, ought to be coming, at least in major part? That in working the contradictions inherent in the suspect North-South dualism we might be able to move beyond it, to the larger dialectic processes of which it is a product. What follows is a reflection on the contemporary Order of Things approached from a primarily African vantage, one which invites us to see familiar things in unfamiliar ways.

Euro-American social theory, as writers from the South have observed, has tended to treat modernity as though it were inseparable from the rise of Enlightenment reason. Not only is each taken to be a condition of the other’s possibility. Together, they are assumed to have animated a distinctively European mission to emancipate humankind from a prehistory of bare necessity, enchantment and entropy. Whether the Enlightenment is seen as an epoch or an ‘attitude’, as vested in Kantian critique or positivist science, in self-possessed subjectivity or civic democracy, in Arendt’s (1958, 4) ‘laboring society’ or Marx’s capitalist mode of production, in the free market or liberal humanism—or in various ensembles of these things—the modern has its *fons et origo* in the West; this notwithstanding the fact in the West itself, the term has always been an object of contestation and ambivalence. *Pace* Cheikh Anta Diop (1955), the Senegalese polymath for whom civilization arose in Egypt thence to make its way northward,<sup>2</sup> other ‘modernities’ are taken to be either transplants or simulacra, their very mention marked by ironic scare quotes. The accomplishment of anything like the real thing, the Euro-original, is presumed, at best, to be deferred into a distant, almost unimaginable future—to which, as Fanon put it (1967, 121), if the colonized ever *do* arrive, it is ‘[t]oo late. Everything is [already] anticipated, thought out, demonstrated, made the most of.’ To the degree that, from a Western perspective, the Global South is embraced by modernity at all, then, it is as an outside that requires translation, conversion, catch-up.

Take two diverse instances, both involving North-South representation. One is literary. It is J. M. Coetzee’s (2003, 51) story, ‘The novel in Africa’, set on a cruise ship called, not coincidentally, *Northern Lights*. The narrative hinges on a conversation between a Nigerian writer and Elizabeth Costello, the Australian novelist who serves as Coetzee’s alter ego. ‘[H]ow can you explore a world in all its depth,’ Costello asks the man, ‘if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders?’ To Europeans,

that is. From the standpoint of enlightenment, African prose is taken to be a performance of otherness, not an act of 'self-writing' (Mbembe 2002). As Žižek (n.d.) observes, the universality presumed by Western liberalism:

does not reside in the fact that its values (human rights, *etc.*) are universal in the sense of holding for ALL cultures, but in a much more radical sense: in it, individuals relate to themselves as "universal," they participate in the universal dimension directly, by-passing their particular social position.

But the African author is foreclosed from writing in the cosmopolitan voice taken for granted by literati in Euro-America. If s/he speaks Out of Africa, it requires 'explanation', conversion into the lexicon of liberal universalism and the humanist episteme on which it is based. Our other example comes from the social sciences. For Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 89), European historicism allows only one trajectory to non-Western societies if they are to be recognized as part of the grand human story: they must undergo a visible metamorphosis—fast or slow, effective or otherwise—to Western capitalist modernity. Their diverse, variously animated life-worlds have to be translated into the 'universal and disenchanted language of sociology' whose *telos* decrees: 'First in Europe, then elsewhere' (p. 7).

Coetzee and Chakrabarty echo a long, slowly rising tide of critique. To be sure, the object of much postcolonial theory has been to disrupt the Western *telos* of modernity, to trouble the histories it presumes, to 'provincialize Europe' (Chakrabarty 2000), to 'renarrate' empire (Makdisi 1992)—all the better, Homi Bhabha (1994a, 6) insists, to move the project of theory-making to an 'ex-centric site', thus to capture the restless, re-visionary energy that comes from the vast reaches of the planetary population whose genealogies do not reach back directly into the European Enlightenment. Bhabha's call is echoed by those who have pointed to the qualifications brought by non-Western experience to mainstream discourses about the nature of modernity itself. It is also echoed, as George Orwell (1933) and W. E. B. du Bois (1933) long ago reminded us so graphically, in the life-stories of those *within* the metropole—Southerners in the North, so to speak—who are largely excluded from its human fellowship.

More immediately, though, despite decades of postcolonial critique, the modernist social sciences—not excluding those of more radical bent—tend still to 'bypass ... the third world', its narratives of modernity and the work of its 'local' intellectuals, in writing the planetary history of the present (Chakrabarty 2000, 7). Even critical theorists take the 'driving engine' of late capitalism to lie wholly in Euro-America (p. 7). In the upshot, the South continues to be the suppressed underside of the North. Which is why, in an important, early intervention on the topic, Gayatri Spivak (1988) censured post-structuralism for failing to give account of geopolitics in its analyses of 'Power' and the 'Sovereign Subject.' By ignoring the impact of the international division of labor on discourse everywhere, she argued, and by rendering ideology invisible, post-structuralism participated in an economy of representation that has kept the non-European other 'in the "shadow" of the Western "Self"' (p. 280)—thereby allowing the Universal Subject to remain securely on Euro-American terrain.

Spivak's point is well taken. But, in dissecting the technologies of Eurocentrism, she courts the very psychic self-obsession that she faults in post-structuralism. By focusing on the colonial narcissism of Europe, a narcissism that obliterates 'the trace of [the colonized] Other in its precarious Subjectivity' (1988, 281), she brackets the very social and material conditions to which she herself drew attention. As a result, the subaltern is so fully eclipsed by an omnipotent Western selfhood as to be rendered inaudible, unspeaking, and unspeakable. But *they*—the colonized were, and are, a *social* category, after all—are not quite that easily effaced, despite their multiple displacements. Even at their most inarticulate, the unsettling presence of those others has always troubled imperial aspirations, demanding constant oversight. Like Rochester's West Indian wife in the attic who, as Edward Said (1983, 273) noted of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, repeatedly threatened to disrupt polite society at the metropole.

What is more, because colonial societies were complex formations, they entered into complex, unpredictable relations with Europe. Metropole and colony, after all, were co-constitutive elements in a rising world capitalist order—entailed, that is, in what Deleuze and Guattari call a double capture, 'an encounter that transforms the disparate entities that enter into a joint becoming' (cited in Toscana 2005, 40). Hence the now well-known claim that colonies were critical sources of value and innovation for the modern nation-states of the North. At the same time, the colonized were excluded from full citizenship in those 'imagined communities'. Worse yet, colonial polities were sustained by acts of violence that flew in the face of the tenets of liberal European law and civility. For imperial frontiers were places of partial visibility, where working misunderstandings bred reciprocal fetishisms, unwritten agreements, unruly populations, and protean social arrangements, held to require forceful techniques of control (Pietz 1985–88; Stoler 2006, 9).

Above all, these frontiers fostered conjunctures of Western and non-Western desires, conventions, and practices, fusions that fueled the destructive, innovative urges of Euromodernity, but with little of the ethical restraint that reined them in 'back home'. Nor is this all in the distant past. In 2000, US Republican senator, Tom Delay, prevented legislation barring sweatshop conditions in the Northern Mariana Islands, an American territory in the Western Pacific; said Delay to the *Washington Post*, 'the low-wage, anti-union conditions of the Marianas constitute a "perfect petri dish of capitalism"'.<sup>3</sup>

As this suggests, modernity was, almost from the start, a North–South collaboration—indeed, a world-historical production—albeit a sharply asymmetrical one. However hard it may seek to 'purify' itself (Latour 1993), it has always consisted of diverse significations, materializations, and temporalities—perpetually contested, hard to pin down, historically labile. As an ideology, it has never been dissociable from capitalism, from its determinations and social logic (*cf.* Amin 1989); although, to be sure, fascism and socialism have sought their own versions. Hyphenated, capitalist-modernity has realized itself, if *very* unevenly, in the great aspirations of liberalism. But it has also *excluded* many populations from just these things, especially those in colonial theaters who have been subjugated to its modes of extraction.

Precisely because it has plied its abrasive course in so many disparate contexts, in other words, modernity has always been both one thing and many, always both a universal project and a host of specific, parochial emplacements, a force for equality and simultaneously, a producer of difference. This is self-evidently true in Europe, where national imaginings have never been all alike, neither within nation-states, nor between them. But it has been even more so in Europe's distant 'peripheries', where, in the shadow of various metropolises, modernity was made at a discount. Colonies were pale proxies, subsidiary holding companies as it were, for sovereign Western powers.

Here, then, is the point. 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 centers—like those maps that, as a cosmic joke, invert planet earth to place the south on top, the north below. But we seek to do more than just turn the story upside down, thus to leave intact the Manichean dualism that holds Euro-America and its others in the same, fixed embrace. We also seek to do more than merely note that many of the emergent features and concealed contradictions of capitalist modernity were as readily perceptible in the colony as in the metropole—or that the former was often a site of production for the ways-and-means of the latter. What we suggest, in addition, is that contemporary world historical processes are visibly altering received geographies of core-and-periphery, relocating southward not only some of the most innovative and energetic modes of producing value, but the driving impulse of contemporary capitalism as both a material and cultural formation. It is in this light that we propose that the history of the present may be more acutely grasped, alike empirically and theoretically, from the vantage of what have been dubbed the antipodes. In making this claim, *Theory from the South* (2011) is built on two closely interwoven arguments. We develop them, as we intimated earlier, by taking Africa as our point of departure.

### *AfroModernity, in practice and theory*

The first argument is that modernity beyond is not adequately understood as a derivative, or a *Doppelgänger*, or a counterfeit, of a Euro-American 'original'. To the contrary: it demands to be apprehended and addressed in its own right. African modernities, for instance, have a deep, highly self-conscious history, as South African scholar, Ntongela Masilela (2003a) shows, being mutating ensembles of discourse and practice in terms of which people across the continent have long made their lives; this partly in dialectical relationship with the Global North and its expansive imperium, partly with others of the same hemisphere, partly in localized enclaves. As in the North, modernity in Africa has manifested itself in a number of registers at once. And, as in the North, it has been mired in contestation, and 'entangled meanings' (Deutsch, Probst, and Schmidt 2002; Nuttall 2009; Táíwò 2010, 13). Should Africans see themselves as part of a universal enlightenment, of Christianity and civilization, of Shakespearean English and scientific reason, as some black South African intellectuals

argued in the early twentieth century (Masilela 2003a, 6)? Or should they strive to 'combine the native and the alien, the traditional and the foreign, into something new and beautiful', as H. I. E. Dhlomo wrote in 1939 (1977)? In point of fact, there has been a steady move toward the second option; a move, that is, toward the mimetic, understood—a la Achille Mbembe (2008, 38f, after Halliwell 2002)—as a process that 'establish[es] similarities with something else while at the same time inventing something original'. Like its European counterpart, self-conscious modernity in Africa has entailed a re-gensis, an awareness of new possibilities, and a rupture with the past—a past that, in the upshot, was flattened out, detemporalized, and congealed into 'tradition', itself a thoroughly modern construct.

African modernities, in sum, have long had their own trajectories, giving moral and material shape to everyday life. They have yielded diverse-yet-distinctive means with which to make sense of the world, to fashion beings and identities, to act effectively on contemporary conditions. Africa, for instance, has generated what are arguably the most dynamic instances anywhere of iconic modern cultural forms, like popular Christianity, or mass-mediated musical modes, or cinematic genres (as evident in the mighty Nollywood straight-to-video movie industry). Such creativity has been at once productive and destructive in flouting, repudiating, remaking European templates. Sometimes the process has been strikingly self-conscious, as among Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s (Masilela 2003b, 706) and, later, black South Africans of the New Africa Movement who famously insisted that the continent not be compared with Europe since it had its own genius; to be inseminated, we might add, by other influences from the South, from the likes of Mohandas Ghandi to the African diaspora in the New World.

Much the same rhetoric was to suffuse anticolonial movements and post-independent nationalisms; also the assertive alterities of Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and Afrocentrism; in experiments with communitarianism, democracy; in high-minded visions, like *Ubuntu*, the call for a generically 'African humanity' and, even more ambitiously, the 'African Renaissance'. Nor is it best labeled an 'alternative modernity', singular or plural.<sup>4</sup> It is a *vernacular*—just as Euromodernity is a vernacular—wrought in an ongoing, situated engagement with the unfolding history of the present.

It is important, in this respect, to distinguish modernity from modernization (*cf.* Appadurai 1996), a point that takes us onto more general terrain for a moment. Modernity refers to an orientation to being-in-the-world, to a variably construed and variably inhabited *Weltanschauung*, to a concept of the person as self-conscious subject, to an ideal of humanity as species being, to a vision of history as a progressive, man-made construction, to an ideology of improvement through the accumulation of knowledge and technological skill, to the pursuit of justice by means of rational governance; to a relentless impulse toward innovation whose very iconoclasm breeds a hunger for things eternal (*cf.* Harvey 1989, 10). Modernization, by contrast, posits a strong, normative teleology, a unilinear trajectory toward a particular vision of the future—capitalist, socialist, fascist, whatever—to which all

humanity should aspire, to which all history ought to lead and all peoples should evolve, if at different rates. This *telos* has expressed itself in progressive movements, both secular and religious, in expansive models of improvement, and in 'objective' scientific paradigms, among them, 'modernization theory' in sociology. It has also been censured for the contradictions between its promises and its effects: between, for example, the promise of a more equal humanity and the burgeoning biopolitics of difference across the world. We are less concerned here with these contradictions, than with the confusion between modernization and modernity. It underpins a recent debate about the latter, about modernity as category of critical analysis, and raises a clutch of theoretical issues salient to our argument.

Frederick Cooper (2005, 113), whose own scholarly *oeuvre* is also deeply rooted in Africa, has recently complained that modernity is ever more imprecisely used as a technical term in the academy. We agree, having remarked ourselves on its vagueness, its tendency to melt into air under scrutiny (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, xii). We concur, too, with his observation that its analytic and everyday connotations are often confused and conflated (p. xiif); although this is as true of other constructs in the vocabulary of the human sciences, like colonialism, identity, politics, liberalism (*cf.* Duara 2007, 295). Even theory. In point of fact, it is precisely the protean quality of modernity that has made it so productive as a trope of worldly claim-making, as a political assertion, and as an *object* of analysis. 'Modernity', plainly, is what linguists term a 'shifter' (Silverstein 1976). Its meaning is dependent on context, serving to put people in particular times and places on the near-or-far side of the great divide between self and other, the present and prehistory, the general and particular—oppositions that are mobilized in a range of registers from theologies to party platforms, from policy documents to black letter law, from maps of social space to the classification of populations.

The positivist social sciences have also deployed this grammar of oppositions, of course, hence the embrace of such foundational contrasts as mechanical versus organic solidarity, status vs. contract, precapitalist vs. capitalist, and so on. Modernization theory, ascendant in sociology from the 1950's, was no exception. Despite having been subject to repeated critique, Cooper (2005, 9ff) argues, both the conceptual foundations and the Eurocentric *telos* of the modernization paradigm linger on in colonial/postcolonial scholarship. As a result, he says, the latter 'reinforce[s] the metanarratives [it] pretend[s] to take apart' (p. 9), thereby muddying rather than illuminating the question of modernity (in Africa and elsewhere), of what it actually is and how we might typify it. For theorists like Cooper, the problem is to be solved by a strong dose of rigorous historical research, as though a protean phenomenon of this sort might finally be pinned down by recourse to frank empiricism.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, by the canons of just such empiricism, colonial/postcolonial studies are not so easily dismissed. Work in that tradition *has* taken pains to transcend the assumptions and methods of modernization theory. Constructs like 'alternative modernities' have their problems. But they were developed precisely to move beyond the binary opposition between the premodern and the modern, and to avoid conflating modernization with Westernization.<sup>6</sup>

But there is something else here, something more general. The effort to counter indiscriminate uses of the term 'modernity' underscores why it is so important not to mistake it for modernization, or to use modernity as analytical construct without also considering the conditions of its material existence. Cooper laments that, with the repudiation of modernization theory, 'everything' tends to be treated as 'simultaneously modern' (p. 132). But that, in part, was the very object of the critique: to show that, while modernization-as-Western-ideology might represent non-Western societies as just so many not-yet-modern outsiders, the capitalist imperium to which it is joined *has* no real exteriors, although it has many peripheries. The production of these margins, as critical theorists of various stripes have stressed, is a necessary condition of the growth of its centers. What is more, to reveal the negative impact of 'modernizing' processes perpetrated in the name of universal advancement is not necessarily to be 'against modernity', as is sometimes suggested. Or *for* it for that matter. It is to subject its history to critical interrogation.

The point, surely, is to pay heed to the ineluctable reality that many disadvantaged people across the world desire much of what *they* understand by the modern. And, to the degree that they can, to fashion their own versions of it, even as they live with its many constraints and contradictions. Which is where the *empirical* fact of 'multiple modernities' came from to begin with. Acknowledging the widespread yearning for the elusive promise of 'progress', patently, does not preclude recognizing its destructive effects, or challenging the Eurocentric myth that there is only one authentic, patented instance of it. Nor, by accepting that there may be more than one modernity, do we *ipso facto* neglect the real inequalities that exist between centers and margins, a legitimate fear expressed by James Ferguson (2006, 33, 176f). It is not that people in the Global South 'lack modernity'. It is that many of them are deprived of the promise of modernization by the inherent propensity of capital to create edges and undersides in order to feed off them.

Modernity is a concrete abstraction. It has realized, manifest forms, being a product of human activity, but also exists as a reified order of exchangeable value. In this sense, it is a Big Idea, referring *both* to something general and to things particular, *both* to the singular and to the plural. And to the relations between them. It embraces the tangible dimensions of life in specific times and places—and, simultaneously, it connotes the epochal and the universal. Multivalent constructs of this kind are as integral to theory-work in the social sciences as they are to the everyday discourses of mass culture; the need to make sense of their practical semiosis would appear self-evident. Can one really argue that to treat modernity as more than a vernacular category, to elevate it to an abstraction at all, is to give it 'artificial coherence' (Cooper 2005, 116)? What exactly is artificial about it, beyond the fact that *every* concept mobilized by the human sciences is, ultimately, an artifice? Why should it be that to recognize modernity to be one thing and many is to fall into 'confusion' (p. 116)?<sup>7</sup> To bring this back to our own argument, it follows from what we have been saying that modernity in Africa is *both* a discursive construct and an empirical fact, both a singularity and a plurality, both a distinctive aspiration and a complicated set of

realities, ones that speak to a tortuous endogenous history, still actively being made. A history, as it turns out, not running behind Euro-America, but ahead of it.

### *The Global South*

This brings us to our second argument. Contrary to the received Euromodernist narrative of the past two centuries—which has the so-called Global South tracking behind the curve of Universal History, always in deficit, always playing catch up—there is good reason to think the opposite: that, in the here-and-now, it is regions in the South that tend first to feel the concrete effects of world-historical processes as they play themselves out, thus to prefigure the future of the former metropole. It is this that we seek to capture in the pointedly provocative, counter-evolutionary undertitle of the book from which this essay derives: *How Euro-America is evolving toward Africa* (2011).

Put another way: while Euro-America and its antipodes are caught up in the *same* all-embracing world-historical processes, old margins are becoming new frontiers, places where mobile, globally-competitive capital finds minimally regulated zones in which to vest its operations; where industrial manufacture opens up ever more cost-efficient sites for itself; where highly flexible, informal economies—of the kind now expanding everywhere—have long thrived; where those performing outsourced services for the North develop cutting edge info-tech empires of their own, both legitimate and illicit; where new idioms of work, time, and value take root, thus to alter planetary practices. Which is why the Global North appears to be ‘evolving’ southward. In many respects, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America seem to be running ahead of the Euromodern world, harbingers of *its* history-in-the-making.

There are many dimensions to this, many cultural mediations: like the fact that European nation-states, having had to come to terms with demographic diversity and the *real* sociology of difference on an unprecedented scale, are beginning to resemble policultural postcolonies. Or the fact that European and North American legal systems are becoming demonstrably more like African jurisprudence, which typically treats most breaches, even homicides, as torts, not as crimes against the state.

Or take what in South Africa is called ‘living politics’ (Chance 2007), a force to be reckoned with as unemployment and homelessness burgeon, as state services are privatized and class politics eclipsed, as rapacious new forms of capital displace ever larger populations to the limbo of transit camps. Here social action centers on what Arendt (1958, 100), after Locke, termed ‘the condition of human life itself’, life vested in the quest for full membership in the polis. Like similarly assertive movements elsewhere, from Cochabamba to Mumbai, Chiapas to Cairo, the South African versions seek to secure what are glossed as ‘services’—the minima of a ‘dignified’ existence: clean water, housing, sanitation, medical care, basic income. Drawing on a diverse global archive, from Marx, Gandhi, and Fanon, through the Book of Revelations to the Zapatistas, to born-again faiths and human rights crusades, these forms of social action are enabled by novel, liberalized social media. Often setting out

explicitly to develop a critical consciousness, they tend to foster new forms of mobilization, and debate about the nature of theory and who rightly ought to be producing it (Desai 2002); they also decry the limited horizons of procedural democracy and politics-as-usual. In large part, theirs is a postcolonial, post-totalitarian enterprise, informed by a legacy of struggle, often in sharp contrast to the North, where critics frequently bemoan the loss of the political, or rue the cynicism that surrounds the idea of a public good. But the wave of popular protests against austerity measures in Europe has brought something akin to a living politics to the streets of Athens and London. Under the sign of economic emergency, new progressive projects are being explored in some quarters, among them, the push for society-wide basic income grants, or something akin to them. Again, the South provides a paradigmatic model: Brazil's Bolsa Família, a massive cash transfer program, initiated in 2003. Retooling social-redistribution in the idiom of neoliberal 'human capital', it uses debit cards to make small monthly payments to poor families, usually to women, which are then augmented if they invest in such things as educational and health services for their children (Morton 2010).

One could go on and on. Here, however, we are concerned with more general processes, processes that run to the very heart of contemporary capitalism and its moral economy: to the means of primary production associated with it, to its preferred forms of labor extraction, to its modes of accumulating wealth and signifying value, to its political and legal geographies, to its interpellation in the institutions of governance. As is widely acknowledged, capital, ever more competitive on a global scale, has placed growing stress on flexibility, liquidity, and deregulation. In this mode, it has yet again found untapped bounty in former colonies, where postcolonial states, anxious to garner disposable income and often put in desperate need of 'hard' currency, have opened themselves up to business; specifically, to corporations—now often based in China, India, the Gulf—that have little compunction in pressuring ruling regimes to offer them tax incentives, to waive environmental controls, wage restrictions, and worker protections, to limit liability and discourage union activities, even to allow them to enslave themselves—in short, to bow to *laissez faire* at its most sovereign. As a result, it is largely in the South, Tom DeLay's preferred 'petri dish', that the practical workings of neoliberalism have been tried and tested; in them that the outer bounds of its financial operations have been explored—thence to be re-imported to various Euro-American locales.

The North, of course, is now experiencing those practical workings ever more palpably as labor markets contract and employment is casualized, as manufacture moves away without warning, as big business seeks to coerce states to unmake eco-laws, to drop minimum wages, to subsidize its infrastructure from public funds, and to protect it from loss, liability, and taxation, as center-right governments cut public spending, public institutions, and public sector jobs;<sup>8</sup> this, often, over unavailing protests from civil society. Which is why so many citizens of the West—of both laboring and middle classes—are having to face the insecurities and instabilities, even the forced mobility and disposability, long characteristic of life in the non-West. It is

also why public intellectuals are now publishing mass-circulation books with titles like *Third World America* (Huffington 2010). The so-called 'New Normal' of the North is replaying the recent past of the South, ever more in a major key.

At the same time, some nation-states in the South, by virtue of having become economic powerhouses—India, Brazil, South Africa—evinces features of the future of Euro-America in other ways, having opened up frontiers of their own and having begun to colonize the metropole: *vide* the seizure of global initiative in the biofuel economy by Brazil, or the reach of the Indian auto industry into Britain, or the impact of the Hong Kong banking sector on the development of new species of financial market. Or, in another register, the emergence of South Africa, a major force in the international mineral economy, as the America of Africa, eager to experiment with constitutional law, populist politics, and, if hesitantly, post-neoliberal forms of redistribution. Or, in yet another, the rise of new forms of urbanism, as in Nigeria, where, according to Joshua Comaroff and Gulliver Shepard (1999, our emphasis), 'many of the trends of canonical, modern, Western cities *can be seen in hyperbolic guise* ...' Lagos is not catching up with us, they show in exquisite detail. Rather, 'we may be catching up with Lagos'. Lagos, adds Rem Koolhaas, is 'a paradigm for [the] future' of *all* cities (Koolhaas and Cleijne 2001, 652–3). A 'megapolis' whose prime real estate is as expensive as property in Manhattan (Guo 2010, 44), it is at 'the forefront of globalizing modernity' (Koolhaas and Cleijne 2001, 652–3). Note: not of an alternative modernity. Of modernity *sui generis*. The irony of this will be obvious to those familiar with Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983). The question now is not whether the West ignores the 'coevalness'—*i.e.* the contemporaneity—of the non-West with the West. It is whether the West recognizes that *it* is playing catch up with the temporality of its others.

In large part, however, it is the *lumpen* end of the story that is worked out first in the South, where much of the working class of the world is dispersed. This, perhaps, accounts for the fact that some of the earliest critiques of the neoliberal turn—and the most skeptical responses to free market fundamentalism—have come from those very undersides (see *e.g.* Lomnitz 2006; Desai 2002; Amin 2010), this being yet another respect in which the Global North has tracked behind its antipodean counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

But why? Why has Africa in particular, and the South in general, come, in significant respects, to anticipate the unfolding history of Euro-America? Why, for good or ill, are the material, political, social, and moral effects of the rise of neoliberalism so graphically evident there? We have already begun to address the question: the answer begins with the past, with the fact that most colonies were zones of occupation geared toward imperial extraction. To the degree that *neocolonial* politics and economics have conspired to keep them that way, postcolonies have remained dependent and debt-strapped, tending still to export their resources as raw materials and unskilled labor rather than as value-added commodities or competencies; this even as some of them—like Nigeria, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and, again, South Africa—have experienced real growth in their manufacturing industries, in their service sectors, and in urban consumer spending.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore,

(i) because large sectors of their populations have long worked under conditions designed to depress wages and disempower potentially dangerous classes, (ii) because market forces in Africa have never been fully cushioned by the existence of a liberal democratic state and its forms of regulation, and (iii) because governance there has frequently been based on kleptocratic patronage—all these things also being, in part, legacies of colonialism and its aftermath—African polities have been especially hospitable to rapacious enterprise: to asset stripping, to the alienation of the commons to privateers, to the plunder of personal property, to foreign bribe-giving. In sum, to optimal profit at minimal cost, with little infrastructural investment.

The rapid increase of foreign direct investment south of the Sahara over the past decade<sup>11</sup>—capital inflows to Africa rose by 16 percent in 2008, while falling 20 percent worldwide (Guo 2010, 44)—has led James Ferguson (2006, 41), among others, to speculate that African countries might be less sites of ‘immature forms of globalization’ than “‘advanced,’ sophisticated mutations of it.’ A recent report on African economies by the McKinsey Global Institute supports this view (Roxburgh *et al.* 2010; see n.16). So does Brenda Chalfin’s (2010, 29) case-study of Ghana, which has become a ‘neoliberal pacesetter’ by putting into play new regulatory techniques at a time when customs mandates are expanding everywhere in response to burgeoning transnational trade. ‘Ghana ... functions in many respects as a laboratory for the testing out and ... shaping of global modalities of governance’, she notes (p. 29–30). Again, for better or for worse, Africa is ahead of the curve. It is precisely the melange of its inherited colonial institutions and its availability to neoliberal development that make Ghana, and other nations of the South, a vanguard in the epoch of the market. As *Newsweek* put it in early 2010, Africa is ‘at the very forefront of emerging markets ... Like China and India, [it is] perhaps more than any other region, ... illustrative of a new world order’.

The US and Europe have colluded in this by imposing their future-vision—in/ famously, under the sign of structural adjustment—on Africa, Asia, and Latin America, inadvertently giving early warning of what would lie in store for themselves. Joseph Stiglitz (2002) has argued that the doctrinaire insistence on the liberalization of trade and capital markets, and the privatization of public assets precipitated the Asian crisis of 1997, a history of failed development in Africa, and the meltdown in Argentina. The fallout provided a chilling preview of the effects of the global economic implosion of 2008. In terms that now sound prophetic, Stiglitz described how the nations of the East were thrown into chaos; how, in order to protect international markets, the IMF rushed in with massive bailouts directed mainly at corporate creditors, leaving ordinary citizens to carry the costs; how financial stabilization rather than job creation became the prime objective (p. 73). How was it that the over-analyzed Asian and Latin American financial crises, or the ill-effects of structural adjustment in Africa, sounded no warning bells for the future of the Global North? Could it be because these things occurred *outside* of Euro-America? Or because, blinkered by our own narratives of Universal History, we have simply been unable to see the coming counter-evolution, the fact, so to speak, that the North is going south?

To be sure, the North had foretaste of the downsides of market fundamentalism well before the crisis of 2008. The contradictions that brought it to a head, after all, were long in the making: the relentless reduction of manufacturing heartlands into rustbelt wastelands has long traced the de-industrialization of Euro-America—and, recently, has given rise to calls for re-industrialization, ironically, by repatriating Fordist manufacture exported to, and re-engineered in, the South; which, under present conditions, is a structural impossibility. Those contradictions also flash into the public eye more dramatically from time to time: In the US, the implosion of Enron in 2001 made plain the fragility of an economy built on corporate voracity and voodoo accounting. (*The Economist* in 2010 referred to all this as ‘*deja voodoo*’!). Then, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina revealed to middle Americans the hidden effects on national infrastructure of the unregulated privatization of many of critical functions of the state, not to mention the deep fissures of race and class among them. Brutal conflict in the *banlieus* of Paris, attacks on immigrants in the UK and Sweden, and the demonization of Muslims in much of Europe have played out similar themes, making clear how, despite their preoccupation with democracy and human rights, the nations of the North are witnessing rising tides of ethnic conflict and xenophobia; of violent criminality, rampant corruption in government and business, and shrinking, insecure labor markets; of afflicted middle classes, *lumpen* youth, and much more besides (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006a, 2006b). Africa, it seems, is becoming a global condition.<sup>12</sup> Or, at least, Africa as *imagined* in Euro-America. Its own, endogenous reality is more complex, more, as we have suggested, an encapsulation of the vectors and polarities of late capitalist modernity as a whole.

Just as it has been in the past, the continent is also a source of inventive responses to the contingencies of our times, responses driven by a volatile mix of necessity, possibility, deregulation, space-time compression. Hence, among other things, the extraordinary, if uneven expansion of its formal sectors and endogenous capital, the massive growth of ‘informal’ commerce, the rise of profitable economies built on counterfeit and mimicry, and the emergence of new modes of service provision and the traffic in care, security, intimacy, affect. The South has also led the way in the efflorescence of ‘ethnoprise’, what elsewhere we term *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009). The boom in the identity economy is having thoroughgoing implications for the ways in which ordinary people experience collective being, social capital, and political attachment. And it is diffusing northward, toward those metropolises that once saw themselves as beyond ethnic parochialism or ‘tradition’. As this suggests, the Global South is producing and exporting some ingenious modes of survival—and more. It is often those adversely affected by modernity who recommission its means most effectively and most radically, thus also to bring to light long suppressed elements of its intrinsic nature. Indeed, it is precisely this dialectic that has pushed Africa, Asia, and Latin America to the vanguard of the epoch, making them the contemporary frontiers of capitalism—which, in its latest, most energetic phase, to reiterate, thrives in environments in which the protections of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and the labor contract are, at best, uneven. It is here that our two theses

converge: here where the first, the claim that modernity in Africa exists *sui generis*, not as a derivative of the Euro-original, meets the second, the counter-evolutionary assertion that, in the history of the present, the Global South is running ahead of the Global North, a hyperbolic prefiguration of its future-in-the-making. Note, in this regard, that, just a month ago, the South African Minister of Education unveiled a 'Charter for Social Theory'. The time has come, he said, for the South to take a lead in the production of social science theory, all the better to understand the perplexing times in which we now live. This at the very moment when, across the Global North, governments are closing down sites of intellectual production and becoming increasingly anti-theory. Perhaps Euro-America is not evolving toward Africa quickly enough.

### Coda

What might be the impact of all of this for the very idea of the 'Global South'? What do we actually mean by the term?

Despite the fact that it has replaced 'the Third World' as a more-or-less popular usage, the label itself is inherently slippery, inchoate, unfixed. At its simplest, the shift expresses the collapse of the tripartite divisions of the Cold War era, in which there were two major ideological paradigms for configuring the political economy of modernity—each with its 'less developed' others. In the age of neoliberal capitalism, the measure of modernization is more crass: it lies everywhere in success or failure in the global marketplace. In the upshot, 'the South', technically speaking, has more complex connotations than did the World formerly Known as 'Third'. It describes a polythetic category, its members sharing one or more—but not all, or even most—of a diverse set of features. The closest thing to a common denominator among them is that many were once colonies or protectorates, albeit not necessarily during the same epochs (*cf.* Coronil 2004). 'Postcolonial', therefore, is something of a synonym, but only an inexact one. What is more, like all indexical categories, '*the* Global South' assumes meaning by virtue not of its content, but of its context, of the way in which it points to something else in a field of signs—in this instance, to its antinomy to '*the* Global North', an opposition that carries a great deal of imaginative baggage congealed around the contrast between centrality and marginality, free-market modernity and its absence. Patently, this opposition takes on a hard-edged political and economic reality in some institutional contexts, like the G-8 and world bond and credit markets. But it obscures as much as it describes.

Two things in particular.

We have already alluded to both. The first is that a number of nation-states of the South, far from being marginal to the global economy, are central to it. Although this is not reducing mass immiseration or lowering Gini coefficients in those places, it *does* ensure that they will become ever more integral to the operations of capital, not to mention cultural imaginations, across the planet. However it may be imagined, as Balibar puts it (2004, 14; *cf.* Krotz 2005, 149), 'the

line of demarcation between “North” and “South,” between zones of prosperity and power and zones of “development of underdevelopment,” is not actually drawn in a stable way.’ *Per contra*, that line is, at best, porous, broken, often illegible. Even if it could be definitively drawn, moreover, many nation-states defy easy categorization: On which side, for example, do the countries of the former USSR fall? Or, if economic development is the primary criterion, where are we to place those powerhouses to which we keep returning, the likes of India, Brazil, South Africa, and Nigeria, which seem to straddle the cleavage between hemispheres? And this is not to mention the most portentous player of all, China. On the one hand, these are among the more dynamic economies on the planet. Yet, still being highly polarized, they are geo-scapes in which enclaves of wealth and order feed off, and sustain, large stretches of scarcity, violence, and exclusion. Microcosms of the so-called North-South divide. Which is also true, increasingly, of Euro-America. In short, there is much South in the North, much North in the South, and more of both to come in the future.

The second thing, which follows as both cause-and-effect of the inchoateness of the line between the hemispheres, is the deep structural articulation—indeed, the mutual entailment—of their economies. This, after all, is what makes global capitalism global, not merely international. Not only are the working classes of Euro-America, those who produce its means of consumption, situated ever more at southern margins, but, as we have noted, southern capital buttresses, even owns, many signature Euro-American businesses, all of which is yet further complicated by the world of finance, whose labyrinthine capillaries defy any attempt to unravel them along geopolitical axes. In the complex hyphenation that links economy to governance and both to the enterprises of everyday life, then, the contemporary world order rests on a highly flexible, inordinately intricate web of synapses, a web that both reinforces and eradicates, both sharpens and ambiguates, the lines between hemispheres. As a result, what precisely is North, and what South, becomes ever harder to pin down. All the more so as Euro-America evolves toward the world of its former colonies.

Which is why ‘the Global South’ cannot be defined, *a priori*, in substantive terms. The label bespeaks a *relation*, not a thing in or for itself. It is a labile signifier whose content is determined by everyday material and political processes. Analytically, though, to return to the point made by Homi Bhabha (1994b, 6), whatever it may connote at any given moment, it always points to an ‘ex-centric’ location, an outside to Euro-America. For our purposes here, its importance lies in that ex-centricity: in the angle of vision it provides us from which to estrange our world in order better to make sense of its present and future.

## Notes

- [1] For just one effort to bring together ‘social theory from the world periphery’—albeit with a rather different emphasis from our own—see Raewyn Connell’s (2007) *Southern theory*; we are indebted to Lauren Coyle, a doctoral student at the University of Chicago, for drawing our

- attention to this volume. In recent years there has also been intermittent discussion of what Krotz (2005, 147) refers to as ‘new “anthropologies of the South”’.
- [2] Similar arguments were to be made later by Afrocentric scholars in the US, most notably, perhaps, by Bernal (1987–2006) in *Black Athena*, a study that evoked a storm of criticism; see, for example, Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996).
  - [3] We learned of DeLay’s statement from Darian-Smith (2010). She quotes it from ‘The real scandal of Tom DeLay’, Mark Shields, CNN.com, 9 May 2005: [www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/05/09/real.delay](http://www.cnn.com/2005/POLITICS/05/09/real.delay). The original article in the Washington Post, ‘A “petri dish” in the Pacific: Conservative network aligned with DeLay makes Marianas a profitable cause’, Juliet Eilperin, 26 July 2000, has been reprinted many times; we read it at [www.freedomworks.org/news/a-petri-dish-in-the-pacific-conservative-network-a-0](http://www.freedomworks.org/news/a-petri-dish-in-the-pacific-conservative-network-a-0) (accessed 6/7/2010). The article details how conservative activists and lobbyists went about making the fourteen islands, formally the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), into a living experiment in free-market economics.
  - [4] We, among many others, have used ‘alternative’ in the past to describe African modernities, although we have usually intended it as a synonym for ‘vernacular’. In retrospect, it would have been better to use the latter term rather than the former—even though, in some contexts, ‘alternative’ *does* describe the intention behind self-conscious African efforts to carve out an indigenous modernity in explicit contrast to its European counterparts.
  - [5] As Duara (2007, 293–4) points out in an insightful review, it is as if Cooper ‘has had it with theorists discouraging historians from getting on with the job of discovering facts’. He also criticizes Cooper for setting up straw men: few historians, says Duara, actually write about modernity in the generalized manner he suggests.
  - [6] And to deconstruct the opposition between the universal and the particular. *Pace* Taylor (2010, 280–1)—who rather caricatures the literature on the subject—the idea of ‘multiple or plural modernities’ emerged specifically to implode that opposition; this by provincializing, and relativizing, the Western conceit of universalism *tout court*. Taylor seems also to miss another crucial point: the analytic appeal to ‘alternative modernities’, whatever its shortcomings, does *not*, as he claims, tacitly support the idea that Western modernity is ‘the generic form against which all other versions become weighed as lesser approximations’ (p. 281). Quite the contrary.
  - [7] There are ironic echoes here of Evans-Pritchard’s (1956, 63) classic argument with Western scholars of religion who would not credit that, for the Nuer of the Southern Sudan, God (*Kwoth*) could be simultaneously one thing and many, that this did not imply conceptual incoherence or an instance of ‘primitive mentality’.
  - [8] There is a large, fast-growing critical literature on these aspects of the ‘new’ age of capital, beginning, perhaps, with Mandel (1978) and Harvey (1982, *cf.* also 1989); since that literature is not directly salient to our present concerns, we make no effort here to address it.
  - [9] The rise of populist political leaders in Latin America and Africa, leaders who cast themselves against the global neoliberalism, is an expression of this. In South Africa, critiques of market fundamentalism have been the stuff of everyday mass media discourse since the 1990’s (see, for example, Bond 1997).
  - [10] This is documented in a recent report by McKinsey Global Institute; see Roxburgh *et al.* (2010).
  - [11] The World Bank reported that FDI in Africa yielded the highest returns in the world in 2002; see ‘Africa “Best for Investment”’: [www.globalpolicy.org/soecon/develop/africa/2003/0408fdi.htm](http://www.globalpolicy.org/soecon/develop/africa/2003/0408fdi.htm) (accessed 1/5/05). This raises unnerving parallels with earlier moments of colonial extraction. The pattern has continued. Guo (2010, 42), citing the IMF, notes: ‘In 2007 and 2008, southern Africa, the Great Lakes region of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, and even the drought-stricken Horn of Africa had GDP growth rates on par with Asia’s two

powerhouses. Last year, in the depths of global recession, the continent clocked almost 2 percent growth, roughly equal to the rates in the Middle East, and outperforming everywhere else but India and China.’ In the same vein, Tostevin (2010, 8) points out that \$1 000 invested in the Nigerian or Kenyan stock markets at the start of 2010 would have yielded approximately \$150 by the mid-year; the same investment in U.S. shares from the S&P 500 index would have lost money.

- [12] Cf. Simon Watney (1990) in his powerful analysis of AIDS, race, and Africa; see also Comaroff and Comaroff (2011, Chapter 8).

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