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Africa in Theory

Achille Mbembe

To write the world from Africa, or to write Africa into the world or as a fragment thereof, is a compelling, exhilarating and most of the times perplexing task. As a name and as a sign, Africa has always occupied a paradoxical position in modern formations of knowledge. On the one hand, Africa has provided most of our modern disciplines with their foundational categories. From anthropology to political economy, from post-structuralism to psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, Africa has been the purveyor of some of the most perplexing and at times fertile concepts without which the face of modern criticism would be utterly different. On the other hand, it has been largely assumed that “things African” are residual entities, the study of which does not contribute anything to the knowledge of the world or of the human condition in general.

This assumption has itself led to a narrow definition of what “Africa” stands for in the history of human thought, and too vulgar a conception of what “knowledge” is all about and whom it is supposed to serve. Today, the overwhelming belief is that coupled with science and technology, market capitalism and “humanitarian” interventions

will sort out most of Africa's problems. Complex social facts such as war and mass poverty, joblessness, disease and illiteracy are treated in uniquely materialistic terms, as if all of these were purely technical matters and the human subjects implicated in these dramas had no histories, no affect and no morals. History itself has been reified in a set of abstractions and the sense of being at the edge of a future, so palpable in the immediate aftermath of colonialism and Apartheid, has quickly vanished.

As radical changes have been unfolding, each requiring ever more complex modes of explanation, Africa has witnessed a *surge in problem-oriented* research that has become attractive to governments and private funding agencies because of its putative relevance to "real-world" challenges. Funding scarcity in turn has led numerous scholars to work as NGO entrepreneurs and consultants, to stockpile short-term research contracts, to shift rapidly from one topic to another, a practice which increases the atomization of knowledge rather than thorough understanding of entire fields. The research for hire financed by philanthropic organizations and development agencies favors the collection of large data sets and privileges the production of quantitative indicators over qualitative and critical analyses. Buttressed by an explicit and at times unqualified commitment to instrumentalism and social empiricism, it mainly treats Africa as a crisis prone entity. The crisis itself is understood simply in technicist terms – as a crisis within technicity itself, as an event that calls for a technical decision. Needless to say, this kind of research has not resulted in as big an improvement of knowledge as might have been expected. Nor has it made any space

for critical analysis and theorization.

Yet, as the new century unfolds, many increasingly acknowledge that there is no better laboratory than Africa to gauge the limits of our epistemological imagination or to pose new questions about how we know what we know and what that knowledge is grounded upon; how to draw on multiple models of time so as to avoid one-way causal models; how to open a space for broader comparative undertakings; and how to account for the multiplicity of the pathways and trajectories of change. In fact, there is no better terrain than Africa for a scholarship that is keen to describe novelty, originality and complexity, mindful of the fact that the ways in which societies compose and invent themselves in the present – what we could call the *creativity of practice* – is always ahead of the knowledge we can ever produce about them.

As amply demonstrated by Jean and John Comaroff in a recent book, *Theory From the South*, the challenges to critical social theory are nowhere as acute as in the Southern Hemisphere, perhaps the epicenter of contemporary global transformations - in any case the site of unfolding developments that are contradictory, uneven, contested, and for the most part undocumented. Here, fundamental problems of poverty and livelihood, equity and justice are still for the most part unresolved. A huge amount of labor is still being put into eliminating want, making life possible or simply maintaining it. People marginalized by the development process live under conditions of great personal risk. They permanently confront a threatening environment in conditions of virtual or functional

superfluousness. In order to survive, many are willing to gamble with their lives and with those of other people, with each activity producing its own social order and rules. This is a deeply heterogeneous world of flows, fractures and frictions. Power relations and the antagonisms that shape late capitalism are being redefined here in ways and forms not seen at earlier historical periods. Contemporary forms of life, work, property, production, exchange, languages and value testify to an openness of the social that can no longer be solely accounted by earlier descriptive and interpretive models. New boundaries are emerging while old ones are being redrawn, extended or simply abandoned. The paradoxes of mobility and closure, of connection and separation, of continuities and discontinuities between the inside and the outside, the local and the global, or of temporariness and permanence pose new challenges to critical thought and intellectual inquiry¹.

These processes have coincided with the redrawing of the global intellectual map – a shift which started during the era of decolonization. Besides traditional Northern Atlantic research institutions and centers of learning, alternative circuits of circulation (South-South, North-East, South-East) have emerged during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The worldwide dissemination of thought has been buttressed by a worldwide circulation and translation of texts, a highly productive invention and re-appropriation of concepts and the de-nationalization of the great academic debates. Whether the de-nationalization of the humanities and academic discussion has brought a truly global perspective to

¹ Jane Guyer, “Describing Urban ‘No Man’s Lands’ in Africa”, *Africa* 81 (3), 2011.

conventional Western or Southern theory and criticism remains to be seen. At the very least, it is now recognized that the world can be studied from everywhere and anywhere². Major transformations in the way in which we think about the histories of the world are under way³. In this context, any inquiry into the place of Africa in theory is of necessity an interrogation concerning the experience of the world in the epoch of planetary power⁴.

The State of Theory Today

Theory has not only been the name of the West's attempt at domesticating contingency. It has also been the way the West has distinguished itself from the Rest. The foundation of the modern university itself and the current geo-politics of knowledge at the planetary level rests to a certain extent, on a Yalta-like division of the world between the West where theory is done and the Rest, which is the kingdom of ethnography. In this global cartography of knowledge production, the function of marginal regions of the world is to produce data and to serve as the test sites of the theory mills of the North. To be sure, historically, theory (at least among the Western Left) has always been many things at the same time. It has always been an investigation into the conditions and limits of knowledge. But the task of theory, at least in the human sciences, has also always been to ask "what characterizes our present and our age". In other words, it has been about the "construction of the intelligibility of our

² Tom Looser, "The Global University, Area Studies, and the World Citizen: National Geography's Redistribution of the "World", *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 27, 1, 2012.

³ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory*, New York, University Press of America, 1994; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995; Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

⁴ R. Hale, "Re-Visioning Latin American Studies", *Cultural Anthropology*, 2011.

time” and about finding out “who is the collective subject that belongs” to that time of ours (Barthes).

Obviously then, theory was always conceived as a political intervention, something somewhat beyond criticism as such. What gave it its edge was its presupposed capacity both to transform the existing structures of power and to imagine alternative social arrangements. In this sense, theory was always understood to be a means of struggle – which allows Michael Hardt to define it as a form of “philosophical and political militancy”. Whatever the case, critical theory emerged in Western Europe in the late 19th-early 20th century in response to transformations in economy, society, and culture. At stake in these transformations was a radical change in the character of the capitalist economy and the liberal political order. This was indeed a time of multiple transitions - transition out of a notionally liberal nineteenth century into an era of monopoly formations, imperialist adventurism and late modern forms of conquest and colonization; the blurring of the boundaries – already then - between private and public spheres; the displacement of skilled artisanship by the serialized processes that will ultimately lead to Fordism; the subversion of traditional structures in the world of work and the collapse of utopian revolutionary hopes. These processes had a huge impact on the nature and forms of cultural criticism. Witness, for instance, the Frankfurt School’s interest in the withering away of the culture of autonomous individuality and the way it paved the way for the expansion of the state – an expansion which, for Adorno, Horkheimer or Marcuse, encouraged a conformist and manipulative culture industry which nurtured a regressive subordination to

bureaucratic administration and allowed for the emergence of what Marcuse in particular calls “the unidimensional man”.

There is no agreement today about what theory is all about and what distinguishes it from “criticism”⁵. Just as the term “critique”, theory today covers a wide variety of practices – from (1) methods to question the truth of authority to (2) techniques to reveal the figures of power that operate in dominant discourses, institutions or social processes to (3) investigating the limits of human reason and judgment⁶. Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, there have been, “something of a flight from theory, a re-embrace both of methodological empiricism and born-again realism; also a return to the ethical and the theological”⁷ – to which I would add the growth of versions of popular science that have produced a ready public for arguments that seek to reduce human nature to biology. The increasing theoretical confidence of theology and biology has resulted in the story of “being human” becoming more and more conflated with the story of “human nature”⁸. The “flight from theory” has left a vacuum in which sociobiology, genetic reductionism, neurosciences and cognitive sciences have flourished. These disciplines are annexing core humanities questions of intentionality, agency, memory, sexuality, cognition, and language. They try to reassert a domain of inquiry which focuses not so much on the modes of production of the historical and the social as on “the place of human beings in the universe”. To a certain extent, their goal is to produce a

⁵ Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?”, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, 2nd ed, 2007; Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”, *The Political*, ed. David Ingram, 2002.

⁶ Michael Hardt, “The Militancy of Theory”, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110:1, Winter 2011.

⁷ Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, *Theory From the South*, 2011, 47.

⁸ Roger Smith, *Being human: Historical knowledge and the creation of human nature* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

theory of how “history” is humanly produced as an essence, and not as *openness-to-contingency* – openness-to-contingency rather than the domestication of contingency (which can be said to have been the project of theory for most of the twentieth-century).

In the United States especially, or at least in certain sectors of the US academy, theory is nowadays haunted either by melancholia or by hysteria⁹. Like hysteria, theory is a strange discourse that is never satisfied with a neat answer. It is always asking for more. It is asking for more in the name of a certain notion of truth, at a time precisely when, thanks partly to deconstruction and psychoanalysis in particular the idea that *there is no truth* has gained a lot of traction. This is a time, too, when interrogations of truth now turn around the question of representation; when history itself tends to be understood either as memory or as representation. And the problem of representation has destabilized the dimensions of language, reference, even thought itself. And this idea that there is no truth is filling some of us with a certain kind of real terror. In such a context, theory is nothing but the discourse of a relation to a missing Master/Mistress. And as we know all too well, where the Master/Mistress is missing, the discourse of hysteria always tends to mask – or to compensate, or substitute for – his/her absence.

Why melancholy? This has to do with the overwhelming feeling today that critique has run out of steam¹⁰. We keep making the same gestures when everything else has changed around us, says Bruno

⁹ Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy”, *boundary 2*, 26.3, 1999. See, too, Brown, “Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times”, in *Edgework...*

¹⁰Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”, *CI*, 30, winter 2004.

Latour. We keep fighting enemies long gone, wars that are no longer possible, and we are ill-equipped in the face of threats we have not anticipated and for which we are thoroughly unprepared. In short, we are on the ready, but one war late. How should we get out of this impasse? Says Latour, by “renewing empiricism” (231), getting closer to facts, cultivating a “stubbornly realist attitude” in relation to what he calls “matters of concern”. As we can surmise, Latour’s crusade is mainly directed against “deconstruction” which he would like to replace with something he calls “constructivism”. For Mary Poovey on the other hand, “we now need to move beyond theories of representation” (what she calls “language-based theories”) to “consideration of social processes” (same volume of *CI*) – a project which requires, according to her, to form “alliances with practitioners in the social and natural sciences” – as if the human and natural worlds were not, to a large extent, organized into discrete series of signals and messages that invite recognition and interpretation, a certain way of coming to terms with language and with representation.

Yet, most of recent assumptions concerning the death of theory can be contradicted. Rather than theory having died, what we have witnessed is its displacement. This displacement has been rendered possible by three processes. The first is that the disappearance of the very idea of truth is but a fiction. The second is that abstract theory has never had such a hold on the material and social reality of the world as today. The particular power of economic abstraction is a case in point. Theory is always a particular theory of the world. Increasingly, that world is being constructed by invisible entities like

finance capital and abstract singularities like derivatives – a business, says Nigel Thrift, “that uses theory as an instrumental *method*, as a source of *expertise* and as an *affective register* to inform an everyday life that is increasingly built from that theory”¹¹. The power and effectiveness of abstractions depends not so much on whether their depiction of the world is accurate as on their capacity *to constitute a world*. This is indeed the case when “idealized apprehensions of the world produced through theory” end up being held up “as desirable states of being” to which social, economic, political or cultural life should conform¹². As a practice that flows from abstraction to action, theory becomes a guideline or a template that operates on different scales and registers.

On the other hand, theory has been displaced into a myriad of *critical practices* some of which are flourishing, alongside new forms of public and politically committed intellectual work. Some of these critical practices are direct responses to an emphatic moment of urgency which itself, seems to have rekindled the utopia of the radically new (see the Occupy Movement). They are also facilitated by the rapid transformations in contemporary media. Here, I do not simply refer to the arts of transmission of knowledge, but also to the fact that the sensibilities, ethos, interior and public life of most people today are determined more and more by television, cinema, DVDs, the internet, computer games, technologies of instant communication. Critical intellectual practices today are those that are capable of writing themselves within a frame of immediacy and

¹¹ Nigel Thrift, “Re-inventing invention: new tendencies in capitalist commodification”, *Economy & Society*, vol. 35, no 2, 2006, 301.

¹² Andrew Leyson and al., “Accounting for e-commerce: abstractions, virtualism and the cultural circuit of capital”, *Economy and Society*, vol. 34, no 3, 2005, 431.

presence; those that are able to locate themselves in nodes that attract other texts; forms of discourses that have the potential of being forwarded, redistributed, quoted and translated in other languages and texts, including video and audio. The result is not only a transformation in the language of knowledge itself, but also a *displacement* of theory, the kind of disarray in which it finds itself these days.

Today the stakes are somewhat different. The biggest challenge facing critical theory now is arguably the reframing of the disciplines and critical theory in light of contemporary conditions and the long-term sustainability of life on Earth¹³. If to survive the ecological crisis means to work out new ways to live with the Earth, then alternative modes of being human are required. The new ecological awareness forces us to understand that we must recover an appreciation of human limits and the limits of nature itself. Anthropocentrism – that is, the privileging of human existence as determining the actual and possible qualities of both thought and being - should become the object of a renewed philosophical critique. So should the age-old divide between nature/culture and the opposition between an instrumentalist attitude towards nature and what has been taken to be the ‘nature worship of the primitive’. The extent to which new modes of being human are prefigured in contemporary arts, technology and natural and environmental sciences should be at the core of any rethinking of the humanities, critical theory, or knowledge itself, beyond the subject-object dualism that separates humans and objects.

¹³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, *Critical Inquiry*, 35, 2009.

A second challenge stems from the alliance between technology, capital and militarism, with the aim of achieving what the late French critic André Gorz called *ectogenesis*. In his mind, the term ectogenesis did not simply imply the separation of science and politics from morality and aesthetics. It also stood for the attempt to industrialize the (re)production of humans in the same way as biotechnology is industrializing the (re)production of animal and plant species¹⁴. Such a project is driven by capital's attempts to transform life itself into a commodity. It represents a major inflection point in the history of humanity because it radically redefines the very nature of 'the human' and forces us to revisit the categories by which we conceive of social life. In fact, it aims to abolish nature, politics and the social as such with the view of replacing them with market relations. Such a pursuit of pure power and pure profit without any other goal but power and profit itself – a power indifferent to ends or needs except its own – is clearly the ultimate threat to the humanities.

Not so long ago, we used to conceive of the world as a huge arithmetic problem - a world in which, as Simmel reminds us, things and events were part of *a system of numbers*. We acted as if it was a world whose deep secrets could be revealed and harnessed if we subjected it to rigorous procedures of calculation, reification, formalization, classification and abstraction. Today, our world is one in which the human body, indeed life itself, is more and more part of a vast system of *info-signs* and electronic codes. It is a world

¹⁴ André Gorz, *The Immaterial*, Seagull Books, 2010.

governed by electronic reason, one in which an important dimension of technological development is to convert the human body into information (from DNA testing to brain fingerprinting, neural imaging, iris or hand recognition). A consequence of this shift is the significant alteration not only of traditional modes of perception and subjectivation, but also of traditional definitions of what “matter” consists of, and of what qualifies as “human”.

The long twentieth-century has also seen the emergence of a general phenomenon that might be called *image-capitalism*. Image-capitalism is a form of capitalism in which the image is not simply taking over the calculative functions yesterday associated with numbers, but has become a *techno-phenomenological institution*. The circuits from affect to emotions and from emotions to passions and convictions are more than ever before attached to the circulation of images meant to stimulate desire, the connection of affect and capital serving to reconfigure not only “the everyday”, but also the physical, political, and psychic conditions of embodiment in our times. Any attempt to theorize culture today must therefore attend to these new pathways of capital.

Liberal political principles (liberty, equality, the rule of law, civil liberty, individual autonomy and universal inclusion) have been overtaken by neo-liberal rationality and its criteria of profitability and efficiency. As a result of the colonization of everyday life by market relations, the worship of wealth and the workings of a mode of production that depends on the destruction of the natural foundations of life, our work, our needs, desires, thought, fantasies and self-images

have been captured by capital. An impoverished conception of democracy as the right to consume has triumphed, making it difficult to envisage a different economy, different social relations, different ends, needs and ways of life. This in turn has led to debates about whether humans do indeed want the responsibility of authoring their own lives and whether they can be expected “to actively pursue their own substantive freedom and equality, let alone that of others”¹⁵.

Furthermore, the neo-liberal drive to privatize all forms of art has resulted in the endless commodification of culture and its permanent translation into spectacle, leisure and entertainment. This significant development comes at a time when global capitalism itself is moving into a phase in which the cultural forms of its outputs are critical elements of productive strategies¹⁶. Because arts and culture have become an integral part of the economic, their capacity to engage critically with the velocities of capital can no longer be taken for granted. Spaces of culture are no longer just aesthetic spaces. They are also commercial spaces. This is one of the reasons why culture is more and more understood as “heritage”, “custom”, “the ancestral” and it is in this sense that many would like to view it as a set of practices reducible to cash. Identity on the other hand is understood as “difference” – religious, ethnic, racial, gender, national. To be sure, “culture” and “identity” have not lost their affective, auratic and expressive potential. But maybe more than ever before, marks of otherness (now called culture, identity, authenticity), even meaning itself, are more and more exchanged, valued and allocated as a

¹⁵ Wendy Brown, “We Are All Democrats Now”, in Giorgio Agamben, *Democracy in What State?*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010, 55.

¹⁶ Allen J. Scott, *The Cultural Economy of Cities*, London, Sage, 2000.

function of the market¹⁷. On the other hand, the hyper-technological enframing of the life-world and the growing implication of art and culture in global systems of militarization of consciousness represent a major challenge to critical arts practices. In the militarized landscape of our times (with its obsession of surveillance and security), to “de-militarize” culture itself has become a cornerstone of the new humanities.

Meanwhile myriad of critical practices are flourishing, alongside new forms of public and politically committed intellectual work. Some of these critical practices are direct responses to an emphatic moment of urgency which itself, seems to have rekindled the utopia of the radically new. They are also facilitated by the rapid transformations in contemporary media. The sensibilities, ethos, interior and public life of most people today are determined more and more by television, cinema, DVDs, the internet, computer games, technologies of instant communication. Critical intellectual practices today seem to be those that are capable of writing themselves within a frame of immediacy and presence; those that are able to locate themselves in nodes that attract other texts; forms of discourses that have the potential of being forwarded, redistributed, quoted and translated in other languages and texts, including video and audio. The result is not only a transformation in the language of knowledge itself, but also a *displacement* of theory and of the canonic texts of the humanities.

¹⁷ Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2009.

The World as Method and the New Southern Question

Yet, as Jean and John Comaroff argue, the biggest challenge to theory stems from the fact that at the present moment, it is the global South that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large. The world of the early twenty first century is a deeply heterogeneous world of flows and fractures, frictions and collisions. Power relations and the antagonisms that shape late capitalism are being redefined. Contemporary forms of life, work, property, production, exchange, languages testify to an openness of the social that can no longer be solely accounted by earlier descriptive and interpretive models. New boundaries are emerging while old ones are being redrawn, extended or simply abandoned. The paradoxes of mobility and closure, of connection and separation, of continuities and discontinuities between the inside and the outside, the local and the global, or of temporariness and permanence pose new challenges to critical thought and intellectual inquiry.

These challenges are nowhere as acute as in the Southern Hemisphere, perhaps the epicenter of contemporary global transformations - in any case the site of unfolding developments that are contradictory, uneven, contested, and for the most part undocumented. Here, fundamental problems of poverty and livelihood, equity and justice are still for the most part unresolved. A huge amount of labor is still being put into eliminating want, making life possible or simply maintaining it. People marginalized by the development process live under conditions of great personal risk. They permanently confront a threatening environment in conditions

of virtual functional superfluosity. In order to survive, many are willing to gamble with their lives and with those of other people, with each activity producing its own social order and rules. In contradistinction with the immediate aftermath of decolonization, the view of a controllable future has been replaced by futures that appear more fragile than ever before. And yet the desire to prepare for the unforeseeable and the unexpected persists.

In accounting for the workings of the world, the question is therefore no longer whether the bundle of questions that defined critical theory at its inception – bureaucracy and domination, innovation, originality and singularity, capitalism and its metamorphoses, reification and democracy, art and emancipation – can be of any help in the effort to understand the dramatic changes underway in the global South. It is rather that in accounting for the workings of the world today, our theory-making ought to be coming from the global South, at least in significant part (Comaroff). This is where novel ways of articulation of politics and culture are in the making. And yet this is also where the lag between actual social processes and our efforts to make sense of them conceptually is nowhere near to be closed. The effort to produce a sense of stability and permanence in the face of temporariness, instability and volatility raises new questions concerning the relationship between causality and intentionality, contingency and routine. Many of these changes can no longer be interpreted solely from within orthodox forms of political, social or cultural analysis. This is also where the question of how do emancipatory possibilities coexist with rapidly widening social differentiations is the more acute; where we wonder the most

whether the spread of private rights can coexist with the regulative and interventionist state in the name of distributive justice; where contemporary socio-economic, political, cultural and ethical questions regarding social criticism, forms of democracy, modes of the secular, forms and validity of normative judgments intersect and clash the most with established traditions of critical theory.

The study of Africa has long been (and is still) dominated by various modes of argumentation. The first is descriptivism and presentism. “Presentism” is neither a method nor a theory. It is a way of defining and reading African life forms that simply relies on a series of anecdotes and negative statements or simply turns to statistical indices to measure the gap between what Africa is and what we are told it ought to be. This way of reading always ends up constructing Africa as a pathological case, as a figure of lack. It is a set of statements that tell us what Africa *is not*. It never tells us what it *actually is*. In that sense – and this the second point - presentism is not a form of knowledge as such. Rather it is a model of misrecognition and disfiguration. It operates by segmentation of time, excision of the past and deferral of the future.

The second is a tradition of detailed, vivid and richly textured ethnography and historiography of life forms, generally in remote corners of the Continent - from the minutiae of dress, spatial organization and bodily gestures to productive techniques, rites of initiation and cult practices. This tradition of thick ethnography, interpretive history and symbolic analysis is a powerful example of how we should think and write about human agency; what analytical

strategies we should deploy in order to describe and interpret specific forms of social life in particular settings. It is also an account of what life is for and what is most at stake, especially for people living in what Jean Comaroff has called “the shadow of the modern world system” – people who are forced to undo and remake their lives under conditions of precariousness and uncertainty. The extent to which this tradition indirectly helped to set the stage for the critical debates on the forms and methods of social inquiry that dominated the mid-1980s to mid-1990s has unfortunately not been sufficiently recognized.

Indeed by the time we entered the 1990s, the study of life-forms and life-worlds in Africa had yielded precious gains in at least four major arenas of social life – struggles for livelihood, the question of singularities (rather than of individuality or individuation); the logics of mobility and multiplicity (that is, of unfinished series rather than a calculus of countable collections); and the logics of experimentation and compositional processes. These gains included, for instance, an expanded conception of rationality/subjectivity that was not limited to that of the rational, individual, self-interested and risk averse social actor; the realization that the self/singular was not only a fiction or artifice or something we come to believe through habit; that our lives were always in-the-making (the theme of life as potentiality, a process of fragile actualization); that in many ways our lives do acquire a certain unstable consistency including in the midst of shifts, instability and volatility.

Perhaps more than any other work in African studies, *Body of*

Power was one of the few studies to engage explicitly and boldly with several key concerns of social theory in the 1980s to the mid-1990s, in the wake not only of structuralism but also after the demise of certain forms of Marxism, the collapse of theories of modernization and the crisis of certain forms of world-system analysis – the matter of form and forces, questions of historical agency, the connection of context, intentionality and what today we would call subjectivity but which, in those days, had another name - consciousness or even ideology. And there was more – the making of practice and the pragmatics of repetition and change, the thorny questions of power and domination, resistance and liberation, and more generally, the vexing issues of the body and its unfinished yet excessive qualities, of the nature and figures of the political.

Furthermore, *Body of Power* helped us to understand that historical cultural structures are not necessarily mechanical reflections of underlying social and economic structures. In fact they are equal to them in “ontological” standing. In turn social and economic structures are themselves as much objective facts (if this means anything at all) as they are the products of the interpretive work of human actors. The book was published at a time when positivism was still alive in a number of fields. But its overall influence was already diminishing – at least in the humanities. The cutting edge of innovation was shifting away from structuralism, even social history to the new cultural history in its various forms. In any case Comaroff showed us how we could expand the ethnographic reach within Africa without losing the capacity to make general analytical and theoretical points. This could be done if, on the one

hand, we took seriously the task of historicizing institutions, practices and cultural repertoires and, on the other hand, if we took just as seriously the reality of the long-term sedimentation of experience – *la longue durée*.

Search for alternative acts of thinking, exploring other ways of speaking, taking seriously the visual, sounds, the senses and thinking as philosophically and historically as possible about the precariousness of life in Africa, the intensive surfaces of power and the various ways in which events coexist with accidents. Indeed, if the project is to “rethink Africa”, or for that matter to write the world from Africa or to write Africa into contemporary social theory, then there is no better starting point than the question of time. Time is neither uniform, nor homogeneous. Structures of temporality in colonial and postcolonial conditions are thoroughly entangled with the vicissitudes of the affective, with the subjective play of desire and uncertainty. In such contexts, we can only refer to the abstraction of time as a rhetorical figure. For many people caught in the vortex of colonialism and what comes after, the main indexes of time are the contingent, the ephemeral, the fugitive and the fortuitous – radical uncertainty and social volatility. Radical changes go hand in hand with various other gradual and subtle shifts, almost imperceptible, and sudden ruptures are deeply embedded in structures of inertia and the logic of routine and repetition. To account for change in such a context is therefore to account for simultaneity, bifurcation, multiplicity and concatenation. The task of the critic is therefore to help us think philosophically about the various ways in which *events coexist with accidents*.

The interrogation of time is very much related to the interrogation of life understood as the mega-forms and infrastructures of our contemporary life-world – a world of global circulatory systems as Arjun Appadurai puts it – infrastructures such as the regulative structures of the market, mass media, electronic technology – these infrastructures that have acquired a planetary reach although this reach never evidences the same depth everywhere or produces the same effects everywhere – and here James Ferguson’s *Global Shadows* might be useful. The question, of course, is to uncover the rules, regularities and reproductive logics that underpin our current condition – a condition that is of necessity global, although always global in a variety of local ways, shapes and forms.

So, what I have in mind here is the amount of labor involved in making life possible, especially in those parts of the world that Jean calls the “shadow” of the global system. What I have in mind is the relation between intentionality, contingency and routine in the making of lives under the shadow of the global system – shadows Africa seems to epitomize in the most dramatic way, precisely as the *kolossos* of our world. What is the backdrop against which the work of production or maintenance of life or of a semblance of life is done? What are the materials that individuals work from, draw on, might even take for granted, in any case consistently use?

The other thing I have in mind Arjun Appadurai has expressed it in the most eloquent terms. He defines life, especially the life of the

poor, as the effort to produce, if not the illusion, then the sense of stability, or continuity, or something like permanence in the face of the known *temporariness* or volatility of almost all the arrangements of social existence. Indeed, the question of *temporariness* has been central to recent efforts to account for life-forms and life-worlds in Africa. For me, one of the most brutal effects of neo-liberalism in Africa is the generalization and radicalization of a condition of temporariness. Appadurai is right when he argues that for the poor, many things in life have a temporary quality – not only physical resources, spatial resources, but also social, political, and moral relations. What he says about the poor in Mumbai – the fact that the social energy of the poor and his or her personal creativity is devoted to producing a sense of permanence – is true for many people in Africa. It wasn't always like that. But clearly, now, there is no way we can theorize the present if we do not take into consideration the fact that for many people, the struggle to be alive is the same as the struggle against the constant corrosion of the present, both by change and by uncertainty, as Appadurai rightly argues – especially when he ties up the struggle against the constant corrosion of the present with the work of producing one's own humanity in the face of powerful dehumanizing and at times abstract and invisible forces.

Now, I would like to suggest that the notion of “temporariness” - or the fact or condition of temporariness which is a central feature of the neo-liberal age especially for those who live in the “shadow of the world system” – this notion has an heuristic or hermeneutical dimension too. In Africa in particular, temporariness can be described as the encounter – a very regular occurrence - with what we

cannot yet determine because it has not yet become or will never be definite. It is an encounter with indeterminacy, provisionality, the fugitive and the contingent. Temporariness is not simply an effect of life changing rapidly. It also derives from the fact that vast domains of human struggle and achievement are hardly the object of documentation, archiving, or empirical description – and even less so of satisfactory narrative or interpretive understanding. It has to do with the colossal amount of things we literally do not know. It is also – as shown in the best of current history and anthropology of African life forms - that uncertainty and turbulence, instability and unpredictability, rapid, chronic, and multidirectional shifts are the social and cultural forms taken, in many instances, by daily experience.

Then there is the question of labor which, at least in the history of capitalism in South Africa, cannot be de-linked from the histories of race and of the body – especially the black body, the body that is at the same time a body and a commodity, but a body-commodity which enters in the realm of capital under the paradoxical sign of the *superfluous* - superfluity. But what does the superfluous designate? In the history of race and capital in South Africa, the superfluous means, on the one hand, the valorization of black labor-power, and on the other hand, its dispensability – the dialectics of valuation and dissipation, indispensability and expendability. It seems to me that this dialectic has been radicalized in this neo-liberal moment. The dialectics of expendability and indispensability has been radicalized in the sense that today many people are no longer indispensable specimens. Capitalism in its present form might need the territory

they inhabit, their natural resources (diamonds, gold, platinum, diamonds and so on), their forests, even their wildlife. But it doesn't need them as persons. Not long ago, the drama was to be exploited and the horizon of liberation consisted in freeing oneself from exploitation. Today, the tragedy is not even to be exploited. The tragedy is to be utterly deprived of the basic means to move, to partake of the general distribution of things and resources necessary to produce a semblance of life. The tragedy is to not be able to escape the traps of temporariness.

at a time of high social velocity. And that speed we see in almost all spheres of South African social life - this element of hyper-mobility is dramatically expressed through the emergence of a black middle class hungry to consume, willing to contract debt, to spend on housing, fridges, cars and all the trappings of a highly consumerist society, an increasingly privatized society with a very raucous and even uncivil public sphere. And then one has to look into the contradictory political effects of welfare, consumption and privation - which themselves are the result of the displacement of the sites of the political, of the refiguring of the political after years of resistance. So the political is no longer where it used to be. Welfare and consumption are, in any case, the two main technologies of social discipline, if not pacification that the government is using, after the years of mobilization, to demobilize people. It doesn't want people to be protesting too much. And it seems to me that these are two technologies critical to the making and un-making of citizenship in

South Africa today.

There is no accident without some form of collision, even collusion. I see three forms of collision/collusion happening in the continent. There is, first of all, collision/collusion when privatization has to be carried out in an environment fundamentally characterized by privation and predation. I see a second collision/collusion when extraction goes hand in hand with abstraction in a process of mutual constitution. After all, the places where capital is most prosperous on the continent today are extractive enclaves, some of which are totally disconnected from the hinterland, in some no-where that is accountable to nobody. The third instance of collision/collusion comes in the form of a coalescence of commerce and militarism. Here, in order to create situations of maximum profit, capital and power must manufacture disasters, feed off disasters and situations of extremity which then allow for novel forms of governmentality of which humanitarianism is but the most visible.

A second example is Africa-in-capitalism. The reality is that it is possible today to produce increasing quantities of commodities with decreasing quantities of labor. In other words, labor has ceased to be the great wellspring of wealth. The real economy is becoming an appendage of the speculative bubbles sustained by a finance industry that is constantly refining the art of making money by buying and selling nothing but various forms of money. The amount of capital the finance industry siphons off and manages far exceeds the amount of capital valorized in the real economy. The value of this capital is

entirely fictitious, based as it is on debt and on expectations of future growth and profit.

In spite of its uneven incorporation into the world economy, this region does tell us a lot more than we might want to think or we might want to hear about the future of global capitalism – and not only in its extractive and at times militarized version, by which I mean the kind of “primitive accumulation” that lies close to, but is not always coincident with, the vast global shadow economy dependent on illegal activities like smuggling, drug and people trafficking and money-laundering through which trillions of dollars circulate around the globe outside formal legal reckoning. Let’s call this extractive economy of unprocessed raw materials the *raw economy*. It has been the source of growth in Africa over the last decade. This growth has been largely the result of a tremendous demand for export commodities, and the resulting high price of crude oil and minerals. Africa today supplies the world economy with more than half its diamonds, platinum and cobalt and more than a third of strategic minerals like Vanadium.

The logic of *extraction* that underpins this *raw economy* might not be the same as the logic of de-industrialization that seems to partly characterize Northern economies. But both seem to have quickened the accumulation of surplus populations. Marx used to divide “surplus populations” into three categories: *latent* (made up of those with insecure employment); *floating* (composed of those cycling rapidly in and out of the labor force; and *stagnant* (comprised

of those only rarely employed)¹⁸. To these three categories we should add a fourth composed of those who *will never* be formally employed. The expansion of capitalism in this new phase of globalization and its transformation into a financial system significantly intensifies this process. In fact, it confirms global unemployment, un-employability (?) and the rise of surplus or superfluous populations as part of what Marx called its “absolute general law”. Such a rise itself points toward the growing *crisis of reproduction* going on worldwide – a crisis of reproduction Africa has, to use one of Comaroffs terms, “prefigured”. Whether old categories of “production”, “work”, “exploitation” and “domination”- and more recent ones of “bare life” or “naked life” inherited from recent theorizations of sovereignty and the state of exception - suffice to write into theory such planetary recordings of situations of misery, debt and enforced idleness is open to question.

Second, the Continent’s historical experience shows that in order to expand, capitalism paradoxically does not need to absorb everything in its path. It does not need to interiorize everything that was hitherto exterior to it. In fact, it needs to keep producing or generating an exterior. And for this to happen, it needs to do two things. On the one hand, it needs to keep jumping from place to place – hopping, as Jim Ferguson says¹⁹. The machine might be constantly “breaking down” (Jameson, 7). Whether it is repairing itself remains to be seen. In any case, whenever it undertakes to solve its local problems, it is usually either by “mutation onto larger and larger scales” or by a singular concatenation of profit-making and, where necessary, war-making activities and the militarization of trade. This

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume 1, New York, Vintage Books, 1976, ch. 25.

¹⁹ James Ferguson, *Global Shadows ...*

is how the dynamic of expansion can produce its full effects.

Third, Africa also teaches us that global capitalism cannot expand without what we should call massive *racial subsidies* or *discounts*. It needs to work through and across different scales of race as it attempts to mark people either as disposable or as waste. It needs to produce, order, segment and racialize surplus or superfluous populations to strategic effect. This takes various forms. One of these is their incorporation into military markets. Significant in this regard is the fact that today, white working class masculinity has been alienated in the de-industrializing contexts of Euro-America, allowing for an accumulation of “excess masculinity” upon which the military complex is drawing. To maintain military numbers, unemployed or under-employed whites are not enough. Vast reserves of the racially disenfranchised men have been recruited. It hardly matters that some are uneducated. Those with criminal(ized) pasts are granted “moral waivers” that allow them for the first time to join the lower rungs of military ranks and to, hence, gain a semblance of enfranchisement and citizenry. Those who are marked as waste are disenfranchised, or simply spatially confined within the prison-industrial complex²⁰. Another form is through cross-border migrant labor. Labor operating in the interstices or the entrails of the global economy is hyper-exploited. The racial subsidy is precisely what allows global capital to feel no sense of responsibility for its actions, the crimes against humanity, the horrendous damage done not only in euro-America, but to the rest of the world as well.

²⁰ Ruth Gilmore, *The Golden Gulag ...*

Fourth – Global capitalism today seems to be moving in two directions. The first is towards increasing exploitation of large parts of the world through what Marx called “primitive accumulation” which, as suggested earlier, is increasingly taking the form of a raw economy. The other direction is to try to squeeze every last drop of value out of the planet by increasing the rate of innovation and invention or through an active refiguring of space, resources and time; or even by boosting difference and inserting that difference into the cycles of reproduction of capital – the race subsidy.

Furthermore, significant too is the increasing conflict between market forces and democracy. Democracy should normally imply the rule of the majority. Since the rich in any given society are almost always a minority, democracy in the form of majority rule should – taken to its logical consequences - imply the rule of the poor over the rich. It is also the idea that people have rights that take precedence over the outcomes of market exchanges and one of the roles of a democratic government is to honor, to some extent, this most human expectation of a life outside the law of the market and the right of property. Historically, the biggest fear of capital has always been that the rule of the poor over the rich would ultimately do away with private property and the “free” play of market forces. Faced with this dilemma, capital would rather abolish democracy in order to save capitalism from a majority dedicated to economic and social redistribution.

Today, we have reached a stage where it is increasingly apparent that *capitalism is not naturally compatible with democracy*. For capitalism to be compatible with democracy,

capitalism would have to be subjected to extensive political control and democracy protected from being restrained in the name of market power. The collapse of the international credit pyramid on which the prosperity of the late 1990s and early 2000s had rested only highlights this realization. Under the emerging international politics of public debt, global capital increasingly requires that the “average citizen” pays – for the consolidation of public finances, the bankruptcy of foreign states, the rising rates of interest on public debt, and if necessary the rescue of national and international banks – with his or her private savings, cuts in public entitlements, reduced public services and higher taxation²¹.

The capacity of national states to mediate between the rights of citizens and the requirements of capital accumulation is severely affected. The tensions between economy and society, between market power and democracy, can no longer be handled exclusively inside national political communities. They have become internationalized. Markets are dictating in unprecedented ways what presumably sovereign and democratic states may still do or not for their citizens. The *pre-emption – or even suspension - of democracy* by market forces is now propounded as the only rational and responsible behavior in a world in which individual debt, public deficits and public debt have resulted in the mortgaging of the future of entire nations and the expropriation of their citizens. Euro-American democratic states – just like African states during the long years of structural adjustment programs – are in danger of being “turned into debt-collecting agencies on behalf of a global oligarchy of investors”

²¹ Wolfgang Streeck, “The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism”, *New Left Review* 71, Sept.-Oct. 2011.

and the propertied classes now firmly entrenched in what looks like “a politically unassailable stronghold, the international financial industry”(Streeck, 29).

Finally, contemporary technologies of the image and the convergence of visual, digital and consumer cultures have created belief structures and paved the way to *practices of affect* that accord a pre-eminent role to faith, sincerity and conviction sometimes in *lieu* of reason and calculation. Moreover, they have transformed what is taken for “fact” (“evidence”, “the real”), and altered the basis of our sensory experience and the connections of human beings to otherwise incomprehensible phenomena. The impact of these transformations in terms of contemporary conceptions of material causality, or in terms of the ways in which we fill the space between fear and anxiety; truth, fiction and imagination – these are questions we have hardly begun to explore and which might help to explain the troubling psychic presence of the image to the real, its capacity to double reality, its power to replace the inanimate with the animate and its anarchic unruliness. The image’s uneasy status as a double of the real and its power to excise time have their origins in a deep anxiety about what constitutes the real – an anxiety that has become a cornerstone of contemporary life. But what gives such power and value to the image at the start of the twenty first century is the fact that it keeps the human person in circulation. It traces the shadow of the human subject and creates an exact transcription of his or her presence, based on the image cast by his shadow. It captures and preserves permanently what we know to be a transient form or a fleeting life and existence.

An epistemic re-orientation is once again needed. The Western ethnocentric tendency to re-interpret the world and all its socio-economic, political and cultural processes from a Euro-American perspective has led the world to a cul-de-sac. This epistemic re-orientation has been attempted in a number of disciplines (world history in particular) where it has raised various methodological questions not unlike those implied by the Comaroffs' "counter-evolutionary" and "prefigurative" approach²². For instance, should the global system be studied as a single world system? Should it better be described in terms of its many nodes and edges or as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? Should we rather understand regions of the world in their own terms, mindful of the fact that they experience separate models of development which may overlap in various ways, but that are nonetheless essentially independent? Or is it that what we need is a horizontally integrative macro-history, one that seeks for the connections between the various events that are happening in regions that have traditionally been considered separate? To what extent our ability to link events in one region to subsequent events in those regions connected with it depends on a close identification of the series of paths that tie the various regions of the world? Under what conditions do simultaneous and momentous events triggered in a particular region of the world lead to similar outcomes and similar implications elsewhere?

This brings me to Giovanni Arrighi's *Adam Smith in Beijing*.

²² Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989; Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998; G. Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*, London, Verso, 2007.

Lineages of the Twenty First Century. As he himself said in an interview by David Harvey before his death²³, Arrighi's variety of world-systems analysis had deep African roots – just as, I must add, some of the most significant social theories of the twentieth-century (a story – that of the work Africa does in 20th-century theory - that still needs to be properly written). In fact, some of the key categories Arrighi will later deploy in his work were forged during his African experience – especially his encounter with “the Africa of the labor reserves” (Samir Amin), that is, the trajectories of accumulation through racialized dispossession in the context of white settler colonialism in Southern Africa²⁴. It is in Southern Africa that he discovered that the full dispossession of much of the African peasantry (so as to provide low cost migrant labor for agriculture, the mines and manufacturing industry) not only ended up raising labor costs. It hindered the development of capitalism by eliminating the ability of the rural labor force to subsidize its own reproduction and capital accumulation. In this sense, the Southern African experience stands in marked contrast to accumulation without dispossession and associated rural development and industrialization throughout much of East Asia.

It is significant that, having started his attempt to account for the *longue durée* of capitalism and its current crises in Africa, Arrighi ended in East Asia, and in particular in Beijing. To be sure, his project was not necessarily to de-center Euro-American theory or to highlight

²³ Giovanni Arrighi, “The Winding Paths of Capital. Interview by David Harvey”, *New Left Review* 56, March-April 2009.

²⁴ See, “Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A study of the Proletarianization of the African peasantry in Rhodesia”, *Journal of Development Studies* 6, 1970; “The Political Economy of Rhodesia”, *NLR* ...; with John Saul, *Essays on the Political Economy of Africa*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1973; “The African Crisis. World Systemic and Regional Aspects”, *NLR* 15, May-June 2002; and, with Nicole Ashoff and Ben Scully, “Accumulation by Dispossession and Its Limits: The southern African Paradigm Revisited” (Unpublished Paper, 2009)

the plurality of theories that emerge out of the processes of decolonization²⁵. He ended up in Beijing because China has become the workshop of the world. He ended up in China because Euro-America is no longer where the most advanced production facilities are located although Euro-America is still able to cream off a substantial part of the super-profits created elsewhere. He ended up in China because Euro-America depends, more than at any time in its history and nowadays in an increasingly parasitic manner, on the productive labor of others.

Indeed, some of the most energetic and innovative modes of producing value are increasingly relocated southward and eastward. The production of value is one thing. The capture or appropriation of value physically produced elsewhere is another. How surplus-value created in newly industrializing nations is captured by de-industrializing ones through transnational production networks, foreign trade and international finance is key to our understanding of the future of global capitalism. To read the world from Africa or to write Africa as part of the world might, in the near future, increasingly happen in that space of new material relations being formed between China and Africa in particular. In fact, it might be that if Euro-America is indeed evolving toward Africa as the Comaroffs argue, Africa in turn is likely to evolve toward China rather than toward Euro-America. The need to feed a vast and growing productive capacity compels Chinese capital to source raw materials all over the world, especially in Africa. China is now the world's largest consumer of Africa's copper, tin, zinc, platinum, and

²⁵ For a recent attempt, see Françoise Lionnet & Shu-mei Shih, *The Creolization of Theory*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

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

A theory from the South will therefore be a theory that attends to the conditions under which Africa (the South) and China (the East) are trying to weave the paths that tie both regions in the present and in the future. For us in Africa, one of the implications of China's (and for that matter India's) ascent for the future of theory is that it forces us to reflect anew on the multiple ways to grow the wealth of a nation. Prior to the arrival of capitalism, Africa may not have known models of growth based on labor-intensive forms of production and husbanding of natural resources. The region's subordinate incorporation into the Euro-American centered regime of accumulation did not entirely erase the historical matrixes that governed the production of wealth prior to the arrival of capitalism. One such matrix is the existence of a long tradition of market economy which mobilized human rather than non-human resources and protected rather than destroyed the economic independence and

welfare of agricultural producers. These historical matrixes might re-emerge as resources as Africa tries to formulate a place for herself in a world where the power of the West has begun to decline.

