

THEORY FROM THE SOUTH

HOW EURO-AMERICA IS EVOLVING TOWARD AFRICA

Jean Comaroff and
John L. Comaroff



*Theory from the South –
How Euro-America is evolving toward Africa*

Published by SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch under the imprint SUN PRESS.
www.africansunmedia.co.za
www.sun-e-shop.co.za

Copyright © 2011 Paradigm Publishers
Copyright © 2014 SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch
All rights reserved.
Published in agreement with Paradigm Publishers.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic, photographic or mechanical means, including photocopying and recording on record, tape or laser disk, on microfilm, via the Internet, by e-mail, or by any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission by the publisher.

First edition 2014
ISBN 978-1-920689-26-1

Set in Serifa BT 9.5/12.5
Design and typesetting: SUN MeDIA
Cover photograph by Leo Reynolds [www.flickr.com/photos/lwr/]

SUN PRESS is an imprint of AFRICAN SUN MeDIA. Academic, professional and reference works are published under this imprint in print and electronic format. This publication may be ordered directly from www.sun-e-shop.co.za.
Printed and bound by SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch.

The STIAS series

The Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study (STIAS) was born from a simple but powerful conviction: in this part of the world special initiatives are required to create and maintain an environment where we can generate and engage with conceptual frameworks and knowledge that may guide us in tracking and co-shaping global academic developments and that will allow us to address the 'big' questions and issues South Africa and the African continent face, also in a global context.

STIAS has been moulded in the tradition of Institutes for Advanced Study across the globe. It distinguished itself by encompassing all disciplines from the natural to the social sciences and humanities (with a particular emphasis on research grounded in multi-disciplinarity), by maintaining a focus on the African and South African context, and by striving towards contemporary relevance, also by actively creating avenues for communicating the results of its research projects to a wider public.

The STIAS series publications are thus aimed at a broad public which will naturally vary with specific research themes. Straddling the academic world and the forum of an engaging public is a challenge that STIAS accepts; we trust that each STIAS publication will reflect the 'creative space for the mind' in which it is rooted, stimulate public interest and debate, and contribute to informed decision making at various levels of our society.

Further information about STIAS and its research programme may be found at www.stias.ac.za.

Hendrik Geyer
STIAS Director
Stellenbosch
June 2011

stias
PUBLICATION

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part in any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way.

Cormac McCarthy,
Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West, p. 245

Social and political theory have been central to creating an understanding of how our society has functioned . . . [They must] take their place again at the leading edge of our struggle for transformation and development of South African society . . . At a deeper level, we also look to social scientists, philosophers, historians, artists and others to help us rebuild our sense of nationhood, our independence and our ability to take our place proudly in the community of nations. We should not only be consumers of theory from the developed world. We should become more active producers of social theory . . .

Ministry of Higher Education and Training, Republic of South Africa,
*Media Statement on the Development of a Humanities
and Social Sciences Charter, 10.vi.2010*

*for our son and daughter-in-law, Joshua
Adam Comaroff and Ong Ker-shing
and our daughter and son-in-law, Jane Anne
Gordon and Lewis Ricardo Gordon*

*who are cited in this book for their own scholarly work
who themselves embody theory from the south
and in whom the future of critical thought is safely vested*

*in appreciation for everything we have learned,
and continue to learn, from them*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xi
1 Theory from the South	1
2 On Personhood: A Perspective from Africa	45
3 Liberalism, Policulturalism, and ID-ology: Thoughts on Citizenship and Difference	57
4 Nations With/Out Borders: The Politics of Being and the Problem of Belonging	79
5 Figuring Democracy: An Anthropological Take on African Political Modernities	95
6 History On Trial: Memory, Evidence, and the Forensic Production of the Past	115
7 Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism	133
8 Beyond Bare Life: AIDS, (Bio)Politics, and the Neo World Order	151
Editorial Note	167
Notes	169
Bibliography	192
Index	215
About the Authors	222

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK OUR COLLEAGUES AND GRADUATE STUDENTS AT THE University of Chicago, especially in the Department of Anthropology and the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory, for the innumerable conversations that have shaped this volume of essays. Our scholarly work is nurtured in the extraordinary atmosphere and intellectual ferment for which Chicago is justly known. It has been both a pleasure and a privilege to count it as home for the past three decades. A major debt of gratitude is also owed the American Bar Foundation. Our colleagues there, too, have been a perennial source of critical insight and inspiration, and have given their enthusiastic support to our often unconventional interests over the past twenty or so years. In South Africa, our ongoing conversations with Achille Mbembe, Sarah Nuttall, Steven Robins, Jane Taylor, David Bunn, Dennis Davis, Hylton White, Kellie Gillespie, Bernard Dubbeld, and innumerable others have also had a major impact on our thinking and on the way we have come to see the world. Three individuals, in particular, have made signal contributions to the production of *Theory from the South*. Molly Cunningham, our research assistant, has tolerated our scholarly inquiries and requests, some of them not easy to deal with, with remarkable forbearance and insight. Lisa Simeone has played an important role as editorial assistant, especially in helping to ensure that the essays come together into a coherent collection. Finally, Dean Birkenkamp

is responsible for the fact that the book exists at all. We have long had both deep affection for him as a person and enormous admiration for his contribution to academic publishing. Funding for the research on which the essays in this volume are based has been afforded, very generously, by the American Bar Foundation, by the Social Sciences Division and the Lichtstern Fund (Department of Anthropology) at the University of Chicago, and by the National Science Foundation under grants #0514207 (2004) and #SE S-0848647 (2009). The introduction was written in the summer and fall of 2010 at STIAS, the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Study in South Africa, and the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften in Vienna. In both places we were warmly welcomed and supported as Visiting Fellows. We should like to express our wholehearted gratitude to all concerned – and to Lauren Coyle, who offered us an unusually insightful reading of the completed text.

Jean & John Comaroff



THEORY FROM THE SOUTH

THE IDEA IS VERY SIMPLE REALLY, ALTHOUGH ITS IMPLICATIONS ARE QUITE RADICAL. We have essayed it many times over the past two decades. So have many others.¹ 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, uppercase; concomitantly, it has regarded the non-West – variously known as the ancient world, the 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 historical, natural, and ethnographic minutiae from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths, its axioms and certitudes, its premises, postulates, and principles. Just as it has capitalized on non-Western “raw materials” – materials at once human and physical, moral and medical, mineral and man-made, cultural and agricultural – 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 subvert the epistemic scaffolding on which it is erected? What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the 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, is and ought to be coming, at least in significant part? That, in probing what is at stake in it, we might move beyond the north-south binary, to lay bare the larger dialectical processes that have produced and sustain it. Note the simultaneity of the descriptive and the prescriptive voice. It is critical to what follows in the following essays. Each is a reflection on the contemporary order of things approached from a primarily African vantage, one, as it turns out, that is full of surprises and counter-intuitions, one that invites us to see familiar things in different ways.

* * *

First, some background.

Euro-American social theory, as writers from the south have often observed (e.g., Chatterjee 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; Mbembe 2001), has tended to treat modernity as though it were inseparable from *Aufklärung*, the rise of Enlightenment reason. Not only is each taken to be a condition of the other's possibility, but together they are assumed to have animated a distinctively European mission to emancipate humankind from its uncivil prehistory, from a life driven by bare necessity, from the thrall of miracle and wonder, enchantment and entropy. Whether the Enlightenment is regarded as an epoch, as Susanne Langer (1942:12f) saw it, or, after Foucault (1997), as an "attitude," whether it be vested in Kantian philosophical 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, bioscience, or liberal humanism – or in various ensembles of these things – the modern has its *fons et origo* in the West; this notwithstanding the fact, as Scott Lash (1999:1; cf. Duara 2009) reminds us, that, in the West itself, the term has always been an object of deep contestation, polysemy, ambivalence. *Pace* Cheikh Anta Diop (1955), the Senegalese polymath for whom civilization arose in Egypt thence to make its way northward,² other "modernities" are, by implication, 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 worst, to be flatly impossible, at best to be deferred into a dim, distant, almost unimaginable future – to which, as Fanon (1967:121) put it, 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, mutation, conversion, catch-up.

Take two diverse instances, both expressions of that exteriority, both involving economies of 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, tellingly, *Northern Lights*. The narrative hinges on a conversation between a Nigerian writer and Elizabeth

Costello, the Australian novelist who, for all interpretive purposes, is 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 northerly enlightenment, African prose is taken, intrinsically, to be a performance of otherness; less an act of "self-writing" (Mbembe 2002) than an allegory of Africinity. As Žižek (n.d.) has observed, the universality presumed by Western liberalism "does not reside in the fact that its values (human rights, etc.) are [putatively] 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." The African author, by virtue of a genetic particularity, 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," a.k.a. conversion into the lexicon of liberal universalism and the humanist episteme on which it is based. The other instance is scholarly. It refers to the social sciences in the global south. 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). This, of course, alludes tacitly to the founding assumption of so-called modernization theory – the "social-science story of modernization as the theory of the true, the good, and the inevitable" (Appadurai 1996:11) – of which we shall have more to say later.

Coetzee and Chakrabarty, both of them from the antipodes, construe the exteriority of the non-West, its displacement from the Euromodern, in ways that echo a long, slowly rising tide of critique. To be sure, the object of much postcolonial theory, like other southern critical theory before it,³ has been to disrupt the 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, whose lives-and-times either elude or exceed its verities, whose ways of apprehending the world make manifest their difference. Bhabha's call is echoed by those social scientists who argue for the distinctive forms of knowledge yielded by peripheral vision (Wedeen 2008; cf. Piot 2010). And by those who have pointed to the qualifications and question marks brought by non-Western experience to mainstream discourses about the nature of modernity itself (Ferguson 1999:17; Chalfin 2010). 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 (cf. Jones 1971). We shall return to the ex-centric as an angle of vision. It offers nuance to what we seek to do throughout much of this volume.

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. Even critical theorists take the “driving engine” of late capitalism to lie wholly in Euro-America (Chakrabarty 2000:7), thus to “create fissures between worlds that [are] in fact intimately linked, that [are] part of precisely the same cultural and historical moments” (Gordon and Roberts 2009:4), the same intricately articulated political economy. 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 and consciousness everywhere, she argued, and by rendering ideology invisible, post-structuralist theory participated in an economy of representation that has kept the non-European other “in the Self’s shadow” (p.280) – thereby allowing the Universal Subject to remain securely on Euro-American terrain, whether it be on the world map of 19th-century imperial rule or the global topography of “decolonized” capital.

Her point is well taken. However, when she goes on to dissect the technologies of Eurocentrism, Spivak (1988:281) seems to court the very psychic self-obsession that she takes to task 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,” she herself puts social and material conditions more or less “under erasure.” 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, notwithstanding their multiple displacements. Why not? Because, being active, sentient human subjects, they were more than just a “necessary supplement” (Derrida 1974:146) or a “constitutive outside” (Butler 1993:39)⁴ to the production of European consciousness, not to mention European material, moral, and political life. Even at their most inarticulate, the unsettling presence of those others has always agitated 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*, had to be exorcized from polite society at the metropole.

What is more, because colonial societies were complex socio-cultural and economic formations, they entered into complex, often 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” (Toscana 2005:40). Hence the recognition on the part of Spivak (*ibid.*) and others that overseas “possessions” were critical sources of surplus value and cultural 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 vaunted tenets of liberal European law and civility. This was owed to the fact

that efforts to impose imperial sovereignty occurred in places of partial visibility, places where working misunderstandings bred reciprocal fetishisms, unwritten agreements, unruly populations, and protean social arrangements, many of which were taken to require unusual techniques of control (Pietz 1985-88; Stoler 2006:9).

Above all, these frontiers fostered conjunctures of Western and non-Western values, 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.” Sometimes, too, they were fertile staging grounds – even, as is often said nowadays, laboratories – for ways of doing things that were not possible elsewhere: experiments, for instance, in urban architecture and planning (Wright 1991), in brutally profitable methods of labor discipline (Worger 1987), in socially engineered public health regimes (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:228ff), and in untried practices of governance and extraction, bureaucracy and warfare, property and pedagogy (cf. Mitchell 1988; Dirks 1992). Nor is this all in the distant past. In 2000, US Republican Senator and House Majority Whip 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’ ...”⁵ The edges of empire also allowed for bold forays across established lines of sexuality, sociality, race, and culture that opened up unfamiliar sorts of intimacy and modes of reproduction (Stoler 2002; Hoad 2007); sometimes, as for the 19th-century English literateur Charles Kingsley, the vigor and vitality of those frontiers threw light on the bloodless decadence of modernity on the home front (Wee 2003:37). Which, in turn, ensured that the traces of colonial others could never be fully removed or repressed. Just as Euromodernity sowed its seeds among those others, so the signs and spoils, the seductions and scandals, the indictments and injuries of the colony made themselves palpably present in the domestic politics and the moral imagination of the metropole, breaching its boundaries and inflecting its interiors (Bhabha, after Fanon, 1994b:116; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997).

As this underscores, modernity was, almost from the start, a north-south collaboration – indeed, a world-historical production – albeit a sharply asymmetrical one. Whatever its philosophical conceits, however hard it may seek to “purify” itself (Latour 1993), it has always been a composite of multiple significations, materializations, and temporalities, one that is perpetually contested, conceptually hard to pin down, historically labile. As an ideology, moreover, 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 to build their own versions. Hyphenated in many respects, capitalist-modernity has realized itself, if *very* unevenly, in the great aspirations of liberalism, among them the politico-jural edifice of democracy, the “free” market, civic rights and civil society, the rule of law, the separation of the public from the private, the secular from the sacred. 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 – or have been rendered disposable by virtue of having no value to extract.

Precisely because it has plied its abrasive course in so many disparate contexts, at so many intersections of the capitalist imperium, in other words, modernity has always been both one thing and many, always both a universal project and a host of specific, parochial emplacements. This is self-evidently true in Europe, where national imaginings have never been all alike, neither within nation-states – a point made repeatedly by the “industrial novel” in British literature, from *North and South* (Gaskell 1855) to *Nice Work* (Lodge 1988) – nor between them (see, e.g., Therborn 1995, Eisenstadt 2002); hence the rise of a discursive domain dubbed, broadly, “comparative [a.k.a. ‘multiple’] modernities.”⁶ 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, at once dumping grounds for their superfluous people-and-products and sources of raw value, rare exotica, and racialized labor. Here the violence and the magic, the expropriation and alienation, the syncretism and archaism suppressed in Europe – hidden from view, like the woman in Rochester’s attic – were often promiscuously visible. So, too, were the local inventions, accommodations, and hybrids produced in different colonial contexts: forms of domestic and urban life, of peasant-proletarianization, and of displaced cosmopolitanisms forged in the spaces between promise and privation, between inclusion and erasure, there to assert their own contemporaneity, their own . . . modernity.

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. Or to displace an established telos with its opposite, leaving teleology itself intact. We also seek to do more than note that many of the emergent features, the sublimated structures, and the 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 disrupting received geographies of core and periphery, relocating southward – and, of course, eastward as well – some of the most innovative and energetic modes of producing value. And, as importantly, part or whole ownership of them. Which is one of the things that makes contemporary capitalism distinctive, thus to alter the lineaments of global modernity *tout court*.

It is in this light that we offer a prolegomenon to the essays to follow, to their central claim: that, because the history of the present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes, it challenges us to make sense of it, empirically and theoretically, from that distinctive vantage. This, of course, is merely to put into the indicative voice the interrogative posed at the outset. In making this claim, *Theory from the South* is built on two closely interwoven arguments. We develop them, as we intimated earlier, by taking Africa as our point of departure. In the final analysis, however, our horizons extend to the global order at large.

Mise en Scène, in Two Parts

Afromodernity, In Practice and Theory

The first argument is that modernity in the south is not adequately understood as a derivative or a *doppelgänger*, a callow copy or a counterfeit, of the Euro-American “original.” To the contrary: it demands to be apprehended and addressed in its own right. Modernity in Africa – which, as Masilela (n.d., 2003) shows, has a deep history – is a hydra-headed, polymorphous, mutating ensemble of signs and practices 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 capitalist imperium, partly with others of the same hemisphere, partly intra-continently, partly in localized enclaves. As in the north, it has manifest itself in a number of registers at once, from the literary to the lay, the philosophical to the pragmatic. And, as in the north, it has been mired in ambivalence, contestation, and “entangled meanings” (Deutsch, Probst, and Schmidt 2002; Nuttall 2009; Táíwò 2010:13). Should Afromodernity be part of a universal enlightenment, of Christianity and civilization, of Shakespearean English and scientific reason – the very things long presented to Africa as the epitome of Western culture – as some black South African intellectuals argued in the early 20th century (Masilela n.d.:6)? Should it choose only “the good things” of that civilization and discard the rest, as R.V. Selope Thema once put it?⁷ Or should it “combine the native and the alien, the traditional and the foreign, into something new and beautiful,” as H.I.E. Dhlomo (1977) wrote in 1939? In point of fact, there has been a steady move from the first to the third; a move, that is, toward the mimetic, understood here as a process that “establish[es] similarities with something else while at the same time inventing something original” (Mbembe 2008:38f, after Halliwell 2002). Like its European counterpart, modernity in Africa entailed a re-Genesis, a consciousness 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 modernity, in sum, has always had its own trajectories, giving moral and material shape to everyday life. It has yielded diverse yet distinctive means with which to make sense of the world and to act upon it, to fashion social relations, commodities, and forms of value appropriate to contemporary circumstances – not least those sown by the uneven impact of capitalism, first colonial, then international, then global. In so doing, it has been at once productive and destructive in flouting, reconstructing, repudiating, remaking European life-ways; Thema’s prescription turns out to have been more or less descriptive. Sometimes the process has been strikingly self-conscious, as among Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s (Masilela 2003:506f) and, later, black South Africans of the New Africa Movement, not least Pixley ka Isaka Seme (1905-06), who famously insisted, in “The Regeneration of Africa,” that the continent not be compared with Europe since it had its own genius; that it was a “giant ... awakening,” about to “march to the future’s golden door”; that, being “part of the new order of things,” it was entering “a higher complex existence, ... a unique civilization” founded on “precious creations of its own,” creations alike

“spiritual and humanistic, moral and eternal” – creations, we might add, that were to be inseminated by other influences from the south, from the likes of Mohandas Gandhi and the African diaspora in the New World.

Much the same rhetoric was to suffuse anticolonial movements and post-independence nationalisms. Kwame Nkrumah, for example, quoted Seme at length in opening the First International Congress of Africanists in 1964. That rhetoric is also audible in the assertive alterities of Pan-Africanism, Ethiopianism, Negritude, and Afrocentrism; in musical genres, Nollywood movies, and surrealist art that spell out profoundly local aspirations; in experiments with communitarianism, democracy, born-again belief, and Pentecostal prosperity cults; in high-minded visions, like *Ubuntu*, the call for a generically “African humanity” and, even more ambitiously, the “African Renaissance.” At other times, Afromodernity has lain implicit in signs and practices, dispositions and discourses, aesthetic values and indigenous ways of knowing. Nor is it best labeled an “alternative modernity.”⁸ It is a *vernacular* – just as Euromodernity is a vernacular – wrought in an ongoing, geopolitically situated engagement with the unfolding history of the present. And, like Euromodernity, it takes many forms.

It is important, in this respect, to distinguish modernity from modernization (cf. Appadurai 1996), a point that takes us away from Africa and onto more general terrain for a moment. Allow us a digression, therefore, before we go on to the second of our arguments. It will return us squarely to the central thesis of *Theory from the South*.

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-actualizing 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 technical skill, to the pursuit of justice by means of rational governance, to a restless impulse toward innovation whose very iconoclasm brings a hunger for things eternal (cf. Harvey 1989:10). Modernization, by contrast, posits a strong normative teleology, a unilinear trajectory toward a future – capitalist, socialist, fascist, African, whatever – to which all humanity ought to aspire, to which all history ought to lead, toward which all the peoples ought to evolve. This telos has expressed itself in self-styled 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 the effects of practices pursued in its name: between, for example, the promise of a more equal humanity and the burgeoning biopolitics of difference across the world; between the promise of global economic development and the reality of spiraling underdevelopment for the populations of the south, of rising Gini coefficients, and of increasingly violent modes of extraction everywhere. We are less concerned here with these contradictions – they are the subject of a large literature – than with the confusion itself 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 this volume.

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 (1993:xii). We concur, too, with his observation that its analytic and everyday connotations are often confused and conflated (*ibid.*: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 a shifter (Silverstein 1976), whose meaning derives from the context of its use. It serves to situate people – recursively, in mutually reinforcing oppositions (Irvine and Gall 2000) – on the near or the far side of the great divide between self and other, the present and prehistory, here and there, the general and particular; oppositions that are mobilized in a range of registers from theological treatises to party platforms, from policy documents to black letter law, from cartographies of social space to the bureaucratic management of populations.

The positivist social sciences have also deployed this grammar of oppositions, of course; hence their embrace of such foundational antinomies as mechanical:organic solidarity, ascription:achievement, status:contract, *gemeinschaft:gesellschaft*, savage:civilized, precapitalist:capitalist, and so on and on. Modernization theory, ascendant in sociology from the 1950s, was no exception; it set out to isolate, define, and measure the variables according to which human populations might be placed along an imagined continuum from the pre- to the modern, the past to the present. Despite having been subjected to repeated critique, Cooper (2005:9ff) argues – and this takes us to the nub of the debate – both the conceptual foundations and the Eurocentric telos of that paradigm linger on in colonial and 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 African modernity, of what it actually is and how we might typify it. For him, the problem is to be solved by a strong dose of “rigorous historical practice” (p.13), as though a protean, contested phenomenon of this sort might finally be laid bare by recourse to frank empiricism,⁹ as though the empirical itself can be read without a theoretical frame to focus it.

Ironically, by the canons of rigorous historical practice, colonial and postcolonial studies are not so easily dismissed. Some work in that tradition *has* taken pains to transcend the assumptions and methods of modernization theory. And to do so with reference to carefully grounded histories and ethnographies that do not confuse the empirical with brute empiricism. Constructs like “alternative modernities” have their limitations, as we have intimated. But they were developed precisely to move *beyond* the binary opposition between the premodern and the modern,¹⁰ to capture complex facts on the ground, to repudiate the telos that was held to chart the course from one to the other, and to avoid conflating modernization with Westernization

– although there have been historical movements outside Europe, like the 19th-century Arab modernism of Jamāl-al-din al-Afghāni (Hourani 1983), that have taken the European version as their model.

But there is something else here, something more general. Cooper's effort to counter indiscriminate uses of the term underscores why it is so important not to mistake modernity for modernization. Or to treat modernity as an analytical construct without also considering the conditions of its material existence. Cooper laments that, with the repudiation of modernization theory and its telos, "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 have represented non-Western worlds as just so many not-yet-modern outsides, the capitalist imperium *has* no exteriors, although it has many peripheries. Its exclusions and its margins, as critical theorists of various stripes have stressed, are a requisite condition for the growth of its centers.

In that light, it is necessary to take seriously the 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 constraints and contradictions, absences and aporias. Which is where the *empirical* fact of "multiple modernities" – a fact that Cooper himself recognizes in another work (Stoler and Cooper 1997:32)¹¹ – 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 instance of it. Nor is the demand for its fruits among those deprived of them negated by accepting that there may be more than one modernity, a fear expressed by James Ferguson (2006:33, 176f), who cautions that, in celebrating "alternative modernities," we may all too easily scant the very real inequalities that exist in the world; inequalities, one might add, to be found as much in the *lumpen* heart of global metropolises as in some of Africa's most remote regions. It is not that people in the global south "lack modernity." It is that many of them are deprived of the bounty of modernization by the inherent propensity of capital to create edges and undersides in order to feed off them.

Modernity, as we said earlier, is a concrete abstraction. It has realized, marked forms in the world, being a product of human activity, but also exists as a reified order of imagined, transactable value. It is a Big Idea: the term refers *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 social, economic, cultural, and moral dimensions of life in specific times and places – and, simultaneously, is invoked to describe the epochal and the universal. Popular constructs of this kind are as integral to theory-work in the social sciences, history among them, 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, as Cooper (2005:116) does, that to use "modernity" in the plural rather than the singular, to treat it as more than a vernacular category and/or a strategy of claim-making, or to elevate it to an abstraction at all, is to give it "artificial coherence"? What exactly is artificial

about it, beyond the fact that every concept interrogated 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” (*ibid.*)?¹² To bring this back to present concerns and to our own argument, it follows from what we have been saying that African modernity 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 – as the likes of Pixley ka Isaka Seme said long ago – that speak to a tortuous endogenous history, one still actively being made. A history, as it turns out, not running behind Euro-America, but ahead of it.

The Global South: Hyper-Extensions of the Present, Harbingers of Future-History

This brings us to the second argument of the volume. Contrary to the received Euromodernist narrative of the past two centuries – which has the 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, given the unpredictable, under-determined dialectic of capitalism-and-modernity in the here and now, it is the south that often is the first to feel the effects of world-historical forces, the south in which radically new assemblages of capital and labor are taking shape, thus to prefigure the future of the global north. It is this that we seek to capture in our pointedly provocative, partially parodic, counter-evolutionary subtitle, *How Euro-America Is Evolving Toward Africa*. In using the trope of the “counter-evolutionary,” we repeat, we do not intend simply to reverse the telos at the heart of modernist reason. We mean, instead, to call into question the epistemic reflex on which that reason is founded.

It scarcely needs to be said that the received narrative itself has always been flawed. The north has long adopted techniques, knowledges, and practices that have prior histories in Africa and elsewhere. British industrialization, for example, as Jack Goody (2006:210) shows, drew on means of mechanization and mass production developed earlier in China and India. Subsequently, many northern innovations emerged directly out of the colonial encounter, the impact of which on the metropolises of Europe has been expansively documented. Not only did this include the repatriation, appropriation, and mimicry of vernacular “talents,” like cuisines, couture, and creative arts. It also ran to more weighty things, from medical expertise and technologies of the body to spiritual beliefs and modes of managing publics. Even more, the in-migration of formerly colonized populations has brought with it species of difference that have transformed Euromodern nation-states, testing the limits of their liberal foundations. But there are also other ways in which the global north is becoming more like the south. These owe less to north-south encounters than to historical exigencies of different kinds. We shall give any number of examples in the chapters to follow. They stretch from the nature of personhood and participatory democracy through the politics of identity and occult economies to sovereignty over life and death.

The point – that the place of Africa in the received narrative of Universal History is fundamentally flawed – need not be labored further. Here, as we said a moment ago, we seek to stress something else: that, while Euro-America and the south are currently caught up in the *same* all-embracing world-historical processes, it is in the latter that the effects of those processes tend most graphically to manifest themselves. Old margins are becoming new frontiers, places where mobile, globally competitive capital – much of it, these days, southern and eastern – 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 have long thrived; where those performing outsourced services have gone on to develop cutting-edge info-tech empires of their own, both legitimate and illicit; where new, late-modern idioms of work, time, and value take root, thus to alter planetary practices. Which is why, in the dialectics of contemporary world history, the north appears to be “evolving” southward. Put another way, as we do in Chapter 3, Africa, South Asia, and Latin America seem, in many respects, to be running slightly ahead of the Euromodern world, harbingers of its history-in-the-making.

This cuts to the very heart of contemporary capitalism: to the means of primary production associated with it, to its preferred forms of labor extraction, to its modes of accumulating and circulating wealth, to its political and legal geographies, to its interpolation in the institutions of governance. In recent decades, capital, with its stress on flexibility, liquidity, and deregulation, has yet again found untapped bounty in former colonies, where postcolonial states, anxious to garner disposable income and often in desperate need of “hard” foreign currency, have opened themselves up to business; specifically, to corporations that have little compunction in pressuring ruling regimes to offer them tax incentives, to relax environmental controls, to remove wage restrictions and worker protections, to limit liability and discourage union activities, even to allow them to enclave themselves – in short, to bow to the tenets of *laissez-faire* at their most extreme, their most sovereign. As a result, it is increasingly 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 exported to Euro-America.

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 ecolaws, to drop minimum wages, to subsidize its infrastructure from public funds, and to protect it from loss, liability, and taxation,¹³ this, often, over the unavailing protests of various sectors of 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, characteristic of life in much of the non-West; also its massively widening wealth gap, which, by some accounts (e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Jackson 2009),¹⁴ is seriously destabilizing economies and societies across the globe under the alibi of unimpeded growth. Which is why, too, we are

beginning to see public intellectuals in the USA publish books with titles like *Third World America* (Huffington 2010).

At the same time, some nation-states in the south, by virtue of having become economic powerhouses – India, Brazil, South Africa – evince 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, an African-America eager to experiment with constitutional law, populist politics, and, if hesitatingly, post-neoliberal forms of redistribution. Or, in yet another, the rise of new forms of urbanism, as in Nigeria, where, observe Joshua Comaroff and Gulliver Shepard (1999), “many of the trends of canonical, modern, *Western cities can be seen in hyperbolic guise* . . . Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos.” That city, adds Rem Koolhaas, is “a paradigm for [the] future” of *all* cities. A “megalopolis of 18 million” whose prime real estate is as expensive as comparable property in Manhattan (Guo 2010:44), it is, he says, at “the forefront of globalizing modernity” (Koolhaas and Cleijne 2001:652-53). 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 eschews, ignores, or misrecognizes the “coevalness” – i.e., the contemporaneity – of the non-West with the West, which is what Fabian accused anthropology of doing. It is whether the West recognizes that *it* is playing catch-up in many respects with the temporality of its others.

But this is a different aspect of the story. In large part, it is its undersides, its *lumpen* ends, that are 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, most trenchant populist critiques of the neoliberal turn – and the most skeptical responses to free-market triumphalism – 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.¹⁵

But why? Why has Africa in particular, and the south in general, come, in significant respects, to anticipate the unfolding history of the global north? Why, for good or ill, are the material, political, social, and moral effects of the rise of neoliberalism most graphically evident there? We have already begun to address the question, and will return to it below. Suffice it to say here that the answer begins with the past, with the fact that most colonies were zones of occupation geared toward imperial extraction (see above). To the degree that neocolonial politics and economics have conspired, more or less coercively, 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,