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Global South 'in Theory' and Southern Epistemology

Abstract I: This essay offers a reflection on the 'global South' category, starting from *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said to finish with the last work by Jean and John Comaroff *Theory from the South*, thus joining the contemporary theoretical debate on the future of the 'southern world'. Since the time of Said, the planet has seen radical changes and the East-West axis of the Cold War has been replaced by the postcolonial North-South axis, with the added complication of the rise of China as a global economic power in the East. This essay tries to untangle such complications through the positions of, among others, Achille Mbembe, reflecting on the fate of Africa as linked to that of China, and of Franco Cassano, with his hope in a southern epistemology, not yet devoured by capitalist fundamentalism.

Abstract II: Il saggio offre una riflessione sulla categoria di 'Sud globale', partendo da *Cultura e imperialismo* di Edward Said per finire all'ultimo lavoro di Jean and John Comaroff *Theory from the South*, inserendosi quindi nel dibattito teorico contemporaneo sul futuro del 'mondo meridionale'. Dai tempi di Said, il pianeta ha visto cambiamenti radicali e all'asse della guerra fredda Est-Ovest si è sostituito quello postcoloniale Nord-Sud, con la complicazione dell'emergenza della Cina come potenza capitalista mondiale in quanto Est. Complicanze che il saggio cerca di districare attraverso le posizioni, fra gli altri, di Achille Mbembe che riflette sul destino africano legato all'ascesa cinese e di Franco Cassano con la sua speranza in una epistemologia del Sud, non ancora divorata dal fondamentalismo capitalista.

A Little Story: Intro

I recently decided to have my old Vespa 50 *special* fixed and went to a garage. Once there, I saw some brand new shining Vespas and the mechanic suggested I should buy a new Vespa rather than having mine repaired. It was cheaper he concluded. I said "I didn't know Piaggio produces new models". He replied "No, Piaggio don't, but LML do". "LML?", I asked. "Yes, the Indian company" he answered. I don't know why, but this occurrence took my mind directly to the Italian marines held in India, accused of killing two Indian fishermen by mistake off the Kerala coast, and to the fact that they were still detained there. I connected the brand new Indian Italian-style vespas, the brand new Indian foreign policy, and the Italian state which in the past had failed to prosecute American soldiers, who had accidentally killed Italian citizens on Italian soil. "Yes, the world is changing" was my conclusion. It is changing and 'evolving' toward the South, to unfaithfully use Jean and John Comaroff's provocative term from their book *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (2012), of which I will talk later.

Edward Said and Imperialism at the Turn of History: West/East to North/South

At the time when *Culture and Imperialism* was written (at the beginning of the 1990s, a few years after the fall of the Berlin wall), in search of an alternative both to "the politics of blame and of hostility", Said accurately wrote: "the old divisions between colonizer and colonized have re-emerged in what is often referred to as the North-South relationship" (Said 1994: 18). To rephrase Said's sentence, he sensed that with the end of the Cold War the world divide was no longer West/East; that is to say, the world split between Euro-American capitalism and Sino-Soviet communism – vying with each other for the so-called Third World. Rather, the divide was North/South, that is to say, a division between northern capitalist countries and southern pre-capitalist countries.

Unlike many statesmen of that time, eager to construct the new 'proper'

world order after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he also sensed that this new partition was potentially dangerous, since it might have triggered devastating cultural and material wars. Indeed, terrible wars *between* and *within* national states were taking or had taken place over and around the same decade (the Gulf Wars of the Bushes and Yugoslavia's violent dismembering, to name but the main ones). He was also right about the inequities of power and wealth in the global setting, which were interpretable as having something to do with new forms of imperialism. He pointed out that the South, or "the nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers" (Said 1994: 20). Twenty years have passed since then and the complex global dynamics have reframed our ideas of hegemonic centres and subaltern peripheries. What was clear and right, though, was that what we now call 'global South' roughly corresponded and still corresponds to former colonized countries. The Comaroffs agree with Said when they claim that: "The closest thing to a common denominator among them [the southern countries] is that many were once colonies [...] 'Postcolonial', therefore, is something of a synonym, but only an inexact one". One inexactness is that countries like Thailand and Ethiopia were never formally colonized. So they conclude that the 'global South' is

less a geographical place than a polythetic category [since] the label itself is inherently slippery, inchoate, unfixed [...] "*the Global South*" assumes meaning by virtue not of its content, but of its context, of the way in which it points to other things. Of these, the most significant, obviously, is its antinomy with "*the Global North*" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012: 45).

So the South is neither solely a historical nor solely a geographical place. Further to history and geography, one should also consider economy or wealth. If it is

true that the line between North and South is unstable and porous (there is much South in the North, much North in the South), it is above all true that we can refer to the South as a place where the majority of people live in a condition of scarcity, so far.

But since we want to give a more general meaning to the vast category of the global South, then the Comaroffs' definition of the South as a 'way' in which it points to other things may be largely acceptable. I like to think of the global South as a vast imagined community (Anderson 1983) made up of a multiplicity of communities, similarly imagined, and which similarly point to *other things*. The very problem is which other things one must point to.

North/South Now. Upside Down World?

If Said could foresee devastating new wars and the nature of the new world axis, he couldn't predict present global trends, which, according to the Comaroffs' mock-counter-evolutionist subtitle, Euro-America, or the global North, is 'evolving' toward Africa. And, perhaps, the global South is, to use again their semi-ironic stance, 'regressing' toward Euro-America. Said wrote *Culture and Imperialism* before the ascent of the so-called BRICSA. What will happen now that Brazil, India and China are, according to the historicist paradigm, 'developing'? And now that America is supposedly becoming, as Arianna Huffington would put it, Third World (Huffington 2010)? Indeed, many questions are raised and, in truth, few answers can be given. But let us tackle the issue closely.

According to the Comaroffs, firstly, modernity is a North-South collaboration, albeit asymmetrical; secondly, this collaboration is now inverting its unevenness. In their words:

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 dialectics 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 (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012: 12).

And although they claim they are not simply reversing the notorious Hegelian teleology, they add: "Put another way [...] 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" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012: 13). To put it yet in another way, neoliberal capital, with its stress on flexibility and deregulation, is once more finding room in former colonies (which are eager to get easy incomes) to practice in a postcolonial context new extreme *laissez-faire* economy. The difference now is that these political-economic experiments are first made in the South, then exported to the North. That is why Euro-America would be semi-mockingly, but not teleologically evolving toward Africa (1). Some examples of political-economic experiments are: the emergence of Brazil as the world's first biofuel economy; the impact of the Hong Kong banking sector on the development of new species of financial market; new forms of urbanism, as in Nigeria, with its megalopolis Lagos (18 million people).

But if the present global South prefigures the future of the global North, is this future utopian or dystopian? The Comaroffs are not interested in this question. It is a question, though, that interests Srinivas Aravamudan, who in the on-line forum on Comaroffs' book writes:

Such a thesis is unable or unwilling to make up its mind about something crucial, which is whether the realization of Africa as the endpoint of late capitalism is truly an advancement in the sense of the nineteenth-century idea of progress, or a trajectory that is an augury of the dystopian

outcome of capitalism: in other words this is Marxist tragedy disguised as Hegelian farce (Aravamudan 2012).

If so, it is as if there is no alternative to the capitalism-and-modernity dialectics: urban blast, hyper-populist or autocratic democracy, epidemics of HIV-AIDS, social policies subsiding under the enormous pressure of the rapacious neoliberalism, all of them represent a dystopian, degenerate future, rather than a utopian one. And, truly, this is a problem, regardless of whether the vanguard-place of its implementation is Africa or another continent.

North and South. And the Confucian Capitalism of the New East?

To put it blatantly, the main problem with the world interpreted through the North/South axis is that it leaves out a key cardinal direction: the East, where China is. According to the Comaroffs, China is both North and South, and greatly profits from this position, playing in the interstices between worlds. In truth, the issue is that China is neither North nor South but plainly East. Above all, it epitomizes a peculiar form of capitalism able to turn both North and South into its periphery. Before India bought the English Land Rover, China bought the American IBM. China owns an important portion of American government debt, it is nearly doubling U.S. exports in 2013, and is the world's largest consumer of Africa's raw materials. If something is evolving toward somewhere, this is the world evolving toward China, if not toward its bizarre form of state or party capitalism, at least toward its most brutal exploitation of labor, fostered by both domestic and global capital. According to Achille Mbembe, it is especially Africa which is evolving toward China and if China wants to build a stronger domestic economy it has to rely precisely on Africa: "A theory from the South will therefore attend not only to 'How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa', but also 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"

(Mbembe 2012).

Indeed, in their rejoinder to the criticism raised by their book, the Comaroffs deny the world is evolving toward China but admit it might indeed become the workshop of the world. They write: "It certainly *is* a critical node in the new global imaginary, one that writes modern history again as an evolutionary narrative, this time with East Asia as its endpoint" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012b). Thus, they admit the importance of that cardinal point on the compass of theory. If so, then, we should say something about it. But a step back, first. We usually connect the East to religious fundamentalism and forget about western fundamentalisms. One of these is, so to speak, Protestant capitalism. Now the latter is being overcome by another, the so-called "Confucian capitalism" (2). Apparently, while we talk about South and North, the contest is between these two ways of controlling the world, both belonging, if not to the same cultural realm, to the same economic one, and both vying with each other for the conquest of the planet, a conquest seemingly passing through the conquest of Africa and its raw materials.

Southern Epistemology as a Way Out of the Capitalist Dead End?

The question is: is the global South, or for that matter the postcolonial world, aware of this danger? Or is it only light-heartedly welcoming the latest stage of the capitalism-and-modernity dialectics? Is a different southern epistemology possible through which to challenge such dialectics? According to some leading thinkers of/from the South the answer is yes. To Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "the conflicts between hegemonic, neoliberal globalization and counter-hegemonic globalization are more intense in [southern] countries" (de Sousa Santos 2005: 157). Mbembe, in turn, believes that Chinese symbiosis with Africa forces the latter to reflect on an alternative way to increase the wealth of a nation, a way not yet forgotten, prior to the arrival of capitalism, which did not wholly erase African historical matrixes:

One such matrix is the existence of a long tradition of market economy and long-distance trading diasporas which mobilized human rather than non-human resources and protected rather than destroyed the economic independence and welfare of agricultural producers. Under what conditions could these historical matrixes re-emerge or be reshaped as resources as Africa tries to formulate a place for herself in a world where the power of the West has begun to decline is certainly a question the rise of China and India poses to the future of theory from Africa (Mbembe 2012).

Franco Cassano takes the existence of the southern counter-thought for granted. To him: "The South poses the problem of justice, not the quest for power; a concept of life that does not seek to dominate nature and other cultures, but to live in harmony with both" (Cassano 2012: LIV).

The problem is that the quest for justice is more thought than practiced, above all by southern governments, as the global South is showing, yielding to both Protestant and Confucian or, considered that the latter term is controversial, Asian capital (3). Is there a way out? A way out, maybe, related to the plurality of the postcolonial world, a South that stretches from America to India and passes through the hybridity of the Mediterranean and the immensity of the African continent? A polythetic South, the Comaroffs call it. Can this plurality, these multiple trajectories be a possible exodus from the monotheism of capitalism, be it western or eastern? Cassano hopes so. The problem, for him, is the prevention of the fundamentalism of one of the cardinal points. This is his 'contrapuntal' solution, which remind us of the final words of Said's book "No one today is purely one thing" (Said 1994: 407):

We must be the center in the only way this is possible today: as a crossroads, as the ability to play each cardinal point against the fundamentalism of the others ... If we are North, we must point South; if

we are South, we must point North; if we are West, we must point East; and if East, West. Today only two of these directions are followed, and it is herein that the lack of moderation lies (Cassano 2012: 123-124).

Finally, if the South does not want to fall into the fundamentalist trap, it should make its voice of 'zero power rule' heard before it is too late, that is to say, before Monsieur le Capital after having devoured the North gobbles up the South, and the old game of master and slave goes on as usual, even though in a new or reversed guise. Ultimately, we are talking of the weakness-strength that would allow the South to dare *parresia*, that is to say, to tell the power the truth, from whichever cardinal direction it comes.

NOTES

1. The Comaroffs stress, in an on line forum on their book, that "'counter' here, is intended to mean not just *inversion* but also *negation*. We deploy it to point to irony, not to teleology". They take the example of urban scapes, which "as global phenomena, have strongly convergent tendencies [...] because of the way that capital, and its cultural mediations, tend to play themselves out under specific demographic, infrastructural, and sociological conditions; conditions that, again, are most graphically visible in places like Lagos. Not everywhere, nor all in the same way – hence, again, our anti-teleological insistence – but in ways that materialize the hydra-headed configurations of contemporary capitalism as it takes its historical course. These configurations, we stress, are ill-captured by terms like 'deterioration' or 'advancement' or any of the other dualisms that we seek so carefully to avoid in *Theory from the South*" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012b).
2. The expression "Confucian capital" takes for granted that Asian capitalism is informed by new-Confucianism as much as Euro-American capitalism is informed by Protestantism. Not so for Lionel Jensen (1998), who claims that

Confucianism is a Western invention, traceable to the Jesuits in late imperial China (a sort of orientalisation and essentialisation of some particular qualities of historical Confucianism such as propriety, social discipline, loyalty), an invention that assumes Confucian values as the motor behind China's economic success. It is to be noted that, in the past decades, those values used to be considered not a stimulus but an obstacle to Chinese modernisation by Western sinologists.

3. The debate around the rise of capitalism in the East is as old as the rise of the so-called 'tiger economies' (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea), and Confucian ethics has often, if controversially, been involved as an explanation following Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (see Macfarquhar 1980; Berger 1988; Kahn 1979).

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