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## THE OMNIVOROUS SCIENCE: JEAN AND JOHN COMAROFF ON THE POLITICS OF ANTHROPOLOGY, CAPITALISM AND CONTEMPORARY STATES

LUIS FERNANDO ANGOSTO FERRÁNDEZ /  
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

## SUMMARY:

Few social scientists reach the status of contemporary classics. Jean and John Comaroff are among those who could be included in that category. Their current work is indeed on the crest of the wave of social analysis, but at least since the 1980s it has been followed, debated and also challenged within the field of anthropology. Beyond this disciplinary area, their work has resonated and continues to resonate in the spheres of sociology, politics and legal studies, in a clear demonstration of the strength and the potential of anthropological knowledge when it engages the 'big issues'. It is only a part of the written production of John and Jean Comaroff that has been translated into Spanish, but contemporary Spanish and Latin American anthropologists are familiar with many of their theoretical proposals. Here is an opportunity to gain insight into these proposals and into the views of the Comaroffs on the politics of anthropology, capitalism and contemporary states. This interview was conducted in Sydney (Australia) on 08 May 2012. I should like to thank Jeremy Beckett for comments on the interview transcript.

KEY WORDS: Jean Comaroff, John Comaroff, Culture, Omnivorous science

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**Luis Fernando Angosto Ferrández [LFAF]:** I should like to start this interview with a retrospective question. I would like you to recall your view on the politics of anthropology in the 1980s. You were by then already in the United States of America [US], working at the University of Chicago. You must of course have been aware of the debates of the day in the country. Indeed, John had already been publishing about disciplinary issues, about the relation between history and anthropology, and on ethnography in Africa. And you, Jean, came in the middle of the decade with a major book which was tackling very large issues, rather than leaning towards introspective anthropology (Comaroff, 1985). You made explicit your concern with the relation between the local and the global, with the discussion of neocolonialism; your work reflected scientific ambitions. How did you feel in that period that your work contrasted with the work of those who were about to publish *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and were engaged in debates about 'the crisis of representation' in anthropology and in general about the lack of legitimacy for the social sciences? How did you feel that your work was fitting there?

**Jean Comaroff [JeC]:** That's a very good question, and there are two kinds of dynamics, I think, that were involved. One was the fact that we were trained in Britain, as colonials who came to the metropole, to the London School of Economics, in the 1960s. This was a time of ferment. For instance, many of our classmates were Americans, refugees from the Vietnam War. But in general, the whole of Europe – youthful Europe -- was in ferment, and nobody quite knew what it was about. It was a time pervaded by political reaction to the onset of what would soon be known as neoliberalism – and the age of the post-colony – and the impact of this on Europe. Politically, it was the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the rapid demise of high modernism, the ideals of the welfare state, and so on. And we were at the London School of Economics, which was not Oxford or Cambridge. It was urban, in the middle of London, which was home to many political refugees and critics from across the world. It was close to the demonstrations in the streets, close to the US Embassy in Grosvenor Square, focus of the anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, and the diverse politics of youthful dissent that accreted around it. So there was that social context for us, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, we were being trained within British anthropology, classic modernist social anthropology, bred of a colonial era, but placing a strong emphasis on social analysis

**LFAF: As opposed to the cultural trend that guided much of the anthropology produced in the United States, right?**

**John Comaroff [JoC]:** Exactly.

**JeC:** Culture was always, for British anthropology, much more of a Durkheimian conception, a reflection of social structure. It's not that culture wasn't significant; it was embodied in 'cosmology' and ritual symbolism, an expression of social relations, rather than an order of determination in its own right. We were trained in that School, but during the political ferment of the late 1960s. And also, of course, in the midst of the anti-apartheid struggle that was going on in South Africa, and also around us in the UK. Later on, we went to the north of England, to the University of Manchester.<sup>1</sup> There we got involved with the union movement as well, and with a kind of anthropology that had longer links to a history of Marxism and union activism. Max Gluckman was there, at the core of the distinctive Manchester School and its unique brand of social theory and method.

**JoC:** Peter Worsley was there too, and was deeply rooted in Marxist thought. He was also concerned with the conceptualization of the 'third world,' of course.

**JeC:** He was there indeed, in the Department of Sociology. By then, Sociology and anthropology were separate departments, with quite distinct intellectual orientations. Marshall Sahlins came to visit the Department of Anthropology while we were in Manchester and, to make a long story short, he invited us back to the US, and eventually we ended up in the University of Chicago<sup>2</sup>. So our move to Chicago came via British social anthropology at that point in the late 60s, and via people like Sahlins, who were cultural theorists of a particular sort, not of the interpretive tradition (à la Geertz) that led more directly to the 'writing culture' tradition. Anthropology in Chicago had a long history of conversation with foundational British scholars like Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski, and then later with French figures like Levi-Strauss and Marcel Mauss. It may have had roots in the work of Boas, Kroeber et al, but it was always, in its own way, much more conversant with European

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1. John and Jean Comaroff took appointments in the University of Manchester in 1972 and 1973 respectively.

2. They started at the University of Chicago in 1978.

anthropology. It was a certainly a major centre for American cultural anthropology of a distinctive kind, but it had many other members, some of more sociological bent: Raymond Smith was in there, for example...

**Joc:** Terrence Turner...

**JeC:** Terrence Turner, who was always trying to reconcile Marxism with cultural theory of a structuralist sort...

**Joc:** And with Piaget...

**JaC:** Yes, and Barney Cohen was an important Chicago figure, who was much more a historian than an anthropologist, and who was doing Foucauldian-style analysis of colonialism in India long before people were doing that sort of thing in either anthropology or history. So that was the world which we entered in the United States academy. There was a tension there from the beginning. We came from a more Durkheimian, British tradition, and it was 'out of Africa.' And we were committed to a sense of an anthropology that was responsive to a changing world.

What they were doing in Chicago at the time was in many ways a cutting-edge experiment. It was always very much within an anthropology that valued theory and systemic analysis. But it was also very well grounded in relation to particular times and places, very ethnographic; yet at the same time, it was always ethnographic in relationship to larger theoretical questions. Marshall Sahlins, at that stage, was one major (structuralist) pole in the department. The other was David Schneider, writing about American kinship as a "cultural account," as a pattern of symbols. Either way, the emphasis in Chicago was on grand theoretical questions. What was significantly different from British anthropology was that, for scholars in Chicago at the time, the whole world was susceptible to anthropological analysis; it didn't have to be small-scale, non-Western societies, it didn't have to be Africa. Schneider had written about mainstream American kinship; Sahlins, about US cuisine and the signifying properties of blue jeans. So that provided our centre of gravity. People were also already working on the anthropology of European communities. But they were also quite far from the kind of anthropology being developed in California in the 1980's. Many were suspicious of approaches that were too textual, too Geertzian; too much affected by what was a kind of postmodern turn in literary studies; this was hermeneutics rather than grounded, structural, systemic anthropology.

**JoC:** That's absolutely right. We had our own strong sense of the discipline within Chicago, although there were disagreements among us that hinged on some of the large questions that faced anthropology. For example, just before we came to Chicago, and in fact integral to our moving there, Marshall Sahlins (1976) had written *Culture and Practical Reason*, a very important book, which sought to write a cultural anthropology of capitalism; itself an extraordinarily ambitious objective. As it happened, we disagreed with him on the nature of capitalism, but it was something we could, and did, argue about. In sum, while we were all deeply situated in the local places and spaces and temporalities in which we did our research – ethnography was critical to all of us – Chicago anthropology was about others. It was certainly *not* about American academics agonizing about themselves and/or the epistemic impossibility of their practices. In particular, it was about understanding the relationship between otherness and the global phenomena that impacted upon peoples across the world – phenomena that, in turn, were affected by the actions and intentions of those peoples. So when the 'writing culture' moment came, we agreed that it raised some important ethical and authorial questions; after all, the scholars involved in that moment were smart and they were concerned about a number of things that one ought to be concerned about. But for us, ultimately, anthropology was *always* a political and an ethical practice; it was, unapologetically, a 'politics of knowledge'. Having come from our background in apartheid South Africa, it could not be anything else, as Jean has said. The impact of the epoch of decolonization, and of its struggles, was deeply felt by those of us who came from the global south. It saw the rise of a Marxist anthropology, which was deeply concerned with nationalist and socialist movements. How did one explain the rise of a socialist East Africa? An anthropologist of the period might have set out to study "traditional" Maasai society, but the Maasai were living in a new socialist state – whose president, of course, was an anthropologist. Their world was being rapidly commodified. So the romance of treating these peoples as though they inhabited isolated islands of history made little sense. In the circumstances, too, much of the 'writing culture' obsession with authorial authority seemed absurd. Why? Because we knew very well from our own ethnographic experiences that the anthropologist was rarely the authority in situations of fieldwork. Many of us were cultural dupes: we were used by 'our natives' for all kinds of things, because we did not understand their worlds, nor always our own, as well as many of them did. The image of the all-seeing, omnipotent anthropologist was simply mythological, something that might have appeared persuasive in

the seminar room. But it bore little relationship to the realities of research in most places -- which, as any experienced ethnographer knows, is a highly complex, protean collaboration.

**LFAF:** On that note: when, a few years later, you published *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (1992), were you consciously responding to those methodological and political debates that came into the discipline in the 1980s?

**JoC:** Oh, absolutely. It certainly was intended as an intervention in those debates. And a provocation.

**JeC:** Absolutely! As John was saying, a key dimension to that was that, in a way, it overvalued anthropology, and undervalued the significance, we felt, of what anthropology should actually be doing to call attention to certain kinds of questions. And it was too invested in the idea that anthropology was about interpretation, hermeneutics; it was about texts, all the way down. It was not about contexts; it was about writing, and we kept saying: 'you know, writing, even to those who write about writing, is a much more complex thing than simply stylistic representation'. Writing comes out of a world where what you write, how you write, the privilege of access to writing, all of those things, are part of a larger political context, social conditions. And so to fetishise the writing dimension of ethnography alone seemed to us to be a misread of what the legacy of social science was all about; and furthermore, it was writing the discipline into obscurity. There was also a strange sense of contradiction in all that; at one level, scholars were saying 'it's all about textualisation, there's no such thing as a real objective account'; but, at another level, they were saying 'we've got to get it right, we've got to get it native voices in there, we have got to get beyond 'his master's voice...'

**JoC:** Which, ultimately, read to us as a crypto-neorealist position...

**JeC:** Yes, that was in a way the issue. And it seemed to turn its back on the big problems of modernity and late modernity, which were happening all around us, and we were leaving that to the other social sciences to deal with. Whereas we had a really important, significant contribution to make which had to do with our method, and our scale.

**LFAF:** Indeed, in that book [*Anthropology and the Historical Imagination*], as



**opposed to those who cultivated that kind of self-reflexive anthropology, you were somehow calling for more ethnography on all fronts**

**JoC:** Oh, absolutely!

**LFAF:** You were requesting even to do ethnography in archives, to maintain a reflexive historical perspective in anthropology. As well, you elaborated on the idea of doing ethnography on an *awkward scale* (2003), and I think that's an essential point for contemporary anthropology. I would like you to talk a bit more about this. It is now better understood what you meant by bringing in that that awkward scale into ethnography, trying to coordinate the possibility of working locally but having the global frame within sight. But, of course, that's difficult to implement methodologically. Some anthropologists have made remarkable contributions in that sense, but their work also posits new questions about the identity of the discipline. In that sense, do you think that it is an indispensable requirement that the ethnographer becomes nowadays more of a sociologist, or on the contrary you think that anthropology remains essentially distinctive through its methods even when tackling the big questions?

**JoC:** I think that anthropology remains distinctive. The truth of the matter is that, for all kinds of reasons, disciplinary discourses cross over more and more into each other, often fusing at their edges. Sociology, for example, has become more ethnographic. There are now branches of cultural sociology and legal sociology doing exactly what anthropologists do. But they do it in a different intellectual and institutional context; or, to invoke Karin Knorr Cetina, different epistemic communities. But the thing that anthropology brings to the disciplinary division of labor is its way of problematizing the phenomenal world. We anthropologists do not, or should not, take anything in the phenomenal world for granted. Our primary epistemic principle is estrangement: we estrange the world, we ask what it is that constitutes the phenomena that the social sciences study, what they *mean* in the practices of everyday life. So, for example, political science spends an enormous amount of time measuring democratic indexes across the world; 'How much democracy does Venezuela or Nigeria or Egypt or Italy or the USA have?' Our tendency is to ask 'What does democracy mean?' 'What is it, in political or governmental or cultural practice?' 'Why is it that when surveys are done in, say, Africa many respondents do not even mention the ballot box as one of the desiderata of democracy?' Or take ethnicity. Sociologists evaluate the

life chances of different ethnic groups. We ask what constitutes identity, what does it mean, what concrete forms does it take. And why? Why is it critically important as an explicit principle of affiliation at certain moments in history and not at others? That's not given at all. I tried to publish an essay on ethnicity in the 1980s; I was told, then, that the piece was unpublishable because nobody was interested in the topic any more. As it happened, it was republished many times afterwards, but, at that moment in history, cultural identity did not appear, to one of the most influential journals in the discipline, as an anthropological problem of any significance. That was then. We estrange, we put things into spatial and temporal orbits, often along awkward spatial and temporal coordinates, coordinates that other disciplines don't tackle. In short, it is not what we study that makes us different, it's how we study it. When sociologists do the same thing, they are often accused of being anthropologists. To give a specific scholarly example, our former colleague at the University of Chicago, Lisa Wedeen, is a distinguished culturally-oriented political scientist. But she does essentially things of the kind we are talking about. As a result, many political scientists see her as a 'crypto-anthropologist'. We are not especially concerned about crossing disciplinary boundaries for intellectually creative reasons. If other social scientists are worried about cross-overs onto our ground, it is their problem, not ours.

**JeC:** Yes. And what lies behind that also is the way in which one understands the nature of history, the human condition, and world-making. The assumption of an anthropologist is always is that there's a dialectic between subject and object, that human beings make the worlds they inhabit; maybe not exactly as they please, but as a meaningful, intentional exercise. And therefore, whether we call it that or not, we focus on a dialectic: we anthropologists don't have our interview schedules already worked out before we go to the field. There's more to know about any social issue of phenomenon than you can possibly discern in advance, from the outside, from a consideration of 'objective' conditions: what turns out to be relevant, what motivates people's actions is what excites them, what they value, what makes them 'anxious.' That is not simple predictable, which is why history and society are not a matter of simple determinations and prediction. There's always that interplay: that dialectical interplay between the phenomenology, what people are experiencing, and the larger horizon out of which it comes. What is the relation between larger structures and the nature of local experience? Why does kinship return, now, in much of the world as a value, and a force of

refuge for people when the nation state and other structures seem to be disintegrating? Suddenly there seems to be an increase in the role of ties of blood in organizing identity and social relations in many places, and there's a return of kinship studies. Why do people come to stress ethnicity in their lives, and as a matter of blood as well as culture? These are the sorts of questions that compel anthropologists like us. It's a matter of both the structure of feeling in a particular place, and of the larger conditions that make this possible. And to be able to answer that question, we anthropologists always start with something in the world, something tangible, an object, like an activity, an anxiety, a cultural manifestation. Because the world is made by people, in practice; that's where practice theory comes in. And again, that makes the point that one cannot make a clear distinction between sociology and anthropology, social action or meaningful construction. Because these were the questions that people like Durkheim and Weber started out with, and they are in fact joint ancestors – both of anthropology and of sociology.

**LFAF:** That tension between what people experience and the 'larger horizons' within which experience takes particular shapes seem to be really essential to anthropology. And to resolve that tension anthropologists need to follow certain strategies. In this regard, one can come back to what John was explaining: our work is estrangement. This expression has become associated with your work. Estrangement is of course pervading anthropology from the very beginning, but you have complemented that basic methodological outlook with other general premises. You have been emphatic on the necessity of looking for what elsewhere you called the 'patterns in the making', talking about Gluckman's work. That exercise is about finding out what brings together all those oddments and apparently unrelated issues that one finds in social lives; it is about asking what is connecting all those oddments within social spheres.

**JoC:** Exactly.

**JeC:** And that is a key dimension of the politics of anthropology. Another person who has emphasised this a lot is our colleague and long-time friend, Keith Hart, who is a wonderful British anthropologist who works on economics, among other things. For a very long time, the methodology of anthropology, particularly cultural anthropology from the Boasian tradition, was very much focused finding unique societies and treating them in terms of their internal complexity; treating them in isolation, but

in terms of the beauty of their internal social, semantic, and cosmological relations. The problem with this perspective is that it fitted the hegemonic ideology of a colonial world that thrived on a vision of European modernizers bringing light and development to simpler people bound by tradition. Treating the latter each in terms of their unique beauty was a good liberal rebuttal to cruder evolutionary stereotypes, but masked the harsher structural realities of overrule and the impact of modern empires, which often had distressingly similar effects on the divers local communities brought within its sway. Our scholarly celebration of the resilience of once independent societies in the face of political and economic domination has been of great value; it has shown how even large, violent forces of colonization are never simple determination, that they always involve local processes of history-making, meaning-making. But the championing of these processes, especially when texts are treated at the expense of contexts, of social and political forces of larger-scale, can mask the bigger story, the larger processes of world-wide scale that *are* introducing distressingly predictable processes of marginalization and homogenization on small-scale communities across the planet. This was the case under high modern colonialism, and it is the case in a different way under neoliberal 'globalization.'

**LFAF:** And that is indeed the core of anthropological questioning.

**JoC:** Absolutely.

**JeC:** It has to be. And the old style comparison of saying 'we want to look at different kinship systems, at patrilineal and matrilineal versions,...'; a comparativism of a typological kind, misses out on the larger structural determinations that are creating the interconnections of these worlds. And that was of course where the anthropology of colonialism came in; which is not to say these places were all being determined in the same way: the challenging question is what was the same, and what was different in such circumstances...

**JoC:** And why.

**JaC:** And how do we account for the non-accidental forces that are making cities in Latin America now look like cities in Africa. What does that tell us about a late postcolonial world, or the changing nature of urbanism in the cities in the South, for instance?

**LFAF:** Along these lines of methodological and theoretical reflection, I would like you to examine the role of the state in this scenario of discussion. You have several times made the point that the state has been eroded by transnational capitalism. And, at this stage of globalisation, there is indeed evidence to support the argument that the state has lost part of its monopolies. It has outsourced some of its responsibilities, when not given them up. Along with many others, you also work with the idea that capital has no national boundaries. And that can certainly be acknowledged. But, in my view, there is also a danger in that type of analysis: sometimes it contributes to withdraw attention from examining the role that states keep on having in the reproduction of global capitalism. In these regard, no matter how small neoliberalism has wanted to make the state in certain fields, one can also argue that what in fact happens is that states have reached the size that neoliberalism requires them to become an instrument of the global capitalist system.

**JoC:** That is correct. Among other things, they provide the legal instrumentation.

**LFAF:** That's right. And, in that sense, do you think then that there is a danger in all these debates about the erosion of the state? As these debates are generally framed in contemporary discussions, they can contribute to withdraw social scientists from political analysis of the role of the state in the maintenance of global capitalism.

**JoC:** First of all we have to remind ourselves of the self-evident fact that states are not everywhere the same thing, the same sort of concrete abstraction. The definite article, '*the* state,' is a chimera, not a political or sociological reality. The scales, the geopolitics, the location within the capitalist world order of different states makes them very different kinds of beasts. 'The' US or the Russian states, for example, contrast dramatically from, say, the Sudanese or the Egyptian or the Italian state. And the relations, the articulations, of states to corporate capital vary accordingly. Indeed, the nature of those relations has to be really very carefully analysed. Some states, to be sure, are themselves becoming more obviously corporate; indeed, they are becoming mega corporations. Russia is a well-known case in point: the Kremlin uses Gazprom, the state-owned Russian Oil Company, as an instrument of its foreign policy...

**LFAF:** And actually ex-politicians become leading members of those companies.

**JoC:** Yes, Medvedev, Prime Minister and President, was its CEO.

**JeC:** Yes, they move back and forth [from politics to corporations].

**JoC:** And look at Berlusconi, who frequently speaks of Italy as ‘our company.’ But, to repeat myself, the connections between state and capital is variable and increasingly complex. Some states operate, *de facto*, as the wholly owned subsidiary of business, others as the (well-remunerated) legal instrument of its deregulation, of *its* freedoms against the incursions and interests of civil society; in this capacity, they serve as the licensing authority of capital. We’ve have a chapter in *Ethnicity Inc.* (2009) about just this. What are often called ‘weak states’ – a term often applied, with prejudice, against regimes in the global south -- are basically nation-states in which corporate capital has seized a great deal of unmediated control, typically legitimized by a small, largely captured political class; these states do not shrink away, they are merely transformed. (Of course, the promiscuous interdigitation of corporate capital and political classes -- to the economic benefit of both and to the material cost of the common good -- has become characteristic of the global north as well; it is just that, in the north, this is more effectively hidden behind the fictive veil of democracy, a.k.a. the competition for spoils among different factions of those classes.) After all, for a corporation to invest in an extractive industry in, say, Angola or in Congo, or for Korea to buy up the agricultural land of a central African republic, legal sanction, a legal infrastructure, is required. Which, in turn, demands at least a semblance of governance, indeed, of compliant governance – or, as likely, as governance made compliant. Herein lies one source of the collaboration between states and corporations: their ruling regimes provide the necessary legal licensing, which is recognised in international courts of law, while, in return, the corporations keep those ruling regimes in power. The likes of Russia, the US, or India, for that matter – or, more precisely, their political classes – are in a better resourced position to impose their will on the terms of the relationship between capital and the state. Nor, in this respect, does the outsourcing of the functions of governance necessarily mean a retraction of the state; it simply means a displacement from one mode of direct control into a form of *rentier* and jurisprudential agency.

**JeC:** NGOs are one of the other interesting dimensions here. Does the NGO represent a contraction of the state or an extension of the state? NGOs across the world are actually not, for the most part, transnational

civil society; they are state agencies operating by other means: less visible, less accountable. The global economic crisis of 2008 was a perfect example. The ideology in the US, from the point of view of corporate capital, is to ensure minimal government. But that minimal government is there above all to regulate the conditions that enable the operation of such corporate, so minimalisation of government requires more law, not less.

**JoC:** Also more personnel.

**Jec:** And government must be there to bail out corporate enterprise that is ‘too big to fall’. We recently saw precisely how the state leaps in again with public funding. I think it’s very important that academics don’t fall into the rhetoric that enables this. We always do so to some extent, of course, because we live in the world that we analyse. But one has to try again to estrange the rhetoric of minimal governance and of free markets. Leading economists, people like Joseph Stiglitz, have pointed out that Adam Smith never meant that the ‘free’ market should work without regulation; he realised that there always had to be government intervention, because markets are only self-regulating in ‘perfect conditions,’ and actual conditions are always imperfect. In the US, the ideology of more or less government is on display in the debate whether Obama’s health-care bill was constitutional. In the meanwhile, Brazil has just instituted what is probably the largest conditional cash transfer from government to people in the history of the world: the *bolsa família*. And in many parts of the South that’s been emulated and debated. This sort of state-centered redistribution is happening alongside rapid expansion, in those countries, of private enterprise. So there you see here a reinvention of the relationship of citizen and state at the same time that capital is renegotiating this relationship.

**LFAF:** And would you say that the state plays a liberating, or potentially liberating role in postcolonial societies, or do you see it as a double-edged potential?

**JoC:** It’s a double-edged potential.

**LFAF:** And, in your opinion, what type of state would a ‘postcolonial’ nation require in order to overcome certain types of structural disadvantages?

**Jec:** It depends very much, as John said, on the nature of the state. I think

what you are seeing in Latin America is something that some anthropologists have been writing about with critical insight. Like Claudio Lomnitz, for instance, who is saying that one of the ways that you see various Latin American nations (maybe not technically ‘postcolonial’ states in the same way as in Africa) dealing with their position in the global order is through strengthening the state and seeking to have it mediate translocal capital more effectively, re the terms of trade, the terms of investment, the terms of selling national land and real estate to outsiders, and so on. One of the ways of coping with their nations in the global order is to strengthen the bite of the state in the regulation of internal/external relations. In some parts of Africa this is termed “upward adjustment,” or “beneficialization.”

**JoC:** Exactly. The Washington Consensus did extraordinary damage across the world. More and more states that had ‘structural adjustment’ imposed on them have started to pull back and even reverse course. For a long time, under the tenets of market fundamentalism, especially during the Bush years, many countries in global south were directly threatened: if they didn’t deregulate their economies, if they dared to sustain features of the welfare state, loans and aid to them would be cut. And for a while they did free up their economies, encourage privatization, cut social benefits, and pay obeisance to the tenets of neoliberalism. Some people, and some local corporations, benefited hugely; new wealth was certainly created. But, at the same time, these countries saw themselves losing literally millions of jobs, cut in the cause of company profits; they also suffered from radically rising Gini coefficients, crime rates, and civil unrest. So they started smuggling back what Anthony Giddens dubbed ‘third way’ technologies of governance. Like, in Brazil, the *bolsa família*, a huge institution of economic redistribution whose operations are phrased in the neoliberal terms of entrepreneurship and investment, but which is nonetheless a form of state intervention against poverty and inequality wrought by the recent economic history of the country. This is just one illustration of the general point that we have sought to make repeatedly about ‘the’ state in the global history of the present. It has not retracted or withered, but has transformed itself in a variety of ways. As social scientists, we have to deal with ‘the’ state not as a simple abstract form, everywhere the same. It is a concrete abstraction that takes a myriad of forms wrought by the specificities of its relationship to capital.

**JeC:** Yes, and there’s another thing. We also live in a world of constitutio-



nality, rights. And a lot of the talk of entitlements actually often amount to things that are more symbolic than pragmatic. So you have many of transitional justice forums that look into past atrocities and patterns of victimisation in the transition to democracy. And that recognise formerly silenced people and voices and offer them formal apologies. But often, this does very little to change the terms of their actual viability as citizens. Any society that is serious about restoring normal rights, about honouring the social contract, requires a state of some kind to enforce them. Rights without some kind of community of responsibility might well mean nothing. And so, to call for global humanitarian rights without some local body that is able to enforce them is meaningless. The return of some kind of responsive political community is key. And you see this desire in many places; look at the return to socialist leadership in France right now, the angry calls for responsible national government in those parts of Europe suffering the imposition of austerity measures. There's a strong sense in South Africa now, for example, that people want their citizenship to mean something; those who feel neglected try to force the state into existence by angry protests that call for 'services.' You know, there has been a strong Foucauldian sense, among late modern scholars, that states are all a matter of domination, but in fact many people want to see more government.

**LFAF: And what about the role of culture in those new meanings of citizenship? I would like to move on now to talk about something that, I think, relates to this discussion from another angle. You have been writing about it in *Ethnicity Inc.*; about how there is a relation between that ethnicity and 'nationality Inc.'. I think you put it very well when you say there is nowadays a tendency to reduce culture to a naturally copyrighted possession. And in that sense, both ethnic groups, and ethno-nationalism and some nations, have converged, have been working along the same lines. This seems to be another central issue for contemporary states. In many countries we see how states and governments become like corporations; they share common idioms. In this regard, there is something that you touch in the conclusion to your book and on which I would like you to elaborate a bit more here: you suggest that there is a way to look at this processes framed by the 'ethnicity inc.' model as potentially beneficial for groups which in the global economy do not have any other possibility but to resort to this type of 'immaterial good' in order to trade and engage global economic transaction. Do you think that there is a liberating potential there, or do you think that this is other way of subjugating 'cultural minorities' in another way? Because, perhaps, they are**

**never going to scale upwards as a group in the capitalist economy in that way. What is your view on that?**

**JeC:** Well, we actually refer to some examples of groups who actually have scaled upwards to the point of becoming global operators, economically. But they are exceptional in many ways. We start this book by saying that we don't come to praise or extol ethnicity, but that it nevertheless is an increasingly visible reality in the world. And rather than saying simply that everything about it is suspect, negative -- that it is a function of structures of domination, the misrecognition of culture, and so on -- we need to understand why it has taken on such salience, how it can be understood as a reaction to very particular circumstances. For a start, it stems directly from something that we said right at the beginning, which is the tendency, which came with colonialism, to separate and identify people above all by way of their distinctiveness, their difference. And anthropology was very involved in that business. Many of the peoples who became known by ethnic labels (like the Tswana that we studied, for instance) only took on their current designation -- qua ethnics -- under colonial conditions. And a good degree of what gave stability, substance, and texture to such ethnic-cultural identity was the actual interaction between them and the world around them -- including the world of scholars. But it was not merely a matter of 'writing culture.' For many years, those designations were a mark of inferiority, marginalisation. To be ethnically labelled in South Africa meant, by definition, that you were cheap labour, and that you were not a citizen -- you were a subject.

**JoC:** You were racially marked.

**JaC:** Now, what is brilliant about this current moment is how these marks of marginality have become a source of capital and value. People have been able, under certain structural and historical circumstances, taken that literally and said: 'okay, we are different, but we are also equal. We have something distinctive here, and we're going to make it ours.' For in a world that has come to fear homogenization and lack of difference, diversity is celebrated (at least, in theory); what is more, it can be a kind of heritage that can be a source of income, profit. So there's a way in which this reversed a whole history of colonial relations, of cultural differentiation, and discrimination. The insight was made evident to us when somebody in the rural South African community where we had long done research said to us: 'we used to sell our labour and now we

sell our culture. So we have to have recover it, because if we don't have culture, tradition, we're nobody'. Now, that's a poignant statement. It could be taken as a tragic commentary on colonial domination; but it can also be seen as taking literally the myth long promulgated by the West that 'other cultures' are equal and have value. And it is the effort to take that myth seriously that has resulted in the industry that we talk about in *Ethnicity, Inc.* We make the point that the process is very complicated. The myth is not simply devalued: many people are still exploited because they are different, and not all that many manage to profit from their distinctiveness. People are living within the market, and the market can both enable them to gain value from their cultural heritage, and it can also simply subject them to the laws of surplus value and monopoly control. And both examples are there, in the cases analysed in *Ethnicity Inc.*

**JoC:** To be sure, ethno-capitalism has created extraordinary wealth for some people and palpable misery for others. Many societies that styled themselves as socialist did much the same thing: they created wealthy political classes -- and all the rest. Likewise, *Ethnicity Inc.* enriches and disempowers, enables and excludes. The question becomes for whom, for what, and in what proportion. But it also raises the problem of how to go about creating an alternative politics that does not disempower, disable, or exclude in the same way that the identity politics and the rise of ethno-capitalism does – or, for that matter, erode class, labor, and gender politics, which it also does.

**JeC:** And poverty. It also dignifies and romanticises poverty.

**JoC:** Right. So it is a very complex beast. From our own perspective, the rise of identity politics and economics is an ambiguous development: we would much prefer to see a mass politics based on principles of inclusion, not on principles of difference...

**JeC:** And on labour. But these people are no longer in a labour economy in an old-fashioned sense.

**LF AF:** Following on this, I would like to close the interview with something about prognosis, about the future of anthropology. You have been daring in that sense, in that you do not fear talking about the prospects of the discipline. At this very juncture of global capitalism, considering the capitalist financial crisis that has hold sway over the last few years and which has

brought many people to return to discussions about the material basis of social reproduction: do you consider that our discipline is going to somehow follow suit and start to change in certain corners? It seems it is still is a minority within the discipline that dares to look frontally at these global issues. However, considering the importance of the 'cultural' dimensions of the crisis, and of course considering as well the essentiality of the material basis of society: do you think that perhaps this crisis, and the shock that it meant for many people, is going to have an impact on the discipline in the short term?

**JoC:** That's a very interesting question. And it doesn't admit to an easy answer.

**JaC:** You put it very well, and it seems to me that there's both a positive and a negative side to this. The academy, and particularly the social sciences, are threatened everywhere. I know that you've had layoffs here at the University of Sydney, by the way. And, certainly, if you came to our campus in Chicago as an anthropologist from Mars, you would conclude that our temple, our most valued, revered institution, was the business school, followed by the biosciences. And, in-between, a bit of respect and support for the performing arts, and for the social sciences. The social sciences, once seen as the "Jewel in the Crown" of our university, are much less valued. And in some ways, this reflects the fact that the very idea of 'the social' is very hard to imagine in the world in which we live, because the scale of the institutions and relational fields that gave it substance, and that form our lived context has so drastically exploded. Also, the territorial architecture of the nation-state, which anchored our social modernist social imaginary, has been eroded in our ever more integrated universe. So envisaging the social and rendering it empirically tangible is a problem, and not only for anthropology. Also, within the social sciences, anthropology has always been the counter-hegemonic social science, the one that asked the hard questions, which has questioned all the terms, as John would say. At the same time, relative to its size, the discipline has contributed major insights to social thought in general. Whether you're thinking of Mary Douglas and *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mauss on the nature of the gift (1966), Turner on ritual (1969), or Geertz on 'thick description' (2000). Or whether you think about culture itself; after all, the nature of property, of ownership in the current world, is increasingly understood in terms of culture, and intellectual property: everyone, from ethnic groups, to cities, to nation-states seek to make economy out of

culture. And we are the theorists of culture *par excellence*, so the discipline has everything going for it from that point of view. And there's always been a strange relationship between the modest size of the discipline, and the impact of its key thinkers; Levi-Strauss is the most notable, perhaps, but even in our generation, the influence of its concepts and methods is quite considerable. 'Ethnography,' albeit often in watered-down form, is taken up across diverse disciplines – even by business and nursing schools. This relates also to the fact that the institutional division of labour that was dominant in the high modern era has shifted, so that many of the 'softer,' more symbolic phenomena favoured by anthropologists have taken on new salience. There is the increasing salience of religious movements in what were once taken to be 'secular' preserves, like politics and public life. Religious movements, especially revitalized, born-again faiths, are increasingly providing an expanding array of services, from banks and universities to public media across the world. They are among the fastest growing social movements, especially in the global south, where they offer people everyday sociality, intimacy, diagnostic insight, the promise of empowerment. Anthropologists can provide insights into these things that no other discipline can; also, into the complex, shifting mythology – what Marx called the 'social hieroglyphics' -- that accompanies the circulation of things in an intensely commodified world (I think here of the language of advertising, the poetics of fashion, the discursive cultures spawned by new media). In the spring of 2012, we taught a seminar at the University of Chicago called 'Theory from the South', which was focused on what a 'late modern anthropology' should look like. Students were very responsive to the topic, suggesting to us that there is a generation now coming into anthropology that wants to ask these sorts of big questions we have been discussing here. Anthropology is becoming diversified; many people are coming into the discipline from India, from China, from Latin America, from Africa. Also, from minority populations in Europe. There's thus much more diversity in the discipline in the North. And these students want to ask large questions, too important to be ignored – about the loss of work in its modern, industrial sense, or the disintegration of the middle-class and class reproduction in many places, or the reinscription of politics into law, technicism, or "theory," or the elusive meaning of key categories like "property" or "money," or "nature." These are questions that you can't get to as suggestively with the more conventional social science perspectives out there, whether vested in positivistic methods, or classic social theoretical approaches. So I think that there's a great potential, but we have to seize that potential...

**JoC:** That's the point, we have to seize that potential.

**JeC:** And make our discipline relevant, capable of speaking innovatively to key issues

**JoC:** A lot of anthropologists run scared. They do not want to take on the big issues, arguing that this is not what anthropology has traditionally done. They also argue that to expand our discursive range to address those big issues will make the discipline into something else, something alien, something that appears suspiciously like sociology. This is ironic, of course, since sociology is seen by some of its practitioners to be deeply in crisis: note, in this respect, the growing literature on the imminent death of that discipline, on its growing irrelevance to the real world, on its fetishism of method above substance. Anthropologists of the present generation are well placed to redefine the scale of the discipline. But it is a real challenge. Many of our well-worn the concepts, not to mention the epistemic scaffolding of our practice, have to be fundamentally rethought in order to do that. We disagree strongly with those who believe that the future of the discipline lies in its past: in a return to the study of 'little' peoples, whether it be in the Northern Territories of Australia, on islands in the Pacific, or in indigenous enclaves in Africa. Nor is a panacea to be found in neo-empiricism, in isolating, decontextualizing, and describing social networks or assemblages and treating them as entirely contingent phenomena. If those are the ways that the discipline is going to go, it is likely to write itself into exquisite irrelevance. So, too, would a turn to an anthropology unadorned by ethnography, a purely philosophical anthropology; philosophers will always do that better than we can – unless, of course, we give up anthropology and become philosophers. On the other hand, if, as Jean says, anthropology comes to reflect the intellectual concerns of a new generation (and maybe our students are not typical), if it does take on big contemporary issues and treats the discipline as a distinct, grounded way of thinking about them, the future is secure.

**JeC:** Anthropology, from its birth, has always been omnivorous. Look at British anthropology in Africa: Evans-Prichard, for instance, was working with ideas from Tylor and Frazer, from Freud and from cybernetics; Gluckman was working with all kinds of theories, be they Marxian, jurisprudential, or psychoanalytic. The discipline has always looked beyond itself and has indigenised and localised theoretical concepts from a wider archive. It should not be different now. The sense that we should

not look to grand theory and grand problems because they're not intrinsically 'anthropological' in nature or scale is nonsense. We've never had theory that's been generically only anthropological...

**JoC:** Structural functionalism, after all, owed itself largely to Durkheim...

**JeC:** Yes. And was Durkheim an anthropologist or a sociologist? Similarly, Marx. Marx in some ways writes in terms of grounded, ethnographic exemplars. Key orientations, like the idea of estrangement, or the salience of practice come him...

**JoC:** To be sure. Marx, fundamentally, was concerned to write an anthropology of capitalism.

**JeC:** And he worked with ideas like fetishism, that was, in its literal origin, an African phenomenon. So there's always been an interchange and reworking of theory between the humanistic disciplines, and that's what we have to do now. And yet, within all this ferment, anthropology's method has remained distinctive, and that's the uniqueness we bring. And the potential remains as great as it ever was, we just need to grasp it.

**LFAF: I don't know if you would like to add something else, to finalise.**

**JeC:** Conversations like this one, across generations, across hemispheres, carry a great deal of potential for the future of the discipline, in my view.

**LFAF: To me it has certainly been very enriching. It is very stimulating to find the strength and the energy that comes into this type of debate from anthropologists like you. For a younger generation it is, I think, very inspiring.**

**JoC:** The production of a persuasive anthropology of globalism, in large measure, relies on the globalising of anthropology, which, gratefully, is happening more and more.

**JeC:** We recently went to Latin America, and we were greatly struck by what's going on there; and in India it's the same. In these contexts, there is frequently a more responsive relationship between academic work and the wider world of debate and pragmatic existence. Scholars tend to be very aware of the relationship of ideas and the politics of history. There remains a sharp memory of dominations past, including intellectual do-

mination. And there is often a close relationship between the struggle for existence, and these sort of questions we have discussed here. Which doesn't mean that these are anti-intellectual questions, or that scholars in places of struggle are limited to utilitarian concerns. You can think theory at its most grand from most anyplace; it is not the privilege of the leisure classes, as it were. But in contexts like South Africa, for instance, there tends to be a move back and forth between the ivory tower and a tangible world to which one feels responsible, a world that keeps one honest. And that's also always been the anthropologist's orientation, right? It is a discipline that is empirical in its referents; however abstract, one touches base somewhere.

**LFAF:** And to produce knowledge to transform is also an anthropological thing as well.

**JoC:** Of course it is. One has to have the courage to theorize. It's as simple as that. We should never lose our heads in the depths of the local – however important it is to sustain our empirical roots there -- and never lose the will to take intellectual risks. If anthropology keeps those two things in its vision, it is safe. If it becomes either philosophy or ethnology it will be nothing.

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