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Response to Comaroff

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Response

Minh Ta

With the onset of globalization producing major ruptures in the modern nation-state and undermining the boundaries, both physical and metaphysical, that shape them, the age-old questions of “Who am I?” and “What am I?” are once again emerging. It is this theme of the “Divided Self,” or identity within the context of globalization, that Dr. Comaroff attempts to address in her essay. My response is structured in three parts: first, I underscore what I think are some of the major contributions of Dr. Comaroff’s essay; second, I discuss my disagreements; and finally, I articulate my own perspective by introducing two concepts within critical social theory—“performativity” and “intersectionality”—which I think might be helpful in our discussions surrounding the theme of the Roundtable.

I. Contributions

I find three elements of Dr. Comaroff’s analysis to be worthy of particular note. These are: first, the extraordinary emergence of multinational capital (facilitated by “virtual, electronic money”), which is precipitating the breakdown of nation-states; second, the development of a “global social imaginary” facilitated by the expansion of sophisticated communications networks that seem to be eroding “national identities”; and finally, the rise of “hetero-nationalist” movements. According to Dr. Comaroff, these three factors are most responsible for the peculiarity of the phenomenon of globalization.

In exploring these issues, Dr. Comaroff suggests that as a result of the dominance of transnational capitalism, the integrity and validity of nation-states as a whole is beginning to break down. She tells us that “few products or transactions are purely ‘national’ anymore.”¹ On the contrary, they are truly “icons of multinationalism.” The “American” car that is currently on the road might have actually been built in Mexico under exploitative labor practices, with parts from Europe. Ironically, some of the cars that are labeled “foreign” might actually have a more

legitimate claim to being “American” vehicles than those that are touted as truly domestic. It is this “estrangement,” in a sense, between nation-states and the products that carry their names that I would like to suggest is another major effect of globalization. Similar to Marx’s discussion on “Estranged Labour,” the forces of globalization are perpetuating the alienation between nation-states and their products.²

The development of an electronic, “virtual” monetary system has strongly facilitated the successful emergence of multinational capital. Here again, the ability of transnational corporations to move and relocate at will strongly rests on the erosion of the power of nation-states. Before the introduction of “virtual” money, states had the ability to control wealth within their domains by their monopolistic control of the money supply and their power to impose taxes on their citizens and corporations. But with an electronic monetary system, the ability of nation-states to regulate these exchanges has become less effective. Nation-states and the “world,” it seems, are at the mercy of multinational capital.

This dissolution of the dominance of the nation-state coincides with the emergence of a “global” social imaginary that has been facilitated by the ever-expanding reach of sophisticated, revolutionary communications technologies. The paradox of the movement toward “oneness” (i.e., that we are all a part of an interdependent global community) within an explosion of difference and diversity embedded in globalization is further accentuated by these innovative technologies. As Dr. Comaroff correctly states, these technologies allow distant populations to share the same “signals beamed to their [satellite] dishes [that] evade control — control once exercised by states and governments — over flows of images and information, flows integral to the creation of collective consciousness and national ‘publics.’”³ The possible consequences are truly radical; chief among them is the fact that the nation-state no longer is the center of production of values and meaning. This, according to Dr. Comaroff, is the basis for the assertion of difference and the explosion of what is popularly known as identity politics, firmly rooted in “hetero-nationalism.” Dr. Comaroff very astutely points out that the eruption of multiple claims of ethnic identity, as a result of the breakdown of the modern nation-state, is itself grounded in

assertions of “nationhood.” The irony of the situation is that as ethnocentric movements attempt to break out against the modern nation-states, they are also appropriating the same language of nationhood. Hence the emergence and popularity of groups such as Queer Nation, the Nation of Islam, Serbian Nation, etc.

II. Critique

So where does this leave us in relation to the self and identity in a global age? It is at this point that I would like to articulate what I perceive to be some of the shortcomings in Dr. Comaroff’s analysis and, thereby, present some of my disagreements. The main focus of my critique will be on the implicit presumptions surrounding the construction of the self and identity, and the relationships and dynamics between the two that are embedded in Dr. Comaroff’s essay. Specifically, I want to raise three concerns: the over-reliance on the unity of the self, the distinct inclination toward dualities/dichotomies, and, finally, her subtle but Marxist materialist constructions of the world.

A. The Unity of the Self

Throughout Dr. Comaroff’s essay, the self is never really directly mentioned; it is alluded to and presumed to be intricately linked to the nation-state, which is accurate in the modernist framework, but what happens to the self in this the “post” age? It should be noted that within the realm of social theory, the relationship between the self and society is far from resolved; it remains a hotly contested topic. In addition, it should be acknowledged that within the modernist framework, the Self is intricately linked to the notion of the Other in an unequal duality of the Self/Other. Consequently, I would like to pose these questions: How is the Self (and the Other) now constituted and situated in this global age? Does this dichotomy of the Self/Other still exist? And if so, how are power dynamics and relations constructed between the two?

In her essay, Dr. Comaroff stresses that the destabilization of the modern nation-state is a key element of the global age and, therefore, offers “hetero-nationalism” as one way to capture the formation of identity in a global age. As Dr. Comaroff states:

“Exchanges of this sort are common these days, not least because most polities are actually ‘hetero-nationalist,’ i.e., hybrids that seek to reconcile ethnic identity politics with a Euro-nationalist conception of civil society.”⁴ Even in the formation of these “hybrids,” it is quite clear that Dr. Comaroff leans toward a conception of the self and hence society, that, though divided, is still “unified” in its division and acceptance of the self. The reason I am raising such a fuss about the notion of the self is that I want to make the explicit argument that the acceptance of the notion of the self comes with a number of ontological presumptions. In the past (and, to a certain extent, the present) these presumptions included the assumption of the Self as heterosexual, white, and male with the Other being Woman, Oriental, Black, etc. Let me be clear that I am not alleging that Dr. Comaroff is making such specific claims, but because of the author’s silence on these issues, I can only speculate on her assumptions.

Viewed from a postmodern perspective, the embracing of the notion of a self inherently holds certain ontological conditions. As Michael Shapiro writes, “Within such a view, knowledge of the self is not a process of accretion but rather a form of power, a way of imposing an interpretation. . . . It is a form of subjugation rather than part of a process of enlightenment.”⁵ The question before us, then, is not “What is the self?” but rather “Which self?” The notion of a divided self has within its terminology the notion of a singular self; it is still this unity within one (though divided) that I would like to contest, and I suggest that we instead view the self as multiple *selves* and not in a single formation.

B. Dichotomies and Dualities

Dr. Comaroff’s bias toward dichotomies/dualities also presents some difficulties. She writes,

The complexity of the current moment lies *not* in the fact that it is definitively postmodern, postindustrial, or *post-anything* [emphasis added] else. Instead, it combines core features of the modern world in unfamiliar, uneasy combinations — speeded up, stretched to the breaking point, recombined — whose very unfa-

miliarity is made plain by market forces of new intensity, new possibility.⁶

Dr. Comaroff seemingly has clumped a number of very different and diverse critical social theories into one amorphous mass signified by “post-.” It is this general conglomeration of significantly varied critical theories without differentiating them and their contribution to the overall discourse that I find particularly troublesome. Dr. Comaroff must realize that postcolonialism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, though all sharing some similarities are, nonetheless, quite distinct and should be recognized as such.

C. The Return of Marx

Finally, I would like to question some of the subtle Marxist materialistic overtones of Dr. Comaroff’s analysis. The following passage seems to affirm this issue by insinuating that the politics of self and identity are, in the final analysis, mystifications.

[T]he language of identity politics cannot adequately address the history of its own making. Nor can it explain itself in terms other than its own ideology. As a result, it *obscures* and *mystifies* the very processes that continue to marginalize many peoples and to widen the gap between privilege and privation on a planetary scale.⁷ (Emphasis added.)

The consequence of this perspective is that, following the reasoning of Marx, the use of the language of identity politics (race, ethnicity, gender) is merely a mystification strategy cast to prevent the working classes from uniting around the “true” notion of the self that is rooted in a classist, materialist struggle. Since Dr. Comaroff explicitly disregards notions of essentialism, I am struck by this possible reference to primordialism. What specifically in the language of identity politics is mystifying? Is there some form of a “truer” self to which Dr. Comaroff is referring? I make these points only to uncover some implicit assumptions within Dr. Comaroff’s analysis.

III. Reflections

Finally, I would like to introduce two notions within critical social theory—“intersectionality” and “performativity”—into our discussion concerning the divided self and the formation of identity in a global age. *Intersectionality*, a term coined by critical race scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, attempts to draw and analyze the intersections (and the embedded power dynamics) of different social categorizations such as race, gender, and class in their formation of social positioning and identity. *Performativity*, coined by gender theorist Judith Butler, speaks to how gender and sexual identities are played out, i.e., “performed.” It is from these theoretical perspectives that I will attempt to argue that identity is an effect of multiple discursive frameworks (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, gender). This effect has been further unleashed by the forces of globalization and carried out through performances that are acts and repetitions. It is my hope that by introducing these two concepts of critical social theory, we will be able to begin to deconstruct the hegemonic notions embedded in the “self” and, subsequently, create alternative, oppositional spaces to view identity formulation.

Identity is an effect (à la Foucault) formed within the intersections of different discursive frameworks. This effect is later carried out through performances in the real, hence identity is, in a sense, a performance. Notions of the self (who am I, and what am I?) have always been areas of contested terrain with competing “selves” struggling to exercise dominance. Subjects/Selves are sites of political intersectional power investments that can be viewed through the process of performances, i.e., the “playing out” of identities. Performativity, then, is the instrument by which societal norms are created and “naturalized.” These acts and performances are neither voluntary nor a product of individual choice, but rather, in order for the self to be identified and intelligible, must be constantly and repetitively performed until they become second nature. Moreover, all notions of identity are based on and rooted in specific ideologies and historical frameworks; there is, therefore, no essential, primordial self/identity. Furthermore, the notion of the “divided selves” comes much closer to representing the multiplicity and ambigu-

ous nature of identity and identities than the concept of the unified, coherent self or a singular divided self.

Let me use the examples of Gangsta Rap and Andean folk dresses mentioned in the essay for clarification. Dr. Comaroff states that “ethnic movements, far from eschewing translocal signs and commodities, often deploy them, brilliantly, in assertions of primordial tradition.”⁸ Hence the use of authentic ethnic “artifacts” and embracement of “ethnic” primordial identities is being appropriated in the name of identity politics. It is within this environment that “authentic” Andean folk dresses can be made of “non-authentic” synthetic polyester because the folk dress is a cultural icon that is being employed in the performing of an “original” ethnic identity. Likewise, American Gangsta Rap can serve as a medium for “colored” identity politics in South Africa. Gangsta Rap, with its strong subversive overtones against traditional White hegemony, is being performed/appropriated by South African Black youth to create an oppositional imaginary that allows for their inclusion, i.e., for their identity to emerge. In this new global age, with the displacement of the modern unified “self,” new selves and identities are being constantly formulated and contested.

In both cases, the usage of cultural artifacts such as folk dresses and Gangsta Rap is a part of an effort to reify ethnic identities. An authentic, indigenous Andean and an apartheid-free black South African identity are both effects of these discursive frameworks. It is within these performances that a referring back (hence repeating) to a “primordial” identity is made in an attempt to claim naturalness and authenticity. In the end, these performances are attempts to create different, inclusive cultural maps in which formerly marginalized groups are included.

IV. Conclusion

Whether one buys into the notion of globalization or not, the world in which we live is definitely at a crossroads. Our old ways of conceptualizing ourselves and the world have become antiquated. Dr. Comaroff is right: “the nature of the play has changed before our very eyes.”⁹ Her apt analysis of global identity based on her extraordinary work in South Africa has provided a wonderful springboard for our discussions. What I have

tried to do in my response is to provide some alternative rereadings of Dr. Comaroff's essay. I have done so by emphasizing the instability of the notions of both identity and, particularly, the self.

My point in stressing the problematic nature of the usage of a singular self over multiple selves is not purely semantic. Rather, I want to force us to reexamine and challenge all the presumptions, both implicit and explicit, concerning the self and identity. Who we are now is inevitably tied into who we once were, but that does not automatically mean that we are locked into these former beliefs and doctrines. If such were the case, there would be little room for who we can become in a continuously mutating global age.

Notes

1. Jean Comaroff, "The Portrait of an Unknown South African: Identity in a Global Age" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 125.
2. Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour," in *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, ed. Charles Lemert (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1993): 36–43.
3. Comaroff, "The Portrait of an Unknown South African," 128.
4. *Ibid.*, 136.
5. Michael J. Shapiro, *Reading the Postmodern Polity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 3.
6. Comaroff, "The Portrait of an Unknown South African," 130.
7. *Ibid.*, 137.
8. *Ibid.*, 134.
9. *Ibid.*, 140.