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# Response to Comaroff

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# Response

Mulugeta Aregawi

Today, problems of identity and globalization are attracting the attention not only of scholars who have the luxury of meditation but also of ordinary people who labor to keep spirit and clay together. The issues are complex and elusive and pose serious intellectual challenges, challenges evident in Dr. Comaroff's intriguing essay. Let me attempt to isolate what I deem to be points of interest and the major contributions of the essay, then express some reservations and, finally, venture my own perspectives.

## I. Points of Interest

Having identified the fundamental problem of identity in South Africa, Dr. Comaroff moves on to make a judgment about the legacy of Enlightenment and the late twentieth century as insufficient materials to give us a reliable explanation. She suggests that ours is a world that seems to breed greater measures of human difference even as it draws humanity into ever tighter interdependence. She wisely advises that we should not commit the mistake of ignoring continuity despite the dynamism of capitalist development.

Dr. Comaroff discusses, with considerable intellectual force, the phenomenon usually referred to as a global order, which reminded me of my readings of the *Communist Manifesto*, wherein Karl Marx outlined the miracles capitalism was destined to accomplish. She nicely updates Marx by relating recent developments in technology and communications. Furthermore, she instructs us how ethnicity is a relational phenomenon which accompanies globalization.

I am very much of the same mind as Dr. Comaroff when she insists that one-sidedness should be set aside in favor of dialectical openmindedness. She writes that "ours is a world that produces both strong identification with, and alienation from, the tenets of modern universalism."<sup>1</sup> In other words, what is important is not the particular or the universal in isolation but the

dialectical relations between them. She also says that “preoccupation with disjuncture and distinctness blinds us to continuities,”<sup>2</sup> an argument she consistently employs to maintain that “ethnic assertion...and the spread of modernity...often coexist, but also that they are reciprocally defining features of the same historical moment.”<sup>3</sup> This is very thought-provoking, but I must contest it on a few points.

## **II. Reservations**

What Dr. Comaroff dismisses as one-sided deserves attention. I do not see one-sidedness in the argument that history, through the instrumentality of “fundamentalists, tribalists, or survivors of the Soviet Empire,”<sup>4</sup> has impeded the passage of ethnic and religious differences to rational modernity. Let me explain.

As Dr. Comaroff observes, many a great thinker has recognized capitalism as a social system bent on doing away with cultural, linguistic, and economic barriers. For instance, according to Marx, national differences would necessarily give way to the homogenizing process of capital. Actually, Marx theorized that the task of eliminating national boundaries in favor of a world of capital and labor would be achieved by the revolutions of 1848. That, of course, was not the case. Although ethnic and national differences would eventually yield to unifying global social forces, the process has proved to be longer and more complicated than we care to acknowledge.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, capitalism was characterized by *laissez-faire*, which made free competition possible. Government was largely limited to noneconomic activities. At the end of the century, however, capitalism reached a new stage: imperialism. And in the twentieth century, there came to the fore not only fundamentalists and totalitarians but fascists and strong monopolists to arrest the free development of capitalism. Yet it is important to note that such interventions were not exclusionary or one-sided. They were simply part of a new stage of globalization.

It is not, therefore, untenable to conclude that capitalism would have accomplished its unifying mission if market forces had been left to freely take their own course. The post-Soviet experience and the former Eastern bloc countries give dramatic

evidence of how totalitarianism deceptively gave the semblance of absolute unity in what otherwise was enormous diversity. The progress of the people who groaned under the Soviet dictatorship and the countries the Soviets dominated as satellites is one of history's most profound if unfinished chapters.

When the Soviet mask of unity was lifted, what was revealed was crude ethnicity. It is reasonable to imagine that if the diverse people of the Eastern bloc had been allowed to develop freely, ethnic tensions and confrontations could have been largely domesticated. The histories of Brazil, Hawaii, and Belgium are interesting examples of successful racial coexistence, if not blending. In today's zones of conflict, if governments exerted responsible efforts to democratize their respective polities, and if international financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) ceased their engineering of the microeconomic life of vulnerable societies, bitter ethnic wars would give way to attitudes and mechanisms that would recognize and tolerate differences.

My second reservation is this: in her answer to her own questions of how and why the coexistence of the two opposing tendencies was possible, Dr. Comaroff says that "[ethnicity] is a *relational* phenomenon" and that "[g]lobalization and localization are two . . . dimensions of the same historical movement."<sup>5</sup> This, I think, means they reciprocate. Yet Dr. Comaroff also argues that "[t]he very *experience* of globalism creates and re-creates a specific awareness of the local. It is this that gives texture to efforts to refigure moral communities; indeed, to refigure the nature of society itself."<sup>6</sup>

When Dr. Comaroff rejects one-sidedness, she seems to insist that it is important to focus on the relationship between globalization and localization. Yet if globalization is the underlying force that reconfigures the nature of society, localization (ethnicity) is a passive recipient reacting to the thrust of globalization. This is, of course, consistent with what she states earlier in her essay: that "countries are drawn into a global workshop and economy. . . . Class relations have become so dispersed as to be invisible. . . . If goods are the bearers of encapsulated worlds, as Mauss and Marx insisted, most things we buy today are icons of multinationalism."<sup>7</sup>

If classes have become so dispersed as to be invisible, it would be logical to assume that globalization rearranges the society. However, the implication of such a conclusion is far-reaching, particularly in light of what Dr. Comaroff contends — that “the politics of identity... [neglects] the... forces that separate and differentiate in the first place:... economic exploitation and political disempowerment inflected in gender and generation, race and ethnicity, culture and class.”<sup>8</sup> This reluctant reference to class, which has been regarded as invisible, is suddenly rendered not only conspicuous but also necessary in explaining the politics of identity.

Dr. Comaroff should have proposed that the fate of men and women is determined by their location in any given society, which is hard to discern without the deployment of the concept of class. Instead of positing ethnicity as a reaction to globalization, perhaps an emphasis on class relation would have been in order.

The relationship between ethnicity and globalization is not a relation of abstract concepts devoid of concrete meaning. Behind such a conceptual relationship are human beings who first made the relation possible. Ethnicity and globalization are opposite sides of the same coin that mutually define each other. Consequently, in those situations where one dominates the other, we should still be alert to their coexistence.

Likewise, the problem of identity and ethnicity in South Africa is not a passive reaction to globalization. The identity problem we currently witness in South Africa has its roots in the class relations that prevailed in the country for generations. Problems of identity or ethnicity in South Africa should, therefore, be conceived of as manifestations of fundamental class conflicts.

My last reservation relates to Dr. Comaroff’s judgment of the extent of globalization. Does the world really consume the same CNN soundbites? Have electronic mail and the Internet exacerbated the production of spaces with virtually no boundaries? Which world? What world? If by “world” one is limited to the Western world or fully capitalistic societies, Dr. Comaroff’s argument would be justified. But if today’s world includes Africa and large parts of Latin America and Asia, she faces difficulties in substantiating her position, because elsewhere in her

essay she has gone out of her way to admit that, according to a UN survey, "the wealthiest and the poorest people — both within and among countries — are living in increasingly separate worlds."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, that we have different worlds, at least two, and that globalization is more limited in scope than Dr. Comaroff thinks, is not difficult to demonstrate.

Ethiopia does not consume the same CNN soundbites, or watch the same American, Brazilian, or Australian soaps. In a nation where more than 80 percent of the population is illiterate, that limitation also applies to electronic mail and the Internet. Even when South Africa, the subject of the essay, is considered, I do not think globalization has a significant impact on the lives of the majority. Globalization, I assume, requires not only a reasonably literate society but also an economy beyond the mere subsistence level. How many use computers in Africa? In Asia?

How important are the media to our considerations? Ethiopia is particularly revealing here, too. The country has only one daily government-owned newspaper (published in English and Amharic). It is published by the Ethiopian Press Agency, which has not a single computer or fax machine. Ethiopia's single national radio station has only one personal computer and one fax machine at its disposal. The country has one TV station that does not operate more than six hours a day. Recently, some weekly and monthly publications have enjoyed limited circulation in the capital. Still, it will be a long time before even these existing media reach all of the people in all areas of the country, for Ethiopia is a country of diverse people who speak as many as 80 languages. This, I think, is definitely more local than global.

Today, the world, as I understand it, is divided into at least two parts: one where globalization dominates and one that is just opening its doors to global influence. The latter could not accurately be explained in terms of the information age. Actually, while one part of the world is drowning in too much information, the other is starving from a lack of it. Perhaps Dr. Comaroff overlooked this because of her peculiar conception of ethnicity.

One of the difficulties the reader might encounter in Dr. Comaroff's essay is the absence of a clear definition of ethnicity that could serve as a common reference. Perhaps she assumes it

is understood. But if ethnicity is defined as “less an essence than a relation, sharing strong family resemblances with other forms of distinguishing identity in advanced capitalist societies,”<sup>10</sup> the definition seems inadequate. I, for one, find it difficult to conceive of advanced capitalist societies in terms of ethnicity. There is obviously a clear difference between ethnicity as it is understood in Africa and as it is understood in the United States. In Africa, religious or linguistic differences can provoke ethnic sentiments with serious consequences far beyond those known in the United States.

Ethiopians, for example, are ethnically diverse people who identify themselves as Oromos, Amharas, or Tigreans, to mention just a few. However, in the United States, if one were to speak in the language of ethnicity, one would refer to him- or herself as African American, Latino, or Asian American, among others. But African American, for example, is not the same as Ethiopian or Nigerian, for countries such as Ethiopia and Nigeria have people of many different ethnicities.

### **III. Summation**

Problems of identity and globalization are best understood when viewed as expressions of class relations. A definite class relation gives rise to a definite form of identity and ethnicity, as can be seen in what Dr. Comaroff describes as ethno-nationalism and Euro-nationalism. It is interesting to note that ethno-nationalism is a reality in underdeveloped areas of the globe, while Euro-nationalism asserts itself in more advanced regions.

The relationship between ethnicity and globalization is recognized because capital has an international character. And capital is nothing other than a relation between social forces able to ignore borders and assert themselves. Hence, globalization.

This process has enabled capitalist countries to assert themselves in the areas that now face serious problems of identity and ethnicity. Countries unable to resist the flow of capital have experienced serious uneven development. Hence, the establishment of what political economists have long called metropolis-satellite relations.

In sum, I think it is wiser to pay due attention to the structure that has kept the underdeveloped world in a quagmire of iden-

tity crisis and ethnic warfare. Although, as Dr. Comaroff has observed, local solutions are more appropriate to the challenge of underdevelopment, it should be borne in mind that so long as the center-periphery relationship that supports globalization endures, such solutions will be broken dreams. The most enduring solution can only emanate from a transformation of the structure that continuously breeds problems of identity and ethnicity.

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### Notes

1. Jean Comaroff, "The Portrait of an Unknown South African: Identity in a Global Age" in *Macalester International* 4 (Spring 1997): 121.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 132–33.
4. Ibid., 132.
5. Ibid., 134.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 125.
8. Ibid., 138.
9. Barbara Crossette, "UN Finds Separate Worlds of Rich and Poor Widening," *International Herald Tribune*, 16 July 1996, 6, as cited in Comaroff, "The Portrait of an Unknown South African," 138.
10. Comaroff, "The Portrait of an Unknown South African," 133.