

African Marxist Discourses on the Cusp of ‘Globalization’: A Preliminary Review

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Abstract

Founded in 1975, the *Review of African Political Economy*, ROAPE, represented a focused attempt at “devising...strategy for Africa’s revolution” and provided a forum for the various discussions among African progressive activists and intellectuals of different stripes in the final quarter of the twentieth-century. With a metropolitan location, ROAPE’s primary method was to mediate those discussions largely in terms of the international machinations of capitalism. In a 1985 retrospective, the review reflected on the shortcomings of this method. What is significant about these two moments in ROAPE’s existence is the coincidence of the exhaustion of the kind of Marxist analysis it promoted with the ascendancy of a new political critique. Inflected with postmodernism and “the cultural turn,” this new political critique was also concerned with questions of diaspora, racial and other minority identities, and its relationship to capitalism was not always one of antagonism. It also eschews specific political affiliations, being forged through the complex historical. The *WISER Review* and the subsequent *Salon* of the Johannesburg Workshop on Theory and Criticism are representative of this political critique. This essay examines both formations as necessary but limited interventions, assesses their value as theoretical attempts to understand realities on the African continent.

Keywords: Marxism, African politics, ROAPE, JWTC, Biodun Jeyifo, *Positive Review*, Achille Mbembe

“I want to say with every emphasis I can muster that civil society organizations, NGOs, that are not rooted in mass politics are at best a palliative, are at best some form of Band-Aid for the open, festering sores of mass poverty and dispossession in our continent.”

--Biodun Jeyifo (2006)

Introduction

This essay is a preliminary review *and* critique of the *Review of African Political Economy*, ROAPE, a journal published in the UK, and the Johannesburg Workshop on Theory and Criticism, JWTC, curated in Johannesburg by the Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe. The two publications are intellectual initiatives whose histories bear a

relationship to the changing fortunes of African Marxist discourses in the last fifteen years of the twentieth century.¹ The central aim of the essay is thus twofold. The *review* assesses the value of the two initiatives (or, scholarly interventions) as institutional and theoretical attempts to come to grips with socio-economic and political realities on the African continent, especially in relation to the complex historical process which informs terms such as “postcolonialism” and “globalization.” The *critique* relates these theoretical attempts to changes in African studies as a field of scholarship wedded to the nexus between political economy, classical empiricism and nationalism, within and outside the continent. A general inventory of the intellectual orientation in each of these two initiatives reveals, I think, a shift in perspective which has to be accounted for as part of a broad understanding of what it means to think, write and act about the continent historically and at the present time. In a fundamental sense, this shift manifested itself in both geographic and symbolic ways. The various socio-political forces which decelerated the process of decolonization in African countries from the mid-1970s had, among others, the effect of transferring African intellectual resources to Western academic institutions through the phenomenon of brain-drain.

With this transfer or relocation of resources came the paradoxical result of heightening an awareness of the ways that those forces operate, and a memory of the variety of practices through which the battles for decolonization had been waged in the first place. But that is not the end of the story. The successful negotiation to the end of apartheid meant, in a major sense, the relocation of a different set of human resources to the continent, as the country became a more viable place than before, and than any comparable country on the continent, for intellectual work following the establishment of

democratic rule. Marxist discourses in different African locations, as well as those which took place outside but were directed at African concerns, were an important moment of those battles for decolonization in the fifty years prior to the end of apartheid, even if their aims and objectives were held in thrall to the tensions between the intellectual and political elites of the continent, and between the elites and the rest of the populations. Those scholars, whether African or Western, who favored various kinds of Marxist analysis in their work found other means to continue, and the slow work of rebuilding consisted of many institutional repositionings, of which the symbolic emergence of South Africa as a multi-racial political community, and the idea of Global South as a non-exclusive political, aesthetic or cultural formation, are significant outcomes. To better understand picture which I am trying to paint about these two institutional initiatives, one could equate ROAPE with “decolonization” and JWTC/*WISER Review* with “globalization,” keeping in mind that these are partial pictures viewed in a schematic manner. The first part of this essay’s objective, the review, is thus an examination of editorials and similar protocols (roundtables, briefings, etc) in the two initiatives which demonstrate specific institutional responses to general topical issues.

A major disorientation—or, more accurately, reorientation—took place in Africa-informed humanities and social science scholarships at the turn of the 1990s. This reorientation coincided with two momentous events of that period, namely the end of Soviet communism and the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa. These events represented huge, perplexing contradictions for those committed to “international” social justice because the end of apartheid rule appeared like a major victory from the perspective of the kind of progressive politics in which the dominant Marxist formations on

the continent were invested. All the same, the misgivings of these formations (best exemplified in the work of Samir Amin, John Saul, Eskor Toyo, Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi, Harold Wolpe, Mahmood Mamdani, Issa Shivji, and several others, and in the editorial philosophy of the *Review of African Political Economy*) about Soviet communism were obscured by the ideological association of Marxism with communism. As Marxist thinkers and activists, these intellectuals were more united in a principled opposition to capitalist exploitation as a form of social organization than they were unanimous on *any* ideological issue pertaining to how this principled opposition might be transformed into political action. Their position that the dissolution of communism, as well as the negotiated end of apartheid, signaled the triumph of capitalism masking itself as democracy could be misconstrued as apologias for the failures of Marxist-Leninist political practice.² The editorial from *the Review's* 1985 issue plays an important role in this critique, as I discuss below.

While progressive Marxist discourses and practices were receiving knocks from these historical developments, the field of African studies was undergoing a specific kind of reconfiguration. In the first few years of the 1990s, the sudden but compelling appearances of Mbembe through the publication of “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony” (1992) and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993), deepened a tear already created in the fabric of Pan-African nationalism as a realm of cultural knowledge by Valentine Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa*, and represented insurrections from within and without. The arguments in the work of both Mudimbe and Mbembe were influenced to varying degrees by the method and insight from Michel Foucault. There were other instances in the field of African studies of that antifoundationalist approach to socio-historical processes (James

Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* is one example) that did not cause as much stir as those two, but which were most likely impactful in terms of the institutional status of the scholarly study of African experiences. Perhaps these were all uncoordinated battles in an ideological advance to displace a scholarly practice wedded to the nexus between political economy, classical empiricism and nationalism. It was an insurrectionary from within, but with impact immediately felt without, considering that African studies was, by and large, always expatriated.³ The association of the continent's modern intellectual heritage with the activism of diasporic intellectuals in the years between the two world wars has historically placed Africanist discourses in an embattled position.⁴ That embattlement was now coupled with the increased presence of African-born scholars in Western institutions through the phenomenon of brain drain, that is, the expatriation to largely Western institutions of intellectual skills and resources meant to develop the continent in different spheres. Thus a situation emerged with the following permutations: the emergent field of postcolonial studies favoring thematics of identity became consolidated at a time when a majority of African states were in all sorts of socio-political and economic crises, giving purchase to questions that cast nationalism in a negative light.

The Offending Angels of the African revolution

But there was another view from without. Founded in 1975, the England-based *Review of African Political Economy*, ROAPE (or the Review), represented a focused attempt at "devising...strategy for Africa's revolution." (Editorial 1975, 2). The journal positioned itself as a forum for the various discussions among African progressive activists and intellectuals of different stripes—Marxist, socialist, communist, cultural nationalist—in the

final quarter of the twentieth-century. Although the Review was primarily focused on African political economy, its intellectual sympathies have to be understood in relation to a global alliance of progressive forces that went under the name of Tricontinentalism, or the Third World in popular parlance (today's Global South). The Review was far from being the only of such intellectual-political outlets for advancing left-identified ideas, even within the continent. There was the shortlived but influential *Positive Review* established by a group of progressive scholars in different Nigerian universities, although the editorial location of the journal was at the then-University of Ife, in Ile-Ife, Nigeria. As I show momentarily, the impulses behind *Positive Review* offer a general commentary on the abiding faith in Marxism as an enabler of transnational ("international" at the time) social justice, and this becomes clearer when both the scholarly and political outputs of Biodun Jeyifo are placed in the context of local and international currents animating political thoughts and actions.

Similar outlets for progressive ideas included the *South African Communist* based in Johannesburg, and the second series of *Transition/Ch'Indaba* under the direction of Wole Soyinka, with editorial offices in Accra, Ghana. There is little doubt that the Review's location in the metropolis narrowed its method down to mediating those political discussions among African progressive intellectuals and Marxist scholars/activists largely in terms of the international machinations of capitalism. However, there was a strong indication, from the very first issue, that the editorial team saw its work in connection with similar initiatives across African countries. The opening paragraph of the inaugural editorial is worth quoting in its entirety:

This review is published with the express intent of providing a counterweight to that mass of literature on Africa which holds: that Africa's

continuing chronic poverty is primarily an internal problem and not a product of her colonial history and her present dependence; that the successful attraction of foreign capital and the consequent production within the confines of the international market will bring development; and that the major role in achieving development must be played by western-educated, 'modernizing' elites who will bring progress to the 'backward' masses. We hold these perspectives to be inaccurate and mystifying and with regard to the last it should be clear that while the African revolution needs leaders and cadres, the record suggests that the leaders who inherited power at independence have all too often borne out Fanon's-description of them as 'spoilt children of yesterday's colonialism and of today's national governments, [who] organize the loot of whatever national resources exist' – primarily on behalf of foreign interests, of course.

Despite its captious tone, this passage reads like the annunciation of an ideological position very much in the spirit of a tendency among African intellectuals and artists, best exemplified in the approving quotation from Frantz Fanon's famous chapter in *The Wretched of the Earth*. At least a decade earlier, this position was already identifiable with a strong current in African literature, and even more directly with the political actions of Soyinka in Nigeria and Dennis Brutus and Alex La Guma in South Africa. The position also coincided with the new direction of the work of the Kenya writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, which was to lead to his political troubles with the government and a long spell in exile. The body of Africa literature (mostly novels, but also with a significant amount of poetry) published

between the mid-1960s through the early 1970s was formidable enough to stand as a signpost: Ousmane Sembene's *Xala*, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence*.

A common impulse in these works is the advancement of the position that the African political elites who took over from colonial rulers were incapable of achieving the political transformation envisaged by the idealism of anti-colonial struggles. In literary criticism, Marxist thought has been useful in developing a mode of ideology critique which went beyond varieties of idealist conception of human affairs. Examples of this mode of critique can be found in specific works by Emmanuel Ngara, Chidi Amuta, and Josef Gulberger.

While there were major differences between the creative and critical productions, as trenchantly demonstrated in Soyinka's famous "Leftocracy" essay (1988), it also the case that for scholars like Jeyifo, the terrains of political thought and action were not so far apart. The journal *Positive Review* was not so much an academic journal as a mode of political intervention calculated to combat perceived reactionary attitudes in the political and cultural lives of the continent, while professing an alternative based on the notion of class differentiations. It was also a collaborative effort, numbering writers-scholars such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, G. G. Darah, Kole Omotoso, and Femi Osofisan among its editorial collective, so singling out Jeyifo's work is only an attempt at discursive example. His scholarly outputs coinciding with this intellectual formation bear clear testimonies to the imaginative conception of the productive relationships between thought (in creative writing and criticism) and action (through the instrumentality of activist politics). His first published monograph, *By Popular Demand: The Travelling Theaters of Nigeria* (1984),

offers one of the most rigorous attempts to explore the class dimensions of so-called “people’s art” by looking at the mass aspirations informing and feeding off the dramatic representations in that idiom.

Jeyifo’s second book, *The Truthful Lie* (1985) is subtitled “essays on the sociology of African drama”; it is an unapologetic attempt to place class at the front, center, and back in the analysis of cultural production: the selection of essays on the work of African dramatists like Soyinka, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, Ebrahim Hussein, and Athol Fugard reflects an interest in various historical formations—feudalism, apartheid, colonialism—in which class distinctions have sharply informed the course of history on the continent. The impulse toward class in this kind of literary criticism is the same as informing the editorial orientation of *Positive Review*; to introduce into cultural and political analyses the idea of class as indispensable to an understanding of social change. The point is not so much whether this approach to literary criticism took the social situation of the “African masses” to account, which was the major argument in Soyinka’s “Leftocracy” essay, but that it drew attention to modes of consciousness which traditional “bourgeois” criticism tended to overlook. In a number of cases (such as among Nigeria leftists like Jeyifo), the critical practice came out of political involvement, a sort of “philosophy born out of struggle.”

The topics of this editorial in the Review’s first issue—Africa and imperialism in the 1970s, sub-imperialism, transnational corporations, class struggle—provide a testimony to this climate of ideological opinion. The Review’s appearance coincided with the upswing in liberation movements in Portuguese colonies/southern Africa and the military takeover in Portugal, as well as the defeat of the United States in Vietnam. These were events directly related to the groundswell of responses to imperialist systems across the world, and they

occurred within the context of the Cold War. The political *détente* following the World War II had resulted in a series of political gestures by countries which had not attained full political independence but also did not view themselves as satellites of the two opposed “blocs”. From the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement in Yugoslavia 1948, through the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955 and the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Cuba, a common, though complex, front emerged on a global level to reinforce the anti-imperial movement which had begun to coalesce against European powers chastened at the end of the war.

The combination of cultural, political, and ideological attempts to fashion this common front resonated with African political figures, in part because the continent contained the most countries in the world still under colonial dependency and blacks the world over were historical victims of racism. This was the political climate under which the Review emerged, ironically at a time when, in hindsight, the revolutionary fervor of the three previous decades was nearly spent. What looked like an upswing in liberation struggle—there were actual wars of liberation at various stages in all four Lusophone African colonies, and in what was then known as Rhodesia, and the anti-apartheid struggle was fully in its military phase—only required a simultaneous attention to the international financial system to seem less sanguinary. But the owl of Minerva flies at dusk, and archival work is hardly respectful of the cessation of war. Though primarily an academic journal, the Review was encouraged by its editorial outlook to be equally interested in political economy as well as in the activities of individuals or groups dedicated to executing “the African revolution.”⁵

The editorial of the tenth anniversary retrospective issue in 1985 amounted to self-criticism, dwelling on the shortcomings of this intellectual orientation. Setting about a strategy for Africa's revolution now appeared in hindsight as a "naively ambitious objective," in light of "how radically the 'international context' [had] changed in the last ten years" (Editorial 1985, 2), and the obviously confident tone of the first editorial now checked itself with phrases like "ill-defined," and "unspecified," the ubiquity of scare-quotes less a function of textual formality than a lack of certainty about what was once confidently proclaimed. But, as they say, "Never Say Die": the same issue contained a rousing interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, now living in exile in England, and a special section on the recent political changes in Burkina Faso. Yes, a shining star blazed in the firmament of African revolutionary politics in the glamorous figure Captain Thomas Sankara, president of then-Upper Volta, whose clear-headed idealism saw to the fundamental change of renaming of that country as Burkina Faso. Ironically, this was the year of the ascension to the headship of the Politburo of Mikhail Gorbachev, and when the memory of the criminal murder of South African activist Ruth First through parcel bomb in Maputo was still fresh.

I would like to stress the point that the combination of political integrity and scholarly rigor informing the Review's editorial outlook was a function of its belief in the African revolution as something that would not only occur within the continent, but would also do so to the extent that the African peoples ("the masses") were at its forefront. A scholarly journal, housed in Keele, England, run by a group of European intellectuals and publishing "wordy articles in a foreign language" (4), the Review's major concern to promote advances in theory manifested itself as a critique of political economy, and most often to the neglect of politics, even if the aim was to clarify political work. There is a sense

in which the ideological differences which have historically hobbled left politics also dogged the journal. In order to determine what to publish, the Review necessarily had to be mindful of the differences between Andre Gunder Frank's "immediate socialist revolution" and Amin's preference for "nationalist capitalist development" (3), while actual collaborations between Arrighi and Saul concealed a fundamental disagreement between both on the nature of African liberation movements. There was always clearly a prominence in its array of leftist (or progressive) intellectuals who, though primarily academic experts out for another day at the office, were often viewed as revolutionary vanguards in a way that obscured Frantz Fanon's category of "bourgeois intellectuals." One instance when the tensions between theory and practice, and between political solidarity and academic freedom implicit in these discussions received fruitful clarifications was in David Harvey's interview with Arrighi in *New Left Review* (2009).

The political optimism which the Review restated in 1985 as it mediated various discussions among progressive activists and intellectuals of different colorations might be hard to grasp today. Three decades ago, it was also waylaid by a complex, contradictory process which, in fairness to the more clear-headed among the progressives, was not hard to see. Five factors are significant in an attempt to come to terms with this contradictory process. First, as might be surmised from the foregoing, African Marxist discourses were far from unitary, nor was there a unanimity amongst scholars and activists about just what Marxism entailed for sociopolitical contexts that lacked (and might not have sought) the kind of ideological coalescence that resulted in the Second International in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Second, African Marxist discourses never fully, that is usefully, successfully, differentiated between the colorations of progressive activists and

intellectuals and what role each might play in the envisioned political future. Hobbled by factionalism, labeling of ideological opponents, and the Marxian culture of ruthless criticism, the differentiations were a performance onto themselves, as the Review showed in that editorial. Politically vibrant life was always one step ahead, for good or ill, and not all aspects of it could be subsumed to a general progressive outlook.

Third, although the inaugural editorial was eloquent in its criticism of the ideological naiveté of expecting “western-educated, ‘modernizing’ elites [to] bring progress to the ‘backward’ masses,” the Review was no less eloquent in its blind spot, which reflected negligence of the ways that Africans “masses,” backward or not, actually carried on with the business of living. Fourth, within communist/socialist circles and even in the so-called Communist bloc, factionalism and schism reigned, mirroring the changing climate behind the Iron Curtain or between Moscow and Peking, never mind that, in fact, these formations in African countries were only aspiring or in the making, since formal communist parties existed only in South Africa and Sudan. Finally, the pursuit of “the African revolution” masked truly horrific events of tragic, genocidal proportions, perpetuated by actually governing “Marxist-Leninist” regimes in different parts of the continent. In order to elaborate on this critique, it is helpful to reflect further on the third and the last factors, which constitute the mesh of the fence separating the interests of African masses and the political elites.

In the latter part of the 1970s and the early 1980s, the period when, by the Review’s reckoning, idealism was humbled by hard reality, a number of important special issues were published on economic changes across the continent. There was an issue devoted to South Africa (Number 7), another (number 8) on Capitalism in Africa (with articles

focusing on “indigenous capitalism” in Ghana, the national bourgeoisie in Kenya, and the Ivory Coast sugar industry as a form of local capital), and a third one on Zimbabwe (number 18), published to coincide with the country’s independence. Most of the articles were the work of experts in the fields working on those countries, and their perspectives mattered to the extent that such insights were difficult to arrive at by other analytical means. Even on this cusp of the global crisis of the working class as the basis for revolutionary change, an issue which was a main topic in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s controversial but admissible *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, the *Review*, through the 1985 editorial, still viewed its operation in the realm of political work as one that turned primarily on class analysis. The “class” was the working class, and very often the section of it engaged in industrial and agricultural labor. Although there were topical interests in questions of gender and “politics,” class remained the conceptual ground of the reflections on this imagined political work, proof of which was to be found in Jean Copans’ article, which traced “the intellectual history of ‘class,’ the category that is the basis for struggle” and in which the editors were well pleased (Editorial 3).

It needs to be restated that one of the *Review*’s objectives was “to promote advances in theory” with a view to clarify political work. There was even an acknowledgement that such an objective often fell short, that in its focus on political economy, the emphasis was often on “economy.” The crux of the present critique is how well this objective, and the kinds of theoretical work it favored, aligned with what was going on on the ground, in those two realms of social life—the everyday choices and options of the non-hegemonic people, and the doings of their rulers. Without falling into reductionist claims about African cultural values, it is legitimate to be stunned by how little categories such as “kinship

structure,” “ethnicity,” “prebendal politics,” “politics from below,”—which became current in much work in anthropology, political science and economic history from the 1980s—engaged the editorial interests of the Review. For whatever it is worth, these categories have been decisive, as actual practices in society, in the emergence of varieties of “cultural forms” across the continent, especially in alliance with similar processes, like the informal economy and “micropolitical” operations. Through the work of scholars such as Keith Hart, Janet Roitman, Kate Meagher in the area of economic history, and of the likes of Paul Nugent, David Laitin, Mahmood Mamdani (who was an ally of the Review and had his work promoted by it) on the African state, there have emerged formidable scholarships which collectively add up to a complex picture of change in a multiplicity of realms.⁶

To provide an example which might clarify the critique here, characterizing the Nigerian businessman who imports printing presses as part of the “comprador elite,” the “local bourgeoisie,” does not illuminate the process by which such an activity might contribute to the growth of a cultural form such as the tabloid newspaper or the political pamphlet. Nor does it help the analyst to come to terms easily with how those who are part of neither the petty bourgeoisie nor the proletariat devise different kinds of system to thrive in urban cities, including ethnic associations and other modes of cooperation. It was out of the collusive relationship between both, as employer and employee operating simultaneously in the shadow and the limelight of capital, that a techno-economic phenomenon like Nigerian Nollywood industry came to life.

For a journal so invested in Marxist analysis as the Review was in those first ten years, its records on so-called Marxist-Leninist regimes on the continent need to be examined more closely. Although only Sudan and South Africa had formal communist

parties, the continent was a battleground of the Cold War, and various governments exploited the situation between the two “blocs” for various kinds of political and economic capital. The regimes in Ethiopia and the Republic of Benin styled themselves “Marxist-Leninist” and were patronized by both the USSR and China, and also Cuba in a few instances, while the ones emerging in the newly liberated countries such as Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau undertook versions of socialist programs.⁷ However, between 1974, when the Dergue reign of terror began in Ethiopia, and 1984, when the Guinean leader Ahmed Sékou Touré passed away, the nearly exclusive focus on political economy ensured that the doings of these regimes received relatively little critical attention. Interestingly, this period coincided with the first decade of the Review’s existence. Social stagnation became second-nature to the Republic of Benin under the Marxist-Leninist rule of Mathieu Kerekou; the tragicomedy of Touré’s socialism might have been an aesthetically endurable spectacle were its real content not the remorseless purging of the intellectual elite. The Review did not exactly ignore these aspects of African politics. Near the beginning of the 1985 editorial, the Review noted:

What is called for is not only documentation of [African states’] abuses but a reconsideration of the importance of the issues of ‘democracy’ and of ‘human rights’ to the left and the realization that these are neither unimportant ‘bourgeois’ values, nor are they charges to be leveled against capitalist-oriented regimes but excused in ‘progressive’ ones (Editorial, 2).

On the very next page, the Review commented on “errors like the now widely-acknowledged mistake of one section of the left in Ethiopia in adopting the tactics of

violence and terror against the military rulers (leading to their equally uncompromising counter-terror) from 1976” (3), but without casting even a reflexive glance at its own track records of documenting the horrors of the murderous regime in Ethiopia. For in fairness to the Review, the “Briefings” section of the Number 8 special issue (1977) carried a report titled “Class and Revolution in Ethiopia.” It was a lengthy excerpt from a manuscript prepared by Nega Ayele, one of the many victims of Mariam Mengistu’s purges, killed in the same year. The article gave a detailed account of the rise of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party, EPRP, the main leftist opposition of Mengistu’s reign during 1976, and probably the purveyor of “the tactics of violence and terror against the military rulers” mentioned above. This was the first political party in the history of the country, and although the confrontation with the regime in October 1976 was violent, it was preceded by politically valid actions like rallies, strikes, and underground coordination. It is noteworthy that a journal which had characterized Mengistu’s government as “a violently repressive dictatorship” in 1977 would view the tactics of its opponents as erroneous. All in all, the connections between political life of various sorts and actual human suffering often proved too messy for a journal whose identity cast it on the side of the offending angels.

Under the Sign of the World Bank

The cover image for Volume One (2009) of *The Johannesburg Salon*, the journal of the Johannesburg Workshop on Theory and Criticism, JWTC, shows a view of planet Earth from the moon. The caption for the image reads, “*The Earth as it was really seen from Apollo 17*. One of the most circulated images in history, NASA’s photograph of ‘the blue marble’

was rotated before distribution to conform to the usual view of the world with the north at the top” (JWTC 2009, 2. Emphases added). The outline of the landmass closest to the satellite camera and most visible through the fuzzy movement of natural rotation is highlighted in what art historians call ‘earth colors,’ and it captures the map of the African continent upside-down, vertically viewable from the southern tip through the Arabian chasm. This is a telling annunciation of the ideological outlook of the project structured around the Johannesburg Workshop on Theory and Criticism, first begun in 2004 under the short-lived *WISER Review* (both overseen by Cameroonian scholar Achille Mbembe). It is true that the ROAPE existed in a relationship of admirable respect and solidarity toward its ideological companions across the continent, and that its editorials, full of gestures of grace and humility, were often marked by respectful circumspection, the deliberate commonsense of outsiders, those “who are not direct participants” in a struggle, as the editorial to the 1976 special issue on South Africa noted (1). It is even true that Marxists imagine one class-less world as the culmination of historical processes, and so ROAPE could be justified on this ground if it made little of its editorial location in England, though it did not.

Ironically for a periodical located in the metropolis, the two big blind spots in ROAPE’s editorial position—its understanding of African political economy in largely geographical terms and its predominantly materialist analyses—served as a critical but unintended overture to the impulse which one can identify with both the *WISER Review* and the *Johannesburg Salon*. Writing, in a special study, about the appearance of African scholars with background in the Francophone intellectual tradition, the economic anthropologist Jane Guyer, had notably characterized them (primarily Valentin Mudimbe

and Mbembe) as empowered with Continental philosophy, bilingual, and invested in issues of symbolic exchange about the African continent in a way few Anglophone scholars were. It would be pleasing to find that those scholars connected to the ROAPE were so succinctly characterized in an emergent form, in spite of the preeminence of associates like Amin and Arrighi. Guyer was here painting the picture of a new kind of political critique as an intellectual formation. Inflected with postmodernism and “the cultural turn,” this new political critique was also concerned with questions of diaspora, racial and other minority identities, and its relationship to capitalism would turn out to be less than antagonistic. Whereas the pre-1985 ROAPE identified political allies in and outside the continent and favored terms like “neocolonialism” and “decolonization,” the new political critique appeared to eschew specific political affiliations, being forged through the complex historical process signified in terms such as “postcolonialism” and “globalization.” Both the *Wiser Review* and the JWTC stand as outlets for this political critique as an intellectual orientation, and their current vitality can be best understood in relation to the processes of disintegration (or reconstitution) of African studies described in the introduction.

Four factors seem to me to be worth stressing in an attempt to understand this new thing. First, the end of apartheid turned South Africa into an appealing destination for all sorts of intellectual work. The contradictions which the cultural turn in postmodernism wanted to address existed in bold relief in the wake of apartheid, perhaps also because, as Etienne Balibar once observed, apartheid represented a problematic mixture of Nazi racism, colonialism, and slavery (Balibar 1991). However, being the most Westernized country on the continent, South Africa was also attractive as a place in which to do business. The first number of *WISER Review*, edited by Mbembe who had become a

research professor at the Witwatersrand Institute for Social Research, WISER, after a stint as director of CODESRIA in Dakar, was published in 2004 to coincide with the tenth anniversary of electoral democracy in South Africa.

Second, Mbembe's familiarity with French/Continental philosophy (markedly clear in his 1992 article) also coincided with "theory" as deployed in Euro-American humanities scholarship, with particular attraction to graduate students. In contrast to the historical-materialist critique in Marxist discourses, Mbembe and his closest allies (John and Jean Comaroff, Arjun Appadurai, Paul Gilroy, Ato Quayson) largely opted for an investment in "the sensory life of power" (Mbembe, 2006) and various operational forms of legalism, in a way reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze's preferment of Leibniz's "folding" to Hegelian dialectics.⁸ In fact, his essay (Necropolitics) outlines this option, with Mbembe displacing Hegel with George Bataille. Third, the long shadow of anthropology hovers: not only were *Public Culture* and *Africa*, the two journals in which Mbembe first made his appearance before Anglophone audiences, instruments for advancing new and old modes of ethnography, a coalescence of Foucauldian medicalization as a procedure of biopower and the scourge of HIV-AIDS in southern Africa also gave the sub-field of medical anthropology a particularly thematic relevance in research. Finally, and important as it is to avoid personality, Mbembe represented a compelling institutional type: an intellectual in the French sense, presiding over a research agenda and attractive to "cult followers," more Derrida than Sartre, so far displaying neither Michel Foucault's professorial shyness nor Jacques Lacan's distrust of institutionalization.

With this broad picture in mind, both the initial forays of this political critique in the preoccupations of the *WISER Review*, and the more elaborate philosophy of the JWTC, can

be approached as a fulsome projection of the “Southern” theory. The *WISER Review* came into existence when Deborah Posel (who served as its co-editor with Mbembe) was the director of the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research. The first issue, published in July 2004, included the essays given by invited speakers at a week-long series of events hosted by the institute in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of South Africa’s first democratic elections. The idea behind the events was to contribute to the debates about the global implications of South Africa’s newfound freedom, “and to remind South Africans of the wider, more global, significance of their recent history” (“A Critical Humanism,” 2). Not only were issues the editors considered germane to the South African situation—racism, democracy, new frontiers of justice, and so on—highlighted in the lineup of contributions, each was also treated in terms of its resonance in different parts of the world. With this editorial orientation of opening South Africa as a window on the world and thus deepening the connections between its history and developments elsewhere, the stage was set for the kind of theoretical stance identified with the new political critique described above. Besides, several of the contributors in this edition had personal connection with Mbembe and would come to be associated with his work in both the *JWTC* and *The Johannesburg Salon*, and in other areas as well.

The *WISER Review* ran as biannual publication, each of its three issues being published in 2004 (Number One, July), 2006 (Number Two, December), and 2008 (Number 3, June). Each issue collected texts from an academic event held at the institute, and the theme of that event usually gave the ensuing publication its editorial focus. Obviously there are several questions to be asked about the nature of this publication, its relatively short lifespan, and its changing lists of contributors, and those questions are difficult to pose

outside of the actual operational modes of a publication which was not formalized like a professional journal, as was the case with ROAPE. Writing on the structural transformation of African higher education in a 2013 issue *The Chimurenga Chronic*, a magazine of art and politics published in Cape Town, the writer and editor Stacy Hardy provides insights into the changes at WISER which could clarify the context in which the JWTC came to replace the *WISER Review*. In 2012 Posel, the institute's founding director "left to set up a new interdisciplinary, donor-sponsored, research institute in the humanities and social sciences at the University of Cape Town, and many of WISER's long-standing funders and partners looked set to follow her." In Hardy's telling, the director's departure was soon followed by a controversy on academic integrity attached to her successor, and by early 2013, a new director (the third within a year) had assumed position at the head of the institute.⁹

The Johannesburg Workshop on Theory and Criticism had been in existence long before these institutional changes. As a matter of fact, first issue of the Salon, its publication arm, came out in 2009, a year after the cessation of the *WISER Review*. But most of the same writers in the first publication soon reemerged on the pages of the Salon. Suffice to note that unlike *WISER Review*, which was not an organ of WISER, the Workshop is only loosely affiliated with the institute and its aims are broader than that of a periodical. It has four components or "projects"—the Workshop (the annual seminar-type meeting in Johannesburg), the Network (envisioned as a peer-to-peer exchange), the Blog (ongoing, real-time dialogue), and the Salon (a quarterly periodical-style collection of edited texts housed on the JWTC site). While these differences are significant, it is also clear that in strictly institutional terms, the two publications come from the same place, so to speak, and speak very much alike. Given this essay's focus on the relationship between the exhaustion

of certain accents in African Marxist discourses and the intensification of socio-historical processes called globalization, *WISER Review's* gesture to a particular political style, and JWTC's annunciation of a Southern salon represent a reconfiguration of Tricontinentalism as postcolonialism. They both make a complex case for Southern theoretical perspectives from a continental African standpoint, imaginably in alliance with the Global South but possibly shorn of that formation's Marxist past.

Conclusions

One major critique of Marxist historiography from the perspective of cultural nationalism concerns the alleged silence of both Marx and Engels on slavery in the New World. The cultural turn in postmodernism has not made much of this critique, and the Workshop's attitude to its premise is marked by ambivalence (sympathetic to the genealogy of African diasporic intellectual tradition but dismissive of its role in "Afro-radicalism"). Yet readers of *Manifesto of the Communist Party* would recall that the text was constituted by an awareness of historical developments that are reminiscent of today's globalization, although the authors followed a methodological procedure that did not admit of such a usage. A deep investment in the aesthetic as a political issue marks a distinctive turn in the constitution of JWTC, in contrast with the exclusive focus on political economy in ROAPE. The rationale for this turn was not explicitly argued in the inaugural statements of the Workshop, either in the initial print form of *WISER Review* or in the latter iteration of the web-based portals associated with the JWTC. Such claims have to be sought in the manners of the Salon's appearance: its dedication to addressing a potential general

audience; its curatorial interest in diverse artistic and intellectual discourses, especially those related to the sensorial aspects of the “global,” Southern, and extra-political forms.

Another significant turn in JWTC is a genuine investment in the idea of the Global South as a viable political and intellectual orientation. This was obvious even in the Salon’s earlier life in the WISER Review, in which the first issue, dedicated to the tenth anniversary of South Africa’s first democratic elections, also included reflections on comparative history of democracy in Russia and South Africa as well as the status of trauma in present-day India. It is thus natural to expect a focus in an edition of The Salon on the spatial transformation of Pakistani cities as a result of the country’s status as home to the world’s largest collection of refugees, or in the importance of Brazil as the location of particular cultural attitudes which become meaningful as a result of translation and on-going creolization. This imaginary of the Global South is, remarkable for its inclusiveness, but it is also the fact that there was already a template for this kind of imaginary in the idea of the Tricontinental (or the Third World). I noted earlier that the Nigeria-based journal, *Positive Review*, with which Jeyifo was associated, derived its impetus from a conception of Marxism as an enabler of transnational social justice, although the preferred expression at the time was “international solidarity.” Though published in Ile-Ife, then one of the most vibrant centers of intellectual work in West Africa, *Positive Review* had its sight set on the world, and established strong, though largely personal relations with international cultural institutions like the Bogle L’Ouverture Bookstore and New Beacon Press, in England. Also, when ROAPE focused exclusively on African instances of political economy, it did so with this imaginary in mind, and it assumed a community that transcended the continent, one that it imagined would bring everyone within its purview. One difference is that while such

a global community is taken for granted in ROAPE, and imagined in *Positive Review*, it is explicitly referenced and practiced in the Salon. The African continent, and specifically South Africa, may be the base of this intellectual project, but it exists in equal relation to the rest of the Global South, and even beyond that primary community.

There is also the pertinent question of the relationship of the new Global South toward “funders.” Each edition of the salon’s publication-data page lists several institutional supporters, such as Prince Claus Fonds, Goethe Institut, Wiser, University of California Humanities Research Institute, and University of Wits. This relationship displaces the old anxieties among Marxists about “revolutionary appropriation,” that is the acquisition of the financial resources tied to capitalist systems for the execution of the revolution. To understand the depth of the anathema in which *Positive Review* held such funding institutions, one has to imagine the ideological attitude toward all practices it deemed “bourgeois,” “reactionary,” and “degenerate.” Most of the articles it published were unsigned because the notion that an individual could claim the copyright of a writing smacked of the bourgeois idea of property. Nor did it have a solid administrative plan for distributing the published issues. No further proof of this is needed than that the idea could not be sustained for long, and now it is hard to find copies of the publication in order to undertake the kind of comparative analysis so far applied to ROAPE and the JWTC.

Yet there are possibilities for the expansion of intellectual ideas that were dimly imagined when ROAPE came into existence over forty years ago. First, the virtual world of the internet allows the Workshop, and particularly the Salon, to be experimental and innovative in many refreshing ways. The 2014 Workshop themed ‘Archives of the Non-Racial’ for instance, was a mobile workshop. It included a two-week road journey across

South Africa, and a subsequent edition of the Salon (as well as the Blog) published most of the impressions of the experiment, in a way that showed a carefully curated relationship between the different aspects of the JWTC. In April 2016, a postdoctoral fellow at WISER startled me with the information that the annual workshop was being discontinued due to the funding having run out, although I have not succeeded in independently verifying this information. However, the 2015 session of the Workshop which had “Bios, Techne, and the Manufacture of Happiness” as its theme was the latest edition as of this writing. The Blog had also not been updated since July 2015, apparently because it is tied to the operation of the Workshop, an outlet for participants to reflect on issues emerging out of the sessions. But the Salon continues to be published, the most recent issue being Vol 10, published in 2015. This situation leaves open the question about the larger politics of the intellectual orientation of the Global South, seen from the standpoint of the Johannesburg workshop.

The narrative comes to something of a full circle: the NGO-format of funding which scuttles initiatives like the JWTC is a reminder of the limits of the idea of “civil society” as a social formation without organic roots in mass politics, as the epigraph attributed to Jeyifo at the beginning of this essay claims. At the same time, ROAPE remains steadily on steam, an academic journal with a progressive outlook, which has managed to reinvent itself in order to remain relevant, even if the idea of “African Marxist discourses” no longer appears to do. There are interesting ideas in these developments that require further reflection, especially in terms of the different categories or genres of intellectual work thus set in motion by the idealistic project of prosecuting the African revolution. Such ideas are viable to the extent that there are archives from which to start.

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Notes

1 It is not entirely accurate or apt to characterize the JWTC as a “publication,” since the Salon best approximates the journal-like format usually reserved for that description. At the same time, a one-word characterization of the two institutional initiatives is just as complicated, hence the multiplicity of tags (“projects,” “initiatives,” and “interventions,”) which I have adopted here, and which I hope will give the reader a fair idea of how I see them.

2 The extreme unevenness of this scholarship, and the equally extreme unevenness of critiques of it, make a proper assessment difficult and at best piecemeal. While the work of individual scholars like Samir Amin, Eskor Toyo, and so on have been important analytical signposts to specific concepts (like class, historical process), a general history of Marxism on the continent is hardly conceived. A global review of socialist history and theory such as Goran Therborn’s “After Dialectics” (2007) is a fine example of summative account which could be attempted of African experiences of Marxist ideologies.

3 When I presented an early draft of this essay at a Theory panel during the 2016 conference of the African Literature Association, the scholar Ato Quayson objected to the inclusion of Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* as part of “insurrection within” on the grounds that the African continent was not part of the book’s concerns. That objection seems to me to miss the point because the context of my critique is the black world, and the thematic concerns of a book are less important than the substantive cultural capital thus generated, proof of which is to be seen in the close relationship between Mbembe and Gilroy and the kinds of political analysis associated with their work.

4 A good account of this history can be found in Wallerstein 1988.

5 A useful comparison here would be *New Left Review*’s interest in modern European Marxisms, best exemplified in Anderson’s *Reflections on Western Marxism*.

6 One of the best interdisciplinary syntheses of these historical processes is Simone and Hecht 1994.

7 For a careful analysis of the pragmatic attitude toward socialism in Lusophone countries, see Chabal 2002.

8 See “Translator’s Foreword: A Plea for Leibniz,” in Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

9 Hardy’s report is written as a series of short, descriptive and impressionistic passages with telegraphic titles. “Diary of a Bad Year,” the section concerning the changes at WISER ends with the following paragraph: “In January 2013, Sarah Nuttall returned to take up the directorship of Wiser. Mbembe accompanied her. A few months after their arrival, the Andrew W Mellon Foundation announced a US\$1.5 million grant to support a programme of collaboration between Wiser and the African Studies Centre at the University of Michigan in the US.”

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