

# An interview with Harvard anthropology Professor John Comaroff—Part one

Anthropology was “the only discipline in South Africa at the time ... that took seriously a concern with the vast majority of the population”

David Walsh  
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John Comaroff is the Hugh K. Foster Professor of African and African-American studies and of Anthropology, and Oppenheimer Research Fellow in African Studies, Harvard University. Born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1945, Comaroff attended the University of Cape Town and earned his PhD from the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1973. He has taught at the University of Wales (1971-72), the University of Manchester (1972-78), the University of Chicago (1979-2012) and Harvard University (2012 to the present). Comaroff was voted one of Harvard’s favorite professors by the Class of 2019 “in recognition of [his] impact on the senior class’s Harvard experience” (Class of 2019’s Yearbook).

He has been invited to present his work at over 60 universities in 28 countries. He is the co-author, along with his wife Jean Comaroff, of numerous books, including *Of Revelation and Revolution* (in two volumes, 1991, 1997); *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (1992); *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (2001); *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009); *Theory from the South* (2011); *The Truth About Crime* (2016); and *Zombies and Frontiers in the Age of Neoliberalism: The Case of Post Colonial South Africa* (2022).

We spoke recently on a video call. This is the first of two parts.

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**David Walsh:** Could you explain how and when—and why—your family on both sides ended up in South Africa?

**John Comaroff:** The classical South African immigrant backgrounds: Jewish Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pogroms and the flight of Jews from Europe. My maternal family were from Lithuania, as was my wife Jean’s paternal family. We’re not sure exactly where my paternal family came from, but it was somewhere in the western end of the Russian Empire, either Belarus or Ukraine. Basically, they were driven out of Europe by antisemitism.

My paternal grandfather arrived in Birmingham during the 1890s depression and went to what was to become Rhodesia, as a laborer, in Cecil Rhodes’s Pioneer Column. He died young, and my father, also from a relatively poor background, migrated south. He eventually became a small shopkeeper in Cape Town.

**DW:** You have cited the comment of the postwar South African prime minister under the National Party government, D. F. Malan, as saying that had the Axis powers won the war, the [Nazi] Final Solution would have been applied in South Africa. What was the context of that remark? Was he saying it threateningly?

**JC:** Yes, it was threatening. Or at least it was taken as such by members of my parental generation, from whom I heard this said. I am not sure of the context, though, and, after 1948, according to some histories, antisemitism in South Africa actually diminished. But, with some real justification, the fear of it did not. South Africa was deeply divided between its conservative Afrikaners right and its liberal, predominantly English center—a conservative liberalism, but liberal nonetheless. The governing party at the time of South Africa’s entry into World War II under Jan Smuts was pro-British, pro-Allied powers, but the Afrikaners, i.e., descendants of the Dutch and German population, etc., were pro-Axis and had wanted to go to war on the side of Germany and Italy.

In fact, some members of what was to become their future government were imprisoned for their Nazi sympathies. So, after the war, in 1948, when they came to power under the National Party, reflecting back on what might have happened—had South Africa gone into the war on the Axis side, that is, and had the Axis powers won—it was perfectly logical to fear what might lie ahead.

**DW:** But this had to be very menacing and threatening to Jewish families living there.

**JC:** It was. My parents spoke about it a great deal. My father was your standard conservative, petty-bourgeois businessman. My mother was more socially critical, and very sensitive to the realities of apartheid. So I was brought up with those sensibilities.

In the Jewish calendar, Yom HaShoah, the Day of Remembrance, was a major day in the education of young Jews, myself included. From very early on, every Yom HaShoah, which came, ironically, close to the Zionist holiday of Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day, we were all dragged into Jewish community halls and shown the most horrendous film footage of the Holocaust. So one was extremely aware of the elision of recent history with the history of the present in South Africa.

However, to be honest, I didn’t experience a great deal of antisemitism as a kid. But I did see a lot of racist anti-blackness close to home. As a result, my concern was much less personally with antisemitism than it was with anti-black racism.

**DW:** You’ve described growing up in South Africa in the 1950s and ’60s, the dark years of apartheid, as a very violent society. Official violence, everyday violence—what sorts of violence?

**JC:** Both sorts of violence really. If one kept one’s eyes open, one saw the South African police arresting and brutalizing black workers, especially domestic workers. Under South African law, all black persons had to carry a pass, basically an internal passport. That passport had to

document their employment, their residence, their right to be in the city, and so forth. Any white person, under the law, could stop any black person and demand to see their pass.

If they didn't have it on their person, or if their pass was not endorsed with legitimate employment details, they could be arrested. At one point in my growing up, I remember that one out of every 234 black South Africans was in prison, itself an institution notorious for its unremitting brutality. By contrast to this everyday violence, the other form was the kind of governmental violence that gave us the Sharpeville Massacre [in 1960, in which 69 people were killed and 180 injured] and the various massacres that were to follow.

There was a widely repeated joke, a very dark piece of humor, when I was a teenager: it had it that the South African cops were the only police in the world that fired warning shots into the air and regularly missed.

**DW:** I was going to ask about Sharpeville. You were 15, it must have had a major impact.

**JC:** Oh, my reaction to Sharpeville was sheer horror. I recall vividly the day itself, and the events, the mass protests, that followed. At the time, I was a member of a Jewish socialist youth movement, and in that context became intensely aware of black protest. I got a lot of my education there, that's when I first encountered Marxism.

The leader of the group that I was a member of later committed suicide as an exile in London. He had been arrested under the Immorality Act for having a partner of color. He was a member of the South African Congress of Democrats, which was the white left-wing group in the Congress Alliance [led by the African National Congress].

I joined this [Jewish socialist] group when I was just 14 and as a result was drawn into the conversations of young members of the Congress of Democrats. That was where I was educated into what South African politics was all about, what the Congress movement was all about. So, when Sharpeville happened, I was able to understand it as an extraordinary moment that expressed the essence of apartheid violence.

Apartheid wasn't only about race. South Africa was a prime case in which race and class fused with one another in an extraordinarily violent formation of so-called racial capitalism. Americans tend to read apartheid as merely racist. But it was much more complex. It was a triangulated structure in which race, class and gender were literally burned into the South African reality, and undergirded its political economy. If you understood that, everything else became clear.

**DW:** What was the political perspective of the organization you belonged to?

**JC:** It was, broadly, a pro-Congress movement. This was, of course, before the Black Consciousness movement arose under Steve Biko. This was in the early '60s, after the Defiance Campaign, when all the Congress movements were banned and went underground. All oppositional political discussion became deeply secretive. The Jewish socialist movement to which I belonged—which had a Zionist element as well, as did virtually all South African Jewish organizations at the time—was legal, but all of its sympathies were with the underground groups. I worked as a university student in the offices of that movement. Our phones were bugged and we were kept under the surveillance of the South African security police.

**DW:** Were you attracted to the Communist Party at all?

**JC:** That's a very interesting question. The South African Communist Party, by the '60s, was a rather shadowy presence. It had been underground for a long time. So, no, we had no relation to the Party as such, although there were certainly Party members in our networks. But nobody talked about Party membership openly because the dangers were huge.

**DW:** When you were of an age to think about such things, what was your attitude towards the Soviet Union and the so-called socialist bloc?

**JC:** Sympathetic. In a way, we were undereducated in the intricate politics of Moscow and the Soviet Union, especially after 1956

[Khrushchev's secret speech lifting the lid on the crimes of Stalinism], which complicated matters entirely. I was still pretty young then, and my awareness of the internal politics of the international socialist movement at that stage was limited.

In some ways, I wish I had been five years older because I think I would have understood the matter better then. But, interestingly, when I taught at the University of Manchester in the early '70s, the backwash of 1956 was still being argued. We had one married couple among our colleagues who probably divorced over 1956, so I became much more conscious of it later on. The immediacy of the South African struggle in some ways elided differences on the left.

**DW:** Were you aware of Trotsky's writings at that point?

**JC:** No, only later. I was aware of Trotsky as a heroic figure, but not as social theorist. Remember, everything on the left was banned in South Africa at the time. I managed to get illicit copies of things like Marx's *The German Ideology*, chunks of the *Grundrisse*, etc., etc., through surreptitious exchanges under difficult conditions. But those books were not even in the University of Cape Town library.

**DW:** You describe the difficulty of explaining to students what it was like growing up in a "fascist education system." You mention in an interview that there wasn't a single text by Marx or anything smacking of socialism or communism openly available in the library. To access such works you had to go and sit in a cage on the library's fifth floor.

**JC:** You had to get special permission to do it, and it was read under supervision.

**DW:** You referred to taking part in protests all the time. What was the character of those protests?

**JC:** At that time, most of those protests fused liberal and left-wing anti-apartheid tendencies. The University of Cape Town campus during the mid-sixties was constantly a site of protest and unrest. I joined those protests all the time. They were about basically everything, including the exclusion of black scholars from the university faculty. The constant imposition of more and more repressive, fascistic laws brought us out into the streets. Protest was pretty constant and so was its repression. South Africa, incidentally, remains a center of almost daily mass protest, but it is now mainly about joblessness, crime and corruption, and the lack of public services—and is centered primarily in black urban areas, where unemployment is endemic.

Repression became more lethal after we left South Africa. In fact, my dear friend David Webster, an anthropologist and anti-apartheid activist, was assassinated outside his home in 1989, not long before Nelson Mandela was released. He had come to live with us in Manchester for a while when he was a visiting fellow at the University of Manchester. We begged him not to go back to South Africa because we saw the violence that was looming larger and larger, especially after 1976 and the Soweto uprising, when things became much more dangerous.

**DW:** When you were growing up, which intellectual or political figures, past or present, were the first ones that were important to you?

**JC:** Again, through the Jewish socialist movement, of course, my most significant confrontation was with Marx. But there were also Jewish socialists of the 19th century, like Moses Hess, who edited the *Rheinische Zeitung* where he worked with Marx. Also Dov Ber Borochov, who wrote about the inverted pyramid of the Jewish class structure in Europe, and how the primary object of Labor Zionism was its reinversion, the creation of a Jewish working class in what was to be a Palestine-Israel. This, in part, was why the kibbutz was so central to Labor Zionist ideology.

I was dezionified later on, but again, in the wake of the war and the Holocaust, Zionist socialism seemed a very logical place to be. A lot of South Africans on the left got their education in Jewish youth movements. In addition to Marx and the Zionist socialist writers, I also got fragments of Engels' *The Conditions of the English Working Class*, though I don't remember how. Ironically, when I worked at the University of Manchester

years later, my office was across the road from the building in which that book was written.

**DW:** What about cultural or literary figures? What was important to you at that age?

**JC:** I had a rather strong Romantic tendency. I read a lot of Dickens, and a lot of Charlotte Brontë. I was very interested in novels like *Shirley* [1849 novel by Charlotte Brontë], which was one of the first feminist books about capitalism. I also read a lot of Russian authors. I was entranced by Pasternak, by Chekhov's short stories, among other things.

I also read a lot of South African literature. From early on, I read Nadine Gordimer, who later became a friend, although we didn't actually interact very often because she remained in South Africa. But she came to visit us in the US a couple of times. I was quite classical in my readings then. Maybe that was partly my bourgeois-Jewish background.

**DW:** There are worse things. This is obviously a large question, but why were you drawn to anthropology?

**JC:** That is a complicated question. I spent a year in Israel after school. My cousin, but a generation older, so genealogically my uncle, had gone to Israel at the time of independence, of Nakba, and later became minister of health in Moshe Sharett's government. He was very much of the Israeli left of the time.

He was a psychiatrist but had a deep influence on me intellectually. He happened to be the brother-in-law of the late Max Gluckman, the South African-born anthropologist who was the head of the anthropology department at Manchester, who later became a colleague. He was a major figure in the discipline and in African Studies. So there was a relationship there. Gluckman himself had been a member of the Communist Party, although his anthropology was anything but Marxist—we used to joke about his “Maxism,” his “Marxism” of the precapitalist world.

In any event, during that year in Israel, through long discussions with my “uncle,” I became interested in anthropology. Also, it was the only discipline in South Africa at the time, even though it had been deeply implicated in colonialism, that took seriously a concern with the vast majority of the population, its black indigenous citizens.

Also, I realized that if I were to become an anthropologist, I would have to learn an African language and that seemed to me an almost sacred obligation, living in a country most of whose people spoke African languages.

**DW:** Could you describe the fieldwork you did in the late 1960s?

**JC:** To take a step back, our undergraduate anthropology professor at the University of Cape Town was Monica Wilson, an extraordinarily gifted scholar and teacher. Interestingly, she was one of the first people to draw an analogy in the early 1950s, in a classic essay, between McCarthyism and African witchcraft.

She was a remarkable anthropologist and advisor. Jean and I were of the left. That's why we went to the London School of Economics to do our doctoral work. Monica Wilson called us into her office one day and said, “Where will it be for you [for graduate school]? Oxford, Cambridge? No, you're too political—LSE.” It was at the time a well-known leftist school.

She said to us, if you want to do fieldwork in the South African context, you will have to go to live among a people who live in a borderland, because the chances are you're going to have trouble with the South African security police. You may not be allowed to finish your fieldwork. Go to a place where you can actually complete it on the other side of the border if necessary.

So we went to the South Africa-Botswana borderland in what is now the North West province, near the historically famous town known in English as Mafeking, in Setswana as Mahikeng, “the place of rocks,” which was where the Siege of Mafeking occurred [in 1899-1900 during the Second Boer War] and where Baden-Powell, who later started the Boy Scouts, made his name, albeit as a rather dubious heroic figure. Our fieldwork was conducted in a Tswana chiefdom, the Barolong boo Ratshidi.

My very first book involved *Mafeking* [Sol Plaatje's *Black Man's View of a White Man's War*], which is an account of the siege. We are now preparing the 50th anniversary edition of the publication, which is, to me, a very poignant moment. Plaatje, himself of Tswana extraction, then a young man with limited education, was to become the first general secretary of the South African Native National Congress, later the African National Congress [ANC]. He was also to be one of the country's great literati: Among other things, he wrote the first novel published by a black person in South Africa, translated Shakespeare into his mother-tongue, Setswana, and emerged as a major public intellectual. Today there is a university and an urban municipality named after him, a scholarly industry around his writings, and much else besides.

For our doctoral research, Jean and I had to select topics. She worked on ritual and religion under apartheid; her dissertation was to become a classic, *Body of Power and Spirit of Resistance*. I was interested in political life and African law. I didn't believe all that stuff about African “tribal” politics being, as it were, “primitive.” Remember, in the 1960s, African political systems were still described in these terms, which, from everything I read, seemed anything but true...

Who could read of the Ashanti Empire or Great Zimbabwe, or, indeed, the interlacustrine states like Buganda or Busoga, and think of them as primitive? They were extremely complex states with highly elaborate legal systems. Also, I always wondered what the relationship was between chiefly politics and national black politics. One of the most famous figures in the community in which we worked was a man called Silas Modiri Molema, who had been the treasurer of the ANC; a doctor, he was also a widely published historian of local political life. Molema was known to be a part of a dynastic chiefly family. Furthermore, a leading royal figure in a closely related Tswana chiefdom, J.S. Moroka, also a doctor, had been president of the ANC. All this led me to an interest in the relationship between what was called tribal politics—which struck me as anything but tribal (“tribe” is itself a deeply pejorative term in South Africa)—and national politics.

My research on politics and law, society and culture, among the Barolong boo Ratshidi, was also a route to a more general understanding of colonial politics in that South African theater, which was a very troubled one. It was where Cecil John Rhodes's notorious Road to the North was supposed to have taken off into Africa. The Cape to Cairo Railway was to cross there from South Africa into Bechuanaland, now Botswana, and to serve as the spine of Rhodes's imperial ambitions. It was, in short, a very complex geopolitical node in Southern Africa. Many decades later it was also on the route that those fleeing from the apartheid regime took to escape the country.

Mahikeng, that is to say African Mahikeng, was also a nodal point in South African history. Not only was it the site of the famous Siege of 1899-1900, but Bechuanaland, just to the north, was where the Jameson Raid [1895-96] started out; this military folly was integral to Rhodes's effort to take over the Transvaal and its goldfields. And just to its south were the diamond fields on land once owned by indigenous populations, land that had been annexed by Britain.

Here, it seemed to me, was a microcosm of South African political history, of long-running struggles over land and labor, between the Tswana, the British and the Boers. At the time I was both intellectually naïve and under-educated. I had had a few years of anthropology under an authoritarian regime. I didn't know what I know today, but it appeared to me to be a place to understand the complexities of South African politics from the fringe.

I was also aware of Lenin's comment—which, oddly, Monica Wilson echoed—that if you want to understand a structural system, look at it from its peripheries. From that vantage one sees all kinds of things there that you don't see at its center, in the eye of the storm, so to speak. That turned out to be true: it was from there that I began to understand what, in

effect, South African racial capitalism really was all about.

The experiences of that fieldwork—although my thesis was about the political history of the chiefdom and its relationship to the greater story of South African colonialism—primed much of my, and our, later work because it gave us an insight into South Africa that we could never have seen from outside.

**DW:** Under what conditions did you then leave South Africa?

**JC:** Oh, because of the security police basically. We had, under South African law, to maintain a residence in the white town of Mafeking. The town was bisected by a railway line. The African town was on one side, the white one on the other. Under the conditions of our research permit we had to have an apartment in Mafeking, which we did.

We also had a homestead in the village, at which we stayed for much of the time. But we had to appear in the white town. A security cop moved in next door to our apartment within a couple of months of our arrival. There were two white Marxists in the town. One ran the *Mafeking Mail*, the historic local newspaper. His name was Joe Podbury. The other, who lived nearby, Bruce Little, was a local chemist. They warned us about the security cops going around the white community asking about us.

The black Anglican priest in Mahikeng, Father Chipfupa, was also aware that the security police were watching us way too closely. He decided to get us ritually washed by a traditional healer. So he schlepped us miles off into the bush one night at 3 a.m. Tswana believe that the best healers come from far away. Also, that you do not tell a really good healer why you are there; it is their job to know. He divined that we were there because of the malign attentions of the South African police. He ritually washed us and made me—who had to take off most of my clothes for the treatment—promise not to have a bath for a week. Jean got off more lightly: she could remain fully clothed and was allowed to wash.

When we left the field after 19 months, largely because the security police seemed to be getting way too close, the Reverend Chipfupa said to us, “See, it worked.”

We had to be very careful of the attention of the authorities. The man with whom I subsequently wrote a book on African law, Simon Roberts, was then working in Gaborone for the new Botswana government. Botswana had only become independent in 1966 and he was working in the attorney general’s office on the Constitution.

We were careful to get copies of our field notes out of South Africa through Roberts, because we were afraid that they might be seized and/or read when we were not aware of it.

We were very aware of the dangers. By the time we left, in August 1970, the security police were getting close. Once, we were taken in, but not questioned; we were literally put in a room and left there by the police—for God knows how long, because our watches were taken.

It was sort of standard infantile terror, just to make us aware they were watching us. We were driving along one day, stopped, pushed into a car and taken to a security center—and left there to sweat it out, wondering what was about to happen to us. That was the point at which we knew that things were not great. Also, Chipfupa, to whom we were close, had been a pastor to Robert Sobukwe [prominent anti-apartheid activist and founding member of the Pan Africanist Congress], which is why he was in Mafikeng cooling his heels and was probably also being watched.

It was also known that we were very close friends with Podbury, who had been a member of the Communist Party. There was every reason to believe that things were heating up.

**DW:** Your collaboration with your wife is obviously both unusual and productive. Could you say something about how that partnership was born and developed?

**JC:** We’ve been married for 55 years, so it developed a long time ago. We first met in anthropology class in South Africa in 1965. I was very aware of her presence. She was extremely beautiful, extremely bright and was top of the class the first year. The second year the class dropped from

about 100 students to nine of us, or seven of us, or something like that.

So we got to know each other, got to argue very early on. Our first argument, however, was about my smoking, to which she objected, although she could produce an exquisite philosophical argument for almost anything on the planet.

We made a bet as to which one of us would come top of the class the following year, and whoever did would owe the other a meal. I ended up owing her the meal, which I attribute to the prejudice of our professor *for* me; being brighter than Jean is something I would never, ever claim to have any right or basis to claim.

We married early because we knew we were leaving the country, believing that, if we stayed much longer, we’d land up in serious trouble. So going abroad to do our graduate work and emigrating were part of the same moment, although we did later think of going back. At that point in time, the great debate among our peers in South Africa was: Do you leave or do you stay?

Father Chipfupa once said to us in Mafikeng when we were doing our field work, “Look, let me tell you something. This country’s going to have a race war.” He didn’t talk class, he talked race, he was a liberal Anglican. He said, “We don’t want you in our gunsights. This is not going to be an issue in which there is a middle ground. If you value your friendship to me and to the people whom you have come close to here, you should leave.”

We were profoundly influenced by that, which is one of the reasons we didn’t change our minds and decide to go back after we finished our PhDs—we missed home deeply, its attractions and its struggle—but went to work in Manchester. I’m very glad we did because Manchester was probably the most exciting university in England at the time.

*To be continued.*



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