

An interview with Harvard anthropology Professor John Comaroff—Part two

“We have always written against the grain, which is the point of critique ... of any weight”

David Walsh
4 May 2023

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 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 second and concluding part of the interview. The first part was posted May 4.

* * * * *

John Comaroff: The University of Manchester was an ideal place to work in the early 1970s. It was also an ideal place to get involved in the anti-apartheid movement abroad. We became friends very quickly with [British sociologist] Peter Worsley, who had been a member of the Communist Party in England; his dad had been a worker in the Everton dockyard. We got very involved in labor union-led anti-apartheid activities and in the boycott South Africa movement in Britain.

We originally disrupted what were called Springbok Society meetings [sponsored by the South African embassy in its efforts to win support for the regime] along with members of the trade union movement. That alliance in Manchester between the anti-apartheid and labor movements became very strong. In the ’70s, England was a great place to engage in anti-apartheid politics. By contrast, everything was pretty quiet in South Africa itself until ’76. Between ’60 and ’76, the repression was pretty effective.

That’s not to say there wasn’t activity in South Africa, but it was diffuse and largely underground. Certainly, Congress movement exiles outside the country were effective in organizing opposition, not least the armed struggle. But to us, the insile/exile distinction was heavily mediated by the experience living on what was then called the “wrong side of the

color bar.” Those very few of us who had actually lived on the “wrong” side, in an African community—very few because it was ordinarily illegal—were more prone to feel the need to leave, for just the reason given by Father Chipfupa, and do what we could abroad.

Do we regret this? That’s an interesting question, because most of our dear friends and our family remained insiles. I respect that deeply.

David Walsh: You have these striking photographs of Isaac Schapera on your website. Can you explain to our readers who he was and what your relationship with him meant to the two of you?

JC: Isaac Schapera was one of the great anthropologists of the 20th century. A Jewish South African, he grew up in Namaqualand. A very difficult childhood, very difficult parental issues. He actually grew up speaking Afrikaans, not English, until he was sent to school in Cape Town.

Schapera was a very bookish character. He never told us why he became an anthropologist. We were very close. He became professor in Cape Town early on. I’m not sure when [1935], and eventually went to London in 1950. Deeply rooted in anthropology, he was a sometime research assistant to Bronislaw Malinowski, who was one of the so-called founders of the modern discipline.

Schapera taught at the LSE (London School of Economics) until he retired in 1969. He lived in one room in London for over 40 years. A very strange, isolated man, who lived to be almost 100. ... His doctoral work was about something else [peoples now known as Khoi and San], but he started doing work among the Tswana in the Bechuanaland protectorate in the late ’20s and amassed an extraordinary amount of data. His Setswana was amazing, very idiomatic, very expressive.

His fieldwork technique was very different from ours. It was not immersive, it was interview-based. He was very, very male-centric. He would get together bunches of men, elders and ask them questions. He was extremely systematic, though; he would have made an extraordinary lawyer. His field notes are unbelievable. There are literally thousands of pages of extremely detailed notes in Setswana, which he translated into English.

Some of Schapera’s work was remarkable by any standards, although he had a naivete about him. He wrote a book about married life, for example, that included intimate details of women’s sexuality. Of course, it led to all kinds of rumors, which were nonsense. Most of the information came, in fact, from his research assistant, to whom he gave a set of questions to ask of his female kin.

Schapera would have described himself as an “apolitical” person, but he had absolutely no illusions at all about what South African apartheid was about or indeed what life was like in what were then called the South

African High Commission Territories, which he saw as labor reserves for South Africa. One of his books was a study of labor migration. It is still cited in scholarly works.

We published a book of Schapera's photographs. He was very attached emotionally to those photographs and to the people whom he photographed in the '30s. He gave us copies of some of the images. For years and years and years we battled to publish them, but nobody was interested. Eventually, we persuaded the University of Chicago Press. We got a subvention and managed to get copies of the ones that he'd given to the Royal Anthropological Institute in London.

We wrote an essay for the book called *A Portrait of the Ethnographer as a Young Man*, an analysis of his photographs. He never lived to see the publication of the book, but he did see the proofs. When we sent him the essay, he wrote a postcard to us in his tiny handwriting, "Thank you for telling me things about myself that I've never known." It was very moving.

DW: You were in Britain from the late '60s to the late '70s, when you went to Chicago. Obviously there was the anti-apartheid movement, but you were in Britain during the growing general strike movement against the Heath government and which eventually led to his defeat by the miners in 1973-74. Did you have any dealings with any of the British political tendencies?

JC: Not really, except for the trade unionists in Manchester. But, again, that was part of the anti-apartheid struggle. We also got caught up in the anti-Vietnam War protests in the early '70s. The LSE was closed for much of the time, so everybody dispersed. The anthropology department went into exile at the Royal Anthropological Institute. It was like being on a centrifuge, that period.

In 1971 and 1972 we were at the University of Wales and then went to Manchester in 1972. Our connections were much more generalized than individuated. We were very aware of the Trotskyist presence on the campus.

DW: Again, another sweeping question, but I'll ask it anyway. What does the anthropologist seek out or look for in particular? Or what can or does anthropology contribute at its best, as distinct from the other social sciences?

JC: That is a complicated question, because anthropology is really fragmenting right now. So much of it has become identitarian in ways that I absolutely reject. Many see this as "progressive," but it's retrogressive as imaginable. A discipline that for a century of its history was anti-essentialist is now sanctioning essentialisms of every kind.

"Only a Navajo can write about the Navajo." That is neo-essentialism of the worst kind. Of course, Navajos should write about Navajo life; there's no question about that. But not only white people should write about whites, or only men about men, or Navajos about the Navajo, or any human subjects only about themselves and their experiences of the world.

Here I have a strong Brechtian faith in critical methodology. Anthropology is, or at least ought to be, about estrangement. It's about taking the naturalized, the taken for granted—in the old Gramscian sense of the term—and turning it on its head in asking why, why, why? Why do we, or anyone else, experience the world and act on it as we or they do? I wrote an essay some years back in which I made the argument that anthropology is not defined by its content but by its methodological curiosity, by defamiliarization of the world.

American social scientists tend predominantly to be empiricists. If you don't see something, it does not exist. Ultimately, this is why US science tends not to think structurally. Even explanations taken to be structural usually refer merely to perceived patterns, not to the underlying causes and currents of history.

Take, for example, the question of why traditional chiefship in Africa is becoming important again in some parts of the continent, this after decades of eclipse. By and large, it is seen as a product of so-called "neo-

traditionalism," of identity asserting itself in the revalorization of the customary—also in the revalorization of the experience of primordial belonging, at the center of which is traditional sovereignty, the linchpin of custom. But beneath the phenomenon lie economic and political forces that have to do with the transformative history of the present.

With the increasing commodification of culture and intellectual property, with the recognition of the rights of ethnic groups to their material and immaterial assets, and with the financialization of almost everything, what were once called tribes are becoming more and more like corporations. Indeed, some have incorporated themselves, as have a number of Native American groups.

Under these conditions, identity becomes a form of monopoly capital, indigenous chiefs become CEOs and their subjects become shareholders in the polity-as-company. If an African people has, say, a cultural product to sell, indigenous knowledge to be patented, land to sell or rent, or natural resources under their territory to be mined, their ruler generally acts as the point of articulation with the market—hence the rising significance of traditional office under entirely new conditions. Hence, also, the revalorization of belonging, whose material and immaterial aspects become increasingly entangled and transformed. Both sovereignty and identity, in sum, take on new meaning as the force fields of history impact structurally, often silently, upon them.

Anthropology at its best asks the questions that the other social sciences do not ask. My political science colleagues at Harvard may go around the world measuring democracy. I, as an anthropologist, ask, what does democracy actually mean? Why do we tend to associate it primarily with elections—which people in many other contexts do *not*, relating it rather to such things as the responsiveness of the state to civil society—and in so doing, reduce it basically to the political analogue of shopping?

DW: I'd like to cite a passage you wrote some 30 years ago. It's in the preface to *Of Revelation and Revolution* [1991].

We are by now all familiar with the accusing finger pointed at the discipline for its complicity in colonialism, for its alleged part in the creation and domination of the "other." ... Our own answer, at this point, is to do an anthropology of the colonial encounter. We do so on the assumption that, if the discipline has, in the past, been an instrument of a colonizing culture, there is no reason why, in the present, it cannot serve as an instrument of liberation. By revealing the structures and processes by which some people come to dominate others, it may just as well affirm—indeed, chart the way to—revolutionary consciousness. Nor does the point apply only to the study of colonialism. It holds equally in precolonial and postcolonial contexts, in the First as well as the Third World. ...

It is at best a gratuitous indulgence merely to debate epistemological niceties, or to argue over the impossibility of making "objective" statements about the world, while apartheid and other repressive regimes continue to wreak havoc on human lives, often claiming anthropological alibis as they do so. Our practice may not make perfect, and it demands of us a deep awareness of its inevitable dangers and entanglements. Still, it can make something in the cause of praxis—in South Africa as everywhere else.

I find that a very interesting and strong statement. How do you think about these things 32 years later?

JC: That still charts everything we do. One needs to have humility in the face of history. I really mean that. It can sound like a cliché, but we've gotten history wrong so often that we end up constantly needing to reinterrogate ourselves, constantly needing to ask how we can commit

ourselves to a praxis that tries to make sense of the world, that doesn't wallow in a kind of defeatist "Everything's impossible." It's not impossible, apartheid came to an end. It's a very, very iffy end, certainly, and there's still a second revolution to be fought, but nonetheless who would have predicted it? The world changes, often unexpectedly.

Ultimately, I take anthropology as iconic of all the critical social sciences. I think of Marxism as critical anthropology. If it's not that, it's nothing. Ultimately, that's what the left has to commit itself to. Much of the left in America has been suckered into a so-called "progressivism," a combination of some dubious form of Marxism with some dubious form of identitarianism, which they think is "progressive." No, it isn't progressive.

Of course, anthropology is imperfect; human beings are imperfect. One of the things I learned in Manchester among very fine Marxist scholars was that we are inexorably creatures of history, that what we're writing is a situated product of history. That doesn't negate it, it simply challenges it.

DW: I was particularly interested in *Ethnicity, Inc.*, about the new branding and marketing of ethnicity, published in 2009, because our movement began looking very seriously at the global integration of capitalist production in the late 1980s. We argued, for example, in 1998 [*Globalization and the International Working Class*] that the new global economic relations had "also provided an objective impulse for a new type of nationalist movement, seeking the dismemberment of existing states. ... This new form of nationalism promotes separatism along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, with the aim of dividing up existing states for the benefit of local exploiters. Such movements have nothing to do with a struggle against imperialism, nor do they in any sense embody the democratic aspirations of the masses of oppressed. They serve to divide the working class and divert the class struggle into ethno-communal warfare."

In *Ethnicity, Inc.*, you asked: "What, precisely, is the part played by the rise of neoliberal capitalism, broadly conceived, in the incorporation of identity? Who, if we may be so unsubtle, are its primary beneficiaries? Who suffer it, and in what measure? What are the implications of Ethnicity, Inc. for everyday ethno-politics, not least those conducted by violent means? And for the affect so long held to be an integral element of ethnic consciousness? Are any parts of the new global order likely to escape the processes described here?"

Obviously, I won't ask you to answer all those questions in three or four minutes, but could you perhaps point in the direction of some of your conclusions?

JC: Ethnicity, Inc. is a very disturbing phenomenon because it combines the worst of faux progressivism, under the guise of righteous identity politics, with the commodity form. Once ethnically defined populations perceive themselves to share interests and have legitimate claims on the world by virtue of a shared primordial essence, their identity becomes self-validating and non-negotiable. Ethnicity is a historical creation, a product of specific material and political conditions, but it is invariably experienced as transcendent, above history, biogenetic.

"We have a right to profit from our identity." This is often claimed as recompense for some real or imagined injury, some wrong, some deficit—exacerbated, typically, by a lack of due recognition. But here's the thing. Ethnic groups in their originary form are what Max Weber referred to classically as status groups, groups founded on a broadly shared culture that, within them, subsumed internal class differences. But as identity—and the imagined cultural infrastructure in which it is ostensibly grounded—becomes commodified, those groups become class stratified internally, as well as exclusionary and exploitative.

How so? Because, as I said earlier, when ethnic groups become more like corporations, or at least can financialize their material and immaterial assets, their elites tend to monopolize those assets or distribute them

unevenly, and those held to be marginal members are extruded. The more identity becomes a form of monopoly capital, the more ethnic groups replicate the class structures of the wider societies in which they are embedded.

So Ethnicity Inc. has produced more poor than rich people. Those, for instance, who claim to speak for the Zulu do very well out of "Zuluness." The late Zulu king, Zwelithini, who died in 2021, was one of the richest men in South Africa, while many "ordinary" Zulu under him found their "traditional" lands, once freely occupied, transformed into rentier property for which they had to pay—all this in the name of a—thoroughly reinvented—"custom." The irony is that, under Ethnicity, Inc. indigenous cultural forms often become reformulated in order to facilitate brute extraction. Ethnicity Inc. appears to enrich, and in some measures it does, but it enriches as the same way as a new factory in Flint, Michigan, enriches.

DW: I watched the New School talk the two of you gave in 2018 ["Crime, Sovereignty, and the State: the Metaphysics of Global Disorder"]. It raises some of the same issues as your book *The Truth about Crime* [2016]. In that work, you referred to a number of processes, including the privatization of the police and prisons, the militarization of the police, the blurring of the line between the criminal economy and legitimate business.

These are things we have also addressed and been concerned with, including also the rise of the political underworld, particularly from the Bush administration in particular onward, but through all the administrations, resulting in presidents and vice presidents talking about "taking out the bad guys," like some mafia don, or at least mafia dons in the movies.

You spoke as well about the re-emergence of quasi-debtor prisons in the US, the criminalization of poverty, the growing entanglement of lawbreaking in law enforcement. You write, "the principal emphasis of enforcement has moved, normatively, from crime fighting to public order. Or, more accurately, it has moved from a historically labile mix of the two to a heavy stress on the latter, defined in such a way as to discipline 'target' populations and their life-ways; this under a criminal justice regime that combines market-style managerialism with militarization, outsourcing with responsabilization, spinning off much of what once constituted conventional law-and-order operations to the private sector."

Could you speak briefly about some of your concerns in the work on law, crime and policing?

JC: The book had several objectives. One of them was to ask why it is that crime has become such a ubiquitous way of talking about the world, of making sense of what we take to be dis/order, of dealing with putative threats to our security and well-being. Part of our argument is that crime-talk is a displacement: that it obscures those structural features of this moment in the history of capitalism that have led to radically increased inequality, to falling real wages, to a situation in which a job does not necessarily equate with a living income, to widespread feelings of precarity.

To us it was clear, from a sociological perspective, that crime and policing today in the USA and South Africa—the two contexts on which we focus—have a great deal to do with transformations in the labor market, and in changing relations between capital and labor. Both countries have a real problem of un- and under-employment. The US is taught to believe that its unemployment level is below 4 percent; but that overlooks the huge numbers of people who are not counted, who cannot find wage work and have given up looking, or who can only find limited-hour jobs. The more realistic figure is the employment-population ration, which, in America, is currently 60.4 percent; put another way, just under 40 percent of the US population is *not* employed.

When this proportion of the workforce is out of work, there is a problem. Basically, they become a lumpen population, which in effect has

got to reenter the economy in some form. The form in which they do is as an extractable population, extractable through their commodification. One major way in which this occurs is through mass incarceration. We don't only mean incarceration in prison or jail, but also in segregated inner cities that have become prison-like in many respects; in some places there is a very fine membrane between prison and neighborhood, one through which people, especially African American men and the poor, pass constantly.

Here people who once produced commodities are commodified, taxpayer money being paid to private sector corporations and public institutions to provision prisons and to secure the streets outside. Indeed, I hardly need to spell out to you all the ramifications of the prison-finance complex: The fact that the private sector spends a great deal on lobbying to keep the size and management of the carceral population yielding high levels of profit; the fact that the so-called fine-farming of the carceral population and their families is an axis of trickle-up economics; the fact that many of the ordinary activities of the poor, like small-time drug dealing and selling untaxed cigarettes, are criminalized; and so on and on.

The general point of the book, in other words, is to make plain how we ought to be theorizing contemporary crime and policing by situating it in the structural ground of neoliberal political economy. Instead, we are encouraged in public discourse to think about crime not as a problem of political economy, changing labor regimes, or the transformation of class relations, but as a problem—or worse these days, as a crisis—of individual, crimogenic evil, inflected by race and poverty. And to think of policing not as an institution of sanctioned violence for the protection of private property and bourgeois personhood, but for the righteous maintenance of order and the management of crime in the general interest. Not that this last point is new: historically, policing has always been intrinsic to the way that capital has worked, sanctifying and protecting private property as a transcendent public good.

There is a lot more in the book—it also explores the complex relationship between crime and politics, including the criminalization of democratic dissidence—but its most significant take-away is that one has to understand policing, crime, etc. in these structural and historical terms.

DW: How do you see some of these regressive social phenomena in terms of their relation to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the supposed “end of history,” a phrase that you refer to in one of your essays?

JC: That's a very interesting question. I think it is one that is wildly under-theorized. The end of the Soviet Union really gave capitalism its monopoly over the human imagination as—*ostensibly*, I stress, since it is purely mythic—the only thinkable political economy. And it gave rein to its neoliberal excesses. That is to say, while there was a Soviet Union, there was a dialectical antithesis to capitalism, one that placed limits on those excesses. For many, too, it gave hope that there were viable alternatives, of which the perfectibility of the Keynesian welfare state, with its liberal modernist social contract, appeared to be one. But more radical alternatives also appeared thinkable.

The end of the Cold War moved us from the Keynesian to the neoliberal moment, and, I think, unleashed the process in which the corporate state grew, as it were, into a wholly owned subsidiary of the market and of capital, giving globalization, deregulation and financialization considerable oxygen. And with it, unleashing the kinds of contradictions that undergird the contemporary logic of crime and policing, the commodification of identity, and all the other historical transformations that we have been discussing.

Of course, in the late years of the Soviet Union, its own internal contradictions also raised all sorts of questions about the relationship between the state and citizen.

I was in Moscow a lot in those difficult years. One wonders whether, if the Soviet Union hadn't fallen as it did, its own history wouldn't have become even more complicated in unpredictable ways—and sparked the

global end of the Keynesian state through a different route.

So yes, I think that there is a direct relationship between the end of the Soviet Union and the contorted, toxic capitalist world in which we currently find ourselves.

DW: Instead of the golden age we were promised in 1989-1991 of peace and prosperity, we've obviously now come closer than ever to a nuclear war. Societies, including the American society, are tearing themselves apart. Fascism has re-emerged. Very big working class struggles are on the rise. So how has the promise of “Millennial Capitalism,” the title of one of your books, turned out for the vast majority of humanity?

JC: Oh, it was never a great promise, was it? You know how skeptical we were of “Millennial Capitalism.”

DW: You've had an extensive intellectual, professional career. What are some of the accomplishments or achievements, whether recognized or not, that you're most proud of?

JC: I'm a teacher and a researcher, that's all. As I said before, one always lives with humility in the face of history.

Research and teaching are a challenge, a constant battle. My wife and I grew up in apartheid South Africa. Being white, we came from a relatively privileged section of the population; in that respect, we obviously benefited from apartheid. This is a contradiction that we have had to confront all our lives—all the more so because we grew up so aware of violence of the regime. It is why the struggle became part of us from very early on.

You couldn't live in South Africa as a sensitive human being and not be affected. I am also Jewish. I came to consciousness at a time uncomfortably close to the rise and fall of Nazi Germany and hence grew into a sensibility of human oppression of one kind or another. Having grown up with that sensibility, I knew very early on that my life would be dedicated to research and teaching.

And what are our accomplishments? Our accomplishments, if any, have been to challenge people in their thinking. We have always written against the grain, which is the point of critique, of theory-work of any weight. And of analytical ethnography. Our work has often infuriated other scholars, which I take to be a blessing, not a curse. One wants to provoke; one wants to estrange established truths. We've taken a lot of heat for this over the years. I think that when you write from the left, you have constantly to write against skepticism and dismissal. So be it.

Concluded.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact