

# rites and responsibilities

A DIALOGUE SERIES ON SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL



---

“GOD WAS ON EVERYBODY’S SIDE”  
A CONVERSATION WITH JEAN COMAROFF  
OCTOBER 2009

*It is my pleasure to inaugurate Rites and Responsibilities, a new dialogue series for The Immanent Frame and the Social Science Research Council, with a conversation with the renowned anthropologist and critical theorist Jean Comaroff of the University of Chicago. Rites and Responsibilities is published in conjunction with the SSRC’s Project on Religion and International Affairs, with the generous support of the Henry Luce Foundation. Throughout the series, we will be talking to scholars, religious leaders, and other public figures about the public life of religion in an age of globalization, especially in regard to questions of sovereignty, accountability, and authority.*

David Kyuman Kim  
Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Connecticut College  
Senior Advisor, SSRC & Editor-at-Large, The Immanent Frame

*DKK: Jean Comaroff, tell us about the role of religion in your work.*

JC: For me, as a scholar, religion has always been an exercise for a left hand. I started out working on these issues because I was interested in the relationship between politics and religion and the uneasy ways in which anthropologists at the time separated them. I was interested not least because, if you went to Africa in the 1960s to study religion, religion was assumed to be a matter of “tradition.” Already I felt that this term, in its then unproblematic usage, was less than helpful.

When I got to my field site, in rural northwest South Africa, the religious lingua franca was Christianity, African Christianity, which was inseparable from anything else you might call spiritual, religious, or moral life. I was Jewish in my upbringing, but the kind of Christianity I encountered was profoundly unlike the Christianity I had known about growing up in white South Africa, or when I subsequently lived in England.

There was concern among my advisors at the London School of Economics [LSE] because Christianity was regarded as a topic for comparative religion or sociology, not for anthropology. There was no anthropology of Christianity at that time, so it was really quite a struggle at that point to find relevant interlocutors.

At the same time, it was obvious that Christianity had long been a key dimension of local history. In South Africa, Christianity was inseparable from the whole logic of the way colonialism had been made and was then being unmade.

*DKK: So was that the initial appeal of working on religion as an anthropologist for you?*

JC: I grew up in South Africa under the apartheid regime and the universities were very depleted by the time we got there—they'd been segregated. In the universities, there was plenty social protest, but no access to intellectual radicalism, no Marx on the shelves. South African universities were an environment dominated by a larger story. In particular, the ethical problem of having the privilege of an education, by virtue of being white, bore in on us very heavily.

At that stage, there was already a lot of government repression of politics with a big "P." Yet already there were forms of religious communal life stepping into the void, as it were. The churches, particularly some of the mainline, former mission churches—the Anglican Church, some Methodist congregations, many of the independent African churches—were places where people could aggregate to raise issues of social justice. By the time the 1960s rolled around, you needed special permits for meetings of more than 12 people; only religious gatherings and funerals were exempted, which was why funerals became such amazing politico-ritual sites.

Many of the churches stepped up. There was the sort of impetus you would find in Christian base communities in Latin America soon after: an effort to re-interrogate the message of Christianity from the point of view of the meek and the oppressed. This, of course, had deep roots. The founding of the African National Congress in South Africa in 1912-13 came out of the African Independent Churches, whose leaders had taken the Bible—which had entered the community as a colonizing, civilizing text—and read another message out of it. So they "liberated the message from the messenger," and made of this a struggle for human dignity. This was a way of saying, "let us make this text live up to its promises, because there's a dramatic contradiction between what we were promised when we were ushered into the global fraternity of the church, and what we have experienced as citizens of this racially segregated society."

In the mid-1960s, when I was at university and studied a number of disciplines, I found anthropology especially interesting because it was relevant to these sorts of issues in Africa. Most other fields at the time—psychology, English literature—did not have one read a single writer from the Global South. You read Conrad on Africa, but you didn't read African writers. That was soon going to change dramatically. In the mid-1960's, anthropology was uniquely relevant in acknowledging the value of non-Eurocentric knowledge and life-ways.

The fine scholar who taught us anthropology, Monica Wilson, was a missionary's daughter. She herself had been involved in quite explicit criticism of the government through her academic work, through documenting the implications of poverty in the countryside. She had made anthropology into a kind of vocation—to use the Weberian term—one that came from where she had grown up, on a mission station in the Eastern Cape.

Somewhere in our readings, which were largely about African traditional rituals, witchcraft, and kinship, there was something about "separatist" churches—African movements that had broken away from the mission churches in the name of another kind of religiosity. These churches had become communal sites for a kind of moral reconstruction in the countryside. Some were more overtly political, some weren't. But they were amazingly inventive in terms of their ritual practices. The book *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, by a very perspicacious Swedish missionary named Bengt Sundkler, explored the way that the prophetic, millennial possibility within the Christian tradition was being acted upon in the South African countryside. The acuity of this insight grabbed my attention and it never left me.

*DKK: That's fascinating. Even in this brief, rich background you've just given, you've brought up a number of the themes that we're addressing in the forum: namely, questions about tradition, questions about authority, questions about inheritance, and questions about sovereignty. I want to come back to each of these. For the meantime let's stay a little bit longer on the question of tradition. In describing your experience with African Christianity, you depict it as both constitutive of who you became and also as an object of study. It would be helpful if you could talk a bit about the difficult relationship in which you know and are embedded in traditions and cultures of inheritance, while at the same time these traditions and cultures also become the object of your intellectual work.*

JC: What was so instructive about growing up in apartheid South Africa was that God was on everybody's side. We had something called "Christian national education" when I was growing up, which was really apartheid as religious pedagogy. Of course, it was a cynical mode of maintaining power for a minority, an experiment in social engineering.

There was always a dimension of the enterprise that was highly theological, especially among national religious leaders who argued for a certain kind of Calvinist tradition. They tried to reconcile a rather literal sense of the Salvation of the Elect with the forms of modern "democracy," which was ironic, because it came from descendants of radical Protestants, many of whom had come to South Africa as Huguenots in 1688, and who as followers of Calvin suffered severe persecution in Catholic France. In the context of the Cape Colony they had developed a mode of reading the Bible and an understanding of Protestantism that remained separate from some of the liberalizing tendencies that accompanied the impact of industrialization, and the rise of a class-based society and secular liberal democracy in Europe. I did meet people who sincerely thought that they could make it work in a relatively humane way, even though the more the system became entrenched, and its contradictions became apparent, the more people became invested in simply maintaining it against all odds, and terrible things were done in its name. So there was that specific tradition, and it had a great influence on apartheid theology.

My family, at least on my father's side, was Jewish. They had run from the pogroms in Eastern Europe and had come to Africa. My mother was from a lapsed Lutheran family that had also known political exclusion in their native Bavaria. In my parents' generation, there was a kind of accommodation to the fact that, while most had run from systems of ethnic-political-racial persecution in Europe, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in South Africa, they were seeing forming around them just such a system: one being validated in theological terms and in terms of fidelity to "tradition." Afrikaners often saw themselves as the more faithful keepers of a Calvinist "tradition" that had been watered down in secular Europe. But there was also another kind of African Christian "tradition"—a tradition in the sense that it stemmed from a particular kind of teaching of theology, and sought to perpetuate itself as such.

Most of the missionaries who came to southern Africa in the nineteenth century were not elites from the established churches. They were people often from working class communities in the north of England and Scotland. David Livingstone, after all, had been a mill worker, and had educated himself to become a doctor. So they were part of a dissenting strain, and there again you have tradition, but a reinterpreted, reformed tradition. This turns on the key question of where authority is located. This was a crucial matter in the non-European mission field, which required the adaptation of "tradition" to local circumstances. What accommodations pose no threat to established authority? At what point does one question that authority? Where does one draw the line and say: "This is a sovereign truth about which I/We can't compromise?"

This is an especially salient issue within Protestantism, of course. The whole point about the Protestant tradition is that Providence has given you not only the means, but the obligation to constantly test sovereign truths against the world, against experience, and thus to bring it up to date, to make it speak truth to the world in which you live. This was how the liberal humanist tradition emerged within Protestantism in Europe. When the nineteenth century missionaries had come to South Africa, all of that gets left in Europe.

In Africa, they become the representatives of authoritative tradition in the church, declaring: "There can be no polygamy, there can be no 'traditional' ritual." "Tradition" now gains special ideological meaning as that which is heathen, unenlightened. One has to put all that superstition behind one, leave the extended family, and become an individual believer, one who reads the text and takes a self-willed decision to convert. Now the missionaries represent orthodox, uncompromising authority. And it is Africans who struggle with this question: "How do we make that truth relevant to our lives? Are we indeed purely sinful, purely evil, and living in darkness? And how do we reconcile the fact that the church into which we've been brought doesn't actually live up to formal tenets of *its own* tradition?"

And so it is that missionization is always a process of reform, some of it explicit, but a lot of it not explicit. Because in making real a "tradition," in making it live in the world, in putting things into practice, in

translating it (in every sense of the word translation), you're also reforming that tradition, whether it's an actual declaration of reform, or through the pragmatic re-vision of its components, which renders it almost the same, but not quite, to quote Homi Bhabha. So the key analytical question was: Is Africa becoming Christianized or was Christianity becoming Africanized? And what was at stake in that process? And the whole matter of what constituted a "tradition" was a complicated methodological problem, for both would-be theorists and their subjects were continually confusing ideological and analytical uses of the term.

Making claims in relation to "tradition" can be very powerful: Africans would oppose laws instituted by the apartheid government, for instance, by saying: "Look, everything I've been taught about justice, about equity, about any kind of sovereign truth in the Christian tradition is belied by what I see here. And on the authority of that commitment and conviction I protest." But at the same time, they would resist certain other things that were done in the name of tradition, the Calvinist tradition, for instance.

This slipperiness of the term "tradition" weighed very heavily on me when I started my own research. There was a very strong sense in which both classic anthropology and our everyday colonial culture in South Africa accepted an overarching distinction between modernity and tradition. In colonial society, tradition was primitive, indigenous, something that had to be cast off. The missionaries sometimes referred to traditional African society as a state of "primitive communism," from which the autonomous, self-determining subject had to be set free. Anthropologists reversed the signs, seeing traditional societies as valuable in and for their difference, even if ultimately doomed by the process of modernization. But anthropologists shared the basic idea of "tradition" as pertaining to an unchanging world, outside of history—not as a living tradition, one that would have acknowledged that African societies might have internal reform, or understood that "customary law" might evolve with social conditions, and so on. Tradition and modernity constituted a kind of Manichean divide—one that was integral to the ideological apparatus of modernity itself, especially as a rationale for colonization and "civilization" (and more recently, for "development").

Beginning in the late 1960s, many of us social scientists felt that such a concept of tradition had no place in social analysis. It was ideology parading as theory. We felt we had to show by every means that those putatively static "traditions" were live and that, in fact, they had been produced by modernity, that the very word "tradition" in this sense didn't exist in African languages until called into being by a discourse of inter-dependent colonizing dualisms. As a discipline, anthropology was itself invested, not always willingly or wittingly, in the preservation of that idea of tradition, and even though they valued it positively, anthropologists were adding a certain kind of ontological legitimacy to the colonizing project because of that. What is more, in subsequent efforts to counter that effect, there has been a move to disestablish the status of "tradition" altogether. All tradition comes to be seen as "invented," which throws out the baby with the bath water. We have tended to lose the recognition of how authoritative bodies of precept and practice are actually maintained and reformed over time in colonial societies and elsewhere.

*DKK: And of course you come to these issues as an anthropologist, but hardly of the conventional stripe. For example, even in your response here, I hear you, as an anthropologist, saying that you can take a perspective about modernity and about tradition in such a way that you inhabit deeply the object of analysis, you inhabit deeply the dynamics and dynamism of tradition, you inhabit deeply the lived effects of modernity. To me, one of the most riveting things about your work is that you are able to bring an intense rigor to these questions about the lived effects of modernity, whether it's about neoliberalism and late capitalism, certain forms of millennialism, or even these questions of the highly ambiguous relationship between traditions, sovereignty, and nation-states. Among the aspirations of this series of conversations is an effort to lay out some of this landscape. As I've been listening to your account of what happened in South Africa vis-à-vis Christianity, and what didn't happen in south Africa vis-à-vis Christianity, I'm also mindful of you not only as a product of a Jewish family, but also as a product of the highly progressive intellectual culture of the LSE. I have in mind the history of the LSE as an institution founded by a group of economist Marxists, particularly the Fabians Sydney and Beatrice Webb.*

JC: What is interesting about that, though, is that when we came to the LSE in 1967, it was in ferment, because the place—in part because of the legacy you identify—harbored draft dodgers from the US,

counter-culture activists, people who'd been variously involved in the German Student Movement and, later, the upheavals in Paris in 1968. We didn't quite know what or who they were at the time, and we still aren't quite sure, historically speaking, what they represented. There were also a lot of student activists from South Asia and Africa. In fact, a large segment of us were post-colonials, though we didn't quite know what that meant at the time.

In 1966 a protracted struggle began there over the appointment of Walter Adams, then principal of the University College of Rhodesia, who was seen to have been soft on the illegal regime of Ian Smith, as Director. In its wake, the school was closed. The faculty of the anthropology department at the time was seen to be strongly in support of the administration, and while the school was closed, the anthropology department continued business as usual in the Royal Anthropological Institute in Bedford Square. So, what was interesting about that time was the tension between that department—and the “tradition” it fostered—and the ferment in the wider institution and society that contained it.

What we saw in the troubles at the LSE was the end of an older, socialist style of protest and the birth of a post-colonial era and an order of global capital. There were very few women in the discipline then. The women who were there, both as graduate students and as faculty, were almost all post-colonial elites from Australia, South Africa, or Kenya. There were anti-Vietnam marches going on in the streets, there were the barricades in Paris, and a world-wide youth culture taking shape. And yet it was not really clear what the deep underlying issues were.

But in England at least, it resulted in a call in many quarters to a radical questioning of the paradigms of the established human and social sciences. And that harked back to the founding tradition of the LSE. What some of the students were saying was: “Look, the School was founded by Fabians, by the Webbs, by people who had a very critical view of the world, and now look where the administration is taking us.”

The LSE, by the way, never survived that crisis. When they reopened the School they purified and laundered the faculty, and the student body became more conservative. It's still a great place, not least because it was, especially for England, an unusually interdisciplinary institution, and it was located in the center of the city, in the midst of where life was happening. You could not avoid the fact that there were big political demonstrations going on only one street away.

It was once John [Comaroff] and I had moved to the “redbrick university” in Manchester that we experienced a closer relationship between the academy and the union movement. At that stage, the anti-Apartheid movement was very active in the north of England and collaborated with the unions in various ways. There was also a lively support network for the African struggle in the University, one that focused both on community outreach and on related scholarly research. Several of the figures involved—scholars like Peter Wesley in sociology and Terrence Ranger in history—worked on the radical religious dimension of resistance to colonial overrule.

*DKK: That's a great transition to the question of what one does with anthropology, especially in regard to the relationship between certain forms of radical politics, activism, anthropological work, and social theorizing. You and John have been able to render a life that has synthesized all of these endeavors. And yet I do wonder, whether it's due to the disciplinizing of anthropology or the disciplinizing of the social sciences—or of the academy in general—what the prospects are for this sort of synthetic work to take place more broadly. More specifically, I think there are many folks who have aspirations to do that kind of work but the possibilities for doing it are narrower, especially given the changes in the legitimization structures of intellectual work in the academy.*

JC: Coming of age in the South African situation brought all of us—at least those with any critical awareness—face-to-face with the questions: What do you do? How much are you prepared to risk? Who would you—*could* you—put at risk by becoming an activist? And there was this constant judgment of oneself and others implied: Were you doing enough? Were you really making the sacrifice?

In light of all this, I learned something from living in a small industrial town (because I grew up in Port

Elizabeth [South Africa], once referred to by a teacher of mine in Britain as “one of civilization’s outer fringes”): that some of the people who did the most consequential work in these challenging conditions started where they were.

My father was a doctor, a primary care physician, who had gotten caught up in World War II, and he couldn’t specialize. He and other family practitioners in the town organized to hold trauma clinics in the segregated, under-served hospitals for people who were without healthcare, especially black people who came from the Eastern Province where there was stark rural poverty. I used to go with him when he did sessions late into the night, over the weekend, and I would see how people would wait in lines stretching out the gate and down the block, waiting for emergency treatment.

My mother was a person who never actually worked in the formal sector, though she was relatively highly educated. But she did all manner of charity work, running soup kitchens and nurseries in the townships. She was deeply anguished by the tangible effects of apartheid, and she would empty our closets and our larder to give to the needy who beat a trail to our back door. Together with a group of progressive Jewish women, she went regularly into the townships to provide aid and document conditions there. She ran afoul of more avid Zionists in the community over their priorities and commitments, arguing that their most immediate responsibility as Jews, especially in light of their own recent history, should be toward those whose evident misery was close at hand, and a condition of their own comfort. She would say, “One should look to build Zion wherever you are. It starts here.” I took this as a basic lesson in the nature of ethics and the quest for social justice.

I was drawn to study anthropology, and I started from this perspective, with the focus of my research, the topic and style of my writing—which sought to understand the making and unmaking of colonialism, and the creative quest for transformative social action. In Manchester, I learned that the university was a good place to expand such work; that educating a generation of critical thinkers, thinking about curriculum, looking at the labor conditions of those who cleaned the school buildings—these things were important too.

Scholars were constantly agonizing about being more relevant to progressive politics. But I had a sense that you didn’t have to be a hero on the barricades; you could do things of use and value from where you were, because you were immersed in life, and that is where politics, in the positive voice, begins and ends.

Some of this orientation came from an anthropological vision: whatever the big processes are—colonialism, missionization, state-formation—they entail the agency of ordinary people, their grounded practices and such. So that has always been my impetus: not to romanticize the “everyday,” but to seek to link it to the larger forces and processes of which—to which—it speaks.

One begins wherever one is. If one is a scholar, one must engage with one’s immediate communities of work, with the politics of pedagogy and the conditions of its production. Universities everywhere need defending, especially with respect to the teaching of the human sciences. They are becoming evermore elite, corporate institutions. In poorer communities in Euro-America and beyond, their very existence is endangered. In my view, that’s where you begin.

*DKK: That’s enormously helpful and inspiring. There is an imperative to know and understand the circumstances under which one lives. Taking your assertion, which I agree with, that you start from where you are, I’m trying to establish the connection between how one gets to a mode of critical thought that is, at the same time, a mode of direct, active engagement, such as your work embodies. In other words, if I read Jean Comaroff’s work, I think, “Well, she is working in many different places and yet she can write—and do so ably and insightfully—about macro phenomena. But what does the journeyman scholar do?”*

JC: My struggle for a certain sort of anthropology emerges directly from trying to make sense of a particular place in which one happens to be rooted, or to which one has made a certain sort of commitment. It is, above all, a commitment to understanding its place in the world and how that has come to be as it is. The production of locality, to use a phrase that Arjun Appadurai has given us, requires that we enter into the history of how a place becomes the place that it is—the larger social and historical forces that are

manifest in it, and with which its inhabitants engage.

For me, that place was South Africa, with all of its evident contradictions—both the world in which I grew up, and the one in which I chose to do my research. No particular segment of this world could be arbitrarily bounded, set off from the broader context and from questions like: Why did apartheid society take the forms that it did? What larger-scale forces permitted this outlier—this official, racial state—to exist in a world where European nations seemed to be of such different, more liberal constitutions? Why, in one of the richest countries in the world, were people starving in such large numbers? What did this have to do with the fact that black women were forced to remain in the countryside while men migrated to the industrial centers, where they worked but were not really citizens?

To comprehend these inescapable facts one had to understand how this particular social world had been produced. And that required that one go beyond the scope of anthropology *per se*—its methods and its concepts. One had to ask: Why has the political culture, the lingua franca, of this strange society drawn so significantly on Christianity of various kinds? Why did Christianity become a political theology, quite overtly, in South Africa? How typical is this of other societies, and societies of what kinds?

This sort of inquiry required that one move beyond the space and time of the immediate, that one read other disciplines, to develop a set of terms that were capable of giving some kind of account of the problem. Why was it that for colonized people in South Africa, the Christian church—read in terms of an African understanding—provided a certain ethical language, a moral authorization for their actions? It gave them a certain community of viability that gave them the strength to do what they did, and to declare that, in terms of *their* sense of the law, the apartheid state was illegitimate. During those dark years, they would say, “The law is actually violence; the law is a form of tyranny. *This* other code of ethics is actually the law.” So there was a disconnect, a discrepancy between the world that is and the world that ought to be.

The other thing is that those of us who have grown up in communities that have undergone migration and displacement often feel keenly a sense of estrangement, and have a sensitivity to the connection between intimate local conditions and larger, translocal forces. If you survive such dislocation, such exile, it can be an incredible gift. Of course, we don’t all travel in comfort; but those of us who have had the privilege of having some control over our own movement, who have had the ability to sit ourselves down in various places, we see how ordinary life and the forms of modern existence vary with context. That kind of displacement, that process of de- and re-territorialization is extraordinarily educative, because it enables a critical estrangement. It prompts one to move between scales and to situate the local fragment in a larger narrative, a larger set of historical relations.

*DKK: Indeed. I’m thinking about that phrase of Appadurai’s, “the production of locality,” in terms of locations of viability. It brings to mind locations of power. If you’re going to ask questions about sovereignty, authority, and accountability, you’re also asking questions about, well, how you identify the lived effects of power, but also about the ability to live under sovereign terms. In this regard, you mentioned political theology earlier, and in the talk you gave a couple days ago [at Brown University] you spoke about Schmitt. I find it to be a curious moment now, in which Schmitt has become revived. There is a great deal of work currently on political theology, in general, and attempts to draw on the insights of Schmitt, specifically. It’s fascinating.*

JC: And I think there are good reasons for it.

*DKK: What do you think some of those reasons are?*

JC: What fascinates me is that Schmitt is currently relevant across the political spectrum. He has enjoyed a revitalized popularity among conservatives, who attack liberalism and its failure to generate effective political power from the Right. But he has also had novel appeal to those who seek the terms for a critique of the failures of liberal democracy from the Left.

There also seems to be more and more appeal, in our late-liberal world, of the idea of politics as a matter of

line drawing, of establishing loyalty and commitment by means of establishing the dualism of friend and enemy, rather than the idea of politics as the building of participatory political forums from above and from below. This, in my view, is a consequence of the manner in which translocal forces—above all the force of evermore liberalized capital—have undermined the capacity of modernist nation-states to embody sovereignty, to control the operation of their economies, monopolize the means of force, and to engage the loyalty of the citizen-subjects. This has undermined the legitimacy of liberal democratic politics—indeed of modernist politics in general. Here, again aspects of Schmitt are appealing: the idea of the infusion of metaphysics into politics, of a rejuvenation of what is seen to be the bloodless legacy of a certain kind of state liberalism. Hence the growing appeal of an overt politics of affect to statesmen of all stripes.

I think, too, that the legacy of foundational social science concepts, political-theoretical concepts, remains rooted in a rather literal idea of the modern nation-state. This conception is coterminous with a certain idea of sovereignty in the old-fashioned sense of maintaining a monopoly on law and order within fixed territorial borders, and with a kind of international order in which the idea of society and the idea of the nation-state were coterminous.

Now this topology has been disrupted, and the challenge is to rethink the reach of power and its relation to institutions of governance. How do we conceptualize the force of law in a world in which sovereignty and borders are less and less coterminous with tangible, contiguous territories; where jurisdictions extend beyond formal institutions and are increasingly plural and overlapping; in which electronic media create a fourth dimension in which politics and sociality “take place”? All this calls for less mechanical ways of conceptualizing what remain foundational questions of society, economy, and polity.

There’s a sense of hopelessness, on the Left, of the limits of liberalism, on the Left. There’s a sense of the incapacity of democratic institutions and their legacy, particularly under late liberal conditions, to generate a politics, a version of citizenship, forms of political participation that make sense, that capture hearts and minds. And there’s an effort to try and explain how you get beyond the fact that there’s a widening gulf between the reach of global capitalism and forms of the bourgeois state, both politically and theoretically. Here, again, Schmitt speaks. And of course some of it is Schmitt as mediated through the likes of Walter Benjamin, but there is a sense that there is a critique of the failure of liberalism here, and it’s a very astute critique, as far as it goes. So that is appealing.

Thus on the Left, as elsewhere, there has been a reaching for other modes of thinking: for the philosophical, for the psychoanalytic, for the role of ethics and aesthetics, for everything that secular social thought kept at bay. And there, I think, Talal Asad has an important point to make: that the drawing of the line between the sacred and the secular, the rise of the idea of secular liberal democratism, was a certain kind of Western state hegemony, and it maintained its dominance for a particular period of time. It lived very comfortably, at least in a Euro-centric world, with the forms of industrial capitalism.

But this hegemony, its political instantiations and its plausibility, have been seriously undermined by the advent and consequences of global neoliberalism. And under those conditions, there’s also been a hunger among critical thinkers on the Left for a certain kind of reconnection with theology. It’s no accident that so many scholars are talking about legal theologies and political theologies right now. There’s an effort to try and infuse these bloodless Weberian structures with something of the sublime, something from elsewhere.

I find fascinating that many scholarly writers—those in the Nietzschean tradition, for instance, like Deleuze and Guattari, or even Hardt and Negri—express faith in a certain kind of vitalism that will animate history, that will escape logocentrism, that has the power to give birth to redemptive action that will move beyond culture and tradition. When one listens to many born-again Pentecostals, they’re saying a similar thing. They too espouse a faith that takes possession of the believer and drives him/her to salvation. There’s that quest for revelation, a break in normative time, and an expression of distrust in the logocentric forms of high modernity—a sense that we can get beyond it, a return to a pre-modern, more authentic time. And again, we touch the spirit of Carl Schmitt.

*DKK: I agree with you about the destabilization of these political categories and certainly about the*

*bloodlessness, as you describe it, on both the Right and Left, of the effects of liberal democracy. So a robust inhabitation of politics becomes difficult at best, because, partially, the categories have been evacuated of a certain kind of substantial meaning. So, for example, if you think, “Well, what are the conditions for the possibility of meaningful democracy under late capitalism?” it’s a very difficult question to answer. Those of us who are theorists, or those of us who have a certain critical bent, will say the best we can hope for is to identify certain episodic examples of utopian energies that emerge.*

JC: Well, I would add something else. I still am an old modernist in many ways, and a social scientist. I believe that our models need to take account of institutions—both theoretically and pragmatically—and that we need to consider the role of forms of organization, and the nature of socially legitimated authority. I think we need to recapture a politics, but politics, for all the reasons you’ve given us, is extremely difficult to locate in our times, and I use that term “location” in its various senses.

Because, in a way, everything you’ve said and everything I’ve said implies something else: it implies that the sources of sovereignty have become radically destabilized—whether we are talking about the power that underwrites currencies of value, or the conditions that stabilize the meaning of language; whether we’re talking about the authority that enables law enforcement (effective police forces, for instance) and the keeping of order in a specific territory—whatever we have assumed underlies such authority in its modern form has become radically ambiguous. The tangible source of supreme authority vested in the democratic state and all that it implied—whether this was Fort Knox and the Bretton Woods System, or the monopoly over the means of violence and the means of death—all have been undermined in their orthodox modern form. Hence the reaching for more clear, seemingly certain sovereigns, theologies, divinities.

And a key component of all this, I think, is the radical impact of the market in shifting the nature of state authority. In outsourcing certain aspects of state functioning, the state weakens itself, whether it intends it or not, because there are people acting in the name of the state—whether it’s through private security, contract military operators, commercial providers of intelligence, or the corporate operation of prisons—these forms of “governmentality” are ever more evidently beyond direct state control. And the new kinds of partnerships—whether in taking censuses or computing crime statistics, fighting wars or keeping order on the streets—people know that this is a new kind of authority that relativizes the sovereignty of the state. The power of modern state government was never *absolutely* sovereign, of course, but the appearance of such sovereignty was enacted plausibly enough to sustain the appearance of such sovereignty until the late twentieth century.

Another key dimension of this shift is the fact that states no longer control a lot of the economic activity taking place within their “sovereign” space because of the transnational nature of capital. So, for instance, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, when the British government moved to bailout a threatened flagship industry—Jaguar Land Rover—they were actually propping up a company owned by the Tata group, a corporation based in India. So who exactly is calling the shots, who exactly is saving whom? What is a national economy and who controls it? Who controls the means of violence? In many parts of the world, when an enforcement agent in uniform stops you on the streets, you do not know whether they act in the name of the state, private enterprise, or even organized crime. Under those conditions, what constitutes an authority? Where does sovereignty reside?

The same kind of undermining occurs when state governments seem radically incapable and/or unwilling to control economic collapse and the plummeting value of money. This always makes me think about what happened in Weimar Germany after World War I, when suddenly the German currency lost all value. When the signifiers (whether official uniforms or currency) lose face value, that prompts collective distrust in the very nature of reality and what underpins it. I think this sets in motion efforts to recover a sense of lost tradition, certain sorts of sovereign force (whether by way of fascism or theology), certain fundamental truths that all assert that “the buck stops here—*this* is the original text, *this* is the unambiguous source of power.” And revelation serves well here: an authority that comes from somewhere else that is undeniable. I think that is the issue that lies behind the re-enchantment of our times, the hunger for the sublime. One can see this clearly in the reading of recent apocalyptic events, even the way that 9/11 provided a “Ground Zero,” time-stopping event that served in the construction of the new kind of international security order.

*DKK: That point about revelation is quite important, and obviously you've written a lot about this. We discussed a little bit yesterday about the encumbrances and obstructions of political cynicism, and that there's a way in which political cynicism works against the possibility that one would be open to something like revelation—whether it's the miraculous, metaphysically speaking, or the miraculous in regard to politics or cultural viability. One of the things I find so inspiring about the work that you and John are doing is that you seem to be constantly looking for fissures of possibility. On the other hand, the responses I've read to your work have often said, to put it crudely: "Well, you've given us a catalogue of problems and you've shown us the steep mountain before us, but you haven't shown us a way forward." On this score, I do have a question for you, and I think you have a good answer for it. It's about the future, about possibility. Part of the analyses that you have given—whether about neoliberalism, or about law and sovereignty, or about the production and reproduction of political theologies and legal theologies—is that there is embedded in all of these forms of thought and life the potential for opening up certain fissures that speak to futures, that speak to possibility. Would you agree with that?*

JC: Yes, and I think one of the key things is to say that the very idea of the future is now, of course, much in question. Futures have, in many ways, been ceded to the market; they've become commodified like so much else.

*DKK: You invest in them now and hope that you still have them later on.*

JC: Precisely. And these investments have been the subject of ever shorter cycles of investment and hopes for more immediate returns.

Of course, what is fascinating is that so much of the vernacular of market-based futures draws on religious language. After all, religious faiths have always been the ultimate custodians of "the future" in the more metaphysical sense, and the more secular teleologies that confidently appropriated this role and offered a vision of unfolding world history have run aground of late.

But if market futures often sound redemptive, faith-based language also bears the imprint of the market. Weber's interplay of Christianity and capitalism continues in our late-modern age. The prosperity gospels that are currently so appealing in many parts of the world bear the impact of a cult of salvation through the market. As William Connolly has noted, they tap into a widespread faith in the creativity of capitalism. This is market fundamentalism in a quite literal sense—or, as some term it, Christian political economy. In fact, certain forms of Pentecostal discourse do not merely promise prosperity; they talk of Jesus "paying immediate dividends"—i.e., shortening the cycle of investment in the future so that you can have a kind of customized millennium now, and not as the eventual result of patient toil. In many such contexts, the Lord speaks the language of finance capital, and the careers of many charismatic preachers, their dramatic rise to prominence and fall from grace, typify the boom and bust cycles of our wider socio-economic climate.

This seems to me to be one practical site in which we might look for ordinary epiphanies, ordinary efforts to grasp a sense of future and secure viability: a quest for what we in the trade would call "social reproduction." This has its parallels in the realm of social theory too, where the future has likewise become problematic. Modernist social theory had a confident telos, and a vision of the future—mechanical or otherwise. But this has been severely compromised in our late-modern world. Whether it be Marxist scholarship or modernization theory, a secular sense of futurity has been dramatically undermined. So that's the first thing to say.

The second thing is this: I really think that critical scholarship is not just negative or, as some might have it, "pessimistic". (In the context of Africa, critical scholars are often termed "Afro-pessimists".) But this seems to me to confuse the act of critical engagement with an affective state. Critical analysis is a positive necessity if we are to understand social conditions, and such understanding is a pre-requisite for any responsible *ethical* engagement, any politically relevant intervention.

To point to the limits of legal action, for instance, is not to say that constitutional reform or human rights

struggles make no difference. The new South African constitution has opened up many new aspirations and possibilities. But in circumstances where there is a 50 percent unemployment rate, as is the case in some rural communities, the most enlightened constitution in the world will make scant headway without more direct engagement with the social and material conditions in which the law has to function. For many people, their new rights have done little to engage their social predicament, or to reduce their immiseration.

To hope that legal reform in itself will produce a world without accompanying social and political transformation, without policy aimed at redistribution, is to fetishize it. A critical analysis would point out that, in itself, the law cannot significantly impact the structural conditions that oppress people. In this sense, law is not the same as justice. Sometimes the most progressive laws result in violence if they're put into practice in oppressive contexts—as advocates have learned in the effort to mobilize domestic violence bills or rape laws to protect abused women in court systems that remain patriarchal in terms of their operation.

As a social scientist, and as a person who owes a tremendous debt to Marxian theory and to the notion of history as a dialectical process, I see the role of critique as the excavation of the wider structural forces—and the unequal social conditions—that configure the various worlds we observe and write about. I talked [at Brown] a couple of nights ago, for instance, about the phobia about aliens that exists in many places—from plants to people—and about how this has grown in proportion to the world-wide increase in traffic of all kind across national borders. This was recently expressed in graphic terms in South Africa with the outbreak of incidents of so-called xenophobic violence (I say “so-called” because I don't think people there are inherently or uniquely xenophobic, and the violence was an expression of a good deal more than antipathy towards “others”). There's a structural context in which this is happening—although when these brutal attacks on foreigners occurred, they constituted both a general and a particular trauma. How could people who themselves had struggled against racist oppression—who had been forced into exile in large numbers, and who now inhabit an assertive democracy—do this to their fellow human beings? Was this an outworking of a brutal colonial history, condemned to repeat itself, despite all redemptive efforts? This, to me, is the kind of event that demands more than expressions of shock and statements of pious condemnation, statements that further alienate the perpetrators. These are acts of desperation, occurring among factions of the most dispossessed in a highly polarized society, those for whom the promises of liberation have been mocked.

Critical engagement here requires thinking about how one translates abstract, large-scale structures of contradiction, post-colonial consequences, into something that is tangible, that grasps anger and terror—both in the way one analyses the situation and makes one's analysis available to scholars and the public.

Also, this calls on us theorizers to think about policy, immediate and longer-term. Where and how does one write? How does one think about institutional forms of power and decision-making and how does one engage with them? Does one put one's support behind efforts such as the campaign to secure a basic income grant for populations whose basic survival is threatened? For these are the conditions that breed xenophobic passions.

These violent acts are desperate efforts to secure some kind of meaningful citizenship. What is more, challenging conditions can also breed highly constructive kinds of social mobilization (like popular AIDS politics in South Africa, about which I have written). What is so extraordinary about movements like the Treatment Action Campaign is that they have developed a kind of “politics of life” that emerges from a single, urgent issue and that moves through a struggle for rights to develop into a more embracing politics of social entitlement and redistribution, one that has served as a model of grass-roots democratism in the world at large.

And writing about those things, teaching about them, taking students to study, as we do each year, from the University of Chicago to South Africa, and to intern with groups like the Treatment Action Campaign are all efforts to engage a politics of the future. In fact, there is an integral role for the intellectual as critic and pedagogue, but one always has to think critically, also, about the connective tissue that joins us to the wider world we are part of, about whom to address, how to address them, and where to situate one's writing and one's talk about the world.

*DKK: With both the metaphor and the practice of translation, I think you're absolutely spot on, particularly in regard to the ways in which intellectual work of the academic Left that had been born, say for example, in the streets has, over the course of decades, pulled itself away from the streets and now finds itself saying, "If the university is a threat, well, we have to establish our own legitimacy in regard to what's happening in the world." So that's an act of translation and—you mention teaching—it's also an act of pedagogy.*

JC: Pedagogy is inevitably a multilateral process of translation. It is also an ethical—and a political—practice, using politics here in the sense of a quest for social justice. This applies to every aspect of pedagogy: the question of whom you teach, how you teach, where you teach.

*DKK: Going back to the theme of revelation, just briefly, there's almost a revelatory quality that's built into the material reality of a certain form of teaching, such that you're banking on this hope that the students will have their eyes opened up, their ears opened up, their hearts opened up. And these questions of sovereignty, tradition, accountability, authority, and revelation, in a manner of speaking—all of them work in different circuits of enchantment, such that when you bring your students from Hyde Park to Cape Town, you're hoping that they're going to experience some kind of enchantment, positively rendered, in South Africa.*

JC: And a disenchantment of certain kinds, in respect of certain myths and assumptions.

*DKK: Exactly.*

JC: One of the most consequential things that John and I have done in the past few years, and it arose in an unintended in a way, is to take this group of students each year from our college at the University of Chicago to teach them in South Africa for a quarter. We've been doing this for ten years, and a recent review of the alumni of this program revealed what a startling effect it has had on students' lives.

This is an academically competitive program; the kids are smart, they're motivated. And they have landed in a range of creative places: as critical photojournalists in Iraq, as founders of feeding programs in central Africa, interning with the Chief Justice of India; doing innovative research in the most challenging Ph.D. programs across the world. It's not about us. It's about the effect on them of a kind of radical estrangement, not least from the US academy.

They read texts *about* the post-colony *in* the post-colony, and it has a highly productive, unsettling impact on their taken-for-granted classification of things in the world. Most of all, by grappling at close quarters with the vibrant history of a place that is in many ways different from home, yet in many other ways like it, they learn about the US and its place in the world. It's a life-transforming experience, and that's an exercise in pedagogy. It's an experiment with a kind of classroom without walls, and those are the sorts of things that I think one can do that have an impact. The students we take on this program come from a range of disciplinary traditions. We have many economics majors who are really invested in the fact that certain kinds of market forces, policies of liberalization, will save Africa—and I'm not saying they're totally wrong, but when they are confronted with graphic evidence of the consequences of that mode of thinking about African development, the tangible effects of structural adjustment-in-operation, they see how it is dangerous to put unswerving faith in the fact that all that is needed to save the continent is market take-off. They also see abject poverty close up. This exists in the US too of course, right in the inner city of Chicago. But for most, it has not been so scandalously visible.

One also has some very bright *Luftmenschen* who are enchanted with certain kinds of reified theory, not least about colonialism, or "the global South." And they come to South Africa and find an obdurate reality that requires that they rethink theory and its uses. But such places also extend forms of enchantment, too, most definitely. But all forms of human symbolic interaction involve enchantment and its obverse. We were talking earlier, too, about the University of Chicago, and you noted a certain kind of mythos about the place. But given the history of the place and its actual urban location, it also has a very gritty physical

reality, and it's the interaction of those two things that creates a vibrant, edgy teaching environment. And that's why, I think, teaching in inner cities can be very productive, particularly as regards the social sciences. There is no easy utopian escape here—one plays in traffic. And challenging issues force themselves onto one, and force one and one's students to be somehow cognizant of the complexity of the world, to be accountable to it.

*DKK: And the trick is that the teacher is not to be an encumbrance to their own natural abilities to translate. In other words, as teachers, we have to be careful how we deploy particular orthodoxies about theory, about structural analysis. We don't become teachers to become impediments, such that our students would simply say, "Well, I read Schmitt, or I read Foucault, and I can see it unfolding in front of me in this city." As teachers we have a responsibility for a kind of unschooling, as it were.*

JC: I agree with you, that's very important. Another thing I wanted to say—because I know that what you're doing in these interviews is a project commissioned by the Social Science Research Council—is that there is a crucial sociological dimension to all of this that I think requires emphasizing. It's very easy to occlude the social in a world whose culture and ideology stresses rational choice and psychological individualism, such that the force of the social seems invisible. It is a fight that foundational sociological thinkers stressed a century ago. Durkheim urged his readers to recognize that the modern world was not made by means of markets and contracts alone. Latter day writers in his wake, like Pierre Bourdieu, have argued likewise. Bourdieu noted that one could not reduce history to biography. There is such a thing as society, though because of our mass-mediated, market-driven, globalized universe, this seems difficult to see. There is also the structural logic of political economy as a world-wide system with consequences.

This to me is a very important aspect of our pedagogy as social scientists. To convey the fact that a condition like poverty is not just a matter of a failure of individual capacity or will, but a structural predicament that is in important respects the consequence of wealth. Why do the rough peripheries of South African cities look like parts of the South Side of Chicago? What does this have to do with their respective locations on a global politico-economic map, and with the historical interconnections one can draw out between these two locales and the larger story of imperial and post-colonial relations? In my view, we need as teachers to raise questions about the social-economic-political forces that are at work in such situations. Probing these connections can be revelatory.

*DKK: To me the challenge always is, "Well, what do you do with the insight?" What do you do with those revelations of the social sciences? This goes back to what we were talking about earlier regarding the constructive mode. How do you make that transition from being the recipient of all this social-scientific insight, knowledge, and research to becoming theorists and critics who work in a constructive mode?*

JC: There I come back to the beginning. I think that is a very personal kind of issue. Some people go out and become community organizers. Some people become teachers. Some organize educational programs in prisons. I always feel, as I have said, that you start where you are. I start with the politics of pedagogy, with the politics of universities, the funding for students, the role of the university in the wider community—but one starts wherever one happens to be.

In recent years, I have been collaborating with colleagues at the University of Cape Town in teaching clinical medical research ethics. We ask what ethical considerations need to be highlighted in a country that is being besieged by global pharmaceutical corporations seeking to do research, often on poor and under-educated populations. Local institutional review boards are just getting underway there, and seek to balance the potential abuse of local people with the positive benefits to them of research. Here the kind of knowledge I have personally, and the greater experience we have of such things in US universities, can be useful. There are all kinds of ways in one's world, one's immediate world, in which one can make those kinds of contributions.

It's difficult in America in that journeyman academics are set off from public intellectuals for the most part. In South Africa, this relationship is more fluid. John and I, for instance, have just been invited to write a regular column for the *Mail and Guardian*, a significant national weekly newspaper. This sort of

participation by academics in the public sphere is much more common in many places. Close colleagues at the Johannesburg School of Theory and Criticism have just launched an online “salon” and I contributed a short piece on “Populism.” When one gives talks at the universities in South Africa, or in India, people will come who are community activists, or journalists, or artists, or union organizers; and they’ll confront you with questions, challenge your ideas. Here in the US the distance for the most part is greater, to the detriment of all parties.

*DKK: It’s also one that’s compromised by market-driven tendencies.*

JC: Academy, Inc.

*DKK: Exactly. So the work of the public intellectual has been narrowed in many ways in the American context.*

JC: And it’s been turned into a certain kind of celebrity form, where there’s a cadre of those people who are always called upon in more public contexts, who command a large amount of recognition (and often payment), but who, by that very token, are treated with suspicion in the serious centers of the academy. And there isn’t an easier kind of back and forth. Also, the more elite universities here are not open to the community in the same way as they are in the South and in parts of Europe. If they are open, it’s often in respect of the most trivial and uninteresting parts of what they do.

*DKK: That’s right. And in a very modest way, the Rites and Responsibilities forum is trying to think with people like yourself—whom I consider to be a public intellectual—what the public responsibilities of intellectual work are. How do we think through some serious public problems in ways that provide different formats and new ways to approach those challenges? We’ve been talking for a while now, but one of the questions I would like to ask you is, who else would you want in this conversation, to talk about these topics, if you could get them in the room?*

JC: It’s difficult to say because it depends on the context. I, for instance, find it very interesting to talk to religious leaders. In various ways over the years—again, mainly in South Africa—I have been involved with people working from within religious organizations and what one might broadly term ethico-theological perspectives. In colonial contexts, this was often the only space in which issues of social justice could be broached, but it remains salient at the current moment because in many parts of the world, where other kinds of communal institutions and relationships of trust are eroding under the impact of liberalization and state retraction, these are the most viable remaining institutions. Religious organizations become like mini-states within states. In many parts of rural Africa, churches of various kinds are dispensing healthcare, education, and personal counseling as community services roll back or disintegrate.

But there are many other kinds of interlocutors. At the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory we’re launching a project in which scholars converse with artists, seeking new, collaborative ways in which the arts, politics, and the academy can triangulate and produce works of various kinds that straddle the campus and the community. We are also hoping to link Chicago with other places in this initiative—places like South Africa where such collaborations between scholars and artists are much more common.

But there are many other kinds of useful conversations to foster. I have just become involved with an international group—The Comparative Research Program on Poverty—which seeks to build a coherent, critical, systemic approach to the problem of poverty and the policies aimed at its eradication—an approach that contrasts with the dominant approaches, which tend to be piece-meal, technocratic, and inadequately focused on poverty’s root causes. This is a group of philosophers, human rights workers, and social scientists. We are concerned to counter the fact that many programs that seek to “make poverty history” talk of poverty as if it were a kind of disease that can be eradicated, not as a social-structural relation. This strikes me as a worthwhile enterprise.

But, again, one must not undervalue our work on campuses, particularly with undergraduates, young people with a range of disciplinary interests who go out into the world, and not necessarily as academics. I value

my undergraduate teaching a great deal. These are the folks that often ask one the hard questions, beyond the confines of formal academic discourse. These are important conversations and one should never undervalue them.

*DKK: That's a great place to end. Thank you Jean Comaroff.*