

# **Power and the postcolony**

# **A short review of our project**

1. We are looking for a politically engaged, public anthropology.
2. But political engagement presupposes an understanding of politics.

**What is politics?**

# **Some standard images of politics**

- Parliamentary debate
  - Street marches
  - Legal disputes
- Renaming holidays
- Any scene of conflict

# **Two ways of understanding power and politics**

- Mbembe: As a play of imitation and (obscene) excess between ruler and ruled.
- Comaroffs: As an aspiring liberalism faced with social difference.

**Achille Mbembe**

**The banality of power  
and the aesthetics of  
vulgarity in the  
postcolony**

# **What's a postcolony?**

The notion "postcolony" simply refers to the specific identity of a given historical trajectory: that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization. To be sure, the postcolony is a chaotic plurality, yet it has nonetheless an internal coherence. It is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or of stereotypes. It is not, however, just an economy of signs in which power is mirrored and *imagined* self-

The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive art of improvisation, by a tendency to excess and disproportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation. It is likewise made up of a series of corporate institutions, and apparatuses which, once they are deployed, constitute a distinctive regime of violence. (2)



# **Postcolonial publics**

The postcolony is made up not of one coherent "public space," nor is it determined by any single organizing principle. It is rather a plurality of "spheres" and arenas, each having its own separate logic yet nonetheless liable to be entangled with other logics when operating in certain specific contexts: hence the postcolonial "subject" has had to learn to continuously bargain and improvise. (5)

The grotesque and the obscene are two essential characteristics that identify postcolonial regimes of domination. Bakhtin claims that the grotesque and the obscene are, above all, a matter of plebian life. He maintains that, as a means of resistance to the dominant culture and as a refuge from it, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies which undermine officialdom by exposing its arbitrary and perishable character, turning it all into a figure of fun. (4)

The obesity of men in power, their impressive physique and, more prosaically, the flow of shit which results from such a physique -- these appeal to a people who can enjoy themselves with mockery and laughter, and, sometimes, even join in the feast.

(10)

**Suppose this applied to  
universities.**

**Name a grotesque or  
obscene thing that you  
have seen on campus.**

**Jean and John Comaroff**

**Reflections on Liberalism,  
Policulturalism, and ID-  
ology: Citizenship and  
Difference in South Africa**

- What is liberalism?
- Do liberal polities presuppose cultural homogeneity?
- What happens in the face of multiculturalism or difference?

# **Politics of "citizenship"**

Identity, in the age of partible, conditional citizenship, is defined, ever more, by the capacity to possess and to consume; that politics is treated, ever more, as a matter of individual or collective entitlement; that social being in general, and social wrongs in particular, are translated, ever more, into the language of 'rights.'



***... this also applies to  
students.***

# **"FeesMustFall protesters clash with police outside parliament"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljcXhXeFlvg>

*October 26, 2016*