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Of Fallacies and Fetishes: A Rejoinder to Donham

> Sometimes there is no story. No music, and no story. Sometimes there's just life.
>
> —Neil McCarthy, *The Great Outdoors,* a play from the new South Africa

How, we ask ourselves, ought we to begin our reply to Don Donham's essay, "Thinking Temporally or Modernizing Anthropology"? Perhaps, in the spirit of post-apartheid South Africa, with a confession: in truth, we feel almost no inclination to respond at all. However conciliatory we try to be, we find it hard to think temperately about Donham's efforts to "think temporally" in the cause of "modernizing anthropology," at least by the means and in the manner he has chosen.

There are two reasons for our disinclination. The first is that *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volumes 1 and 2 (RR)* has been subject to a good deal more searching, more comprehensive, more constructive debate, most recently in a special edition of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (3[1], 2001); indeed, this debate takes further many of the conceptual and methodological issues originally raised in *RR*. Donham would do well to read the nine papers and our (in that instance, enthusiastic) reply: they offer thoughtful, at times critical commentary on many of the issues that he raises—and show at least some of them to be groundless, to be based on misunderstandings, or to be beside the point. Donham himself remarks that *RR* and *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination (EHI)* have already been the object of lengthy discussion—much of it, as he is less quick to note, in a spirit of affirmation. We have welcomed this discussion and have reacted, at times strongly, to such criticisms as we have felt it necessary to rebut. As a result, there is little new to be said here. Nothing fresh is offered by way of dissent; vide the fact that Donham, whose own intervention reads like a pastiche of old points, cites earlier writings for almost everything he says, even if he seldom chooses to expatiate on our rejoinders to them. Nor is there anything here to which we have not replied before. Bluntly put, the debate has long since moved on from where Donham would have us (re)join it; so, too, have we. Readers interested in the vexed, contested questions of history, theory, and method covered by *RR* and the body of criticism addressed to it, both positive and negative, are directed to the aforementioned edition of *Interventions.*

The second reason for our reluctance is the kind of argument into which Donham's essay necessarily draws us. "Disagreements, pursued in the right spirit," he says, "can be richly productive." True. But the "*right* spirit" entails not only politesse, nor only "balance[d] . . . language" (pp. 134–135). It demands equal stress on the second, unstated connotation of the adjective: that the work of others be *right*ly—that is, accurately and comprehensively—represented. In a situation in which we find ourselves compelled to correct recurrent misreadings, mistaken attributions, simplifications, omissions, and flatly contradictory claims, it is difficult to pursue any argument at all, let alone a productive one. Also, Donham has a predilection for towering ex cathedra statements (ironic, perhaps, in a discussion of the role of Christianity in Africa) about assumptions we are said to make, about alleged contradictions in our "oeuvre," about what may or may not stretch the limits of credulity—statements that, by their very nature, are difficult to counter without sounding either arrogant or didactic. In the upshot, almost any rejoinder comes out sounding defensive. On the other hand, we are placed in a classical double bind: not to respond is to concede to a series of propositions that are, for the most part, spurious; it is also to leave the unfamiliar reader with an oddly deformed impression of our work. Which is why, despite the disinclination, we *shall* reply—albeit summarily and, in order to save space, trees, and tedium, with as much reference as we can to answers given elsewhere.

Point Counter Point

Of Power, Materiality, and . . .

Reading, as we have said before, is a profoundly theoretical act. Of course, it rarely declares itself as such. Lurking uneasily behind Donham's foray into our work is a philosophical commitment, on one hand, to radical empiricism and, on the other, to a neoliberal fetishism of narrative, which is offered—along with an unmeasured, insoluble twist of materialism—as an elixir for the malaise of

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historical ethnography, an elixir that owes more to the spirits of the right than anything we would construe as the right spirit. The mix of metaphors here is deliberate: Donham, it seems, wants to make of *RR* a straw figure out of which he would spin a new golden age of anthropology. But alchemy remains alchemy, however it is spun. We shall weave our way back to this panacea for postcolonial anthropology in due course. First, though, his critique of our work.

Here is where our difficulties begin. To be perfectly frank, it is not always easy to follow Donham's argument: to us at least, it appears rife with discontinuities and internal contradictions, seeks simultaneously to make quite different, often inimical species of critique, and doubles back on itself more than once—this aside from the distortions that it perpetrates on our narrative. What is more, as we shall show, the position toward which it moves becomes more and more incoherent the closer we are brought up to it. In consequence, it is hard to distill the piece into a series of tropic questions to which we might address ourselves. At the risk of skewing our response, we alight on five major foci, leaving aside many of the smaller cavils that trail across the pages as irritants rather than issues—like his complaint (n. 7) that the title of *RR* is "misleading" because "there has been no revolution in South Africa," a remark that combines an extraordinary literal-mindedness with a careless reading of the text. Donham (p. 136) himself quotes us, in a highlighted block, as saying that "the difficult road from revelation to revolution . . . is the *continuing epic* of black South African history" (1991:xii; emphasis added). In short, we agree with him—or, more accurately, he with us, since we wrote that passage more than a decade ago. The "revolution" of which we speak in the title, as we make clear, is a polymorphous signifier, referring to the "revolution in habits" that the Nonconformist evangelists sought to effect on Southern Tswana (1997:119); to the radicalization of our anthropology by virtue of its encounter with apartheid (1991:xii); to the temporal span of our account between two Ages of Revolution, 1789–1848 and 1989–? (1997:xv); and, as a postscript to the project, to the overthrow of the apartheid-backed Mangope regime in Bophuthatswana in March 1994—referred to locally as "the revolution"—which, in vernacular memory, marks the end of the colonial age, and the historical cycle, that began with the coming of the missions (1997:xiii). The point, as we say, is small. But it is just one instance of both the spirit of the critique and the recurring tendency to simplify, reduce, and misrepresent—willfully or not, it makes little difference—in order to dissent. It is also a harbinger of larger, more serious things.[1]

Like, for instance, the first of our five foci: the accusation that, in our eagerness to establish the primacy of a particular view of culture—of which more in a moment—we ignore the effects of power, of "the constraints imposed by systems of material domination in South Africa" (p. 136). Donham returns to this point in a variety of guises, declaring, among other things, that we underplay the impact of the rise of capitalism, and the processes of class formation, that occurred here from the late nineteenth century onward; that we hardly mention the role of Afrikaners in this conflicted world; that we allow too much to the part played by the "long conversation" with the colonial mission in the proletarianization of Tswana. He even intimates that, in our view, black South Africans accepted the Natives Land Act of 1913, perhaps the most coercive legislation in the history of the subcontinent, as part of the "taken-for-granted" capitalist hegemony wrought by the Nonconformists. Leaving aside for the moment the theoretical questions surrounding hegemony and agency (see below), this accusation begins with an elementary confusion. It is made first, and primarily, in respect of *RR1,* which concentrates on the early phases of the encounter of Southern Tswana with the Protestant evangelists—long before the mineral revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism on the subcontinent, long before the arrival of the colonial state. Of course black South Africans could not elude the grasp of colonial political economy by the early twentieth century, as he notes; we say as much ourselves in *RR2,* which deals at considerable length with the processes in question. Donham does here just what he says we do: he reads history backward in order to make a point.

But we are more concerned with the general point, the claim that we ignore "power" and "material domination." It is, we believe, breathtakingly baseless. Can Donham even have read chapter 7 of *RR1,* the longest chapter of that volume, which traces out, in languorous detail, the early political struggle for the southern African interior between *Bantu, Boer, and Briton* (Macmillan 1929), a protracted triangular conflict over land, water, labor, sovereignty? Can he have read chapters 3 and 4 of *RR2,* which discuss, expansively, the effects of the growth of the commodity economy, the opening up of the diamond and gold fields, the expansion of contract work, monetization, the imposition of taxes, and the seizure by Boers (aka "Afrikaners")—hardly mentioned, indeed!—of ever more Tswana territory. Oh, and yes, the Natives Land Act, on which Donham cites Colin Murray as if to suggest that we do not speak of its discriminatory character (*RR2*:204f.); not only *do* we speak of the Act, but—*pace* another spurious allegation, that we do not embrace "native" narratives—we quote Sol Plaatje's extensive account of its horrendous fallout, stressing how it reduced many to menial labor and dramatically altered the moral and material lebensraum for all black South Africans (1997:205). "To assume," says Donham, "that early twentieth-century Southern Tswana accepted this [i.e., the Land Act] as only a part of the 'taken-for-granted' is, to use understatement, difficult" (pp. 142–143). Difficult? No, absurd. As absurd as the misstatement—note, not understatement—that we ever

suggested anything of the kind. In fact, just a page earlier (1997:204), we state that "few [Tswana] were entirely captured by the monetary economy," though many were forced into it. None of this is to mention, either, our analysis of the impoverishment of the Southern Tswana world caused by agrarian transformations, border wars, settler incursions, ecological disaster, and the like—or the fact that we specify, with great care, how it was that the encounter with colonial evangelism was inseparably cultural and concrete and that it was always played in counterpoint with other colonizing forces on the landscape.

What in the world could Donham have been thinking when he accused us of paying no heed to power and materiality? Why did he do it? After all, we argue volubly throughout—as much in our analytic practice as in our theoretical pronouncements, as much when we deal with bodily adornment, aesthetics, architecture, ritual, law, or medicine as when we write about agriculture, wage labor, money, cattle, and the like—*against* the primacy of culture over the material, or vice versa, preferring to essay a dialectical reading of history, this contrary to both the cultural structuralism and the Marxist structuralism with which Donham seems to want to taint us. Why is there such a yawning gap between what we do, what he says we say we do, and what he says we actually do? Apologies here to the late Malinowski, whom we are also said to resemble (see n. 1).

Which, in turn, takes us to our second focal point, the question of culture itself.

. . . Culture

Not only do we make culture into a first cause, argues Donham, but we treat the two *cultures* in question as static, "relatively solid homogeneous wholes" (p. 136)—this being the manner in which he portrays our account of the emergence of the opposition between *setswana* and *sekgoa* in *RR1*. Although he concedes that human beings sometimes *do* understand their situations (especially in colonial contexts) "by means of cultural dichotomies" (p. 137), Donham also takes us to task (1) for suggesting that these cultures "struggled for dominance," sekgoa "invading" setswana, which, in turn, "reacted"; and (2) methodologically, for hypostatizing the "two worlds," reading them backward into history,[2] and then attributing historical agency to them. But the problem becomes yet worse in *RR2*. Here, he says, we do a volte-face, repudiating the "notion in *Volume 1* of the interaction of two cultures" for one of an encounter between "imaginative antinomies invoked by historical actors themselves" (p. 140). Nonetheless, we "continue to insist that the *simple* opposition"—the qualifier is his, most certainly not ours—"between setswana and sekgoa was a feature of social actors' cultural worlds from the early or mid-nineteenth all the way into the twentieth century" (p. 140, emphasis added), this notwithstanding the presence of third parties on the scene. Our argument, he adds, is actually given lie by our own example of Chief Sechele: because he found no difficulty in both partaking of rainmaking ceremonies and believing in Jesus Christ, it may be inferred that there was never any "contradiction" between the two worlds; that that "contradiction" is entirely of our making; that it derives from a projection of the oppositions of apartheid backwards into the South African past. Finally, the coup de grace. A phrase of ours is taken, from nowhere in particular, to damn the entire project:

> "To plumb the depths of Tswana cultural understanding"—to treat culture as a shared and unconscious grammar abstracted from material context—is precisely to homogenize and to staticize. This operation jerks social and cultural movement to a halt and, in that sense, is fundamentally and necessarily ahistorical. This constitutes perhaps the central contradiction in the Comaroffs' oeuvre. [p. 144]

Note the syllogistic structure of the passage: the opening attribution by way of quotation marks; the infix that distills our phrase into a conceptual caricature, which, by a not-very-subtle sleight of syntactic transposition, is implicitly ascribed to us; the conflation of *cultural understanding* (our term) into *culture* (his) as if the two were synonymous; the imputation—on the basis, first, of the distillation and, second, of the conflation—that we are guilty, therefore, of a dehistoricizing "operation." We shall come back to these things in a moment. We shall also return to Donham's own interpretation of setswana and sekgoa:

> Rather than two systems of value . . . what setswana and sekgoa arguably connote is contrasting narrative constructions of local history and hence collective identities, each of which gained its import and meaning in relation to the other. "Modern" helped to construct "traditional," and vice versa. Ever unstable and changing, these two stances, along with their combinations and permutations, depended upon a shared social field. [p. 144]

As if "narrative constructions" have no semantic roots in the cultural.

Well, what to make of all this? How to respond? Short of a *précis* of the two volumes—which, carefully read, provide an extended answer to Donham—a few observations will have to do.

In *RR1*, it is true, we speak on occasion, in a synoptic voice, of an encounter of two cultures—at least in its opening moments. However, we take pains to define culture at the outset not as a static or homogeneous whole at all—nor anything like a "shared and unconscious grammar abstracted from material context"—but as a historically labile, variously empowered, always heterodox field of signifiers and social practices, some of them taken for granted, some contested (1991:18–22; 1992:28–31). What is more, our typification of hegemony and ideology derive from an effort to insert power and consciousness, *dynamically* and

dialectically, within culture, not to render them external to it or to sever them from the material world. As we make clear throughout, we prefer, in the context of our analytic practice, to use the concept adjectivally ("cultural understanding") rather than as a noun ("culture")—and, for the most part, do so. Observe, too, in this respect, that we translate setswana and sekgoa as "Tswana ways" and "European ways," respectively (1991:194), not, as Donham says—in order, presumably, to add force to his characterization of our position—as "Tswana *culture*" and "European *culture*" (our italics, but his emphasis). The point of this translation is precisely to give a more fluid sense of the repertoire of signs and practices of which we speak. Do we treat either as homogeneous? Or static? Hardly. Early on in *RR1* (1991:164), we give evidence that Southern Tswana frequently traveled long distances to learn the cultural practices and vernacular knowledges of others. We also go to considerable lengths, throughout, to show that many Tswana willingly and quickly internalized aspects of sekgoa and, reciprocally, that the Europeans, despite themselves, appropriated elements of setswana almost from the time of their arrival. Of course, as we said above, *Volume 1* deals with the early moments in the encounter (1991: 309); in the expository division between the two volumes, it is the second that was always intended to explore that encounter over the long run—and to do so at a different analytical level. There we show, in (ethno)graphic, empirically minute detail, that setswana meant quite different things across the coordinates of the social world, that its content changed palpably over time. Recall, for example, how clothing styles and houses thought of as vernacular at the end of the nineteenth century were seen as sekgoa 50 years before (1997:304, 267) and how, conversely, the missionaries, and other whites, took on African architectural and sartorial fashions quite unselfconsciously (1997:312, 247). Recall also how, in concluding that history of the long run, having dealt with each of its aspects—religion, economy, aesthetics, embodiment, domesticity, architecture, medicine, selfhood, and subjectivity—over a century marked incessantly by the contingencies of the South African past (is this history "jerk"[ed] to a halt?), we glossed the playing-out of the opposition between setswana and sekgoa:

> As we have seen, [Southern Tswana]—depending on their class, age, gender, and so on—ascribed dissimilar values to the things for which these terms stood; sometimes they argued openly over them, sometimes they differed in silence. But the antinomy itself distilled a highly ambiguous, fluid field of relations and practices into a pair of working essentialisms, ideological tropes with tangible consequences. This antinomy did *not* exhaust the multiple, polymorphous ways in which people lived their lives. Nor did it pay heed to the ways in which the content of setswana and sekgoa changed, hybridized, and were contested over time. To the contrary, the very point of imaginative dualisms lies precisely in reducing the inchoateness of everyday experience. [1997:407]

To this last point, as we know, Donham concedes (see above). The rest speaks for itself.

> But this does not deal fully with the prior challenge: *Did* the opposition between setswana and sekgoa actually arise in the nineteenth century? Is it *not* possible that this antinomy is a retrojection? What *is* the evidence for its historical contemporaneity?

Notwithstanding Donham's own speculations, which are not dignified with any supportive documentation, it is unquestionable that the antinomy does have a "deep" past. Apart from all else, sekgoa is already named as such, and rendered as "[things] belonging to Europeans, especially English," in J. Tom Brown's late-nineteenth-century *Secwana-English Dictionary* ([1895]1924); interestingly, in light of our preference for culture-as-adjective rather than noun, he defines it in the first instance as an adjectival term. Sol Plaatje, a Tswana linguist of great stature, used the contrast in its expanded form in the 1916 edition of his *Sechuana Proverbs,* juxtaposing *puo megopolo ea Sekgoa,* translated as "European speech and thought" against *Secoana a bogologolo,* "primitive Sechuana custom"; *bogologolo,* conventionally, is translated as "[of] long, long ago" (pp. 1–4). In short, the opposition has had *formal,* documented linguistic recognition, both British and African, for a century or so. More substantively, however, the evidence cited throughout *RR* makes it clear that the terms *did* come to capture and to objectify an order of difference, despite the evanescence of its content.

Remember the repeated, often heated disagreements between the evangelists and Tswana ritual practitioners over, among other things, rainmaking, the use of medicines, and circumcision (e.g., 1991:259, 245); these are metonymically represented, verbatim, in the famous confrontation between Livingstone and the Rain Doctor, represented on both sides as a face-off between two inimical, but epistemically parallel, orders of knowledge and practice (Livingstone 1857:25–27; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 210–211). Remember also the debates between Mackenzie and his various interlocutors over contrasting cultural practices in respect of rights in land (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:378–379); it was a Tswana everyman in the 1870s, not us in the 1990s, who referred to the British obsession with contracts and titles, and the procedures to which it gave rise, as "the English mode of warfare" (1997:370). Remember the chronic political arguments between chiefs and royals on one hand and the Nonconformists on the other over such things as the meaning of time, the control of space, and the taking of place (1991:200), over language (1991:213–29), over water (itself the most significant material, political, and cultural resource in the Tswana world at the time [1991: 201–213]), over social conventions like polygamy and bridewealth (e.g., 1991:245), indeed, over

the value of "their" custom—*mekgwa*, already marked then in the vernacular (1991:245; see also 1997:389)—and "ours" (1991: 245). Remember how these arguments congealed into a battle, verbal and gestural, over two modalities of sovereignty: *Bogosi ya Kereste* ("The Kingdom of Christ"), again a contemporary term (1991:261–262), and *Bogosi ya Setswana*, "Tswana chiefship," each standing for a state of being, an imagined world.

We could go on and on: as any careful reader of the text will know, the long conversation—once more, *pace* Donham, a metaphor meant to grasp just one dimension of the encounter, not its totality—took in everything from differences between the "God of the whites [and] the Bootshuana God" (1991:194) to explicit comparisons of contrasting "manner[s] of life" (1997:140, 389). Patently, the antinomy is *neither* our invention nor a backward projection. (To wit, as much recent scholarship has shown, the architects of apartheid did not have to invent the manichean oppositions that they formalized into the legal structure of "separate development.") It was the product of a highly complex, protracted flow of exchanges—of words, acts, objects—which, through time, fashioned two imagined orders of being-in-the-world, this in spite of the presence of others on the landscape.[3] None of this, we repeat, is to say that setswana and sekgoa were ever closed "cultures." We do not, again *pace* Donham, do a volte-face on the question between *Volumes 1* and *2*. In both instances we treat them as fields of signs and practices under perpetual construction *in relation to one another*, their content constantly undergoing revision with the passage of time and, yes, the contingency of events.

Nor does the case of Chief Sechele's capacity both to believe in Jesus Christ and to engage in rainmaking rites somehow prove that the antinomy did not exist, that it is entirely of our apartheid-infected making. The whole point of *RR*—can Donham *really* have missed it?—is to show that some Tswana embraced sekgoa fully and enthusiastically, that some rejected it entirely, that others forged syntheses, hybrids, fusions of the two; that such things, over the long run, followed intricate patterns of class formation; that, being relativist in its epistemic orientations, setswana, as an imaginative order-under-construction, was open to the adoption of European and other African knowledges and practices (see above). We *never* pose the opposition between them as a "contradiction" for Tswana—quite the contrary. It was the Europeans who treated it as such, which did, of course, have consequences for the Tswana. In fact, as one must presume that Donham knows, Sechele was forced by the missionaries to leave the church because of his "un-Christian" behavior. So where, exactly, is the disproof of our argument? To wit, Donham could not have chosen a better example to make it for us. Had he paid closer attention to our evidence, not to mention the more subtle dimensions of the analysis, he could not, we believe, have suggested that our approach "jerks" to a halt cultural movement through time. How, if it had, could we have found it possible to analyze all these processes of the long run, to follow time—indeed, to think temporally—over a century, and thence into the postcolonial present? Where, again, is the "contradiction in [our] oeuvre"? In what way, having just written almost a thousand pages about those processes of the long run, all carefully periodized and situated, do we "not appreciate the radical challenge that temporality poses"? The suggestion is little short of insulting. Nor, had he paid closer attention, would he have found it possible to translate the opposition between setswana and sekgoa into "contrasting narrative constructions" of local history and collective identity, let alone into signifiers of the "modern" and the "traditional." Narrative constructions? Tradition and modernity? We shall return to the former, to narrative, in due course to object to the reductionism wrought in its name. To the latter, all we can do is heave a sigh: is Donham truly trying to smuggle back into anthropological discourse the oldest, most problematic and problematized dichotomy in the history of the discipline?

This leaves some very general questions that Donham tosses out, as if to imply that we do not address them: How, for example—and here we take the liberty of making some elisions—did setswana and sekgoa come to be inhabited? Just who were the actors? How, and by what combination of intended and unintended processes, did the largely implicit, taken-for-granted cultural contrasts get created in the first place? These, patently, can only be answered by recapitulating the content of the two volumes, where, we submit, they are dealt with in extenso. Donham, of course, would disagree. We are quite happy to leave it to the reader to judge.

The Question of Agency, Effect—and Power, Again

As with culture, so with agency, the third of our foci.

In *Volume 1*, declares Donham, "Tswana historical agency evaporates like a raindrop on a hot summer sidewalk" (p. 138). True, Southern Tswana could and did express their disagreement with the colonial evangelists; in this respect, he allows, we *do* treat them as active agents in their own history. But they are said, nonetheless, to have been drawn into an encounter with European cultural *forms* that would slowly make them into colonial subjects, into a process in which they had "no alternative" but to be "imposed upon," to have those forms "inculcated" in them, to react rather than to act. Behind this criticism is a more general one: because we give primacy to "culture," it is abstractions, not human beings, that are the historical actors in our story. In *Volume 2*, Donham goes on, things improve: abstract concepts are presented less frequently as historical actors. (They do not disappear entirely, we are told: in order to illustrate the point, however, he cites a passage in which we speak of the intentions of "the civilizing

mission," clearly referring to the evangelists of the London Missionary Society [LMS] and Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society [WMMS]. If this is Donham's idea of an "abstract concept," it is hard to be sure what exactly we are being criticized for; but that is another matter.) Still, while the "reader" may here get "more of what might be termed Tswana agency," that agency is oversimplified; like *reduction, (over)simplification* is a word greatly favored by Donham. Why is it oversimplified?: Because we concentrate on what was done *to* elites, who were quicker to adopt the values of sekgoa, while stressing that the poor tended to elude Nonconformist hegemony. Again, Donham admits that we are probably correct in this. His complaint? It is framed interrogatively: "[M]ust we then speak of colonial elites only in the passive voice? In other respects, they surely had more power than the poor, more agency to define the parameters of their lives and to negotiate white domination" (p. 141).[4] Our view of agency, he goes on, returning to his point about power, is confined to the contestation of cultures: for whites, to the capacity to inculcate one's own in others; for Tswana, to hold on to theirs. "One understands how this notion of culture and power made 'sense' under apartheid, both to the Comaroffs' Tswana informants and to themselves," says Donham patronizingly. It should not, however, "be read into other times and places" (p. 141).

With apologies to Donham's metaphorical sensibilities—to his evocative play on the poetics and politics of hot summer pavement—we have no option but to pour a heavy dose of cold water on all this.

In *Volume 1*, we do not dissolve Tswana agency in the face of the onslaught of the colonial mission(aries), but try to confront a profound historical conundrum. It is one that long detained such eminent theorists of colonialism as Fanon and Memmi: how it is that colonized peoples can engage with the presence of colonizers on what appear to be their own terms—to reject it or to appropriate what it offers, to accommodate to it or to fight with it—and yet have their ways-of-being and of thinking, of seeing and perceiving fundamentally altered in the process. This is *not* a question of agency. It is a question of the effects of history, of its unintended, often unnoticed consequences for the making of subjects and their capacities as actors. That the colonial mission *did* effect such a change, alike cultural and material, on the inhabitants of the Southern Tswana world is hardly in doubt. This is not a fanciful argument on our part, let alone an expression of our "theoreticism" or our apartheid-infected consciousness. Nor is it just the view of many black South African intellectuals, those who write, *pace* the anthropological romance of "native" agency, of the ways in which colonialism robbed Africans of their room for willful, effective action; recall here Es'kia Mphlele, cited at the very beginning of *RR1* (1991:4), telling us how Christianity—another "abstract concept"?—was responsible for the "conquest of the [black] mind." It was also the opinion of those Tswana elites of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on whose power and agency Donham would have us focus. *They* saw the coming of European Protestantism, *at the time*, as a highly positive thing. In fact, Plaatje and Molema, among others, celebrated the invasive, pervasive effects of the civilizing mission—which, for them, was anything but an "abstract concept"; if they had any regret, it was that Nonconformist ways and means were not inculcated fast enough into all Tswana hearts and minds. *They* heralded the arrival of the British evangelists as a new moment of African genesis; and, unlike Donham, *they* understood that it was an epochal event to which their compatriots had no alternative but to *re*-act. So too, from very early on, did Tswana political cadres, who were quick to apprehend what the presence of the mission might mean—and considered their *re*actions accordingly. Hence our inclusion, in *Volume 1* (1991:196), of a narrative fragment concerning Chief Mothibi (1991: 196), who told the Reverend Read that his headman wanted to refuse entry to the LMS, this because they knew "that as soon as . . . due submission . . . [was] paid to all what the missionary proposes [there would be] a change in their whole system." We repeat: Europe colonized Africa, not the other way around, a simple—dare we say, *objective*—fact that ordered the dialectic of action and reaction in the space-time of first encounters.

In sum, *RR* is *about* the historical relationship among power, agency, and effect: three terms in a complex equation that, unwittingly, Donham collapses into one, thereby missing the point of our analysis. To say that people were deeply, and variously, affected by historical processes, by things done *to* them, is hardly to say that they did not act upon the world; though to act, self-evidently, is not necessarily to be empowered. For our part, we do not agree with the contention that, because "colonial elites" were fundamentally transformed by the civilizing mission, they must therefore be written in the passive voice. And, in analytic practice, we do not do so. Quite the opposite: *RR* is filled with accounts of Tswana—new elites and old, royal and commoner, men and women, rich, poor, and middling—whose signatures, deeds, and distinctive impress on the colonial encounter are spelled out, people like Joshua Molema, the iconoclastic rentier capitalist and his noble older brother Silas; Leteane, the middle peasant with primitive accumulation and headmanship on his mind; the "native agents" Shomolekae and Khukhwi Mogodi; the prophetess Sabina; the "heathen" Chiefs Mothibi and Montshiwa; and many, many others both less and more elevated. Similarly with the whites. Both volumes deal, over the long run, with the ways in which all parties to that encounter acted upon and reacted to one another, to contingent circumstances, to events within and across the frontiers of their own worlds. Nor do we ever allow abstractions

to "act": even when we use abstract nouns synoptically, they always stand for culturally and socially endowed people—observe, again, the adjectives—who embody them, do things in their name, act in relation to their presumptive existence, or whatever. It is an open question, of course, whether such things as the "civilizing mission" or "colonial evangelism" or "bourgeois ideology" are merely "abstract concepts," no less than is the case with "class formation" or "capitalism"—which, it appears, Donham *would* admit as historical forces in the colonization of the Southern Tswana, as forces that "penetrated" their very being, forces to which they had "no alternative" but to react.

There is more to be said on the question of agency, power, and historical cause and effect (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). But, in the circumstances, this will have to do. We must of needs move on to the remaining focal issues.

Of Theory and Method

Let us dispose quickly of the fourth issue, the two Big Questions of Theory—all in the uppercase—posed by Donham. Both are about hegemony.

One concerns "the equation of vernacular modernism with capitalist hegemony" (p. 141). Donham's quarrel with us here arises out of our statement that the missionaries "strove to instill the routines and dispositions of wage work," and various other signs and practices of bourgeois modernity, long before the advent of mining and manufacture in South Africa. From this he makes a large inference: that we believe the inculcation of those "modernist ideas" to have been *necessary* to the rise of capitalist hegemony here. As it happens, he agrees that the Nonconformists *were* successful at essaying the notion of the modern—but not at "instilling capitalist hegemony itself" (p. 141). Even more, he says, "to suggest that Protestantism was necessary to the economic transformation that occurred in South Africa strains historical credulity to the breaking point" (p. 142). With this last we agree. But what, in fact, strains credulity is that Donham should have attributed any of this to us in the first place, especially when he cites passages from *RR* that say quite different things. Our argument—which, incidentally, is empirically grounded, not "theoreticist"—is *not* that Protestantism was functionally "necessary" to the rise of South African capitalism. It is that, historically, Christian Political Economy—a highly elaborated theory of the proper workings of production and consumption, money, markets, and morality, circulation and health, authority and spirituality (Waterman 1991; see our 1997:167f.)—was dialectically entailed in the particular species of colonial capitalism that was to take root in South African soil, part of its ontological fabric, and therefore inseparable from it.[5] This was not the case everywhere, as we all know. But it *was* the case here. Nor do we argue—which is where this quarrel began—that the missions "instill[ed] capitalist hegemony" (p. 141) in Southern Tswana. (What we say is that they were the effective bearers of many of its taken-for-granted conventions and practices, that, from early on, they set in train processes of commodification [1991:224].) For one thing, as we note more than once, the LMS and WMMS had contradictory views about industrial wage labor and its proprieties, their initial objective being to re-create the British yeomanry in the countryside. For a second, in spite of their efforts to reorient Southern Tswana toward the means and ends of bourgeois modernity, in spite of their desire to spread the gospel of the market, in spite of their hopes of bringing a new civility (1997:322) to Africa, their would-be converts oriented themselves in widely different ways to colonial economy and society. For a third, our point was much narrower than the one ascribed to us: it was that, to the degree that the missions did inculcate those means and ends, they predisposed Southern Tswana to engage with the new colonial economy after the mineral revolution of the 1870s.

Does Donham doubt any of this and, in particular, the last? If so, how would *he* account for the way in which Southern Tswana, above all those living within the sphere of missionary influence, entered into that economy, at first willingly and uncoerced, as wage workers, transport riders, and entrepreneurs? How would *he* explain the patterns of consumption that emerged, among these evangelized peoples, in lock step with the money economy—and that often led to labor migration? Instead of having us address such empirically founded questions, Donham would, paradoxically, prefer us to engage in a profoundly theoreticist exercise: an effort to weigh the relative impact of economy (i.e., capitalism and class formation) and culture (i.e., the ideological effect of the mission) in transforming the Southern Tswana world—this, paradoxically, after himself agreeing "that any social formation must be understood as 'at once' economic and cultural." He simply refuses to grant that we have principled reasons for not forcing a wedge, analytically, between things that, historically, were indivisible. This is why he finds it difficult to make sense of our refusal to entertain the question of what might have happened in this part of the world had the Protestant missions never established themselves among Southern Tswana, which is much like asking what might have happened had the United States not entered World War II. The only answer, of course, is that things would have been different. But they were not. That *is* the point.

The other Big Question has to do with "the assumption that all capitalisms require hegemony" (p. 141) and, in particular, that South African capitalism "required" it. "The Comaroffs," Donham states, "assume that *any* social system must have hegemony" (p. 142, emphasis in original). Do they? Not quite. Our argument is not that social systems per se are hegemonic; even to frame the matter in this way bears the ring of a functionalist understanding of political economy. It is that, in any social world, there will always be *some* signs and practices that come to be

naturalized, routinized, and taken for granted: hegemony refers to that part of a dominant worldview that has been conventionalized—alike for the poor and the powerless, the worker and the petty bourgeois, the rich and powerful, and all those who are none of the above—to the point of slipping beyond notice, beyond discourse. At the same time, we stress, "[n]ot only is hegemony never total. . . . It is always threatened by the vitality that remains in the forms of life it thwarts. It follows, then, that the hegemonic is constantly being made—and, by the same token, may be unmade" (1991:21). It also follows that coexisting with it everywhere are ideologies that are *not* naturalized, that are variously empowered, variously contested, that the content and proportions of these things are intrinsically unstable, incomplete, and labile. The corollary? Once capitalism establishes itself anywhere, some of its forms—the commodity, the "free" market, wage labor—tend quickly to take on the features of the quotidian, the axiomatic, the (literally) matter of fact, even though their concrete manifestations and materializations may be contested. So it was, we would argue, with colonial capitalism in South Africa. This is why so many black South Africans took to wage employment of their own volition even while complaining about conditions at particular workplaces; why so many came to express themselves through the media of bourgeois consumption even when to do so was to go heavily into debt peonage; why so many found dignity and an assertive masculinity in labor despite the harsh conditions in which it was typically undertaken; why the African National Congress, in its early days, fought discrimination while nonetheless celebrating both the Protestant ethic and the liberatory spirit of enlightened liberal economy. All this reaffirms what we have already intimated: that hegemony is not a property of social systems, but of cultural fields, evanescent fields of signifying practices, which is why we would never say, and *nowhere* do say, that capitalism(s), let alone South African capitalism, *require(d)* hegemony.

This brings us, fifth and finally, to Donham's concerns with method, a mélange of assertions about absence, about storytelling, and about house painting.

About absence . . .

We allude here to the accusation, made by a somewhat roundabout route, that we have no method: "the Comaroffs appear to assume"—another of Donham's recursive phrases—"that theory of the conventional anthropological sort can substitute for historical methodology" (p. 138). No, actually, we do not. That much should be evident from everything we have written in the past decade or so: why publish hundreds of pages of detailed historical ethnography, the production of which must necessarily have involved *some* modus operandi, if all we want to do is avoid method in the name of theory? More egregiously yet, he suggests, the manner in which we conceive the distinction between "ideological" and "objective" history can have the effect of "immuniz[ing] theory from data" and so "protect . . . the historical anthropologist in any position he or she may take" (p. 138). How so? It does not seem to have protected us from Donham, or from other critics who have wished to differ with us. But here comes the real blow. When we *do* address the question of method in substantive terms, Donham sloughs it off in one line: it "turns out to culminate in an exposition of Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma*" (p. 138). This, he reminds us, was a "structural" rather than a "temporally grounded" analysis of *gumsa* and *gumlao* by a scholar who, for all his talents, neglected historical method.

What Donham fails to say is that the "exposition," part of an account of the history of historical anthropology, takes *Political Systems of Highland Burma* to task precisely for its reduction of history to a repetitive pattern of social equilibrium (i.e., to structure), for its failure to locate the Highland Burmese in processes of the long run (i.e., in historical time), for describing *gumsa* and *gumlao* as ideal types *"without subjecting them to historical analysis"* (our emphasis, Donham's silence). The lessons we take from this critical engagement with Leach, itself part of a long reflection on the method that we allegedly lack, are (1) the challenge of connecting the "fluid, fragmentary character of [all] social reality" to broader processes, patterns, formations, or whatever ("Class"? "Capitalism"? "Colonialism"?); (2) the necessity of writing historical anthropology not merely by situating ahistorically conceived "local" worlds within global histories, but by insisting on the historicity of the local, of *its* capacity to impact on worlds beyond itself; and (3) the advisability of regarding the methodological tropes of liberal modernist historiography—the individual, the event, biography, the social drama, and so on—with a skeptical eye (1992:23–26). Does Donham disagree with any of this? Why, again, does he reduce what we say to caricature? Why accuse us of a sweeping sin of omission rather than actually take on what we *do* say about method? What, we ask, is the point? What about our careful efforts to develop an ethnography of the archive? What about our answer to the problem of how to recuperate and interpret the voices and gestures of those who did not, could not, would not, write the historical record, those who left few traces, most of them in the annals of cultural aliens? What about . . .?

About storytelling . . .

The great panacea for historical anthropology, argues Donham, is narrative. Had we only understood this, we would have been able to take account of contingent events and their emergent properties—like the rise of capitalism in South Africa?—and thus been able to make "the historical turn." Donham does not say whether that turn, at least in (t)his version of it, is to the left or the right; as we intimated earlier, it seems to us like the latter. Or, worse yet, a

U-turn, an unwitting step backward in time to the textualizing excesses of the 1990s. For Donham, our problem is that we see terms like *individual, event,* and *narrative* as Eurocentric and culture bound—a view that "holds a certain fashion in current thought," he adds almost derisively—and regard them as concepts from which we have to "liberate" ourselves. (Again, he appears to have missed our statement to the contrary [1997:53]: that narrative may as well be "an instrument of liberation" as limitation, that it can as well be a medium of self-discovery or self-expression as self-delusion.) He goes on to repeat a "searching critique" by Peel of *RR1,* but does not bother himself with our equally searching counter-critique, which is brushed off as a "defense"; where we reiterate our *positive* take on the matter, he dismisses it as a series of "qualifications."

In point of fact, we make no such qualifications. We simply repeat what we have always said about Tswana modes of cognizing and telling history: that none of the historians or ethnographers who have ever worked with them, including Schapera and ourselves, have elicited a distinctively vernacular narrative genre that parallels its European counterparts; that there were other, culturally preferred, vehicles for giving account of the past, such things as praise poetry, ritual speech, genealogy, divinatory incantation, the inscription of the landscape, lists of regiments, place names, and personal honorifics; that, nonetheless, Tswana will and do recall significant acts and events using the linear, realist prose of modernist narrative *in specific discursive contexts;* that we certainly do *not* avoid including such narratives where they are recuperable from the historical record—difficult for earlier periods, obviously, easier for later ones, as will be evident from *RR2*—but that we insist on treating them as just one among many expressive and communicative media; and so on and on. We *do,* as we said there, have substantive theoretical objections: not to the careful analytic use of narrative, but (1) to the term being used, promiscuously, to refer to any kind of utterance, any kind of text, and (2) to its being given priority above other forms of signifying practice, particularly those available to people rendered inarticulate by the politics of voice. These objections Donham also sees fit to leave unremarked. Instead, tucked away in a footnote (n. 17), he offers a lame suggestion to explain why we, and our informants, might have "avoid[ed]" narrative—which, of course, is not the case to begin with. Perhaps, he speculates, it is because of the difficulties of a white anthropologist establishing rapport with black South Africans. Donham admits that he has had such problems. We have not. Having grown up in the place, having been actively engaged with its languages, it peoples, and its politics for decades, having accrued lifetimes of shared experience and shared struggles, our connections go far beyond the anthropological, far beyond the notion of "rapport." In this respect, we let our "oeuvre" speak for us.

Let us turn the tables here for just a moment, thus to cast a critical eye on the critic. We find puzzling Donham's own unquestioning, almost fundamentalist, faith in narrative. This for several reasons. One is his claim that "the emergent properties of events . . . *require* narrative as explanation" (p. 143, emphasis added). How so? Whose narrative? More basically yet, what does this actually *mean*? Explain what, exactly? In the absence of any exemplification or typification, this statement, which lies behind much of Donham's commentary on our work, is utterly baffling. Another qualm is the fact that the term itself—*narrative,* that is—goes utterly undefined, save for a categorical distinction between "shallow" (i.e., objective, factual) narratives, "native" narratives, and (presumably analytic) narratives about those narratives. Given that the three terms are left similarly under-specified, and their interconnections barely interrogated, they hardly seem a sufficient methodological basis for the "radically temporalized historical anthropology" touted here—indeed, for any anthropology at all. A further problem lies in a rather different place. Donham observes that "the imputation of unconscious meaning," which is said to go with our preference for "culture," has "always been . . . a vexed methodological issue" (p. 139), that this is especially so when dealing with the past. What he is alluding to here, more accurately, is the analysis of non-narrative speech and other forms of practice. By contrast, he intimates, narratives do not pose the same difficulty. The implication is that, somehow, they declare their own meanings, that they do *not* demand the interpretation of the unsaid, the undisclosed, the motivations and intentions behind them. If they *did,* presumably, they would evince the same "vexed methodological issue(s)." They do, of course. To suggest otherwise, as Donham does, is to fall to the fallacy of misplaced transparency. This, in turn, raises one more obvious question, a question simultaneously theoretical and methodological: how, given their significance to him, does he propose that we actually analyze (yes, interpret) "native" narratives, if not by presuming that they are made meaningful by some or other existing set of signs and values? Is there any way other than by "plumbing deep cultural understandings"? Note that it is a "deep" story that Donham is after here. How, in short, are "native" narratives produced if not with reference to such understand-ings? Are they *pre*cultural? *Praeter*cultural? Entirely exiguous? And what precisely *is* the connection between narrative sui generis and those material forces of history, those large processes, which Donham insists that we take into account? Can such processes really be distilled, in all their complexity, from various orders of story-telling? In short, it is one thing to romance a fetish, quite another to make it yield the Holy Grail—or a historical anthropology. Which takes us, lastly, to . . .

House painting.

Donham closes his critique by telling us that we have "painted [ourselves] into an old corner." For him, it seems,

our entire edifice is a poorly decorated house of cards. The problem arises, at the end of the day—or, rather, at the end of the essay—out of our self-confessed desire to write an anthropology of colonialism that is at once ideographic and nomothetic: that pays due respect to the "messy profusion of events 'on the ground'" while simultaneously seeking to make sense, in theoretical terms, of broad historical processes (1997:411). Perhaps we erred by referring at all to this time-worn distinction. But we did so in order to underscore the need to transcend a procrustean opposition: to separate ourselves, on one hand, from postmodern theoreticism and, on the other, from those more conventional colonial historians who have sought to avoid theory via the empiricist strategy of finding order in events by putting events in order. Donham, however, reads us as aspiring to the lofty heights of the nomothetic, his own stated preference also being for deconstructing the opposition *tout court.* That, we repeat, is exactly what we thought we were doing, what we thought *RR* was about. Obviously we did not make ourselves clear, for which we must take full responsibility. In the rupturing of old dualisms of this kind, Donham believes—and here, finally, we agree—lies the real promise of historical anthropology. It is a promise, he continues, that is already being realized by locally based South African academics, academics who are said to be the heirs of an earlier generation of anthropologists like Isaac Schapera and Monica Wilson, both "ethnographers and historians." Interesting this, and ironic too, since, to our best knowledge, we are the only living social scientists who actually *were* students of both of those two fine Africanists. In a profound sense, we still are.

> It struck me that our history is contained in the homes we live in, that we are shaped by the ability of these simple structures to resist being defiled.
>
> —Achmat Dangkor, *Kafka's Curse*
> Painted on an old wall, in a corner, more or less.
> District Six Museum, Cape Town, 2/14/01

Notes

1. There are other examples, not least the allegations that our work may be described as "late Malinowskian" (n. 9) because it is about "the interaction of cultures," a statement which seriously distorts what we actually *do* say about cultural encounters (see below); that *RR* is replete with internal contradictions and with claims that we "are not doing what . . . [our] analysis seems to do," an assertion supported only by page numbers and thus unanswerable; that we hesitate to treat conversion as an analytic category because the adoption of Christianity by Tswana was never thoroughgoing, an obvious simplification of our argument (see 1991:243–51).

2. This assertion derives from a note in *RR2,* where we say that older Tswana men invoked the opposition in the late 1960s, which is when we first became aware of it. But that fact is immaterial to deciding whether we then projected the usage backward in time. As we show, the evidence to the contrary is irrefutable.

3. Donham implies that the presence on the scene of the "missionaries' non-Tswana Christian interpreters and assistants" somehow undermines our argument, saying (1) that many of these men preceded the Britons as evangelists to the Tswana, and (2) that such people carried out much of the daily activity at the missionary workface. All of which, he says, "places the 'implantation' of bourgeois culture into Tswana in a different light." In respect of the first point, as we make abundantly clear, none of those early evangelists actually gained a long-term foothold among Tswana or had great impact on them. Nor, second, does the magnitude of their role in the everyday activities of the missions, itself a claim for which no evidence is cited, cast any "different light" on the processes we describe; there is nothing, beyond the facts given in *RR2,* chapter 2, to suggest this at all. If anything, these people, like the new Tswana elites dealt with later in *RR2,* became vehicles for the purveying of sekgoa.

4. We do not answer Donham's cavil here about resistance. Suffice it to say that nowhere is it—resistance, that is—equated simply with cultural refusal. The inference drawn from the passage about the poor "unhitch[ing] the African spirit from the grasp of white Nonconformist hegemony" caricatures our treatment of the topic in *RR2.* One point that we *do* want to make, however, concerns the critique of Jean Comaroff's early work on Zionist Christianity. It is that, in sharp contrast to Werbner, some South African theologians intimately familiar with this religious movement have concurred strongly with her reading of its political salience in the apartheid years (see, e.g., Petersen 1995).

5. Reading his didactic exposition of Weberian theory on the relationship between capitalism and Calvinism, it appears that Donham has a slim grasp of Christian Political Economy in its historically specific, technical sense; his phrase "it was not just 'Christian political economy' but Calvinism. . . ." implies that he thinks we use the term as an under-specified metaphor.

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