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Review Essays

Hegemony and Culture in Historical Anthropology:
A Review Essay on Jean and John L. Comaroff's
Of Revelation and Revolution

SALLY ENGLE MERRY

IN THE RECENT RAPPROCHEMENT BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND HISTORY, one of the most important projects is Jean and John L. Comaroff's study of the colonial mission in South Africa. In this large, two-volume work spanning almost 200 years and over 700 pages, the Comaroffs tell the history of the colonial encounter on the South African frontier and detail its contemporary consequences.¹ More a history of culture than a history of persons or events, this work presents the story of the changes in cultural meanings and practices taking place over time in a region of radical political, economic, and religious transformation. Although it begins from the role of the mission, the scope of the project extends into an exploration of changing conceptions of agriculture, money, healing, fashion, architecture, house furnishings, law, property, and subjectivity. This work contributes to the effort to expand the terrain of data and methods of historical analysis and to re-theorizing and historicizing culture.

By focusing on the way the unnoticed and undiscussed features of social practice and meaning contribute to maintaining or changing relations of power, these two volumes contribute to the move within history to expand the subjects relevant to historical analysis and the ways of analyzing them. The volumes are less an examination of events, persons, and narratives than of the cultural interstices of the historical process. They track the exercise of power in the unexamined domains of everyday social life. They have made an enormous impact on the field of anthropology, particularly on the critical issue of the reformulation of the notion of culture, the core concept of the discipline. Rethinking what culture means has consumed the field for the last two decades, and these two books have spurred the effort.² Within anthropology, they have been widely praised for breaking new ground theoretically as well as criticized for failing to present an adequate temporal

I am grateful to John L. Comaroff and Jane Collier for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

¹ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1: *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 2: *The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago, 1991, 1997).

² See, for example, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986); Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).

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