INTRODUCTION

Time on the Move

No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.[1]

Speaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally. Doing so, at this cusp between millenia, comes even less so.[2] It is for all the world as if the most radical critique of the most obtuse and cynical prejudices about Africa were being made against the background of an impossibility, the impossibility of getting over and done "with something without running the risk of repeating it and perpetuating it under some other guise."[3] What is going on?

First, the African human experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a *negative interpretation.* Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of "human nature." Or, when it is, its things and attributes are generally of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality. It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind.

At another level, discourse on Africa is almost always deployed in the framework (or on the fringes) of a meta-text about the *animal*—to be exact, about the *beast:* its experience, its world, and its spectacle. In this meta-text, the life of Africans unfolds under two signs.

First is the sign of the strange and the monstrous—of what, even as it opens an appealing depth before us, is constantly eluding and escaping us. Attempts are made to discover its status, and to do so the first requirement is, apparently, to abandon our world of meaning; is not Africa

to be understood for what it is, an entity with its peculiar feature that of shared roots with absolute brutality, sexual license, and death?

The other sign, in the discourse of our times, under which African life is interpreted is that of intimacy. It is assumed that, although the African possesses a self-referring structure that makes him or her close to "being human," he or she belongs, up to a point, to a world we cannot penetrate. At bottom, he/she is familiar to us. We can give an account of him/her in the same way we can understand the psychic life of the *beast.* We can even, through a process of domestication and training, bring the African to where he or she can enjoy a fully human life. In this perspective, Africa is essentially, for us, an object of experimentation.

There is no single explanation for such a state of affairs. We should first remind ourselves that, as a general rule, the experience of the Other, or the *problem of the "I" of others and of human beings we perceive as foreign to us,* has almost always posed virtually insurmountable difficulties to the Western philosophical and political tradition. Whether dealing with Africa or with other non-European worlds, this tradition long denied the existence of any "self" but its own. Each time it came to peoples different in race, language, and culture, the idea that we have, concretely and typically, the same flesh, or that, in Husserl's words, "My flesh already has the meaning of being a flesh typical in general for us all," became problematic.[4] The theoretical and practical recognition of the body and flesh of "the stranger" as flesh and body just like mine, the *idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others,* long posed, and still poses, a problem for Western consciousness.[5]

But it is in relation to Africa that the notion of "absolute otherness" has been taken farthest. It is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world.[6] In several respects, Africa still constitutes one of the metaphors through which the West represents the origin of its own norms, develops a self-image, and integrates this image into the set of signifiers asserting what it supposes to be its identity.[7] And Africa, because it was and remains that fissure between what the West is, what it thinks it represents, and what it thinks it signifies, is not simply *part of* its imaginary significations, it is *one of* those significations. By imaginary significations, we mean "that something invented" that, paradoxically, becomes necessary because "that something" plays a key role, both in the world the West constitutes for itself and in the West's apologetic concerns and exclusionary and brutal practices towards others.[8]

THE LONG DOGMATIC SLEEP

Whether in everyday discourse or in ostensibly scholarly narratives, the continent is the very figure of "the strange." It is similar to that inaccessible "Other with a capital O" evoked by Jacques Lacan. In this extremity of the Earth, reason is supposedly permanently at bay, and the unknown has supposedly attained its highest point. Africa, a headless figure threatened with madness and quite innocent of any notion of center, hierarchy, or stability, is portrayed as a vast dark cave where every benchmark and distinction come together in total confusion, and the rifts of a tragic and unhappy human history stand revealed: a mixture of the half-created and the incomplete, strange signs, convulsive movements—in short, a bottomless abyss where everything is noise, yawning gap, and primordial chaos.

But since, in principle, nothing Africa says is untranslatable into a human language, this alleged inaccessibility must flow not from the intrinsic difficulty of the undertaking, not from what therein is to be seen and heard, not from what is dissimulated. It flows from there being hardly ever any discourse about Africa for itself. In the very principle of its constitution, in its language, and in its finalities, narrative about Africa is always pretext for a comment about something else, some other place, some other people. More precisely, Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity.[9] Thus, there is no need to look for the status of this discourse; essentially, it has to do at best with self-deception, and at worst with perversion.

The harshness of such a diagnosis may surprise. But it must not be forgotten that, almost universally, the simplistic and narrow prejudice persists that African social formations belong to a specific category, that of simple societies or of traditional societies.[10] That such a prejudice has been emptied of all substance by recent criticism seems to make absolutely no difference; the corpse obstinately persists in getting up again every time it is buried and, year in year out, everyday language and much ostensibly scholarly writing remain largely in thrall to this presupposition.[11]

Three major features are seen as characterizing traditional societies. First are what might be called *facticity* and *arbitrariness*. By *facticity* is meant that, in Hegel's words, "the thing *is;* and it *is* merely because it *is* . . . and this simple immediacy constitutes its *truth*."[12] In such case, there is nothing to justify; since things and institutions have always been there, there is no need to seek any other ground for them than the *fact*

of their being there. By *arbitrariness* is meant that, in contrast to reason in the West, myth and fable are seen as what, in such societies, denote order and time. Since myth and fable are seen as expressing the very power of the *originaire,* nothing in these societies requires, as noted above, justification, and there is little place for open argument; it is enough to invoke the time of origins. Caught in a relation of pure immediacy to the world and to themselves, such societies are incapable of uttering the universal.

Second, in addition to being moved by the blind force of custom, these societies are seen as living under the burden of charms, spells, and prodigies, and resistant to change. Time—"it was always there," "since time immemorial," "we came to meet it"—is supposedly stationary: thus the importance of repetition and cycles, and the alleged central place of witchcraft and divination procedures. The idea of progress is said to disintegrate in such societies; should change occur—rare indeed—it would, as of necessity, follow a disordered trajectory and fortuitous path ending only in undifferentiated chaos. Finally, in these societies the "person" is seen as predominant over the "individual," considered (it is added) "a strictly Western creation." Instead of the individual, there are entities, captives of magical signs, amid an enchanted and mysterious universe in which the power of invocation and evocation replaces the power of production, and in which fantasy and caprice coexist not only with the possibility of disaster but with its reality.

More than any other region, Africa thus stands out as the supreme receptacle of the West's obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of "absence," "lack," and "non-being," of identity and difference, of negativeness—in short, of nothingness.[13] And, contrary to M. de Certeau's view, the problem is not that Western thought posits the *self* (self-identity) as *other than the other.*[14] Nor does everything come down to a simple opposition between truth and error, or to a confrontation between reason and that form of unreason called fable or even madness.[15] In fact, here is a principle of language and classificatory systems in which *to differ* from something or somebody is not simply *not to be like* (in the sense of being non-identical or being-other); it is also *not to be at all* (non-being). More, it is *being nothing* (nothingness). Flying in the face of likelihood or plausibility, these systems of reading the world attempt to exercise an authority of a particular type, assigning Africa to a special unreality such that the continent becomes the very figure of what is null, abolished, and, in its essence, in opposition to what is: the very expression of that nothing whose special feature is to be nothing at all.

There, in all its closed glory, is the prior discourse against which any comment by an African about Africa is deployed. There is the language that every comment by an African about Africa must endlessly eradicate, validate, or ignore, often to his/her cost, the ordeal whose erratic fulfillment many Africans have spent their lives trying to prevent. In their objects, language, and results, the fragments of studies brought together in this book endeavor to tease out the far-reaching consequences of the theoretical and practical effects of this violence and this extremism. Starting with the theme of *contemporaneousness*, they seek to give as intelligible an account as possible of some aspects of political imagination and political, social, and cultural reality in Africa today, both for their intrinsic worth and in the perspective of a comparative study of societies. The problem is to do so in a manner that does justice to what J. F. Bayart describes as "the true historicity of African societies"[16]—that is, the foundations of what might be called their "true lawfulness," "true raisons d'être" and "relation to nothing other than themselves." Such an undertaking poses numerous problems of methodology and of definition.

The first has to do with the extraordinary poverty of the political science and economics literature on Africa, and with the crisis of its languages, procedures, and reasonings.[17] The issue is not that nothing has been achieved, or that there have not been remarkable advances.[18] And it is not that other disciplines have had fewer shortcomings and weaknesses.[19] Concerned with explaining either single and unrepeatable occurrences or symbolic representations, recent historiography, anthropology, and feminist criticism inspired by Foucauldian, neo-Gramscian paradigms or post-structuralism problematize everything in terms of how identities are "invented," "hybrid," "fluid," and "negotiated." On the pretext of avoiding single-factor explanations of domination, these disciplines have reduced the complex phenomena of the state and power to "discourses" and "representations," forgetting that discourses and representations have materiality. The rediscovery of the subaltern subject and the stress on his/her inventiveness have taken the form of an endless invocation of the notions of "hegemony," "moral economy," "agency," and "resistance." In keeping with an outdated Marxist tradition, most scholars have continued to operate as if the economic and material conditions of existence find an automatic reflection and expression in a subject's consciousness; to account for the tension between structural determinants and individual action, they lapse into the grossest Parsonian functionalism.

Thus, on the basis of dichotomies that hardly exist, everything is considered said once it has been shown that the subjects of action, subjected

to power and law—colonized people, women, peasants, workers (in short, the dominated)—have a rich and complex consciousness; that they are capable of challenging their oppression; and that power, far from being total, is endlessly contested, deflated, and reappropriated by its "targets."[20] Helped by the collapse of Marxism as an analytical tool and all-embracing project, and by the demise of theories of dependency, economic explanations of contemporary social and political phenomena have, with consideration of the draconian character of external constraints, all but disappeared, all struggles have become struggles of representation. Levies, exploitation, corvée, taxes, tribute, and coercion no longer exist. Breaking away from the influence of Weber, everything has become "network," and no one asks any more about the market and capitalism as institutions both contingent and violent.[21] Only rarely is there recourse to the effects of the *longue durée* to explain the paths taken by different societies and to account for contradictory contemporary phenomena. Finally, there persists the false dichotomy between the objectivity of structures and the subjectivity of representations—a distinction allowing all that is cultural and symbolic to be put on one side, all that is economic and material to be put on the other. Rejection of philosophical perspective is such that any basic thinking about African societies and their history is deprived of all legitimacy. An instrumentalist paradigm now rules, too reductionist to throw intelligible light on fundamental problems touching on the nature of social reality in Africa.

The concepts developed in this volume start from two observations. The first postulates that what passes for social reality in sub-Saharan Africa is made up of a number of socially produced and objectified practices. These practices are not simply matters of discourse and language, although of course the existential experience of the world is, here as elsewhere, symbolically structured by language; the constitution of the African self as a reflexive subject also involves doing, seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling, and touching. In the eyes of all involved in the production of that self and subject, these practices constitute what might be called *meaningful human expressions*. Thus, the African subject is like any other human being: he or she engages in *meaningful acts*. (It is self-evident that these meaningful human expressions do not necessarily make sense for everyone in the same way.) The second observation is that the African subject does not exist apart from the acts that produce social reality, or apart from the process by which those practices are, so to speak, *imbued with meaning*.

Subsequent chapters proceed in two directions at once. On the one

hand, they endeavor to study some *sites* and *moments* of "imbuing with meaning," while showing how, in postcolonial Africa, this process is inseparable from a subjective individuation. On the other hand, they attempt, through examples drawn from history and everyday life, to grasp the ways this subjectivity is constituted.

Returning to the literature of political science and development economics, it becomes clear these disciplines have undermined the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts. In spite of the countless critiques made of theories of social evolutionism and ideologies of development and modernization, the academic output in these disciplines continues, almost entirely, in total thrall to these two teleologies.[22] This thralldom has had implications for understanding the purposes of these disciplines in Africa, for the conception of their object, and for the choice of their methods. Mired in the demands of what is immediately useful, enclosed in the narrow horizon of "good governance" and the neo-liberal catechism about the market economy, torn by the current fads for "civil society," "conflict resolution," and alleged "transitions to democracy," the discussion, as habitually engaged, is primarily concerned, not with comprehending the political in Africa or with producing knowledge in general, but with social engineering. As a general rule, what is stated is dogmatically programmatic; interpretations are almost always cavalier, and what passes for argument is almost always reductionist. The criteria that African agents accept as valid, the reasons they exchange within their own instituted rationalities, are, to many, of no value. What African agents accept as *reasons for acting,* what their claim to *act in the light of reason* implies (as a general claim to be right, *avoir raison*), what makes their action intelligible to themselves: all this is of virtually no account in the eyes of analysts. Since the models are seen as self-sufficient, history does not exist. Nor does anthropology. It is enough to postulate, somehow, in a form totally timeless, the necessity of "freeing" the economy from the shackles of the state, and of a reform of institutions from above, for this economy, these institutions, to function on the basis of norms decreed universal and desirable.[23]

It should be noted, as far as fieldwork is concerned, that there is less and less. Knowledge of local languages, vital to any theoretical and philosophical understanding, is deemed unnecessary. To judge from recent academic output, sub-Saharan Africa, wrapped in a cloak of impenetrability, has become the black hole of reason, the pit where its powerlessness rests unveiled. Instead of patient, careful, in-depth research, there are off-

the-cuff representations possessed and accumulated without anyone's knowing how, notions that everyone uses but of origin quite unknown—in Kant's well-known formulation, "groundless assertions, against which others equally specious can always be set."[24] One consequence of this blindness is that African politics and economics have been condemned to appear in social theory only as the sign of a lack, while the discourse of political science and development economics has become that of a quest for the causes of that lack. On the basis of a grotesque dramatization, what political imagination is in Africa is held incomprehensible, pathological, and abnormal. War is seen as all-pervasive. The continent, a great, soft, fantastic body, is seen as powerless, engaged in rampant self-destruction. Human action there is seen as stupid and mad, always proceeding from anything but rational calculation.

Not that there is no distress. Terrible movements, laws that underpin and organize tragedy and genocide, gods that present themselves in the guise of death and destitution, monsters lying in wait, corpses coming and going on the tide, infernal powers, threats of all sorts, abandonments, events without response, monstrous couplings, blind waves, impossible paths, terrible forces that every day tear human beings, animals, plants, and things from their sphere of life and condemn them to death: all these are present. But what is missing, far from the dead ends, random observations, and false dilemmas (Afrocentrism vs. Africanism), is any sign of radical questioning. For what Africa as a concept calls fundamentally into question is the manner in which social theory has hitherto reflected on the problem (observable also elsewhere) of the collapse of worlds, their fluctuations and tremblings, their about-turns and disguises, their silences and murmurings. Social theory has failed also to account for *time as lived,* not synchronically or diachronically, but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change beloved of so many historians.

What a certain rationality, claiming to be universal but in reality mired in the contingent and the particular, has never understood is that all human societies participate in a *complex* order, rich in unexpected turns, meanders, and changes of course, without this implying their necessary abolition in an absence of center. The torment of nonfulfillment and incompleteness, the labyrinthine entanglement, are in no way specifically African features. Fluctuations and indeterminacy do not necessarily amount to lack of order. Every representation of an unstable world cannot automatically be subsumed under the heading "chaos." But, reduced to impatience and ignorance, carried away by verbal delirium, slogans,

and linguistic inadequacy—with some analysts, only reading French, others only English, and few speaking local languages—the literature lapses into repetition and plagiarism; dogmatic assertions, cavalier interpretations, and shallow rehashes become the order of the day. Ethnographic description, distinguishing between causes and effects, asking the subjective meaning of actions, determining the genesis of practices and their interconnections: all this is abandoned for instant judgment, often factually wrong, always encumbered with off-the-cuff representations. The standard prescriptive discourse of economism is becoming combined with the exhortation and social prophetism of a certain sort of political activism. The upshot is that while we now feel we know nearly everything that African states, societies, and economies *are not,* we still know absolutely nothing about *what they actually are.*

The discussions in this volume stand apart from such crass judgment and the negative thinking leading to such judgment. It is not that, in absolute terms, it is impossible to imagine rigorously conceiving the negative or founding a specific body of knowledge that would be the knowledge of non-being, of nothingness (*the ecceity of non-being*)—but because it is not true, as either starting point or conclusion, that Africa is an incomparable monster, a silent shadow and mute place of darkness, amounting to no more than a lacuna.

BETWEEN GENERALITY AND SINGULARITY

The central assumption that guides what follows is that the peculiar "historicity" of African societies, their own raisons d'être and their relation to solely themselves, are rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualized outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized.[25] From a narrow methodological standpoint, this means that, from the fifteenth century, there is no longer a "distinctive historicity" of these societies, one not embedded in times and rhythms heavily conditioned by European domination. Therefore, dealing with African societies' "historicity" requires more than simply giving an account of what occurs on the continent itself at the interface between the working of internal forces and the working of international actors.[26] It also presupposes a critical delving into Western history and the theories that claim to interpret it.

An extraordinary difficulty at once begins to loom. Social theory has always sought to legitimize itself by stressing its capacity to construct universal grammars. On the basis of this claim, it has produced forms

of knowledge that privilege a number of categories dividing up the real world, defining the objects of enquiry, establishing relations of similarity and equivalences, and making classifications. It has equipped itself with tools to ask questions, organize descriptions, and formulate hypotheses.[27] But this same social theory has defined itself, above all, as an accurate perception of so-called modern Europe.[28] When examined, it turns out to rest on a body created, for the most part, at the time of the first industrialization and the birth of modern urban societies; modernity itself as a phenomenon has been primarily understood in the perspective of Western rationalism.[29] In other words, from Max Weber to the deconstructionists, the link between modernity, rationalism, and Westernism was seen as more than merely contingent; it was seen as constitutive of all three, so that it is precisely this interlinking that is the "distinctive feature of the West," distinguishes it from the rest of the world, means that its developments have not happened anywhere else.[30] This uniqueness would cover, for example, the secularization of culture, the release from the thrall of nature, the end of miracles, the elimination of finalism from religions, and the shattering of primary bonds and loyalties and ancient customs and beliefs—an assertion of which the validity might, if one so wanted, be profoundly questioned.

Continuing the habitual argument, modernity is also seen as characterized by the liberation of the sentient subject and his/her sovereignty from the unifying power of religion and the authority of faith and tradition. The triumph of the principle of free will (in the sense of the right to criticize and the right to accept as valid only what appears justified), as well as the individual's acquired capacity to self-refer, to block any attempt at absolutism, and to achieve self-realization through art, are seen as key attributes of modern consciousness. So is differentiation among the various sectors of social life—for example, between state or bureaucracy and the market, or between public and private life. On key matters, the Hegelian. post-Hegelian, and Weberian traditions, philosophies of action and philosophies of deconstruction derived from Nietzsche or Heidegger, share the representation of the distinction between the West and other historical human forms as, largely, the way the individual in the West has gradually freed her/himself from the sway of traditions and attained an autonomous capacity to conceive, in the here and now, the definition of norms and their free formulation by individual, rational wills.[31] These traditions also share, to varying degrees, the assumption that, compared to the West, other societies are primitive, simple, or traditional in that, in them, the weight of the past predetermines individ-

ual behavior and limits the areas of choice—as it were, a priori. The formulation of norms in these latter societies has nothing to do with reasoned public deliberation, since the setting of norms by a process of argument is a specific invention of modern Europe.

In this context, when articulated, the critique of modernity is always directed against the positivism seen as emanating from the alienated life and self-dispossession resulting from a form of work that deprives the producer of the enjoyment of what he or she has produced (Marx); against the total assimilation of reason and power, with claims to validity seen as simply masking mundane claims to domination (Nietzsche); against the corruption of all rational criteria and the confusion of reason, technicism, and absolute domination by obscene totalitarian forces (Horkheimer and Adorno); against the absolutization of reifying, instrumental, and calculating reason (Heidegger); or in the name of the supposed death of every form of unifying teleological interpretation of the world (Derrida, Foucault, etc.).[32] The dispute thus bears not on the Westernness of modernity but on what the Enlightenment bequeathed "us" and on the possibilities of accomplishing in reality the promises of universality contained in the ideals of the *Aufklärung*.[33]

ON *TIME* IN THE STATE OF BECOMING

What these comments and their tautological character quite clearly show is that, by defining itself both as an accurate portrayal of Western modernity—that is, by starting from conventions that are purely local—and as universal grammar, social theory has condemned itself always to make generalizations from idioms of a provincialism that no longer requires demonstration since it proves extremely difficult to understand non-Western objects within its dominant paradigms.[34] There thus arises the purely methodological question of knowing whether it is possible to offer an intelligible reading of the forms of social and political imagination in contemporary Africa solely through conceptual structures and fictional representations used precisely to deny African societies any historical depth and to define them as radically *other*, as all that the West is not.

In the following pages I have sought neither to discover traces of European modernity in Africa nor to sketch dubious comparisons between historical trajectories. There is no question of going back over the hoary question of what it means to be African in the world. As with the Jews in a recent period, many African thinkers, moved by determination to

rebuild a history of the "black nation," have in effect devoted their work to offering Africans a view of their historical destiny that is dense with meaning.[35] In so doing, they have sought to demonstrate the capacity of Africans to achieve sociability within nations, and to create their own image of their destiny. Such an effort formed part of a general emancipatory project; it rested on the messianic utopia of a world that would in future, in a complete absence of prejudice, be free of unreason—or so these thinkers believed.

To secure emancipation and recognition, they thought, required the production of an apologetic discourse based on rediscovery of what was supposed to be the essence, the distinctive genius, of the black "race." It also required the actualization of the possibilities of this genius and its power to give itself a form of reason in history, a form it was supposed to harbor; the necessary means of realizing this genius was its fusion in the crucible of the universal.[36] There can be no doubt that this African struggle for self-understanding was marked, perhaps unknowingly, by a degree of naiveté quite peculiar to it. This struggle and naiveté had arisen out of adversity, the shadow of ancient—at times poetic, at times terrifying— dreams, of blind alleys, of the distress of existence deprived of power, peace, and rest. Their imagination was working on the memory of an Africa, a vast petrified song, deemed past and misunderstood.[37] But, as a result of the tension inherent in the twin project of emancipation and assimilation, discussion of the possibility of an African modernity was reduced to an endless interrogation of the possibility, for the African subject, of achieving a balance between his/her total identification with "traditional" (in philosophies of authenticity) African life, and his/her merging with, and subsequent loss in, modernity (in the discourse of alienation).[38]

For the men and women of these generations seeking some crumb of fulfillment, such was the stark choice available. For many, it has ended, either in acceptance of a tragic duality and an inner twoness,[39] or—as a result of repeated stress on the absoluteness of the African self (in the terms of Afrocentric theses)—in an extraordinary sensitivity about identity.[40] I do not mean that, in the chaotic nightmare that followed the abolition of slavery and ended in colonization, the reaffirmation of African humanity was a matter of no consequence. The uncompromising nature of the Western self and its active negation of anything not itself had the counter-effect of reducing African discourse to a simple polemical reaffirmation of black humanity. However, both the asserted denial and the *reaffirmation* of that humanity now look like the two sterile sides of the same coin.

What distinguishes our age from previous ages, the breach over which there is apparently no going back, the absolute split of our times that breaks up the spirit and splits it into many, is again contingent, dispersed, and powerless existence: existence that is contingent, dispersed, and powerless but reveals itself in the guise of arbitrariness and the absolute power to give death any time, anywhere, by any means, and for any reason. More precisely, it is the current face of arbitrariness over the *longue durée,* yet not just any arbitrariness, but arbitrariness in its comedy and stark horror, a real shadow that, while totally devoid of beauty, does not lack clarity; not just any arbitrariness, but arbitrariness as human and contingent violence with the distinctive feature of committing acts of destruction that, in their starkness, scale, and "knock-out" effects, have the peculiar characteristic of concealing human suffering, burying it in an infinite circle centered, so to speak, everywhere. This is, then, the arbitrariness that accomplishes its own work and validates itself through its own sovereignty, and thereby permits power to be exercised as a right to kill and invests Africa with deaths at once at the heart of every age and above time.

But the question of the violence of tyranny was already posed to Africans by their remote and their recent past, a past slow to end. This obsession is found in African awareness in the nineteenth century. The slave trade had ramifications that remain unknown to us; to a large extent, the trade was the event through which Africa was born to modernity. Colonialism also, in both its forms and its substance, posited the issue of contingent human violence. Indeed, the slave trade and colonialism echoed one another with the lingering doubt of the very possibility of self-government, and with the risk, which has never disappeared, of the continent and Africans being again consigned for a long time to a degrading condition. In many ways, the form of domination imposed during both the slave trade and colonialism in Africa could be called phallic. During the colonial era and its aftermath, phallic domination has been all the more strategic in power relationships, not only because it is based on a mobilization of the subjective foundations of masculinity and femininity but also because it has direct, close connections with the general economy of sexuality. In fact, the phallus has been the focus of ways of constructing masculinity and power. Male domination derives in large measure from the power and the spectacle of the phallus—not so much from the threat to life during war as from the individual male's ability to demonstrate his virility at the expense of a woman and to obtain its validation from the subjugated woman herself.

Thus, it was through the slave trade and colonialism that Africans came face to face with the *opaque and murky domain of power,* a domain inhabited by obscure drives and that everywhere and always makes animality and bestiality its essential components, plunging human beings into a never-ending *process of brutalization.* It is these lines of separation—and of continuities—that African philosophy has failed to take up. Underlying the problem of arbitrariness and tyranny, as we have sketched it, of course lies the problem of freedom from servitude and the *possibility of an autonomous African subject.*

It is to focus on these issues that I have deliberately abstained from theorizing that would involve examining how, in sub-Saharan Africa, the critical power of reason could be retained or by what means could be ensured its triumph against all sorts of superstitions, customs, and habits.

To ask whether Africa is separated from the West by an unbridgeable gulf seems pointless. In an attempt to force Africa to face up to itself in the world, I have tried to state, in the most productive possible way, some general questions suggested by concepts drawn from social theory—notably those notions used generally for thinking about time, the bonds of subjection, the ways domination is validated, the collapse of historic "possibles" or their extensions, the symbolic constitution of the world, constraint and terror as limits of what is human, and relations to transcendence and finitude. Where these concepts were manifestly incapable of describing the particular figures of reason in African history and the practices of our time, I have invented different modes of discourse, *a different writing.*

By focusing the discussion on what I have called the "postcolony," the aim was not to denounce power as such, but rather to rehabilitate the two notions of *age* and *durée.* By age is meant not a simple category of time but a number of relationships and a configuration of events—often visible and perceptible, sometimes diffuse, "hydra-headed," but to which contemporaries could testify since very aware of them. As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another:[41] an *entanglement.* I also wanted to pose the whole question of *displacement.* To do so with even a minimum of relevance, it was necessary to reject theories that—by proclaiming not only "the death of God" and "man" but also of "morality" and the "subject" at the risk of bringing about the disappearance of any axiological reference point and any object other than "oneself"—reduce individu-

als to mere flows of drives and networks of "desires," to libidinal machines. The central concern was to rethink the theme of the African subject emerging, focusing on him/herself, withdrawing, in the act and context of *displacement* and *entanglement*.

Displacement is not simply intended to signify dislocation, transit, or "the impossibility of any centrality other than one that is provisional, ad hoc, and permanently being redefined."[42] While willing to take up a philosophical perspective when needed, I started from the idea that there is a close relationship between subjectivity and temporality—that, in some way, one can envisage subjectivity itself as temporality. The intuition behind this idea was that, for each time and each age, there exists something distinctive and particular—or, to use the term, a "spirit" (*Zeitgeist*). These distinctive and particular things are constituted by a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individuals' imagination and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called "languages of life."

This "life world" is not only the field where individuals' existence unfolds in practice; it is where they exercise existence—that is, live their lives out and confront the very forms of their death. On this basis, I then asked what is the set of particular signs that confers on the current African age its character of urgency, its distinctive mark, its eccentricities, its vocabularies, and its magic, and make it both a source of terror, astonishment, and hilarity at once? What gives this set of things significations that all can share? In what languages are these significations expressed? How can these languages be deciphered?

This line of thought led me to ask, for example, about the *fact* and the sign of the potentate, the relations between the government of people and the multiplication of things, the various forms of indigence, and the problem of excess and laughter, or of finitude and madness, as stated in the languages and practices of the supernatural and the divine.[43]

From the outset, there were two difficulties. First, every age, including the postcolony, is in reality a combination of several temporalities.[44] In the case of the postcolony, to postulate the existence of a "before" and an "after" of colonization could not exhaust the problem of the relationship between temporality and subjectivity, nor was it sufficient to raise questions about the passage from one stage (before) to the other (after), and the question of *transit* that such passage raises, or again to recognize that every age has contradictory significations to different actors. It was still necessary to know how, for each time, this multiplicity

of times was to be re-inscribed not only in the *longue durée*, but also in indigenous *durées*. And then it was necessary to think about the status of that peculiar time that is *emerging time*.

To think relevantly about *this time that is appearing*, this *passing time*, meant abandoning conventional views, for these only perceive time as a current that carries individuals and societies from a background to a foreground, with the future emerging necessarily from the past and following that past, itself irreversible. But of central interest was that peculiar time that might be called the *time of existence and experience*, the *time of entanglement*. There was no way to give a plausible account of such time without asserting, at the outset, three postulates. First, this time of African existence is neither a linear time nor a simple sequence in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it, to the point where a single age exists within society. This time is not a series but an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones.

Second, this time is made up of disturbances, of a bundle of unforeseen events, of more or less regular fluctuations and oscillations, not necessarily resulting in chaos and anarchy (although that sometimes is the case); moreover, instabilities, unforeseen events, and oscillations do not always lead to erratic and unpredictable behaviors on the actors' part (although that happens, too).

Finally, close attention to its real pattern of ebbs and flows shows that this time is not irreversible. All sharp breaks, sudden and abrupt outbursts of volatility, it cannot be forced into any simplistic model and calls into question the hypothesis of stability and *rupture* underpinning social theory, notably where the sole concern is to account for either Western modernity or the failures of non-European worlds to perfectly replicate it.

African social formations are not necessarily converging toward a single point, trend, or cycle. They harbor the possibility of a variety of trajectories neither convergent nor divergent but interlocked, paradoxical. More philosophically, it may be supposed that the present *as experience of a time* is precisely that moment when different forms of absence become mixed together: absence of those presences that are no longer so and that one remembers (the past), and absence of those others that are yet to come and are anticipated (the future). This is what this book endeavors to interpret. I felt that what distinguishes the contemporary African experience is that this emerging time is appearing in a context—

today—in which the future horizon is apparently closed, while the horizon of the past has apparently receded.[45]

Moreover, to focus on *time of entanglement* was to repudiate not only linear models but the ignorance that they maintain and the extremism to which they have repeatedly given rise. Research on Africa has hardly stood out for its attempts to integrate nonlinear phenomena into its analyses. Similarly, it has not always been able to account for complexity. On the one hand, it has assimilated all non-linearity to chaos, forgetting that chaos is only one possible corollary of unstable dynamic systems. In addition, it has underestimated the fact that one characteristic of African societies over the *longue durée* has been that they follow a great variety of temporal trajectories and a wide range of swings only reducible to an analysis in terms of convergent or divergent evolution at the cost of an extraordinary impoverishment of reality. Further, research on Africa has literally impoverished our understanding of notions such as rationality, value, wealth, and interest—in short, what it means to be a subject in contexts of instability and crisis.[46]

In this book, the *subject* emerging, acting effectively, withdrawing, or being removed in the act and context of *displacement* refers to two things: first, to the forms of "living in the concrete world," then to the subjective forms that make possible any validation of its contents—that objectify it. In Africa today, the subject who *accomplishes the age* and validates it, who lives and espouses his/her contemporaneousness—that is, what is "distinctive" or "particular" to his/her present real world—is first a subject who has an *experience* of "living in the concrete world." She/he is a subject of experience and a validating subject, not only in the sense that she/he is a conscious existence or has a perceptive consciousness of things, but to the extent that his/her "living in the concrete world" involves, and is evaluated by, his/her eyes, ears, mouth—in short, his/her flesh, his/her body. What are these modes of validation of conscious existence? Which are capable of being re-actualized? What is the share of arbitrariness in that re-actualization? And to what particular figures of reason and violence does that arbitrariness refer?

This book may not answer all these questions. They may not have been well posed, or I may not have the means to deal with them. It has seemed enough to initiate some thinking about the postcolonial African subject, his/her history and his/her present in the world. Throughout the chapters that follow, I have tried to "write Africa," not as a fiction, but in the harshness of its destiny, its power, and its eccentricities, without laying any claim to speak in the name of anyone at all. As far as possible, I have

adopted the attitude that everything remains to be learned about this continent and that, at any moment, things may inflict surprises, even disavowals, on me. I was hardly seeking to "grasp and reproduce the effective reality in all its immediacy."[47] It sufficed me, coming from and being of the world, to try to say what, it is said, seems to resist being said.

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NOTES

1. Marlow, in J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Dell, 1960), 70.

2. See A. Mbembe, "Écrire l'Afrique à partir d'une faille," *Politique africaine* 53 (1993).

3. J. Bouveresse, *Rationalité et cynisme* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), 118; comment on J. Derrida and philosophies of deconstruction.

4. There are numerous studies, for example: the collective work *The Representation of the Black in Western Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death,* D. Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).

5. Attempts at resolution of this problem in philosophical terms only seriously began with the works of M. Scheler, M. Heidegger, K. Jaspers, and, later, E. Lévinas and P. Ricoeur. See also M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) [*Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. C. Smith, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962], and J. P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris, Gallimard, 1943) [trans. H. E. Barnes,

Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, London: Methuen and Co., 1957]. Even these studies often end in a pluralist idealism that leaves the foundations of Western solipsism intact.

7. See V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

8. C. Castoriadis very pertinently recalls, "The institution of society is in each case the institution of a magma of social imaginary significations, which we can and must call a *world* of significations . . . Society brings into being a world of significations and itself exists in reference to such a world . . . And it is only in correlation with this world of significations as it is instituted in each case that we can reflect on the question raised: what is the 'unity' and the 'identity', that is to say the *ecceity* of a society, what is it that holds a society together? What holds a society together is the holding-together of its world of significations." See *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 480–481. [Trans. K. Blamey, *The Imaginary Institution of Society,* Cambridge: Polity, 1987, 359].

9. See C. Miller, *Blank Darkness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

10. This approach, which often consists, in contrasting "the identical to oneself" with "the other" by excluding it, is at the basis of a more or less similar contrast between allegedly holistic societies and others said to be individualistic. The first are said to stress "above all, order, and hence the conformity of each element with its role in the whole, in a word society as a whole." The others, "at any event ours, emphasize the individual human being: in our eyes, every man is an incarnation of the whole of humanity, and as such he is equal to every other man, and free." See L. Dumont, *Homo Aequalis: Genèse et épanouissement de l'idéologie écomomique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 12. [Eng. trans of the first ed., *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology,* London: University of Chicago Press, 1977]. See also Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus: Le système des castes et ses implications* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). [Trans. of rev. ed. by M. Sainsbury, B. Gulati, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.]

11. For this type of classification, see G. Balandier, *Le Dédale: Pour en finir avec le XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 25. It is, in part, to remove all credibility from such consideration and return to these societies a historical dimension that many recent studies lay so much stress on the *problématique* of their "invention."

12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Eng. trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 58–59. The italics are Hegel's.

13. Without going way back to Parmenides, see A. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) [trans. A. Bloom, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980]; J. P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant;* M. Heidegger, *Questions I et II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

14. See M. de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975, ch. 5). [Trans. T. Conley, *The Writing of History,* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.]

15. See M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). [Abridged translation of first ed. by R. Howard, *Madness and Civi-*

lization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, London: Tavistock, 1967]; B. Mouralis, *L'Europe, l'Afrique, et la folie,* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1993), 15–74.

16. J. F. Bayart, *L'État en Afrique: La politique du ventre* (Paris: Fayard, 1989). [Eng. ed., *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly,* London: Longman, 1993.]

17. These questions were touched on in J. F. Bayart, A. Mbembe, and C. Toulabor, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire: Contributions à une problématique de la démocratie* (Paris: Karthala, 1992), 9–64, 233–56.

18. See the survey in the apologetic work by R. Bates, V. Y. Mudimbe, and J. O'Barr, *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contribution of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). In addition, there are excellent works in French, in various disciplines.

19. For an initial critique, see, for example, F. Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *American Historical Review* 99, 5 (1994): 1516–45.

20. This is not to say that such assertions are necessarily false, but to suggest that a project to build a cumulative body of knowledge about Africa cannot rest on such thin hypotheses without dangerously impoverishing reality. Reducing everything to "resistance" or to quantifiable calculation is to ignore the qualitative variety of the ends of human action in Africa.

21. See Max Weber, *Histoire économique. Esquisse d'une histoire universelle de l'économie et de la société,* French trans. C. Bouchindhomme (Paris: Gallimard, 1992). [Eng. trans. S. Hellman and M. Palyi, *General Economic History,* London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1927.] The best recent studies of firms and wealth formation are not exempt; see, in particular, Y. A. Fauré, *Petits entrepreneurs en Côte d'Ivoire: Des professionels en mal de développement* (Paris: Karthala, 1994); E. Grégoire and P. Labazée, eds. *Grands commerçants d'Afrique de l'Ouest: Logiques et pratiques d'un groupe d'affaires contemporains* (Paris: Karthala, 1993); J. Ellis, Y. A. Fauré, eds., *Entreprises et entrepreneurs africains* (Paris: Karthala-Orstom, 1995).

22. On this point, see the criticisms by J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

23. See B. Hibou, "The Political Economy of the World Bank's Discourse: From Economic Catechism to Missionary Deeds (and Misdeeds)," *Les Études du CERI* 39 (1998).

24. E. Kant, *Critique de la raison pure,* third ed., (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), 45. [trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, *Critique of Pure Reason,* rev. ed. (New York: Colonial Press, 1900), 14.]

25. Care must be taken not to conceptualize this globalization only in terms of "failed Westernization" leading to social trauma and disorders in international relations, as does B. Badie in *L'État importé: L'occidentalisation de l'ordre politique* (Paris: Fayard, 1992). A more historically situated and hence more complex assessment of these phenomena is provided by F. Cooper, "Africa and the World Economy," in F. Cooper et al., *Confronting Historical Paradigms* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 84–201. See also A. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2, 2 (1990): 1–24.

26. See the comments of C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, "Les débats actuels en histoire de la colonisation," *Revue Tiers-Monde* 28, 112 (1987):782.

27. For an examination of the basic underpinning of this social theory, from which knowledge and scholarship are possible, see J. S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990) 1–23; M. Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966) [trans. by A. Sheridan-Smith, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Knowledge*, London, Tavistock, 1970]; J. Habermas, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*, trans. from the German by S. Weber-Nicholson, J. A. Stark (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989); and J. Bohman, *New Philosophy of Social Sciences: Problems of Indeterminacy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

28. A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 10–12.

29. See, nevertheless, three recent efforts by "non-European" theorists: H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); C. Patterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

30. M. Weber, *L'éthique protestante et l'esprit du capitalisme,* Fr. trans. J. Chavy (Paris, 1964), 23. [Eng. trans. T. Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, London:* Allen and Unwin, 1930.]

31. According to L. Ferry and A. Renaut, "The distinctive feature of modernity lies precisely in the way in which the individual, even though he quite clearly does not have absolute freedom to create his own norms, yet sees himself as having the sovereign right to submit them to a free examination and, as this critical examination proceeds, asserts and thinks of himself as the ultimate foundation of the process of argument through which he legitimizes or rejects them." *In Pourquoi nous ne sommes pas nietzschéens* (Paris: Grasset, 1992), 131.

32. A summary of the key elements of these various critiques will be found in J. Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité,* Fr. trans. C. Bouchindhomme and R. Rochlitz (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) [Eng. trans. F. Lawrence, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987]. See also A. Touraine, *Critique de la modernité* (Paris: Fayard, 1992). [Trans. D. Macey, *Critique of Modernity,* Oxford, Blackwell, 1995.]

33. This, for example, is one meaning of the controversy between Foucault and Habermas over what attaining "the age of man" means. See, for instance, Foucault's "What Is Enlightenment?" in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) and Habermas, *Le discours philosophique de la modernité;* or M. Kelly, ed., *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

34. The notes by V. Descombes, "Notre problème critique," in *Stanford French Review,* 15 (1991):253–61, give an accurate idea of the epistemological nature of the issues raised here.

35. On the Jews, see, for example, H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951); G. Scholem, *Fidélité et utopie: Essais sur le judaïsme contemporain* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1978), 79–100; I.

Berlin, *Trois essais sur la condition juive* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1973). On the Africans, see C. A. Diop, *Nations nègres et culture* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1954).

36. On this point, see the writings of A. Horton, Blyden, and others in H. S. Wilson, ed., *Origins of West African Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 167–265.

37. See C. A. Diop, *L'antériorité des civilisations nègres: Mythe ou vérité historique* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1967) [Trans. M. Cook, *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality?* (Westport, Conn: Lawrence Hill, 1974)]; T. Obenga, *L'Afrique dans l'antiquité* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1973); E. Mveng, *Les sources grecques de l'histoire négro-africaine* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1972).

38. This problematic has already been criticized. See, inter alia, F. Eboussi Boulaga, *La crise du Muntu: Authenticité africaine et philosophie* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1977); P. Hountondji, *Sur la "philosophie africaine"* (Paris: Maspero, 1977) [Trans. H. Evans, with the collaboration of J. Rée, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality,* London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, 1983]; V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); K. A. Appiah, *In My Father's House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

39. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989 [first pub. 1903]).

40. M. K. Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1989) and *Afrocentricity and Knowledge* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).

41. See M. Foucault, "Revenir à l'histoire," *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 278–80.

42. As suggested by P. Michel in "De la notion de la 'transition': Remarques épistémologiques," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 96 (1994):214.

43. These are some reasons our problematic has little in common with current discussions in the United States on "postcoloniality" or "subaltern" consciousness. On these latter see A. Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice, or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); G. C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); E. Shohat, "Notes on the 'Postcolonial,'" *Social Text* 31–32 (1992): 84–113; G. Prakash, "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography," *Social Text* 31–32 (1992); G. Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *American Historical Review* 99, 5 (1994): 1475–90; G. Prakash, *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); D. Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (1992).

44. For some discussions of time in general, see F. Braudel, "Histoire et sciences sociales, la longue durée," *Annales ESC*, 4 (1958); K. Pomian, *L'ordre du temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); P. Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995).

45. Read J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copper Belt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).

46. A. Mbembe and J. Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," *Public Culture* 7, 2 (1995).

47. E. Cassirer, *La philosophie des formes symboliques: Le langage*, Fr. trans. Ole Hansen-Love and J. Lacoste (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), 16. [Eng. trans. R. Manheim, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1: Language*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 76.]