

Review article

Pitfalls and promises in the anthropology of Africa

ADEBANWI, WALE (ed.). *The political economy of everyday life in Africa: beyond the margins*. xviii, 364 pp., maps, figs, tables, illus., bibliogr. Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2017. £60.00 (cloth)

GOLDSTONE, BRIAN & JUAN OBARRIO (eds). *African futures: essays on crisis, emergence, and possibility*. 264 pp., table, bibliogr. Chicago: Univ. Press, 2017. £22.50 (paper)

These two edited volumes reflect two major trajectories in the anthropological study of Africa today. One is rather more theoretically inclined, interested in the broader narratives that have been spun in the media and in scholarship about Africa, ruminating ‘within the paradoxes, perplexities and apparent certitudes Africa is taken to insinuate’ (Goldstone & Obarrio, p. 3, their emphasis). The other is broadly empirical and empiricist – interested in what social scientific endeavour might reveal about contemporary economic life in Africa, what its editor calls ‘the political economy of everyday life’ (Adebanwi, p. 4), an inquiry into the ways in which Africans live their lives and exercise agency in relation to economic circumstances and constraints not of their immediate making. Right off the bat, there is an unmistakable divergence in ambition and method between these two volumes, expressed in form as much as content. *African futures* is 264 pages of short essays, containing meditations on ethnographic

and conceptual issues in the study of Africa. *The political economy of everyday life in Africa* is almost half as long again, comprised of far more extensive chapters exhibiting a more sustained engagement with empirical material. Insofar as the ambitions of these books differs greatly, they can hardly be compared on the same terms. But insofar as they are emblematic of the two polarities of contemporary Africanist anthropology, they intrigue.

African futures begins with an introduction by the editors, Brian Goldstone and Juan Obarrio, that sets the tone for much of what follows: ‘This book of essays approaches the subject of futurity in Africa as an irreducibly open question, one whose potential answers are contingent not only on who is posing the question but also on the myriad specificities – of scale, location, sensibility – that orient it’ (p. 1). At the heart of this book is a concern with experiences of time and crisis in Africa, and how the continent’s relationship to the rest of the world has been mediated (by scholars and media pundits alike) as one *defined by* time and crisis. The narrative of Africa as a place of crisis, which scholars can hardly be seen to have stood apart from, or as one of newfound optimism (the ‘Africa Rising’ trope, p. 1) looms large in the introduction and across the subsequent essays. The introduction is immediately followed by the first of the book’s three subsections, ‘Rethinking crisis’, in which chapters 2 to 4 by Janet Roitman, Brian Larkin, and Ramah McKay respectively contribute in distinctive ways towards rethinking the notion of ‘crisis’ in Africanist scholarship.

I must dwell a little longer on this section – and particularly on the essays by Roitman and Larkin – since it tells us much about the knots that anthropological scholarship can tie itself in against its better judgement. Roitman goes to great lengths to argue that ‘crisis’ is of enormous import to understanding Africa today, but

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primarily in relation to narratives bequeathed either by academics (she refers to her own co-authored article 'Figures of the subject in times of crisis' [Mbembe & Roitman 1995]), other commentators, or anecdotal evidence of Africans themselves who claim to be in a state of crisis. Crisis is a contingent, shifting signifier bound to be deployed in all manner of contexts, Roitman insists. And yet one wonders how anthropologists ended up narrating 'crisis' as a facet of African lifeworlds to begin with and how useful it might be to continue to plough that particular field.

Brian Larkin's intervention is revealing. When he conducted fieldwork in Nigeria, it was during the height of structural adjustment's economic effects, but he notes this was not the same 'crisis' described by Charles Piot (2010) in Togo, nor James Ferguson (1999) in Zambia. 'Like the poor', Larkin says, 'crisis, it seems, is always with us' (p. 45). His solution is to recognize the situatedness of crisis narratives, the relativity of crisis as a descriptive tool – a perspective embraced by a number of other contributors to *African futures*. Yet my concern about the concept remained pronounced even after reading such reasonable rapprochements between divergent accounts of 'crises'. Does it still make sense to speak about a singular 'crisis' as a quality of African life and experience? What is lost in abstracting from country-specific experiences of economic change, and out to a wider notion of 'crisis'? Undoubtedly, discussions of conceptual tools like crisis will be of interest to some readers, and yet one can wonder whether such large-scale abstractions serve to blunt fine-grained ethnographic description (particularly if they have to be calibrated at such great length) rather than elucidate it. The time spent dwelling on the term is emblematic of a trajectory in anthropology (not merely Africanist anthropology) concerned with concept production and rumination, at times to the detriment of ethnographic investigation. The idea of crisis as 'continual movement' (Larkin, p. 46) gets us little further. That 'no condition is permanent' remains something of a truism – the question remains what anthropologists can add to the study of impermanent African contexts rather than objectifying their flux as a characteristic in and of itself.

Whilst appearing somewhat laboured, these debates hardly derail the volume. Some of its most striking offerings are its ethnographic ones. Brad Weiss's chapter 14 explores notions of temporality and economic success in Tanzania – revealing familiar critiques of ill-gotten wealth from 'fast business'. Ramah McKay (chap. 4) analyses how notions of crisis amongst her interlocutors inform claims made on the state. A middle section sees a range of authors consider rural-to-urban peregrinations, ideas of luck, and the myriad, non-teleological fates of African migrants. Again, the contributions are short, but not without important insights and ideas. Peter Geschiere and Antoine Socpa's

reflections on Cameroonian 'bush fallers', for example, reveal the belief in luck underlying the risky migration strategies they pursue, often with family expectations pinned on them (chap. 12).

In contrast to *African futures*, *The political economy of everyday life in Africa* appears far more empiricist than critical-theoretical. In this volume dedicated to the intellectual legacy of Jane Guyer (whose work also appears in *African futures*), Wale Adebani's thought-provoking introduction spells out an intriguing and yet straightforwardly sociological mission for anthropologists of Africa today: to study the everyday lives of Africans under the economic constraints they face. Emblematic of this is Gbemisola Animasawun's chapter 9 on the struggles of *okada* motorcycle taxi riders in Lagos, their clashes with city authorities pursuing 'urban renewal', and the reordering of public space by restricting them from the urban centre, pushing the already marginal further to the margins.

Some of the first entries in the volume return to classic debates about the influence of money and commoditization in Africa. Chapters 1 and 2 by Jean and John Comaroff and David Pratten respectively are finely tuned to the importance of *longue durée* history and how wider transformations have shaped local conflicts over wealth and people. Pratten offers a meticulously researched chapter on the relationship between fluctuating exchange rates for prestige goods (manillas) and a whole range of local social conflicts in Nigeria surrounding bride-price disagreements, including a spate of vengeful murders by mysterious 'leopard men'. The book's ranging contributions touch on a variety of themes, from politics and patronage to disease and violence, always approached through the lens of wider economic dynamics. Fred Cooper's essay provides a valuable survey of debates and historiography on the topic of labour in African history, bringing them into discussion with the recent turn towards 'precarity' as a feature of 'post-Fordist' economies in the Global North. Anne-Maria Makhulu's important chapter observes how South African corporate capital increasingly relies on marginal sums extracted from the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid, providing credit that fuels desires for consumption whilst subjecting poor South Africans to new and pervasive forms of indebtedness.

From this perspective, the distinction between the two books could hardly appear more stark. In *African futures*, Roitman (p. 31) suggests that 'Africanist anthropologists have much to learn from critiques of historiography', approvingly citing Hayden White, but one of the major achievements of the work in this latter volume is to historicize African economic life and experience through carefully contextualized research. Exhortations to epistemological openness can fall rather flat in comparison to scholarship capable of weaving economic change with African understandings and

knowledge production at the interstice of the global and the local.

The book is not without fault, however. Other reviewers have noted that its case studies are primarily focused on Nigeria and South Africa, and that their contributions do not adequately reflect the intention to study the 'political economy of everyday life' (see Allain 2018). The macro level at which many of these contributions work means that the 'everyday' can often become occluded by wider historical, economic, and political processes.

Where is an Africanist anthropologist left to go from here? The metaphysical concerns of *African futures* will provide plenty of food for thought for the curious. Yet its promise may prove disappointing for scholars who have already pursued long-term embedded fieldwork and know that practically every concept or scholarly concern breaks up as it passes through the upper atmosphere of the deep and intuitive appreciation of social complexity we actively cultivate throughout our research. One wonders what colleagues from the continent might make of the volume's scale-busting theorization of 'Africa' as such. As semi-realized as it might be in *The political economy of everyday life in Africa*, the call to explore how 'a certain, often difficult and challenging political economy is encountered, domesticated and made sensible; how people attempt to impose some measure of order and stability on their

lives, even in the context of acute precarity, poverty and various forms of fiscal, social or political instability' (p. 5) resounds and reverberates rather more clearly than rubrics of 'crisis' and 'the future' – a pathway to exploring the man-made historical and material conditions in which Africans live and participate, less a metaphysical or a temporal predicament than a human, socio-economic one. Both volumes will undoubtedly be of interest to Africanist anthropologists, and whilst *African futures* will attract anthropologists theorizing temporality and future-making practices, *The political economy of everyday life in Africa* will draw attention from anthropologists of economic life and change.

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