

Review of "Invisible Governance: the Art of African Micro-Politics"
1994 Autonomedia, New York.

Perhaps only a phenomenologist blinkered by his own influences would call "Invisible Governance" a work of phenomenology but indeed that is how I found it. The book is an implicit recognition of the possible intimacy between the philosophy of experience and ethnography in that it suspends any 'natural attitude' (dubious or otherwise) by use of a glorious proliferation of case studies.

The subtitle of the book, 'the Art of African Micropolitics', reveals the theoretical debt the authors David Hechte and Maliqalim Simone have to the later Foucault and Gilles Deleuze; indeed, there is something of the latter's conceptual punchiness in the style of the text. The aim and argument of the book is clear from the outset: to detonate the Western imaginary of 'Africa'. They do this by following the two French philosophers' insistence on a radical empiricism (a phenomenology by other means?) - showing the active pragmatics that engages different Africans in their everyday lives.

The bulk of the ethnography is from francophone west Africa (Hechte is a freelance journalist based in Dakar), including Set-Setal graffiti art, the trans-cultural phenomenon of Mami Wata, the Congolese fashion fetishist Sapeux, cross-border night markets and aspects of the multifarious strands of African Christianity. Interlaced with each example are insightful citations from thinkers such as Hountondji, Mbembe and Mudimbe, as well as proverbs, each reinforcing the active differentiations and modes of resistance found within any African existential situation. As with Simone's earlier writing ("About Face"), the overriding interpretation is that the economic constraints and the sociocultural hybridity of different African settings intertwine to engender a globalized cultural eclecticism the authors call 'post-modern'. This argument has a prospective arm: that with the decline in power of the nation state, postmodern Africans accustomed to the fuzzy boundaries of their existence will be better prepared than westerners with their anxiety-ridden identity politics.

..Africans may, in the long run, be well prepared to act in a future devoid of national or international cohesiveness - a world of interdependent popular neighborhoods which, like multinational corporations, blur the meanings of borders and ideologies. In this regard, contemporary African socio-cultural

practices could be said to constitute a new form of political training, one that can respond to the dissolution of the nation as a legacy of colonialism. (p23)

A key exemplification of this argument occurs in their comparison of American ghettos and African *bidonville*. As a westerner myself, I find the anxiety-free approach towards what Hechte and Simone call 'the non-West' liberatory. Rather than tip-toe around the imaginary's relation to the construction of its others (for example through the silencing strategy of 'exotification'), Hechte and Simone argue that *all* cultures exoticize their others as a matter of course:

Europeans are often associated with blindness, partly because their appearance is similar to African albinos who characteristically have bad eyesight and partly because blue eyes look somewhat like cataracts. (p58)

Furthermore, in place of geo-cultural essentialisms, the book demonstrates that the production of identity is contingent upon diverse imperatives in the context of shifting cultural boundaries. Thus the production of African identities involves ambiguity and tricksterism; as Hechte and Simone say,

Every social reality is fraught with an extravagance which is both its forcefulness and undoing. All attempts at closure, necessary in order to determine what's in or out, what's incorporated or "free," must eventually open out, become a laughing matter - a bursting of the seams. (p79)

Rather than a static ethnophilosophy, the invocation of such hermeneutic demons as Eshu and Anansi demonstrates the essentially dynamic nature of African self-interpretations. Indeed, western constructions of Africanity have themselves been absorbed by the non-West to economic advantage (and ironic effect),

[s]ometimes Western experts go and teach Africans how and why they once made what they did. Often, this is useful for the production of tourist art which is mostly made for the West. But nowadays, some African Art gets made in Taiwan and never sees Africa. (p72)

In ontological terms, at work in this book is an account of agency as active and energetic in any situation. All forms of appropriation (colonial or otherwise) are met with forces of *expropriation* and the pragmatics of survival (the invisibilities of the title), leading oftentimes to modes of

ontological excess and cultural subversion. As an example of this, Hechte and Simone cite the Sapeux and the way their haute-couture dress sensibilities destabilizes class-based hierarchies of taste (thus driving Bourdieu's thesis into over-determination). Implicit in *Invisible Governance* is that to say otherwise is to attenuate agency and reproduce what one can call 'the fallacy of the pathetic other'. It seems to me that this affirmation of the power of agency has wider appeal, certainly for example as a way of clarifying issues in Western feminist critiques of non-Western patriarchy. The argument of the book goes further still: rather than pragmatics referring to 'making the most of a bad situation', Hechte and Simone argue that the situation itself is *maintained* by Africans to their own benefit. For example, the bureaucracy that surrounds official cross-border trade is actively supported by Africans wishing to profit from 'night-markets' existing close to the border. Again, the pomp and circumstance of government in African countries is actively upheld, according to Hechte and Simone, in order to widen the gap between state and non-official transactions, the former the artifice which safeguards the 'invisibilities' of the latter.

The beauty of this book is its relative compactness, delivering a short sharp essay on philosophical ethnography. As a playful polemic against western reifications of Africa, as well as an exemplification of the arguments of key contemporary African philosophers who insist upon the power of modes of agency and difference, it is thoroughly recommended.