

CSSH NOTE

Mann, Gregory. 2015. *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Gregory Mann's *From Empires to NGOs* comes as a welcome corrective to current re-readings of West African history that assume a quick and relatively smooth transition from colonial to postcolonial governance, and that tend to read the past from the vantage point of the present: a world of discreet nation-states, on one hand, and one marked by postcolonial dependencies, on the other. The book starts in the 1940s and traces ideas about the nature of government and sovereignty as they were developed during the anti-colonial struggle in the region, via the first decade of independence, to the Sahel drought. It thereby questions both the colonial/postcolonial divide and the dominant focus on neoliberalism in African Studies by sketching a "prehistory" of neoliberal Africa and of its roots in a historical moment when national sovereignties "were real and ripe with potential" (p. 244). The approach also shows the long and often painful process of disentanglement that led away from the "open" years (the phrase is Frederick Cooper's) of the 1950s and 1960s—when other political options seemed viable—to the world of hierarchically ordered and discreet nation-states that we now take for granted. It lends voice to the "losers" of history, those who have lost not because their names have been forgotten, but rather because the social visions they stood for either now appear implausible or have been reclaimed by others. In other words, it "gives back to the past the uncertainty that characterises the future," as Raymond Aron—no friend to any of the militants cited in the book—would have put it.

This is done not so much through a complete historical narrative as through a series of "snapshots" of particular events when "common sense [was] both disrupted and recreated" (8). Chapter 1 explores connections between French leftist social sciences and political activists in Mali, arguing that these connections shaped the notion of "governance" that informed Mali's first independent government. Chapter 2 outlines the profound internal political changes that preceded the accession to independence by Sahelian countries that had been part of French West Africa. Chapters 3 and 4

examine the relationship between emerging notions of citizenship—as a reflection either of long-standing connections or of national sovereignty—as seen from the vantage point of migration, first by West Africans to Sudan, then to France. It concludes with, among other things, the longevity of the “messy categories” of imperial rule long after the empire had contracted beyond recognition. Chapters 5 and 6 take us to the Sahel drought in the 1970s and slightly beyond, sketching the moment when Malian sovereignty was gradually undermined, or rather shadowed, by projects of governance developed by international institutions and NGOs, in the name of, first, emergency assistance, and then human rights. Throughout, the chapters provide a sensitive and nuanced sketch of the paradoxes of political commitment and governance, and they make for compelling reading.

One question that remains—although its urgency decreases from chapter to chapter—is that of the book’s overall coherence. Each chapter (with the exception perhaps of chapter 2) stands well on its own. All six address similar issues from different perspectives, but the reader is often left to tie them together. This is not necessarily a bad thing, of course, although at times one wishes for slightly more analysis, or indeed an internal point of view—a sense of place, as the author has compellingly argued elsewhere. Another question is that of the unity of the Sahel: the book mainly focuses on Mali, and makes a convincing case for its specificity, but it also aims to underline the historicity of the Sahel as a region. Perhaps undertaking both endeavors is simply too much for one book. These minor details aside, this work is an important contribution to scholarship on Mali, the West African Sahel, and the colonial legacy (and its limits) more generally. It reminds us of the many roads not traveled on, debunks a number of all-too-common assumptions, and opens new, relevant avenues of research.

———Judith Scheele, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin