

colonial rule; how ideas of Indian slavery intersect with wider debates about slavery, abolition, trade, empire, evangelicalism, missionary enterprise and civilizing mission” (14). Reading her book, one can only think that she has amply fulfilled her objective, and that this will remain the standard history of British abolitionism and Indian slavery for years to come.

——— Enrico Dal Lago, National University of Ireland, Galway

Sasha Newell, *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Cote d’Ivoire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

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This highly insightful and beautifully researched book provides a window on the insecurities and frustrations of young people, mainly men, in near contemporary Cote d’Ivoire, situated with reference to a broader literature on the anthropology of youth and modernity in Africa. It is a compelling read, rich in insight, very clearly written, and full of important new material on the lives of twenty-something and thirty-something young men living in a highly fluid and uncertain environment.

Sasha Newell’s fieldwork took place primarily in Cote-D’Ivoire in 2000 and 2001, a period immediately preceding political conflict in the country. He interviewed young men, but also conducted research among young women and other members of urban society. Much of the fieldwork took place in the city of Abidjan, which grew from a population of fifty-eight thousand in 1948 to over two million today.

At the heart of this book is a central story about the importance of “bluff” in the survival strategies of unemployed men aged between their mid-teens and mid-thirties. Ivorian young men from poor backgrounds often spend huge sums of money on Western-style clothes and staging lavish parties in bars. Large quantities of food and alcohol, dancing to U.S. hip hop, and other extravagant displays of apparent wealth characterize these displays of power. But the luxury is a sham: those staging these cultural performances are poor, and they often lack even the money to feed themselves on an everyday basis. Others understand that the men are bluffing, raising the question of why young men spend so much money in this way. Newell argues that the lavish displays serve to nurture social networks that are important in the everyday efforts of young people to navigate an uncertain political environment and the city more broadly. They are also a means for young men to cultivate a type of lower-middle-class urban identity, superior to “rustic youth” in rural areas and distinct too from French-influenced cultural practice of Ivorian elites.

The book contains a pithy chapter-by-chapter summary of the arguments (pp. 29–31), and I will not attempt such a thing here but instead draw out some of the key further arguments of the ethnography. Newell draws attention to the

gendered nature of the displays of conspicuous consumption he describes. Men usually stage the parties, but women are important as audiences for the shows and can also play a crucial role in disrupting the performances through their demands on the performer, revealing the lie at the heart of their displays. At the same time, women are typically reluctant to go to such lengths because they depend upon the social networks of the “bluffeurs.”

Newell also highlights the role of the cultural performances of wealth in the construction of a grassroots vision of citizenship. Through their occasional acts of excess, as well as their everyday clothing and speech, young men effectively critique notions of citizenship based on the nation-state.

The book also presents highly insightful material on economic lives of the young men, who are not straightforwardly “unemployed” but rather engaged in a range of forms of “bizness,” a word that connoted an assortment of legal, semi-legal, or illegal forms of urban entrepreneurship, including working as security guards, phone fraud, forgery, extortion, and blackmail. As Newell points out, such informal activities are not marginal to the economy but instead are constitutive of urban entrepreneurship.

Woven through the book is an interesting set of arguments around the relative position of urban lower-class underemployed youth in Cote D’Ivoire and migrants in France. Newell draws comparison between young people’s encounters with modernity as migrants and their engagement with modernity via consumption, concluding that the lavish displays of wealth by insecure Ivorian youth are in themselves a type of “partial migration” that entails rethinking one’s relationship to place and the Ivorian social order.

Toward the end of the book Newell successfully dismantles certain assumptions that might be made about the real and the fake. There is no Archimedean standpoint from which it is possible to make judgments about the authenticity of certain cultural performances, and there is nothing authentic about the products of Western modernity, which itself reflects hodge-podge histories of imitation and reinvention. He also argues that the bluffs of Ivorian young men are “real” rather than “fake” in the sense of being important in the production of social relations.

Like all books, this one has weaknesses. I wanted to read much more about the childhoods of the men at the center of the book, especially regarding their schooling, health, and intra-family relationships. Newell might have engaged more with issues of policy. I was also surprised by the lack of reference to literature on youth and modernity outside of Africa. Newell makes great efforts to highlight links between his findings and those of Africanist anthropologists, but other comparative possibilities are not examined. There are parallels between his arguments about grassroots citizenship and James Holston’s notion of insurgent citizenship that are not drawn out. In addition, something could have been made of the similarities between Ivorian “bluffeurs” and contemporary Euro-American youth who engage in a similar type

of “bluff” as they search for secure employment while trying to maintain a sense of themselves and their families as upwardly mobile. Likewise, young people in South Asia are often engaged in a prolonged effort to appear “modern” while at the same time they increasingly find it impossible to maintain the fiction of their mobility. Had Newell made these comparisons, he might have been able to make some important points about the relative importance of parental support in the cultural production of a “modern image,” and flush out comparatively the relative significance of the state in supporting, penalizing, and shaping youth practice.

But these criticisms should be very much read in context: This book should be required reading for anyone interested in post-colonial Africa, youth, and the cultural production of modernity around the world. It is an exemplary ethnography.

———Craig Jeffrey, University of Oxford