

# BOOK REVIEWS

## AFRICA - GENERAL

**Wale Adebani, ed. *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa: Beyond the Margins***, James Currey and Boydell & Brewer Inc., 2017. xv + 364 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. No price reported. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-84701-165-7; No price reported. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-84701-166-4.

The book is a series of essays in honor of Jane Guyer's inspirational contributions to the study of Africa. The substantial introduction by Wale Adebani introduces "the political economy of everyday life" as a multi-disciplinary engagement with the intersections of economies at global and local scales, processes of valuation and cultural meanings, and everyday transactional struggles. Echoing Guyer's research as being "a journey of exploration," the chapters address her key themes of agency, resilience, and creativity in four parts: Money matters, currency, and fiscal life struggles; Labor, social lives, and precarity; Marginality, disaffection, and bio-economic stress; and Historicity, temporality, agency, and democratic life.

Jean and John Comaroff address Guyer's writing on "commensuration" in revisiting their earlier work on cattle, money, and contests between regimes of value among Tswana and British missionaries in southern Africa. David Pratten reveals the instability of exchange rates as a key factor in Nigerian cases of gendered violence such as the Women's War of 1929 and the man-leopard murders of the 1940s. Geschiere and Oestermann use Guyer's concepts of "self-realization" and "composition" to illuminate the rapid embrace of monetization of life by Maka, and the roles of disaffected youth and competitive German companies in the wild rubber boom of the 19th century, both cases in Cameroon. African Development Bank economist Célestin Monga advocates an embrace by macro-economists of the "stunning insights" of detailed micro-level socio-economic research typified by Guyer's publications.

Frederick Cooper provides a stimulating synthesis of "the labour question in African history" while Maxim Bolt delves into the "fragmented mosaic" of a supposedly homogeneous "formal" sector experienced, often painfully, by Zimbabwean migrant workers on South African border farms.

Michael Watts' penetrating chapter discusses three concerns for Nigeria—secular development, democratic process, and political violence

“through the lens” of two insurgencies, the Niger Delta movement and Boko Haram, which arose in the petro-state “from the intersection of a profound crisis of authority and rule ... and the politics of precarity...” (201). Anne-Marie Makhulu describes the extension, in the context of financialized economies, of banking and insurance to the previously assumed unbankable and uninsurable. Using a South African friend’s experience as example, she argues that, contrary to the rhetoric about “liberating entrepreneurial freedoms,” the poor end up being captured by the credit and insurance markets and exposed to “subjection and dispossession.” The motorcycle taxi drivers of Lagos described by Gbemisola Animasawun as “marginal men” struggle to make a living in face of chaotic, rule-less traffic and inept and corrupt government authorities. Economic collapse and casualization of work make marginality the norm yet, through struggle and luck, a space for maneuver and small gains. Elisha Renne sees both persistence and transformation in the conceptions of smallpox and its treatments among Yoruba.

Sara Berry shows how the strategic management and selective secrecy of history and historical knowledge add value to a wide range of transactions, from ecotourism, heritage parks, and art collections to access to land and political authority. She concludes that, “If value, like history, is in part a secret, there’s no such thing as a market ‘free’ of the politics of knowledge” (303). Souleymane Diagne considers the colonial translator as one of “the actors of a third space ... of hybridity,” that is, participating in two worlds, here the “imperium” and the “colonized” (311). His cases show the interpreter not as a neutral channel for transferring information but rather as a co-creator of meaning in particular instances of translating, often consciously *re*-interpreting discourse in efforts to inject greater “reciprocity” into the exchanges. Finally, Adigun Agbaje reviews pervasive patronage (favours from state officials to various clients) and prebendalism (corrupt use of state resources) in Nigeria’s “travails of democracy,” but sees a ray of hope in the “episodic and more systematic” challenges to these “toxic” characteristics (320–21), including recent protests and election outcomes.

Jane Guyer’s Afterword draws on a wide range of authors, including well-known African scholars (e.g., Ake, Hountonji, Mbembe) as well as younger writers on Africa from within and outside the continent, to reflect on the contributed chapters, linking them to her own themes of margins, agency, and radical empiricism. She comments on the contributions of past and present work on these themes and on “everyday life” to African Studies, while also emphasizing how the scholarship on Africa contributes to broader social and economic theory, especially in view of the problems brought to the continent by “the limits of explanatory schemes” based on different histories, economies, and societies (here invoking a phrase used by Frederick Cooper in his essay).

This book is an important and stimulating addition to African Studies and, indeed, as emphasized by Jane Guyer and many of the contributors, also to social theory, especially social theory of “economic life.” Threads running throughout many of the chapters include the jostling co-existence

of excess, abjection, and precarious livelihoods with inventive use of margins and ambiguity; the uneven hold of capitalism in the face of different regimes of value, different rationalities, and “the messy realities of actual reasoning” (6); and gender, generation, and class divisions interacting with political and economic strains. In a short Foreword, James Ferguson pays tribute to Jane Guyer’s refusal to separate empirical reality and theorization (what she refers to as “radical empiricism” in her Afterword). He felicitously notes that she has always “worked from a careful and imaginative interpretation of ... mundane realities” and in so doing, “she has enabled us, again and again, to see how taken-for-granted analytical frames have misled us” (xvii). This echoes Frederick Cooper’s point on Jane’s ability “to use a concept to launch an enquiry, not to close off an analysis by slotting something definitively into a [received] category” (136). The essays follow her lead.

Pauline E. Peters

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

*pauline\_peters@hks.harvard.edu*

doi:10.1017/asr.2017.139

**Nic Cheeseman, Lindsay Whitfield, and Carl Death, eds. *The African Affairs Reader: Key Texts in Politics, Development, and International Relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 372 pp. Index. \$40.00. ISBN: 9780198794295.**

*The African Affairs Reader* provides a useful summary of the contributions made to the *African Affairs* journal in the last thirty years. Drawing from one of the oldest and highest-ranked African studies journals, the volume brings together some of the key texts that have shaped the study of African politics and societies. It includes thirteen re-published articles, as well as a general introduction that discusses how research on the continent has evolved over time. There is an additional introductory discussion before each section on topics including the African state; the political economy of development; elections, democracy, and representation; and Africa and the world. The volume presents a general overview of the politics of Africa and could provide a basis of African studies knowledge for graduate students as they develop their research projects.

The volume does a good job of outlining some of the challenges that researchers face when developing theories of African politics, such as when the editors emphasize the problems with “trying to generalize about the nature of ‘the African state’” (29). The introductory essays also attempt to situate African states in a broader global context. For example, in her discussion of the political economy of development, Lindsay Whitfield offers an important overview of how foreign capital can shape African prospects for development, but not always for the better. Similarly, Carl Death emphasizes the importance of “showing African agency and how African political actors have shaped the world we live in, as well as being shaped by it” (287).