Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

McGovern, Mike, *Making War in Côte d'Ivoire*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 263 pages.

Hellweg, Joseph, *Hunting the Ethical State: The Benkadi Movement of Côte d'Ivoire*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 307 pages.

Reviewer: Ronald Niezen
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Violence and Un-civil Society in Côte d'Ivoire: *A Review Essay*

There is a truth-defying—but at the same time admirable—persistence to the goal of unlocking the universals behind human bloodshed, almost as though a history-less, Kantian age of perpetual peace could still somehow be realized just by correctly orienting our analytical and political wills. But violence seems to have become kaleidoscopically inscrutable in its tendency to take on complex, shifting forms. A current example of this is the political transformation of the Tuaregs of northern Mali, from active NGO-based participants in human rights initiatives on behalf of indigenous peoples to uncomfortable allies of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, taking advantage of a weak military presence in the north to occupy Gao (my erstwhile field site) and Timbuktu, thereby provoking a state of civil war, a strategic crisis, and a re-invasion led by the French. There seems to be a defiance of universal normativity both in the behaviour of individuals seeking (or protecting) state power and in the circumstances of violence that acts contemptuously against international law and the soft power of human rights. This is evident in an emerging literature on new and very dangerous forms of rapacious incivility that have manifested themselves in a variety of armed conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, including those in Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Republic of the Congo and Uganda, with circumstances inclined precariously in the same direction in Côte d'Ivoire.

With some notable exceptions (a couple to be discussed here), the study of violence has been relatively impervious to the insights of ethnography, for the very simple reason that it is incredibly dangerous to get too close for too long to the circumstances surrounding armed struggle, particularly those of the shifting, kaleidoscopic sort. Connected to this obvious risk is a bureaucratic impediment: the broadening of anthropological subject matter to include violent conflict and humanitarian intervention corresponds with circumstances in which university-based research ethics boards have taken measures to protect researchers from the dangers to themselves and others that might follow from the ethnographic study of violence. This, for better or worse (worse, I would argue), leaves the field more open to the imaginations of peacemakers-at-a-distance.

Besides appearing in the same year (2011) with the same publisher (University of Chicago Press) on the same situation of conflict (in Côte d'Ivoire), the two books I discuss here have in common the simple practical fact that the authors were initiated into organizations outside the usual research structures (and hence ethics boards) of universities. This gave them each an unusual vantage point from which to observe at close hand the lives of people enmeshed in one of the least expected recent conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa: that which took place in the Ivory Coast, commonly referred to as "the Ivoirian conflict."

Mike McGovern's *Making War in Côte d'Ivoire* offers an analysis that has the advantage of the longue durée (nine months spread over seventeen years) as he worked as a Peace Corps volunteer and later, during his doctoral research, as a researcher for the International Crisis Group (ICG), a think-tank NGO based in Brussels. As he reports in his preface, his first assignment for ICG was in Côte d'Ivoire, which gave him the opportunity to meet and in some cases interview the central players in Ivoirian politics and to observe their political behaviour closely and over time. The extended period of research behind this study also allowed for a fairly close-grained analysis of those who became part of an urban underclass, whose elite status and hopes for the future were displaced by the state's kleptocracy and the conflicts it caused.

McGovern's overview begins with the ethics and institutions of independence, with the hidden structures that connected political power with control of the economy, including sophisticated strategies of corruption and acquisition of personal wealth. For all the laudatory analysis of Houphouët-Boigny and the peace and prosperity associated with his leadership in the transition to independence and the decades immediately following the establishment of the postcolonial state, his rule, McGovern observes, established the sickness that later emerged as a chronic disparity of wealth and a state

of conflict that resolved itself into a condition of neither war nor peace. Control of the state under this first independent regime gave the political elite access to the *filière*, the network of corruption that connected politics to the economy and all the benefits that flowed from it. This network was both national and supra-national, extending into global markets, international political alliances and offshore accounts. This basic observation of the conditions of independent statehood becomes the key to understanding subsequent patterns of violence that otherwise might seem random and inexplicable: a "violent political economy of predation" (59) marked by gruesome, anonymous slaughters in a strategic context of "social advancement by force" (53).

The rot in the structure only became apparent when it had to bear a load, when disruption to the global cocoa market, a shrinking economy and escalating greed by a ruling elite reduced almost everyone in Côte d'Ivoire to an underclass. The problem for the elite in these circumstances becomes one of maintaining access to power under conditions of decreased political legitimacy posed by economic collapse. And the answer to this problem, aptly referred to by McGovern as "high modern authoritarian demographic fantasy" (64), involved sharpening boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, pitting one class of citizens against another, and drawing on cultivated hatreds to further one's control of the so-called democratic process. The particular iteration of this political/rhetorical strategy became known as "*Ivoirité*," marked by a myth of the purity of original belonging and the impurity and foreignness of interlopers. In the case of Laurent Gbagbo's hold on power and his unsuccessful bid for re-election in 2007, this took the form of hatred and dissatisfactions politically channelled toward the Muslim minorities and temporary migrants of the north, the "Burkinabe" and the Malians. True to McGovern's service in the interest of strategic analysis, his understanding of this aspect of the conflict is particularly crystalline: "as soon as one shifts focus to the fact that in capturing power in Cote d'Ivoire, political figures gain control of a lucrative clandestine economic network, it becomes clear that much of the hate rhetoric serves one of two purposes: in the short term, it can be a useful diversion that masks economic pillage, while in the longer term, it can be a useful way to disqualify opponents towards the end of monopolising political—and thus economic—power" (165).

Once the political elite's skill in using media to cultivate, harness, and co-opt resentments in target audiences is set in motion, it spills over and spreads beyond the strategic goal of capturing the state. Conditions of insecurity manifest themselves in urban violence, in which displaced, formerly privileged youth, some organized as the Jeunes Patriotes (Young Patriots), take pleasure in destroying a society seen as already broken and without promise. Violence in these circumstances becomes a kind of macabre vehicle for self-expression in intergenerational struggle, with an even more elemental motive than greed, in which "young men break things (including human beings) because they enjoy it" (110). (One might have liked this angle to be explored further but, alas, it remains tangential to the main argument.) Then there is that form of political bad faith to be seen in the check-point economy, the local manifestation of power and plunder in which road blocks by armed personnel along highways are used to extort money from travellers, seemingly replicating the abuses of the state on a small scale. All of this can be traced to a basic condition of dysfunction in which "political actors have found that war serves as even better cover for the pillage of the national economy than simple economic prosperity, and they may be ill-served by the restoration of peace and security"(165).

Joseph Hellweg's ethnography of the Ivoirian conflict zeroes in on just such local answers to the need for security—and on the corruption of their promises. His book is set in the mid-1990s, when he made a sudden decision to shift the topic of his research from theatre in Abidjan to the secret society of Dozo hunters and their Benkadi security movement, originally based in the countryside and eventually finding their way into the corridors of power. The 1990s were a simpler time in Côte d'Ivoire; and Hellweg was able to learn about the Benkadi movement in a way that seems to replicate some of his early section titles: "shape-shifting as strategy," "structure, agency, oscillation," and "meetings with remarkable Dozos" (10-18). His impressions and emotions associated with this encounter with the secret society were such that, in the process of deepening his knowledge, he transformed more than his topic, but also himself. His initiation into the society gave him a unique vantage point from which to observe the Benkadi movement's navigation of the Ivoirian conflict—and as a hunter initiate/researcher it also gave him the title of his book.

The starting point of the political transformation of the Dozos is the centre point of McGovern's more macro analysis: the rise of president Herny Konan Bédié's antinorthern revisionist history in the mid-1990s (later also taken up by president Laurent Gbagbo), accompanied by the collapse of the economy, the rise of political acrimony and dysfunction and the predictable turn to crime among displaced youth. The Dozos responded to this challenge by taking on some of the combined qualities of a security force and a social justice NGO, and did so, as Hellweg explains, "according to the imitative logic by which they blended into the forest to kill game and made a place for themselves as hunters in Islam" (1). With the police failing to quell a national crime wave, they stepped in as an unofficial police force. Their closeness to the rural and working-class people they protected also gave Benkadi the intimate knowledge needed to establish a system of restorative justice, punishing offenders with fines that were then shared with their victims, combining the state's formal legal code with "a reciprocal ethic of virtue grounded in ritual practice" (128).

It is at this point that, as Chinua Achebe once expressed it, "things fall apart." To put it over simply, by replicating the structures of the state, the Benkadi organization also took on the state's taint of corruption. The compelling and repelling manner in which this occurred merits attention to Hellweg's detailed account of it, but in essence the Dozo's success as local power brokers sanctioned through their simultaneous

presence in state officialdom, made them a force to be reckoned with—and one subject to the same sordid motives and abuses of power as the state, the object of their mimesis. Fast forwarding to the violently contested election of 2007, their unregulated power came to include "the same sense of impunity that police and gendarmes affected" (162); and worse, as "Dozos committed atrocities against the same people they were ostensibly trying to protect or collaborate with in the 1990s: women, the poor, immigrants, Ivorian citizens, and police," with crimes including documented cases of beatings, rape, and murder (17). The secret society that initially attracted Hellweg with its social poetics and honour-oriented sensibilities later became a menace in a vacuum of accountability within a winner-take-all electoral system.

McGovern concludes aptly when he writes, "watching the degradation of the situation is like watching a slow-motion train wreck" (215). But there is good reason not to avert our gaze. If anything, the two books I have discussed show that ethnography is more important than ever before, in part as the only viable way to interpret such vexed conflicts as that of Côte d'Ivoire. The astonishing plasticity of social forces in West Africa (and arguably elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa) that sit astride tradition and modernity, that defy categorization as civil or uncivil society, that seem to be capable of strategic mimesis in any direction, means that unqualified pessimism may be misplaced. Even things that look like an inevitable train wreck are capable of transformation. For now, one of the best things we can do is to keep watching.

Fitting, Elizabeth, *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside. Durham: Duke University Press,* 2011, 319 pages.

Mathews, Andrew S., *Instituting Nature: Authority, Expertise, and Power in Mexican Forests.* Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011, 316 pages.

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A Review Essay

Both *The Struggle for Maize* and *Instituting Nature* are exceptionally written, well researched ethnographic monographs that offer contributions that reach well beyond the field of Mexican studies. In both cases the authors analyze modern regimes of natural resource access and management in peripheral areas of Mexico: the mountains of Oaxaca in Mathews' case, and a southern valley in the state of Puebla for Fitting. Both authors contribute to, and expand on the study of modernity understood as the "great transformation," as the unfolding of the modern state and the capitalistic market over the national territory (Polanyi 1944). These large structural frameworks, state and market, translate into the transformation from individuals into citizenry and the integration of local modes of production into larger national economies characterized by mass production and consumption. These two studies provide exceptional political ecology analyses of the impacts and subtle processes of negotiation that accompany the implementation of environmental governmentality in indigenous communities (Agrawal 2005).

There are, of course, obvious differences between both works that are not limited to the geographical and cultural context of Zapotec villages in Oaxaca and a Nahuatl valley in Puebla. The chronology is also different. Mathews compiles a deep historical chronology of state-driven forestry. He scrutinizes the interactions between a modernizing external forestry administration, starting in the first quarter of the 20th century, and the local ways to conceptualize and manage the forest. Fitting, on the other hand, focuses on the impact of late modernity, what Lipovetsky (2005) has defined as hypermodernity, on agricultural strategies, especially those related to corn cultivation. While Mathews engages a territorializing modernity by focusing on state controlled forestry, Fitting considers the impacts of early 21st-century neoliberal deregulation, and the emergence of a post-NAFTA neoliberal nature. These differences, far from making the two books incomparable, help us to discern a political genealogy of different waves of state-market intervention in a Mexican rural context.

Since the main focus of the analyses is the unfolding of international regulations and national administrations, it will come as no surprise that both books invest considerable effort in discussing the role of bureaucracy, science, expertise and knowledge as tools to claim authority and legitimacy for outside managers as they compete against local agents for control of natural resources. The main contribution of these two books, especially Mathews', is their emphasis on the role of local agency in reshaping the practices of public officials while they are trying to implement a national agenda with bureaucratic and scientific tools. Too often, studies of governmentality tend to focus on the state and the impacts of its policies on locals. These perspectives overemphasize the role of external agents and their top-down approach. Mathews avoids this by focusing on dialogues between forestry officials and indigenous people. In *Instituting Nature*, he offers an excellent genealogy of the emergence and consolidation of modern forestry in Mexico across the twentieth century. He questions the unilateral predominance of expert knowledge and bureaucrats in the actual materialization of the practice of forestry and governance, showing instead that it is a dialogue of performances, a "coproduction," as he puts it. He argues that scientific and local bureaucracies mutually reshape each other in their attempt to impose their practice and agendas in the field. This analysis allows Mathews to discuss the process of state-making behind bureaucratic practice, and to demonstrate how these processes are dominated by "uncertain authority."

Fitting follows a very interesting itinerary throughout *The Struggle for Maize,* starting with a discussion of the transformative introduction of genetically modified maize in the Mexican countryside, and emphasizing the discourses and