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The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire
by Sasha Newell (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

Sasha Newell. *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. xi + 305 pp. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$90.00. Cloth. \$30.00. Paper.

Because successive colonial and independence regimes in Africa explicitly designated the urban as modern and the nonurban as traditional, scholars of the African city have come to hold a distinct position in ongoing debates around modernity in the postcolony and the crisis thereof. In *The Modernity Bluff*, Sasha Newell draws on ethnographic fieldwork he conducted in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, from 2000 to 2001 to advance this conversation, making a powerful argument about the modern condition generally.

The focus of Newell's analysis is the "bluff," similar to the Congolese *sape*, which he defines as an "act of artifice" whereby young lower-class Ivoirians combine "dress, attitude, physical comportment and spendthrift practices" (1) to embody modernity. The "bluff" constructs the global "as a geographically dispersed scale of social evolution" (71), such that goods from the Occident, through their consumption, bestow modernity onto the owner. In a passage that beautifully articulates why a study of popular culture is important for understanding political economy, Newell writes, "In this contemporary Ivoirian cosmology, modernity acted as a kind of force or quality which inhered in places, objects, and people, rather than a state of development" (178). For the rest of the world, the "bluff" exposes the dilemma of the real versus the counterfeit, revealing much about the categories of center and periphery it supposedly demarcates in regard to the exclusive notion of authentic modernity. He concludes: "Ultimately, our unmasking of the bluff exposes not the mimicry of the postcolonial subject, but rather the fantastic performance through which the North Atlantic continues to manufacture the illusion that modernity exists . . ." (261).

The (mostly) male subjects from Newell's study are *nouchi*—roughly translated as hoodlums who make a living through informal and illicit activities. Newell demonstrates that Abidjan functions according to a moral economy in which money is used to navigate one's place in a social hierarchy and to ensure social debts. This explains seemingly irrational rituals of consumption and display in which men spend all of their money on a night

of drinking (chapter 3), or on gifts upon returning from several years abroad (chapter 5). And the expectation that earnings will be distributed immediately explains why incomes are “shrouded in secrecy” (66), hidden from even close friends—and ethnographers. Having myself conducted fieldwork with underemployed Abidjanais men, I too confronted this formidable challenge when seeking reliable income data.

However, in restricting his study to the city’s criminal elements, Newell raises questions about the applicability of his findings for Abidjanais sociality broadly. For example, he insists that wearing authentic brands is requisite to localized performances of modernity. But I found no such thing—likely because the men I studied disavowed illicit activities and thus lacked the means to purchase such prohibitively expensive goods. Perhaps these men would have been considered *gaou* according to the categories that Newell found distinguished the cosmopolitan, urbane “*yere*” citizen from the backward, country “*gaou*” outsider. Some were, but many were not and instead established accessible means of gaining street legitimacy among their peers that nonetheless approximated similar patterns of consumption and display.

More problematic is Newell’s use of *yere* and *gaou* classifications to draw a specious connection between “two parallel processes of authentication, both of which were meant to produce Ivoirian nationality” (243): citizenship and brands. He suggests that a “conflict of taste” (11) partly explains the decade-long civil war that pit southern nationalists against northern rebels. While stereotypes of the autochthon and the stranger indeed reflect *yere* and *gaou*, they do not hold to Newell’s own evidence when he is discussing the rural and Dioula backgrounds of the men he studied, the origins of *nouchi*, or the very real practices of discrimination and exclusion that occurred systematically to people with northern/foreign names, whatever their stylistic inclinations. Before engaging with the topic of the political conflict, Newell should perhaps have spoken to actors directly involved. Further, he might have more deeply engaged the rich political science literature around the issues, such as land tenure struggles on cocoa plantations, the breakdown of the educational system and the bureaucracy as a path to middle-class life, the generalized unemployment crisis (which he too readily dismisses), and the xenophobic uprisings that regularly occurred despite President Houphouët-Boigny’s open-door policy welcoming migrant labor.

Despite these caveats, Newell’s larger and more enduring contribution is to a critique of modernity; even absent brand authenticity, his point about the modern counterfeit holds. With the dominant conversation around modernity firmly anchored in how it does or does not apply to the postcolony, it is refreshing to see the reverse: an African case contributing to theory about modernity.

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