

BOOK REVIEW

Neoliberal Bandwagonism: Civil society and the politics of belonging in Anglophone Cameroon, by Piet Konings. Bamenda and Leiden: Langaa and African Studies Centre, 2009. 272 pp. £19.95 (paperback). ISBN 978 9 95655 823 0.

Despite having one of the most inelegant titles in the history of social science, this is a splendid book. It combines a coherent overarching argument about the inadequacies of existing conceptions of civil society in Africa with twelve substantive but concise empirical chapters on diverse aspects of associational life in Anglophone Cameroon. The book brings together Piet Konings's multiple research interests in this region over a quarter of a century and is a fine testament to his ongoing engagement with both the Northwest and Southwest Provinces. Few European scholars have contributed more to understanding society in Anglophone Cameroon than Konings, who has an unerring ability to spot not only which topics matter, but also to work on topics (such as labour relations) that tend to get passed over because (perhaps) they are insufficiently intellectually sexy. In this book about half the empirical subjects covered (trade unions, ethno-regional associations, anglophone identity, and nationalism) entail revisiting earlier work and updating it, whilst other chapters address new topics (the Tombel disturbances of 1961, the Maranatha movement, university students' movements, relations between church and state, and international boundary issues with Nigeria). With the exception of the chapter on Tombel, the topics broadly reflect political events and trends since the early 1990s, described by Konings as 'the era of neoliberalism' (p. 5), a concept that is taken as self-evident and is not critiqued. There is a wonderful quantity of empirical material cajoled into 250 or so pages, which will continue to provide a vital and authoritative record of events in Anglophone Cameroon for some time to come. This will be a crucial source of reference on the region for the period covered and, in addition, it also contributes to much wider debates about civil society, associational life, and belonging of broad interest to many Africanists.

The book's core argument is that existing theorizations of civil society are inadequate in the current African context, because the definitions used are too narrow, since they are European in origin. While this may not be a path-breaking argument it remains a powerful one. Konings suggests that those who internalize a neo-liberal vision assign a crucial role to civil society but they do not reflect on the fact that the concepts they deploy emerged in a European setting. So the expectations placed on the institutions of civil society (often treated as synonymous with NGOs) are not only too great, but they imagine a range of organizations and associations that bears little relation to those that exist in Cameroon, or at least to those that matter in people's everyday lives. So, for example, ethno-regional associations tend to be downplayed or dismissed, by those who have such hopes for civil society, as archaic, aberrant, or inappropriate forms of civil society, that

cannot deliver the civilizing function they are expected to in theory. Yet, as Konings correctly asserts, these associations have ‘far more significance to the ordinary people in Africa than conventional civil society organizations that are based on horizontal bonds and solidarities and promoted by scholars and donors’ (p. 4). Furthermore, as Konings observes, there is a hugely important contradiction between the conceptual separation of state and civil society in political theory and their almost total inter-digitation on the ground in Cameroon.

Konings is not an author who seeks to intimidate or impress the reader with linguistic acrobatics or reams of social theory, and his argument is dealt with crisply and clearly at the outset, though he returns to it frequently in the empirical sections, all of which inform it in a variety of ways. The project of really describing (or indeed theorizing) actually existing civil society in Africa remains an ongoing scholarly project. While there is little doubt that development policy still relies heavily on NGOs (usually taken to be the essence of civil society), few critical scholars would be unaware of the limits of such policy. However, the odd thing is that in practice the institutions on which Konings focuses (ethnic associations, trade unions, church groups, and students’ groups) are closely related to subaltern European theories of civil society. Unions and church in particular, were at the heart of Gramsci’s discussion of civil society in early twentieth-century Italy, so the problem is less one of the European origins of the hegemonic ideas than the narrowing of all theories of civil society to particular strands of thought. Ironically, Konings’s particular fascination with trade unions as a form of civil society, though certainly out of vogue in African studies, is also part of a distinctly European tradition.

The book is co-published by the African Studies Centre in Leiden and Langaa, a new(ish) not-for-profit publisher based in Cameroon, who have produced 160 books, many by new African authors, in the last four years. This book may not be an object of great beauty, but it is a great initiative to produce and distribute new books at a reasonable price in Cameroon, which has been starved of local publishers willing to support local (as well as international) academics and creative writers in recent years. Given the increasing intellectual strength of the anglophone university at Buea it is vital for outlets such as this one to succeed, and with books of this quality it certainly should do.

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