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REVIEW ARTICLE

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF MARGINALITY

J. Joost Beuving

MORTEN BØÅS, *The Politics of Conflict Economies: miners, merchants and warriors in the African borderland*. New York NY: Routledge (hb $145 – 978 0 415 58084 7). 2015, 162 pp.

PAUL CLOUGH, *Morality and Economic Growth in Rural West Africa: indigenous accumulation in Hausaland*. New York NY and Oxford: Berghahn (hb £75 – 978 1 78238 270 6). 2014, 442 pp.

DEBORAH JAMES, *Money From Nothing: indebtedness and aspiration in South Africa*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press (pb $25 – 978 0 8047 9267 7). 2015, 282 pp.

MARGINAL AFRICA

Africanist discourse today displays a strong, widespread and growing sense of optimism about Africa's economic future. After decades of decline and stagnation in which Africa found itself reduced to the margins of the global economic stage, upbeat Afro-optimism seems fully justified. One only needs to consider African economies' solid growth rates, the emergence of new export markets earning unprecedented quantities of foreign exchange, and the rise of novel groups such as innovative African entrepreneurs (Taylor 2012) and urban-based middle classes (Simone 2004). Ironically, Africa's bright future stands in strong contrast to the stagnancy of European and American economic powers, once seen as superior to their African relatives. Deeply held feelings of Afro-pessimism, affecting intellectuals as well as ordinary Africans, are thus giving way to almost millennial expectations of Africa's economic future: the continent's imminent catching up with a degree of private and public prosperity so commonly registered elsewhere on the globe. Some go as far as to declare the rise of a proper African renaissance wherein Africa can (finally!) claim its rightful position on the global stage.

To be sure, more and more Africans are drawn into globalized configurations and there is a central process driven by neoliberal forces: the growth in trade, the rise of a middle class and so on. But that is only

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one response: at the margins of these processes is a whole range of different processes. To reiterate an established critical position: to many ordinary Africans, the talk of prosperity and material advancement associated with globalization is as remote as their lives are from the social positions and practices of the evangelists of Afro-optimism – intellectuals, policy makers and other commentators speaking from the comfort of their air-conditioned offices. There is a Manichean aspect to Africa's developmental leap, and that consists of the many millions who must make a living under very difficult circumstances, thereby facing the triple burden of securing a decent livelihood, seeing their children through higher education and into a proper marriage, and ensuring that their relatives are taken care of. Viewed in these terms, many Africans feel that they have failed to live up to their own expectations and, perhaps even worse, to those of their societies. Africa's renaissance may very well exist for some, but for many others it consists of an ongoing uphill struggle, with potentially long-term, corrosive consequences.

Three recently published ethnographic works speak to that complex reality of diversity in lived experiences: Morten Bøås' *The Politics of Conflict Economies*, Paul Clough's *Morality and Economic Growth in Rural West Africa* and Deborah James' *Money From Nothing*. Offering subtle ethnographic analysis from the ground, their works look from below at the various meanings of *marginality* and its translation into everyday action. The cases they survey encompass a striking diversity of empirical situations, yet they draw on a shared idea that frames marginality not as a position in a changing global order, but as an elementary form of self-understanding. Thus adopting an interpretive perspective (all find inspiration in the work of Clifford Geertz), the reviewed works move beyond conventional understandings of marginality as Africa's umpteenth development problem that needs immediate resolution, the intellectual task of which consists of operationalization through the construction of proper measurement scales. Instead, marginality is viewed as a social construction that needs careful cultural unpacking. A more radical note even appears here and there, suggesting that marginality may be central to Africa's experience, and that it may not necessarily be a bad thing. As will be shown, marginality itself can be a powerful agent of change, and marginal sites and positions produce surprising degrees of social transformation. It is this double meaning of marginality – as a site of human tragedy and as one where unexpected things can happen – that this article considers further.

To do so, it first surveys the meanings of marginality in the three reviewed works, and then discusses common themes: the politics of marginality (including the role of African states), marginalization as the outcome of a diversity of trajectories, and the symbolic construction of marginality as a form of belonging. These points will be woven into a brief discussion of the ethnographic study of marginalization, focusing on what to look for in the field and how to build new understandings from observed instances of marginality. I show that central to these understandings is the fact that marginality is not some inescapable property of social life, but rather one to which African actors impute meaning. Grasping diversity in ordinary African men and women's perceptions

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and responses to conditions of marginality, therefore, remains an ongoing concern for ethnographic research.

MARGINALITY IN THE WORKS OF BØÅS, CLOUGH AND JAMES

Political scientist Morten Bøås looks at the constitution of marginality in places off the beaten track, such as northern Mali, the hinterland of Sierra Leone, the backwaters of northern Uganda, and refugee camps across the continent. These are termed Africa's borderlands, places seemingly betwixt and between where the action takes place, such as cities, sea- and airports and the like. Borderland populations appear unstable, attracting an odd mixture of unsettled marginal groupings with few ties to mainstream society; they constitute an amorphous floating population in search of a better life. Emphasizing the liminality of borderlands reveals important dynamics, Bøås argues. Taking northern Mali as an example, he shows that the Tuareg minority living there first saw the tables turn against them during decolonization. Once known as 'masters of the Sahara', they now found themselves as ordinary citizens of a black state. And their pastoralism-based livelihoods, drawing on decades of the caravan trade that had been the mainstay of an earlier wealthy society, quickly became obsolete consequent to Malian society's rapid modernization. For decades, their society had therefore been in decline, but the tables turned once again, this time in their favour, with the recent collapse of the Libyan state. Since then, the Sahara desert has become a new site of opportunity. Old caravan trade routes have been reinstated, bringing goods into Libya and labour from it, and sleepy, remote desert towns such as Kidal have been transformed into vibrant economic hubs. Marginality suddenly became an asset because, lacking real government interest or surveillance, 'the area informally and illicitly is well connected to the world of globalisation' (p. 92).

Marginality in the work of anthropologist Deborah James is situated in South Africa's debt crisis that ensued in the post-apartheid era. For a long time, being black in South Africa meant being cut off from the consumptive spending that was available in privileged, white and/or coloured circles. Many black South Africans were poor because they were relegated to menial work, and race segregation barred them from formal credit. James shows how credit flowed through *stokvels* and other mutual savings clubs, making money available during high and low points in people's personal lifecycles, but beyond that there was limited surplus cash to go around. That changed dramatically once credit bars were lifted following bank deregulation, and as black South Africans moved into well-paid government jobs through the country's affirmative action policies. Backed by a soaring outpouring of credit from banks and other credit institutions, black South Africans began to spend, sometimes quite literally buying their way out of mediocrity into middle-class life. But there is a snag to consider. Marriage and funeral prices have inflated since apartheid, and many black South Africans find themselves

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faced with similar predicaments to those faced by their parents (how to meet social obligations). Only, this time around, the resulting debts are no longer embedded in *stokvel* practices that can be negotiated under soft conditions; rather, they risk ending up in the hands of avaricious debt brokers or, worse, in those of *mashonisas*, short-term, private credit suppliers. Thus, challenged by middle-class aspirations, in less than two decades many black South Africans have ended up being chased by creditors, conjuring up the same images of marginality that they sought to escape after apartheid.

Anthropologist Paul Clough relates marginality to imbalances in land ownership. Situated in Hausaland, northern Nigeria, he registers how in this part of Africa a small rural elite controls vast swathes of agricultural land, the produce of which circulates in the regional economy. Building on Jane Guyer's wealth-in-people thesis (Guyer 1993), Paul Clough shows that rural Hausa elites do not appropriate profits for capitalist accumulation, but instead divest surplus produce into expanding circles of wives, children and other relatives, perpetuating a highly imbalanced rural system. Many Hausa thus lead a marginal existence, albeit one that is cushioned in local, social practices – those of kin patronage in particular. Following privatization in the 1980s, guinea corn (sorghum) exports to the subcontinent meant that capitalist markets for the product transformed Hausa local economies, but the social pattern proved resilient. Larger landowners, often the sons of informants that Paul Clough surveyed in the 1970s, succeeded in expanding landholdings by inheriting land from their fathers (this part of Africa is patrilineal). On paper, this would have created a marginalized, landless rural proletariat, yet Clough registers how the service sector that expanded in the wake of the oil boom offered a way out of agriculture. Further, prolonged land consolidation proves problematic: large landholdings are built up to sustain large families, yet upon death they become fragmented because of inheritance rules. Hence, forces of consolidation and fragmentation compete, with limited elite formation as a result (see also Hill 1970).

MARGINALITY IN ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Now that we have carried out the groundwork in preparing the reviewed works for further analysis, our next task is to elicit points of convergence. Two themes suggest themselves, and their treatment occupies the following pages: the politics of marginality, and how marginality manifests itself in a diversity of trajectories.

The politics of marginality

State politics in Africa remain important in the orchestration of public life and thus impact directly on questions of marginality. Despite the neoliberal mantra (especially in policy-making circles) that associates African state presence with market inefficiencies that block national advancement, the three works provide a more variegated analysis of politics,

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each offering a different interpretation of the state, with different consequences for the constitution of marginality.

Morten Bøås makes a case for what could be termed the conflict state. The African state he describes is the main prize in a game of power between opposing groups, and the conflict cases that he describes in reality revolve around a struggle for state control. That struggle is conceived as a zero-sum game: the hegemony of one political group denotes the marginalization of another. Although these struggles are often framed as a natural resource scramble, both in popular media coverage and in academic discourse, Bøås shows convincingly that natural resources entered the conflict only at a later stage. Obviously, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) leadership in Sierra Leone and Hutu groups in Congo are interested in, respectively, diamonds and coltan, as are Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) soldiers in the productive farms of northern Uganda. But that is not the entire story, Bøås argues. The wish to establish hegemonic rule is also pursued under the banner of identity politics. Underpinning many of the struggles that he observes, Bøås notes, are questions of belonging, and whether to be in or out of the state. Seeing competing political groups as adversaries that need to be contained and invoking a deliberate strategy to marginalize them are thus key processes in the formation and transformation of the African state.

Identity politics may not be an overriding theme in James' portrayal of state discourses in South Africa, but here the dubious role of (financial) regulation has to be considered. Initially, the South African state leaned towards what James calls the protection of consumer rights, making sure that poor (black) people did not over-borrow. However, once national banks discovered the huge, untapped reservoir of poor, black South Africans craving credit, they aimed to bank the hitherto unbankable (those without assets: the poor). They formed pressure groups, and, through networks of patronage, in part colluding with the ruling South African elite, influenced financial legislation, resulting in pro-banking laws and a shift in the responsibility for debt to borrowers. With credit pumping out to an unprecedented level, many South Africans today are saddled with an extensive debt portfolio, combining multiple store cards, hire-purchase arrangements, a credit card from an international bank, a vehicle finance agreement, and personal bank loans for house repairs (p. 151). Even more damaging, in James' eyes, has been the far-reaching legislation permitting creditors access to defaulting debtors' wage slips. In its wake, an entirely new, hugely profitable industry of debt counselling has emerged, creating jobs but also deepening the problems that many debtors face. Hence, through financial deregulation, large sums of money are extracted from ordinary South Africans and channelled into the hands of the financial world; and James analyses this as a function of the South African state in which political circles and business interests overlap.

The state manifests itself in Clough's study of Hausaland in a different way. Previously under the influence of the Sokoto caliphate, the area became integrated in the Nigerian state following decolonization. The

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Nigerian state became visible here in the form of marketing boards for the numerous cash crops that are produced in the region. In the 1980s, these were dismantled under structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). As elsewhere in Africa, SAPs were expected to result in a privatization of rural markets, in turn provoking a supply response. In this part of Africa, cotton comprises a major cash crop, and for those familiar with West Africa's political economy there is a familiar ring to Paul Clough's story: 'the privatization of cotton marketing created a new opportunity for wealth acquisitions in which cotton buyers had much greater freedom to negotiate terms with urban merchants than they had formerly as buyers subject to the Cotton Board' (p. 333). However, whereas rural capitalist take-off remained largely absent because of a cultural preference for kin-based distribution, the pre-existing social hierarchy, which places considerable wealth in the hands of a small number of landowners, became steeper. Clough observes that, in the twenty-year pause between his first and his subsequent, more recent fieldwork, the number of large landowners had not increased, but the size of their landholdings had. At the same time, new job opportunities had arisen from the discovery of oil and had provided an alternative trajectory out of agriculture, relieving some of the marginalizing pressures locked into this land-use system.

Diverse trajectories of marginality

Marginality is not an inescapable aspect of social life, the inevitable flip side of the capitalist coin, as critical thinkers have it. The reviewed works teem with examples of a more complex dynamic, nuancing also the above-made points on the African state. Political-economic contexts (policy making included) constitute a very real social fact, enabling new courses of action as well as blocking existing ones, and the point is that this often happens in unpredictable ways. Under comparable circumstances, a variety of responses may result and actors can choose from various options. That is not to suggest that marginality is a deliberate strategy (that would be to disregard the predicament of many Africans with aspirations for a better life), or that moving out of it is a matter of will alone, but the reviewed works all point to instances of agency: situations in which actors work out solutions to practical problems. Obviously, some fare better than others and, although certainly not offering a final statement on it, the works offer considerable food for thought.

The South African case points to a situation wherein credit pervades economic life, but that does not mean that becoming indebted is inevitable. A case in point in James' book is the story of businessman Frank Pule, who does not borrow and in fact looks down on excessive borrowing, even though he benefits from the borrowing of others. He is a former transporter who moved into the property business, buying houses in white suburbs (often built under social housing schemes – called townhouses) and selling them to aspiring township dwellers who wanted to move uptown. Frank, through his work, observes how the new salaried classes not only overstretch themselves financially in buying property they cannot really afford, but add to their debt huge expenses for extra purchases such as

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furniture and expensive cars. Frank thus maintains an outsider position in the culture of aspirational spending, which is relevant though analysed in somewhat inconclusive terms: 'He and his wife, perhaps learning from the mistakes of a relative who bought a house in a formerly white area that was later repossessed, restricted their participation in the suburban lifestyle to sending their children to school in those suburbs while remaining resident in the township of Soweto' (p. 197). One wonders what social mechanism lurks behind this apparently sensible decision in a sea of folly!

A more collective example of agency is presented in Bøås' discussion of refugee camps. Taking as a case the Nakivale settlement, Africa's oldest refugee camp, located in central Uganda, Bøås shows how different ethnic groups occupying it fare quite differently. Its colonial initiators conceived of the camp as a rural site revolving around agriculture; its present administrators continue to do so, yet many of the camp's inhabitants do not have a rural background: they originate from towns or had previously been engaged in pastoralism. Those with a farming background are therefore better positioned to make a living in the camp and accumulate wealth, enabling them to move on eventually. Likewise, some groups appear to be more embedded in diasporic networks than others, and that offers particular advantages. As an example, Bøås mentions the Somali and their *hawala* monetary system. Revolving around the social capital of Somali ethnic identity, cash is transferred quickly and easily across Africa and even to other continents through *hawala*. Thus Somalis operate as key financiers in the camp, and that contributes to their prominent position in it (p. 128). Consequently, those without a farming background and those lacking transnational relations tend to occupy marginal positions in Nakivale.

In Hausaland, two patterns in wealth creation can be identified since the economic reform of the 1980s: one revolving around production, the other around trade. Clough shows how these are embedded in different social practices. The accumulation of wealth through land expansion is driven primarily by a 'response to the imperatives of increasing family size in a polygynous culture' (p. 363). Thus, rural accumulators are intrinsically motivated to expand their landholdings and, because land is a finite resource, that creates land shortages for others. Those who do not belong to the landed gentry, on the other hand, occupy the sphere of trade. Trade lacks the security of agriculture, and in this part of Africa it revolves around small profit margins, faces volatile markets and is usually financed with loans. Success in this strategy, Clough shows, depends on past savings and continuing austerity. That is difficult in a society which esteems the circulation of money through expanding networks; where young, aspiring men must constantly refrain from what they are expected to do, i.e. marry multiple wives and father numerous children. Marginalization is thus locked into this system, and Clough shows how the financial support of wives becomes important. Operating behind the scenes of cash-crop agriculture, they own small plots on which they grow grains to feed the family, they sell prepared food in local markets, and they use the proceeds to buy a small number of cattle that can be sold in lean times, keeping their husbands out of harm's way (p. 352).

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THE MORALITY OF MARGINALITY

Underpinning these trajectories are distinct symbolic meanings, and my reading of the reviewed works suggests that they can be summed up by the question that the anthropologist Mary Douglas once formulated: what does it take to be considered a whole person (Douglas and Ney 1998)? All societies hold ideas about where and when positions of esteem and command shade into their reverse meaning: landless farmers in Hausaland, creditless South Africans, West Africa's floating population. These are not neutral positions in society but normatively charged ones; they are imbued with a negative social stigma. To be marginal is to be relegated to the fringes of a society; to be considered not quite 'in' or even to be an outsider. Marginality in that sense has the symbolic function of carving out what (and who) is important in African society, and what is less so; in essence, it presents a moral statement of attachment or belonging.

The reviewed cases suggest that sudden changes challenge or even disrupt established attachments and create new ones, and this has implications beyond the situation in which they were discovered. As James shows, for black South Africans, the state in the days of apartheid constituted their chief adversary, yet following the events of 1994 the state became the major vehicle of their middle-class aspirations. Reattachment to the state (through white-collar wage labour but also in the form of business tenders issued to established businessmen) laid bare already contested family solidarities. Suddenly, it made possible a broader view on kinship, including one that saw family ties as no longer the atom of sociability and solidarity, but as a millstone in the pursuit of personal advancement. Marginality subsequently came to be seen in terms of laggard kinfolk, who lacked the essential, vertical ties of state patronage needed to move on, rather than a collective, political problem: the restraint of black agency by the state. Coupled to that is the capacity to become indebted: it presents a financialized mode of belonging. Whether or not one can secure credit increasingly defines whether one is in or out of society. Interestingly, it does not matter much that indebtedness (and how to deal with defaulting) is a great worry; not being able to be indebted is far worse, a point that applies across Africa's emerging middle classes.

New attachments are crafted too in the case of Africa's floating populations: Tuareg in the Sahara (as noted above), but also, for instance, fishermen around Africa's lakes and shores (Diggins 2015), young and single men venturing into mining (Walsh 2004), intermediaries tackling new forms of trade (Beuving 2013) and so on. These are instances of African frontiers and hubs that are emerging as new nodes in the global, economic order, usually originating far away from the African continent's zones of contact with the rest of the world that were established in an earlier episode of its history. The ethnographic record suggests that these instances occasion the coming together of previously unconnected groups. Relatively insulated from established ethnic and class identities, new social networks tend to develop under such circumstances, and this promotes the formation of new identities as well as spawning novel forms of African enterprise. Marginality, as defined as the absence of

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strong attachments to mainstream society, can in that case offer an advantage over earlier established ways of doing things by functioning as a springboard into new forms of self-realization. As Clough writes: 'It opens up new pathways … for people seeking to escape poverty and marginalization through capturing whatever niche in the global economy that is possible.'

The Nigerian case, too, unveils a broader pattern: the limits of local attachments in times of new economic opportunity. Here we see at work a landed gentry with a firm grip on society through the kin-based circulation of money originating in surplus production as well as the recruitment of labour through patronage networks. Smallholder farmers and a growing group of landless labourers contested that social order: following the economic reforms of the 1980s, they reattached themselves to new, off-farm labour opportunities. The upswing of Islam in the area presents a related case in point. Although Islamization had already been accomplished a long time previously, Clough registered a revival of Islamic religious practice. This appeared popular especially among the poorer segments of Hausa society who were anxious to limit socially necessary expenses, those of marriage in particular: Islam preaches austerity. Hence, the social revolution observed by Paul and Laura Bohannan following the introduction of general-purpose money into traditional Tiv society in the 1940s failed to materialize in the Hausa case (Bohannan 1959). Although this case draws on similar sentiments of dissatisfaction towards the local elite, it is mitigated via shifting attachments, the existence of alternative livelihood pathways and new forms of religiosity in particular.

The more general model driving these instances seems to be that new, political economic conditions intensify the reflection of ordinary Africans on their position in society: Tuareg seeing their desert transform into a site of globalization; young Hausa seeing employment opportunities grow outside Hausa society; black South Africans seeing credit channels expand. This brings out new realizations of marginality: maintaining a marginal position in society may not be considered a problem so long as that position is considered legitimate. Once prevailing conditions change, room is created for new, perhaps more utopian, ideas about mutual dependence (be it personal reciprocity, moral obligation or even obedience). This, in turn, can alter prevailing orientations towards outside resources, including networks of migration and trade, and forms of (state) patronage, solidifying changes in self-understanding. As the reviewed cases suggest, this is not unproblematic and may be accompanied by outbreaks of violence and other negative tendencies. The rise of a new social order (and hence the elimination of old marginalities and the creation of new ones) apparently is not free of birth pains.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF MARGINALITY

The morality of marginality – and, in particular, its transformation into a legitimate category – presents a special problem for ethnographic research.

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The reviewed works suggest that such research requires a critical stance in relation to the term, rejecting the notion of marginality as a mere reflection of the natural order of affairs. (African) societies present themselves to outsiders in ways that obscure marginality as a problematic condition. Try to look for the ultra-poor in some African village: chances are that the leadership will flatly deny their existence. The lesson suggested by this review is that one should look beyond big and important events, people and places. Those are obviously significant in the functioning of any society, yet, if left unchallenged, they become a form of self-understanding that develops into the status quo. Thus, the study of marginality involves looking at that which societies like to obscure from scrutiny, from outsider views, or even from themselves. The ethnographic task is a painful and very often an unwelcome one, resembling more that of the therapist than that of the technocratic development expert in search of practical solutions.

Hence finding out what marginality looks like often requires getting off the beaten track and going where mainstream society ends. Because marginality is a moral condition, it entails looking at the symbolic ending of mainstream society, which may actually overlap with its spatial ending, as we see in the South African case. Under apartheid rule, townships and other sites of marginality were often tucked away from the centres of white society; thus, marginality was (and to some extent continues to be) solidified in the form of infrastructure. The cases recorded by Bøås reiterate this point. The borderlands that he studies are located far away from mainstream sites and institutions, and may therefore easily escape the attention of the passing visitor. A case in point: during my fieldwork in Central Uganda (2006–12), I never came across a single reference in the national newspapers to the Nakivale refugee camp. Another case that comes to mind (but is not reported in the reviewed works) is slums. Here, too, we see an infrastructural organization that follows from particular politics of marginality, spatially segmenting it from mainstream society.

Yet a more common, and distinctly less politicized, case seems to be that exemplified by Clough's work: marginality in relation to proximity. In the Hausa countryside, public space is occupied by marginal, landless and/or wage-labouring farmers, and their meetings take place on a regular, if not a daily, basis. Although Clough remains regrettably implicit about the everyday, his reports shimmer with incidences of terse encounters between patrons and clients. These reminded me of the aloof stance with which established second-hand car dealers in Cotonou treated their less successful colleagues – often former employees who tried their hand at trading themselves. Of course, such instances apply to other situations too, where marginal actors and successful ones meet, and the ethnographic challenge in that case revolves around making visible the invisible, in particular by purposefully sampling for it.

A second set of ethnographic considerations revolves around the exploration of African people's mindsets in producing or perpetuating marginality. How does marginality become solidified in people's thinking? If marginality constitutes a moral attachment that is legitimized as a natural category, then ethnographic inquiry must consider how such processes of naturalization occur to symbolically produce marginality. Put in

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other words, as ethnographers we must look for cultures of marginality. At this point in the discussion it becomes difficult to maintain a comparative stance, as the reviewed works draw on rather different ideas of culture. In Clough's world, culture follows from material realities and is expressed in the ways in which rural Africans 'negotiate in their minds and actions the claims of obligations which they make upon each other' (p. 165). Capitalism does not replace the polygynous mode of circulation because local elites benefit from the established pattern of land use that underpins it. Marginality is thus a function of the material organization of Hausa society, expressed predominantly in land distributions.

Bøås, on the other hand, argues that material concerns are of limited relevance in discussions of marginality: marginality is essentially grounded in belonging. The question of 'who is in and who is not' thus prevails, conjuring up images of Barth's well-known ethnic boundary theory (Barth 1969). In that case, understanding marginality in such terms requires the mapping of boundaries. Across such boundaries, various transactions take place, such as between Tuareg leaders and representatives of the central state, but also between the Tuareg and their leadership, negotiating their position in Malian and Tuareg society respectively. Marginality is then the outcome of such transactions, although the precise trajectory that it follows may be entirely dependent on contingencies (as the Tuareg case aptly illustrates: their marginal position suddenly flipped over after political turmoil hit Libya). So what once qualified as a disadvantage – being ascribed Tuareg identity – suddenly transforms into economic capital.

James adopts a more substantivist interpretation of culture, considering it to be a socially situated point of symbolic reference. Here we see both material concerns (credit) and social ascription (race) in action, but these are predicated upon processes of sense-making. South Africa 'post-1994' offers a framework for new forms of material behaviour in which some are better positioned to reap its benefits than others. Both the structure of social networks and the structuring of symbolic capital play a considerable role. Black South Africans coming from esteemed families (the Mandelas are a case in point) were far better able to transform changed political and economic realities into new possibilities for upward mobility. But the true contribution of James' work is what it adds to our understanding of self-denying prophecies in economic life (inspired by Merton 1968). In a culture connecting upward mobility with accentuated consumption, economic motivation may no longer be derived from careful investment in enhanced possibilities for self-realization (such as we find in the educational attainment literature), but from associating oneself with outward signs of material success. That pursuit may draw economic resources away from productive ends, thus constructing black holes of unproductive expenditure. The pursuit of material goods cannot be limited to making a careful assessment of future possibilities. James' work teems with examples where debt commitments go sour, turning a life of seeming prosperity into a slide into marginality, a reality many South Africans deny rather than confront. Consuming below one's means

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is imbued with such a strong, negative, cultural stereotype that challenging it quickly places one outside the new (South) Africa.

How cultures of marginality coincide with the structures of inequality in African society remains uncharted terrain. Across the continent, disparities between the top percentile and the rest are mounting (as they are elsewhere around the globe; see Piketty 2014), and there is little reason to assume that this process will reverse any time soon. It seems not without grounds to assume that growing economic inequality finds its symbolic representation in cultures of marginality; following from the analysis offered in this review, inequality impacts on the attachment of ordinary Africans to the larger, socio-political structures in which they find themselves. However, the ways in which that is shaped require exploration beyond the material that the reviewed books offer.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Africa's ongoing integration into globalized frames of reference is neither a smooth nor a uniform process, and everyday experiences defy simplifying categories. There is a mainstream process that is captured by neoliberal discourses emphasizing new economic opportunity with upward mobility as the expected outcome. That promise is enticing, and it succeeds in mobilizing masses of Africans. Yet, at its margins, one sees a greater diversity of responses, and that begs further explanation. This article reviewed recent work exploring that broader range, unveiling the contribution of a perspective looking at the morality of belonging: what does it mean to be positioned in a place that mainstream African society considers marginal? Thus, looking at cultures of marginality requires us to look beyond that which seems obviously central to society. Instead, we must consider with equal intensity and sincerity the cracks and frays of African society, empathizing with what seems odd, outsider or renegade. Africa's globalization may have shifted into a new gear, but the ethnographic concern should remain fixed on the stuff that goes on above and beyond facile interpretations and self-images.

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