July 2014

Review of "Navigating Terrain of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau"

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Recommended Citation

For years I was obsessed with investigating the relationship between warfare and poverty. Focusing on the role played by the technological advance promoted by the West, my thesis was originally oriented to point out that the tenets of production in peace-keeping processes were extended in moments of war. States, in the Hobbesian terms, would enable the necessary resources to legitimate the production-machine. These points of discussion put me in a difficult situation; I have received not only many criticisms from my colleagues but also galvanized my earlier argument. For the sake of completeness, I argued in another paper that any warfare legitimated policies that otherwise would be rejected by the population, appealing to much deep-seated discourse of fear, but I must confess, my idea remained incomplete at that moment, until I read the book *Navigating Terrain of War*. In this masterful work authored by Henrik Vigh, the thoughts struck me that I was not wrong in my original idea; war represents an economic tactic of production. Of course, there are worldviews that can be duly documented, while others such as corruption, bribery, and poverty escape to the classical scientific methods of explorations. Capitalism produces in times of peace, increasing the existent levels of accumulation. But this process seems not to be egalitarian; a gap between dominant and dominated groups enlarges. Whenever the process of accumulation is saturated poverty, which is triggered by the previous material asymmetries, it serves as reservoirs to be administered in wars. Once again, poverty should not be considered as a consequence, but as a pre-condition that sustains the economical-machinery.

At a first glance, Vigh’s book is based on a robust examination of the politic climate in Guinea-Bissau and the negative effects of the civil war that whipped the country from 1998-
1999. The author collates a lot of life stories and biographies that explain the life of youth and aguentas, a civil-armed force recruited by the Government to fight against military-force, which following personal interests looked to destabilize the power by means of a coup. In the West, adulthood is seen as a superior stage to youth. However, in Guinea, youth does not encompass a temporal stage in the life-span, but a condition for those who are deprived from the basic conditions of life. Quite aside from the five hundred years of colonization or the inter-ethnic diversity of Guinea, teenagers do not find working opportunities that allow them to emancipate from their families. The main thesis of this work is that social navigation, as a metaphor, is often employed in order for agents who do not have the resources to be inserted in the production-chain. Brotherly-war, as many Guineans said, is not aimed to an enemy but towards opponents who exhibit opportunities for betterment.

Given this argument, the possibilities to enter into war entail benefits for gaining status, or being recruited in a patrimonial network based on the economy of affection. Whenever the income to hold a family is not granted, agents recur to the economy of affection to survive. The prolonged climate of decline, which characterizes Guinea-Bissau, marginalizes thousands of teenagers to serious financial problems. The “patronage of affection” results from the tactics of agents to gain support enabling a circulation of patrons and clients.

Vigh goes on to say: “...youth seeking to enter patrimonial networks do so by trying to gain a reciprocal relationship to a patron, at any point in the patrimonial network, who controls a flow of resources exceeding that needed to fulfil his family obligations” (p. 107). Being recruited as aguenta is one of the tactics that leads agents with possibilities to migrate abroad. The ongoing state of marginalization facilitates the dominance by dint of scarcity. To be a complete man (homi completto), youth join to aguentas to fight a war against the neighbor. As the author noted, “my line of argument has had its point of departure in the realisation that the Aguentas were not fighting against an enemy but for a possibility. Their battle was not so much against another as for a process of social becoming and improvement of their life chances. Locating my analysis in social possibilities and life chances led to an illumination of the constitution of the Aguentas militia in relation to the general context of decline” (p. 235)

Following this, Vigh explains how democracy, as public opinion sees it in the West, is lived as a reason to gain the control of impunity during the pertinent mandate. In addition, democracy serves as an important reason for aguenta to feel they are necessary to hold the government, as a protector of democracy. Aguentas-militia poses itself in favor of the democratic government to gain a visa or a permit to fly to the United States or Europe. The fact is that Guinea has faced not only the frustrations of Marxism, but also the problems of
open markets and capitalism. The social imaginary was educated under the premise of the evolution of history. Negritude (being black) worked in the left-wing governments as a sign of pureness and collectivism. The theory of social development envisaged a biased conception of history, where blacks were identified in a regressive trajectory; this means as a pure form (uncorrupted) of original tribal politics. After all, the Marxian teleology not only gave further institutionalization to Guinea-backwards, but also conferred an effective instrument of control in the hinterland. However, the story was witnessed of the Berlin Wall and communist collapse, and Guinea was subjected to adopting a new system of politics. The radical centralization of state, proper of all ex-communist countries, was replaced by an open market where the backwardness was re-elaborated as a sign of ineptitude and racial inferiority. This forced change generated a serious misunderstanding for the citizenry and its horizon of progress. The conflict between the army and democratic government paved the ways for the introduction of conflict and instability, redirecting the loyalties to a given point. The borders configured new tactics for youth to prosper, or at least, to think they can go forward to a defined direction. Guinea is not declaring the war against other neighboring states, like Colombia or Mexico; it is subject to a circular war whereby eschatological narrative is placed into the future as an ideal to follow. The old ideologies claimed for the advance to the next evolutionary-linear stage while the new one prioritizes the return to mythical first original society; a state that only can be accessed by the apocalypse. As Vigh put it, these types of new circular wars are based on the idea of incessant rebellions to achieve the necessary internal power configurations. Nonetheless, this tactic generates an ongoing climate of instability that portrays the social fabric with serious consequences for present and next generations.

To sum up, *Navigating Terrain of Wars* represents a vivid effort to understand the complex world of war and poverty. In this masterful work, Vigh combines an innovative methodology in fieldworks with tribalismo theories. Youth, in Guinea-Bissau, is circumscribed to the dilemma of migrating or perishing. What is more than important to discuss is to what extent capitalism makes poverty the reservoir to mobilize in contexts of warfare. Vigh’s development poses not only poignant questions respecting the unresolved frustrations of an entire generation that passed politically from left to right, but also provides a serious framework to understand how violence works. This is, undoubtedly, one of the best books I have ever read in these types of topics. Magisterially explained throughout the ten chapters that form the project, Vigh reveals how poverty is conducive to warfare.