Mattia Fumanti's *Politics of Distinction* : Elite formation, the public space and the moral base of politics in (post)colonial Africa. Review article

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Abstract

The article presents a review of Mattia Fumanti's The Politics of Distinction (2016), a provocative study on the complexities of elite formation and elites' influence over emerging public spaces in post-apartheid Namibia. Based on an intermittent long-term fieldwork and archival research on old and new elites in Rundu, a frontier town in Northern Namibia, the book goes beyond its ethnographical setting, offering a plethora of alternatives to general pessimistic readings about colonial and post-colonial Africa. Recognizing its contribution to central analytical concepts in debates about state and society in the continent, the article unveils the ethnographic drama and attempts to contextualize it in relation to contemporaneous political changes taking place in the continent since 1990, the year of Namibian independence. Assessing the importance of the book in its capacity to suggest optimistic perspectives about African politics, the article expands its analysis of the moral bases of the public space in Rundu, suggesting that the future of democracy in Namibia and elsewhere in the continent might rest in the development of moralizing arenas of deliberation and dialogue.

We have all become uncomfortably accustomed with rhetorical conceptualizations of postcolonial African politics as corrupted, authoritarian, tribal and unstable.[1] Built upon a rather old idea of an 'African crisis' and rooted in the believed dissonance between state and society,[2] this 'custom' evolved historically, is dramatically displayed in both popular and specialized chronicles and eloquently exposed by humanitarian and economic global agents.[3] African politics, the argument follows, is a form of criminality,

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[1] I would like to appreciate the kind support of Dr. Jill Kinahan, who read, commented and edited the article.

[2] See, for example, Aristide R. Zolberg, "The structure of political conflict in the new states of tropical Africa", *The American Political Science Review*, 62 (1), 1968: 70-87; and Naomi Chazan, "The africanization of political change: Some aspects of the dynamics of political cultures in Ghana and Nigeria", *African Studies Review*, 21 (2), 1978: 15-38.

[3] Chabal, Patrick, *Power in Africa*, London, Macmillan, 1992.

an exploitation of disorder, controlled by state elites and coating society with layers of patrimonialism, violence and incivility.[4] Reproducing itself through 'qualitative jumps' of inequality and predicated on the continuous dependence of juniors to elders, women to men, poor to rich, its most striking metaphor is 'the politics of the belly'.[5]

Intermittently seen as cause and effect of the dramatic events unfolding in the continent since at least the golden age of independences, these enunciations give support to an 'unprogressive' narrative of African history, its future divinized in a cult of fatalism that undermine our understanding of Africa and discourage an active reflection on political practices and meanings. To counter these over-generalized narratives, Mattia Fumanti offers a new metaphor, directing our attention away from an antagonistic analysis of state and society and to ethnographic spaces in which old dependences are rendered anew – as subjectivity, not subjection.[6] Inspired by a growing preoccupation with the moral bases of political action in postcolonial Africa,[7] *Politics of Distinction* stimulates a different narrative and, I suspect, cultivates the possibility of other futures, in Namibia and beyond.

Both for academics and politicians, or, for that matter, anyone genuinely interested in the predicaments and fate of post-apartheid Namibia, the book offers a most needed recall out of pessimistic (and often tedious) trends surrounding our expectations of state and society, here and elsewhere in the continent. Vibrantly and sensitively, it also offers alternatives to a range of stereotypes commonly associated with post-colonial Africa: the weakness of the state; the underdevelopment of civil society; the predatory nature of elites; and the dispossession and violence of the youth. Believing the Namibian case to represent, together with Botswana,[8] an exception to generalized views of African independent nations as dysfunctional, fragmented and/or victimized, Fumanti indeed brings forth another kind of post-colony: "Rundu is a nice place, Namibia is a nice country [and] Africa is not all Congo and Angola", as a grade 10 student admonished him (p. 4).

Nevertheless, rather than singularly Namibian, the processes foregrounding this study are contemporaneous to similar events elsewhere in Africa. By the time Namibian independence was on its way, other African countries were going through what

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[4] Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Béatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, Oxford, Currey, 1999; Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, Oxford, Currey, 1999.

[5] Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009 [1989]: 107-115.

[6] Mattia Fumanti, *The Politics of Distinction: African Elites from Colonialism to Liberation in a Namibian Frontier Town*, Windhoek, University of Namibia Press, 2016 (first published by Sean Kingston Publishing, United Kingdom).

[7] See Frederick Klaits, "Postcolonial civility", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31 (3), 2005: 649-662.

[8] Richard P. Werbner, *Reasonable Radicals and Citizenship in Botswana*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004.

Mahmood Mamdani so aptly calls a "second liberation movement".[9] Having overcome colonial domination decades before, the oppressor to be liberated from this time was the state. Under the grip of authoritarian cliques of power unwilling to share, let alone cede power, African states were seen as authoritarian and corrupt, incapable of delivering development and economic growth, and keeping their societies subject to elitist interests. Like the Namibian struggle for independence, this process was gradual: it started with structural adjustments in the 1970s; was marked by 'liberalisms' of all kinds; and ended with multipartyism and decentralization (aka redemocratization) towards the 1990s. Reenacted constantly up to today, the ubiquitous consequence has been, allegedly, the weakening of state power. Itself seen as a consequence of its lack of legitimacy, this was not only an inevitable affair, but also a necessary one.

Foregrounding the need for more accountability, responsiveness and good governance in the continent, this momentum was welcome as a most needed attempt against state's control over society. For many, time was ripe for the much-awaited emergence of civil society, its strength measured in relation to its capacity to detach itself from the state, creating public spaces for ideological and institutional mediation between state and society.[10] Yet, frustrating renewed expectations on African modernity,[11] the initial optimism was soon to be matched by a consistent narrative of failure, in which the soft but still 'overdeveloped' – i.e. interventionist and authoritarian – nature of the African state insinuated its protruding belly.

Characteristic of Afropessimisms, rather than challenging the monopolies of power in the continent, civil society came to be seen as marked by historical legacies of all kinds: patrimonial, amoral, grotesque, uncivil and divided.[12] While the public space, ravaged by the liberal seesaw of mobility and belonging, became exclusive and fragmented rather than an inclusive and all-embracing arena for emancipatory politics.[13] It is against this

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[9] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary African and the Legacy of Late Colonialism,* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996: 289.

[10] Patrick Chabal, "Introduction", in: idem, (ed.), *Political Domination in Africa: Reflections on the Limits of Power.* Cambidge: Cambridge University Press, 1986: 1-16.

[11] Victor Azarya and Naomi Chazan, "Disengagement from the state in Africa: Reflections on the experience of Ghana and Guinea", *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 29 (1), 1987: 106-131; Mahmood Mamdani, Thandkia Mkandawire and Wamba-dia- Wamba, "Social movements, social transformation and struggle for democracy in Africa", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 23 (19), 1988: 973-981.

[12] Bayart, Jean-François, "Civil society in Africa", in: Patrick Chabal, (ed.), *Political Domination in Africa: Reflections on the Limits of Power.* Cambidge: Cambridge University Press, 1986: 109-125; idem, *State in Africa* ; Peter P. Ekeh, "The constitution of civil society in African history and politics", in: Bernard Caron, Alex Gboyega and Eghosa Osaghae, (eds.), *Democratic Transition in Africa*, Ibadan, CREDU, Institute of African Studies, 1992: 187-216; Achille Mbembe, "The banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity in the postcolony", *Public Culture*, 4 (2), 1992: 1-30; Robert Jr. Fatton, "Africa in the age of democratization: The civic limitations of civil society", *African Studies Review*, 38 (2), 1995: 67-99; Mamdani, *Citizens* .

[13] Peter Geschiere and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, "Capitalism and autochthony: the seesaw of mobility and belonging", *Public Culture*, 12 (2), 2000: 423-452; Jean-François Bayart, *L'Illusion Identitarie*, Paris, Fayard, 1996.

dramatic scenario that *Politics of Distinction* becomes relevant beyond the 'Land of the Brave'.

Facing this context, Fumanti attempts to strike a balance between two overrated readings of postcolonial Africa. The first sees the state taking charge of civil society and depleting society of any meaningful action against authoritarian rule. The second sees violence and disengagement or, conversely, connivance and mimicry as society's only viable weapons.[14] *Politics of Distinction* offers us alternatives to both. To do that, Fumanti focuses on processes of distinct generational elite formation, from colonial to post-colonial Namibia, and their role in making the public space in Rundu. A middle-range frontier town in northeast Namibia, situated at the heart of Kavango Region, Rundu was a nodal center in the apartheid structure of domination and has been booming since independence. Significantly, its very position made this town much more than a state project. Giving rise to a particular associational life that straddles both urban and rural, tradition and modernity (p. 37f.), its public space is connected with a wider field of social relations, composed by a diversity of actors and permeated by contrasting narratives. Promoting, rather than undermining the public good and civility in Rundu, the continuous making of different generations of elites is deeply influenced by this reality, both politically and emotionally.

The first overrated reading of postcolonial Africa is dealt with in chapters 1 to 4 in which we are introduced to the pervasive state presence in Rundu's associational and public life. The most visible indication of this is the apparent control state officials exert through their conspicuous participation in almost every association in town, from church youth unions and soccer clubs, to boards and committees in foreign-funded projects (pp. 109-116). Invariably associated with apartheid-era political practices, this reverberates not with an authoritarian and greedy clique of power, but with a particular idea of leadership. Finding its correlate in local political cultures, leadership is conceptualized morally, associated with cherished ideas of wisdom, goodness and exemplarity, and conditioned by values of achievement and accomplishment (pp. 70-72). Dynamic and upward-looking, leadership is thus not self-evident, but seen as an on-going search for distinction.

In Rundu, this distinction has been coveted above all through a great concern with education. Indeed, the state elite most effectively engaged in Rundu public space are officials from the Ministry of Basic Education, Sports and Culture: the state elite in Rundu is an 'educational elite' (pp. 117f.). They are also the 'liberation elite' (pp. 103-109). With trajectories originating in colonial times, its members are former local students and educators, who in the early 1980s became actively involved in the struggle by the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO). For them, as indeed for SWAPO, education is an instrument of emancipation (pp. 128-132). Rooting the generational conscious-ness of this elite, education is further imagined as a civic virtue, directed towards professionalism, hard work, commitment and individual achievement, and interlocked

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[14] Goran Hyden, *Beyond Ujamaa in Tanzania: Underdevelopment and an Uncaptured Peasantry*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980; Mbembe, "Banality".

with discourses that reinforce their politics of distinction: narratives of sacrifice, accomplishment and exclusivity. Most importantly, for this elite, education carries a sense of moral duty towards the community (p. 141) which, although sometimes seen as patronage, manifests itself through a particular idea of accomplishment, the ability to take care of others (p. 72).

Occurring in the public space, the *agora* of the ancient Greek cities (p. 4) and the privileged and only meaningful place for action, the distinction sought by this elite is mostly visible in what Fumanti calls a 'culture of officialdom' (pp. 138-141). Embodying the moral virtues of education, and giving minute attention to ceremonialism of all kinds, their authority and hierarchy becomes explicit in meetings, funerals and daily greetings. It is also where their distinctive elitist culture meets the challenges of acquiring hegemony and making their generational interests universal.[15] As shown in the book, their prerogatives do not go uncontested. At the turn of the century, the ethnographic momentum to which we are presented, the way in which public servants have penetrated Rundu's associational life was being problematized by an emergent youthful elite. Paradoxically, many of its members were themselves public servants, although stagnated in junior positions of authority. Employed by the government, but restricted by its gerontocratic hierarchies, they saw that penetration as a backlash to their own pretentions of upward mobility, achievement and prestige. Forged after independence, this youth has developed a generational consciousness focusing on education and other virtues predicated by the educationalists. Nevertheless, theirs was constituted in a society in which there was also a powerful place for playfulness, irony and creativity, and in which there was a high desire (and, we must admit, liberty) for conviviality and sociality (p. 183).

It is here that the first part of the book shades over to the second and last (chapters 5 to 8), offering us alternatives to that other overrated discourse about postcolonial Africa. Two related grievances against the educational elite were relevant in the making of this youth elite's generational consciousness: the way the educationalists blocked channels for upward mobility; and their incapacity to deliver good governance. Both are related to the impression of a 'Swapo-ization' of Namibian politics, which, giving the pervasive presence of the state in the public sphere, kept SWAPO's authority generally unchallenged. Advanced through officialdom and a rhetoric of self-legitimation and moral 'unchallengeability' (p. 159), this was mostly a result of a strategy of survival of the state's elite, always eager to draw from the moral weight of the nationalist past and the heroic efforts of the struggle (p. 166). More concerned with their own self-preservation and unwilling to give space to the youth, the founding liberation elite was at the center of a 'crisis of delivery' by the state – a morally charged idea linked, once again, with civility and (the incapacity to) care for the community.

Yet, facing a state they saw as lacking effective legitimacy and intent on controlling the flow of opportunities in town with a heavy hand, the youth elite has chosen not to opt

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[15] Abner Cohen, *The Politics of Elite Culture: Explorations of the Dramaturgy of Power in a Modern African Society*, Berkeley, LA, University of California Press, 1980.

out of the public space, nor to charge it with violence. Rather, they tried to engage with it more vigorously, involving themselves on the reconceptualization of its civic virtues and related ideas of accomplishment, recognition and exemplarity. This was done through a double movement in the public sphere, at once reproducing and challenging the discourses of the "educationalists" (p. 212). Seeing these discourses as largely ineffective rhetorical displays of authority, this youth critically and playfully distanced themselves from the state elite's 'charade of officialdom', criticising their discrepancies between words and deeds among themselves as an acid critique of the state's hegemony. Counterbalancing their private ironies, they saw in the correct conducting of officialdom part of their own distinction and a prerequisite for good governance and delivery (pp. 237f.). Marked by a strong sensibility for distinction and surrounded by moral reasoning regarding the meaning of accomplishment and civility, as well as the importance of exemplary behavior and respect, this was its most public contribution. The creation, by this youthful elite, of the Shinyewile Club ('the' ethnographic case of the book) conveys these images in a striking and revelatory way.

Appearing to be in transition towards inheriting the establishment (p. 156), criticism of the liberation elite was a central aspect of the formation of the youth elite own consciousness, bringing to the fore an intergenerational dialogue in which different experiences, conceptualizations and expectations were put to the test (p. 184). However, their moral reasoning reflected more than youthful disenchantment with the government elite and its place in the public arena. It was also rooted in the ongoing construction of their masculinities and interlocked with their own family legacies. Significantly, most of the youthful elite came from distinguished families in the hinterland whose significant others, their fathers and uncles, were once part of the colonial elite sustaining the old Kavango Administration (p. 173). Simultaneously striving to achieve distinction within more traditional publics, they looked at the actions of their family leaders not as an idealization of the colonial past (as white elites are mostly prone to do), but as a measure of the very nature of contemporary politics. Critically reading their seniors' past 'collaboration', they looked up to what they believed to be most significant: the way their past actions resonated with legitimate ideas of leadership, based on inclusivity, equal opportunity, nurturing, dynamism and upward-mobility. Contrasting with their conceptualization of SWAPO's elite grip over society, this playful but also serious youthful elite gave temporary rise to a subaltern counter-public in which to carve their own views on policies and rightful leadership (p. 211).

Fostering rather than mining civil society, the critical space opened by this youthful elite forces us to consider a most needed debate on morality, power and leadership in postcolonial Africa. Searching for distinction through the 'vertical complexity' of institution-building in Rundu,[16] they also allow us to acknowledge the hybrid nature of elites, mediating between rural and urban, tradition and modernity, past and present,

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[16] Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, "Power in the village: Rural Benin between democratisation and descentralisation", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 73 (2), 2003: 145-173.

and thus giving rise to a most welcome critique to ideally pure forms of governance (pp. 177f.). Above all, they help us conceptualize postcolonial Namibia as "a critical and dramatic site", to use an influential conceptualization.[17] However, the problems being played out, at least in Rundu, are not of subjection and indiscipline, its corollary (ibid). Revealed at the point at which it becomes public, it is rooted in the more sensorial and emotionally-ridden problems of (inter)subjectivity and its corollaries, playfulness and officialdom.

My comments here cannot fully appreciate the various arguments presented by the author. My intention, rather, is to convey what I believe to be its spirit. In many ways, *Politics of Distinction* insinuates itself as an evocative way to talk about Namibian public and political arenas. Consider, for example, all those young men going through village and town carrying their plastic folders with certificates and CVs – their own temple of distinction and officialdom; or the emerging youthful elites elsewhere in Namibia who consistently use family legacies and genealogies to enrich their legitimate ambitions. Above all, consider the continuous debate about politician's participation in public spheres. In this case, what is relevant here is not so much *distinction*, but rather the idea that it becomes manifest through a particular kind of *politics*. Indeed, an important aspect of debates on civil society in Africa has been exactly the recognition that its emergence asks us to consider questions of politics.[18] So, as young SWAPO cadres continue to ply their distinction in the public arena, as recently seen, how do we interpret the ardent defenses of liberalism coming from SWAPO elders arguing against their involvement in the public space? Like traditional authorities in their prohibitive relation to the political sphere, wouldn't this hamper the attempted emergence of a political practice that while acknowledging differences is also inclusive and open for debate? A politics, what is more, that manifests, rather than hides political interests and is, therefore, open to accountability and criticism? Reverberating with agonistic views of politics – a plural space for the consensual recognition of differences[19] – couldn't this be the very condition of Namibia's democratic existence?

Fumanti's book does not offer us straight answers to these questions. Yet, while unveiling an ethnographical sparkle of civility and good governance in Rundu, it guides us beyond current pessimistic answers. It is significant, in fact, that this book does not depict an idealized civil society existing, as in liberal thinking, autonomously from the political sphere – itself another self-containing universe. Conversely, he follows more optimistic views,[20] cultivating interrelation and interpenetration and bringing to memory well-known examples of African sites of political contestation and ongoing discourses

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[17] Mbembe, "Banality": 2.

[18] Chabal, "Introduction".

[19] Chantal Mouffe, "Politique et Agonism", *Rue Descartes*, 67, 2010: 18-24.

[20] Richard P. Webner and Terence Range, *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, London, Zed Books, 1996.

about governance, leadership and authority.[21] Affiliated to a new 'public anthropology' that critically engages with African predicaments, *Politics of Distinction* is an example of a growing counter-narrative within academy. Like intellectuals during the time of Africa's first independent movements,[22] Fumanti brings a sense of possible alternative political goals and strategies, foregrounding its capacity to influence social practice. The underlying and yet unsaid optimism, is that the future of democratic rule in Namibia, as in Africa, might rest on the possibility of a public space in which both state and society are enmeshed; and in which civil society's strength is measured in its capacity to absorb (not distance itself) and, therefore, moralize the state. Who knows? Maybe Namibia will indeed strike a 'distinct' democracy.

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[21] John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Postcolonial politics and discourses of democracy in southern Africa: An anthropological reflection on African political modernities", *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 53 (2), 1997: 123-146.

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