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BOOK REVIEW

Shadows of War: Violence, Power, and International Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century. Carolyn Nordstrom. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 293 pp.

Carolyn Nordstrom is one of the academics who has led the way in conflict zone ethnography and has conducted detailed fieldwork in spaces riven by war. In doing so, she has opened up interesting insights into the nature of contemporary conflict in Africa and, as she phrases it, has entered into the shadows war. These shadows, very often clandestine and “illegal”, stake out the bulk of Africa’s wars, although perhaps not recognizable at first glance. Yet they are surely there and as “real”, if not more so, than “normal” war. Indeed, the types of economies being established in the shadows of conflicts link up well-placed individuals and groups within Africa to outside interests, creating a milieu where a wide variety of networking involving states, mafias, private armies, “businessmen” and assorted state elites from both within and outside Africa has developed. These linkages may start locally, then regionally and finally encompass international connections or, they may develop in a variety of combinations. Nordstrom’s volume is excellent in exposing these networks and connections.

Crucially, the forms of shadow networking, based essentially on a form of kleptocratic political economy, not only undermine coherent developmental projects but also radically destabilize the prospects for peace and stability. As Nordstrom quotes an Angolan youth, “Peace? Forget it, there’s too much money being made here” (191). And in her various discussions of Angola, Nordstrom quite convincingly throws into sharp relief the involvement of international interests in helping perpetuate the continent’s disorder. Meanwhile, influential voices, ignoring such roles, throw up their hands at the “hopeless continent”.

Nordstrom’s work bolsters the existing literature on the real political economy of Africa, the political, private, social, ecological, and informal/illegal aspects, *alongside* the formal institutional (or what remains of it) and economic realms. These combinations of political, economic and socio-cultural forces are linked to the international and transactional. In many respects, the actors involved share an inter-subjective understanding of their own roles and norms of exchange and alliances. Nordstrom’s book is valuable because it reinforces the need to transcend the traditional boundaries taken for granted by African Studies, which invariably see state boundaries as frontiers of knowledge, converting geographic frontiers into epistemological ones. The dynamics that have driven the shadow networks are not confined to Africa. Indeed, what is intriguing about these networks is the way that they are not restricted by notions of state or continental boundaries, but are regional, continental and global: the continent’s boundaries are now truly transnational in scope.

In this light, Nordstrom’s book examines the forms of networks that are currently reconfiguring various spaces in Africa and aspects of the global political economy. How and in what way can international interests be understood to have contributed to the current malaise in the continent? How have international business networks worked to make things worse in Africa? Obviously, this is not to suggest that the continent is simply acted upon by “imperialism” or broad outside interests. Clearly, all the actors within the continent possess varying degrees of agency. How and in what ways in which there are varying convergence of interests between outsiders and internal actors is absolutely key to understanding how global forces may be thought of as contributing to the scenarios that we may observe in today and which Nordstrom draws out.

The recognition that violence and power in Africa are multi-layered and can and do involve transnational networks that may or may not be legal, or that reflect the “criminalization of the state” is fundamental. Such networks involve the participation of a multitude of actors, both “state” (whatever that may actually mean) and non-state players. This is essential, particularly in Africa, as much of the social and economic interconnectedness remain at the nexus of formal/informal, legal/illegal, national/global etc. In such a milieu, formal activities, quantifiable through orthodox analyses, only tell one part of the story, if at all—there is a conceptual gap that does not allow us to analyze the informality

of networks that are typical of much of Africa's political economy, for instance. Linking this to international profiteering, as Nordstrom notes, is crucial.

Indeed, outside involvement has stimulated a set of structures that now criss-cross Africa, some new but many with a decidedly older pedigree. Working hand-in-hand with global networks of extraction, local big men have openly advertised the economic motivations underlying their participation in conflict and war. Such activity has built up a series of inter-linking connections in collaboration with outside, i.e. extra-African forces, that have constructed what may be seen as a set of transnational networks centered in Kinshasa or Luanda and extending outwardly to Geneva, Brussels, Lisbon, Paris, Washington, etc. These shadow the type of networking and linkages that already exist "from below" vis-à-vis the trading interactions between central Africa and Europe.

Such developments are not necessarily new per se— international forces have helped mould and influence domestic outcomes in Africa for a very long time. What is new in the contemporary post-Cold War era however is that the emerging shadow networks are managing to develop their own links and ties to the international arena, often on their own terms. While we should not overly exaggerate this agency, it has increased the space available to the type of shadowy manipulators and elites involved in the process and in tandem with diverse international actors. During the immediate post-independence period aid relationships granted donors a degree of latitude and influence over the receiving elites, but in an era where Africa continues to be "marginalized" and aid is rolled back in favor of (elusive?) "trade", this patron-client linkage is dissipating. In addition, in a liberalizing world, the ability of the dominant powers to manipulate the global market has somewhat declined, granting even greater agency to those actors involved in such networking. Such involvement in war-ridden spaces reflects the internationalization of African conflicts, not only through "normal" state-to-state (or rather "state"-to-state) relations e.g. Paris with Kinshasa, but also through global business networks. These mesh outside interests with local elites' stakes. Making sense of these complicated systems of accumulation and profit is needed now more than ever. Nordstrom's book is an excellent advance in this field and is enthusiastically recommended to all interested in conflict and security in Africa.

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