

Peter Geschiere & Piet Konings

Empirical Studies and Conceptual Dilemmas

A Reply to Janet Roitman*

Janet Roitman's way of dealing with a whole array of very difficult conceptual issues in the framework of one short article is really impressive. She evokes, in breathtaking speed, a series of very real and unresolved dilemmas in the works under review: between the preference for an action approach and the tendency to fall back on culturalism; between the emphasis on new forms of heterogeneity in global developments and the more or less implicit retaining of one idea of 'modernity'. One cannot help wondering whether, thus, her own programme does not become all too ambitious. In the beginning of her article she emphasises the need for 'serious, detailed empirical studies documenting the various scenarios [...], leading to the reconfiguration of economic, cultural and political spaces' (p. 630). The question is whether the conceptual dilemmas evoked in the rest of her article will not have a paralysing effect on such empirical studies.

In this respect, the quotation of G. Chakravorty Spivak at the end of her article might be characteristic. What is striking is that this whole quotation is in the passive. Probably this is why passages like these acquire a discouraging density. It is clear why Spivak prefers the passive. Roitman does show that an approach in terms of acting subjects often has a deceiving simplicity, if only since agency is culturally circumscribed. But there is a danger of pushing things too far: Spivak's quotation seems to show that a determined effort to avoid any reference to acting subjects has problems of its own.

Roitman is no doubt right that an approach in terms of actors is often too easily linked with Foucauldian perspectives. But it has become clear also that Foucault's emphasis on the working of power which cannot be reduced to acting subjects is one of the aspects of his work that, although highly intriguing, is the most difficult to do justice to in empirical studies. To us, the strength of an anthropological approach remains fieldwork (which is certainly more important than the discipline's focus on culture). Whatever fieldwork means, it does confront one—sometimes in unforeseen forms—with acting persons. Therefore, versions of anthropology which do take fieldwork seriously will always tend

* 'Queries on Cultural Capitalism', *Cahiers d'Études africaines* 138-139, XXXV (2-3), pp. 629-645.

to produce results in terms of acting subjects, valuable though certain caveats about the need to problematise agency may be. Again, Spivak's quotation seems to illustrate, in a negative sense, the merits of such an anthropological approach. The highly provisional solution might be to keep Roitman's dilemmas in mind but to be nonetheless not discouraged to undertake empirical studies.

The same applies to her stricture concerning the use of terms like 'modernity' or 'capitalism' in the works under review. Her discussion on this point recall the—no doubtless exciting—debates on how to arrive at a proper notion of 'development', or on originally Western concepts like 'sorcery' or 'witchcraft'. Roitman is right to emphasise that such terms carry a heavy conceptual ballast because of their history in Western thought. But the attention to this historical side should not be at the expense of another aspect, at least as important, namely the ways in which these terms are appropriated by people in the South, in highly varying and dynamic ways.¹ To us, it is at least as urgent to study how concepts like 'development' or 'modernity' (or rather 'modern') have come to lead their own life in Africa—how people there work with these notions—than to continue to try and liberate ourselves from their historical ballast. Or, to make this point more concrete: the most interesting question is, no doubt, how people in Cameroon work with the old association of 'capitalism' with 'economic rationality' (versus the 'cultural reason' of 'traditional' society). Of course, this is certainly in line with Roitman's own ideas. The challenge seems to be, again, to take her strictures seriously while going on to study empirically the varying role these notions play in present-day Africa.

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1. This is also why we adopted the term of 'alternative' modes of accumulation. Roitman is certainly right that this term automatically implies that there is something like a 'normal' model of accumulation. But it is true that such normative models have been imposed with great force. This makes that the term of 'alternative' forms of accumulation—for instance in order to escape from the controls exercised by the state and official development agencies—does make sense to people in a country like present-day Cameroon.