
Reviewed by Thomas Blaser (Department of Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand)

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The End of Culture?

Jean-François Bayart has written an erudite and entertaining journey around the world in politics and culture that is pertinent to the contemporary politics of identity.[1] According to the author, this book summarizes the last three decades of his writings in which he was concerned with "the complex relationships between cultural representations and political practices, popular modes of political action, and the political imaginaire – in short, ... ‘politics from below’ and ‘political utterance’" (p. ix). Through this research agenda, Bayart pursues two main objectives. The first intends to do away with reified notions of culture and identity, as encountered in what he calls culturalism, which are at the root of violence and war. The second is an eloquent advocacy for a social science analysis that studies the social imaginary.

Bayart suggests culture does not have an inner core and so-called cultural identity does not lead to a corresponding political identity. Rather, political identities are political, ideological, and historical constructs. This is recognized as the dominant approach to the study of culture, known as constructivism, trumping primordial and instrumental approaches. Yet if we follow the political realities illustrated here, we can see how cultural representations are easily reified and used for political mobilization. This is particularly the case with Western Islamophobia, especially after September 11 and the disastrous war on terror. Bayart’s analysis of modern Islam is a welcome antidote to the usual stereotypes encountered in Western media and academia. He also shows how little factual credibility underlines similar stereotypes about Asia, China, and Japan, and the "wonders" that Confucianism is supposed to have brought to the economic miracle of the Asian tigers.

The African continent suffered lethal consequences from a French (and Western) culturalist imaginaire. The belief in the existence of tribal identities and the explanation of politics with the particularities of African culture led to catastrophic policies fueling the Rwandan genocide. In breaking with such reifications of ethnicity, Bayart sets out to demonstrate that ethnicity is a modern phenomenon related to the colonial state. We are here very far from the myth of a perennial, traditional African culture which is at the heart of the culturalist argument and the political relativism that denies Africans access to the universal (p. 33). Instead, Bayart restores the universality of culture without celebrating the triumph of the enlightenment. Universality is for him the reinvention of difference and he remains critical of the culturalist discourse that restrains "concrete historical societies in a substantialist definition of their identity by denying them the right to borrow, to be derivative" (p. 245).

Bayart argues that culturalism commits three methodological errors. First, it assumes that culture is a corpus of representations that is stable over time when in fact culture oscillates between two forms: culture is the tradition that is transmitted and the irruptions and deviances that inflect new directions into cultures (p. 65).
Second, culture is represented as a corpus that is closed in itself. Quite to the contrary, Bayart argues that culture is marked by a dialectic of permanence and change (p. 67). Third, culturalists claim that each culture demands a specific political orientation. However, Bayart makes it quite clear with his examples, drawn from politics around the world, that such “purity” has little factual basis. Rather, political cultures (as is manifest in popular culture and despite the claims of the proponents of invented traditions) incorporate foreign representations and practices (p. 68). Hence he claims that “traditional culture” does not exist—culture is “constantly being negotiated” (p. 30). As is the case with the emergence of invented traditions and imagined communities on the African continent, “colonized and colonizers often acted together, sometimes within the same institutions, the same intellectual currents, and the same beliefs, but most often with differing objectives, and almost always in the mode of a working misunderstanding” (p. 42). The nation, the tribe, and the village community is a myth, but they were the allegories around which the genesis of modernity was discussed (p. 47). The interactions between the colonizer and the colonized involved cultural operations that went beyond enclosed cultures.

The study of these cultural operations is facilitated by an analysis of political performance, as is made visible in utterance or enunciation. The reception of cultural phenomena, ideologies, and institutions contribute to the formation of these very same utterances and enunciations. In the act of enunciation, actions are reshaped because “to espouse a cultural representation is ipso facto to recreate it” (p. 110). The cultural heterogeneity of political societies appears in the variety of “discursive genres” of politics. These discursive genres not only include discourse but also gestures, music, and clothing (p. 110). Bayart encourages his colleagues to study the cultural reasons for political action, instead of analyzing political cultures (p. 121). As an example, he points to beliefs in the invisible, like witchcraft, that are African cultural practices and argues that they enable Africans to reinvent their difference in a globalizing world and thereby allow them to accede to universality (p. 131). I am not sure if beliefs in the invisible hold such a benevolent promise. While they reflect cultural particularities to be taken seriously, they can also contribute to confusion and dislocation, with detrimental effects upon the political landscape.

In the second part of the book, Bayart explains how and why studying the imaginary of society is an important contribution to political analysis. As his example above shows, the focus on the imaginary allows us to understand better the usage and function of a belief system in society and how it contributes to the creation of meaning. Equally important, his analysis of social imaginaries that is an established approach in French historical writing, with such outstanding authors as Jacques Le Goff, creates greater clarity about what is superficially labeled post-modern. Too often, such approaches of the linguistic turn, making use of intertextuality, deconstruction and narratology, are criticized for seeing history only as an illusion, a fiction, or a myth. But I think Bayart shows well that these ways of imagining play an important role in society. While looking at imaginaries certainly involves the study of representations, it does not mean that there is no external reality independent of our representations. In many ways, interpretation and acts of imagination are tied to materiality, such as time and space compression that is a result of the industrial revolution (p. 182). Diverse practices such as hair-styles, cuisine and clothing express a political ethos. How an imaginary is related to the material is best illustrated with the passions that the wearing of the “Muslim” scarf elicited in France. Indeed, the imaginaire of clothing can leave its mark on politics in an industrial and disenchanted society (p. 200).

What then is the social imaginary? Charles Taylor defines it as “the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit.” Such imagination is an integral part of society since it enables people to live together through the creation of common meanings. The imaginary has a historical dimension, and we can find in historical action and in the universe of meanings a radical imaginaire (p. 133). Passions are part of that imaginary and Bayart argues that not only Max Weber but also Spinoza, Alexis de Toqueville and Montesquieu tried to relate these to tangible realities. Weber, in particular, suggests that individuals and groups have economic interests, but they also have ideals expressed in lifestyles that reflect a particular ethoi; this is part of the imaginaire of social action which cannot be reduced to instrumentalism and rationality (p. 134). Through the imaginary, we gain insights into the “belief, the miraculous, rumour and rite” of modern society, but also how heritage and innovation are in a constant dialog (p. 137). For instances of this, we may look at the role of dreams and their influence on political decision-makers, and how they relate to religious aspects of politics (pp. 138-144), or how politics follow scenarios borrowed from other cultural genres (pp. 145-150) and the role of political rituals (pp. 151-152). In sum, the imaginary is the seat of passions, of aesthetics,
Bayart argues that bringing the study of politics and the study of the social imaginary together means looking at how the human subject is constituted (p. 152). By doing so, we investigate how subjectivity is produced or, in other words, subjectivation. This involves the production of modes of existences or lifestyles. Politics and the state constantly interact with processes of subjectivation, like in the sexualization of power relationships. For example, in France in the 1990s populism was related to a certain view of virility (p. 153). Often, the political passions carried by an imaginary cannot be managed—the imaginary remains autonomous (p. 160). Above all, Bayart argues, political subjectivation is marked by contradiction and ambivalence, intrinsic characters of politics (p. 165). Contrary to what culturalists would do, this ambivalence cannot be attributed to certain cultures only and it is an integral part of our analysis of politics. Imaginaries do not have a definitive political meaning. As historical phenomena, they are “amorphous nebula ... ambivalent from a political point of view” (p. 229). Through their radical ambivalence, imaginary social meanings hold together, and thus hold together society—this holding together is not demonstrated and is never assumed to be demonstrable (p. 233). Without doubt, it is for these reasons that the workings of the imaginary are, at times, difficult to penetrate: how can we grasp a socio-historical phenomenon that often remains intractable and elusive? Nonetheless, Bayart reveals how a look at social imaginaries may provide new perspectives on old problems.

Notes


[2]. In the earlier published Le Politique par le Bas en Afrique Noire, Bayart, Achille Mbembe, and Comi Toulobour explain lucidly the importance of “post-modern” writers such as Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, in their approach to the study of African popular cultures and social imaginaries. Such explanations provide us with excellent insights into post-modern approaches beyond generalizations. Le Politique par le Bas en Afrique Noire: Contributions a une Problematique de la Democratie (Paris: Karthala, 1992).


[4]. Ibid.