Mike McGovern
MAKING WAR IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE
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As the reader may know, the war in Côte d'Ivoire has not yet happened. Departing from this Baudrillard-esque harbor, Mike McGovern sails off to describe the situation in Côte d'Ivoire between 2002, when a civil war was, to the eyes of most of us, imminent (indeed, many violent episodes followed between 2002 and 2004), and 2007, when elections were approaching again, in a country geographically divided in two regions: the "north" (mostly Muslim and Mandingo, with close cultural and historical links to Mali) and the "south" (more predominantly Christian, with historical and cultural links to Ghana to the east and southern Liberia to the west).

Because of this clear-cut division, many people thought that there was a "civil war" in Côte d'Ivoire of "Southerners" against 'Northerners', Christians against Muslims,

"autochthons" (the coastal people) against "strangers" (the northern people, many of whom, including political leader Ouattara, were politically classified as "strangers" in the late 1990s owing to their genealogical links to Malian citizens). Those were no doubt elements in the conflict, but this was triggered by a much bigger set of conditions. And it was not really a "civil war" like the ones the world witnessed in neighboring Sierra Leone and Liberia. There was a lot of cruelty, with several thousand deaths but, against our fears, it never became a war remotely comparable to the neighboring ones.

Ironically, the book has taken a long time to be produced. "Ironically" because the delay has been paralleled by that of the elections, which only took place at the end of 2010 and produced today's alarming situation, with two people (President Gbagbo and Ouattara, his northern opponent) each claiming to be the winner, the former supported by the Constitutional Council (and by some African countries), and the latter by the international community, and West African neighbors in particular, who have

hard evidence that *he* was the winner of the election. The country has probably never been as close to a fully-rounded civil war as it is in this moment. The book becomes, thus (against its intention), a timely analysis of the conditions of possibility of such post-electoral predicament.

Mike McGovern is a political anthropologist with extensive research on conflict and post-conflict situations in Africa, not only as an academic, but also as the West Africa director of the International Crisis Group, which (together with his doctoral fieldwork, conducted on the border between Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire) has given him a privileged angle from whence to study the volatile situation of many West African countries. Côte d'Ivoire is a special case. Under Houphouet-Boigny's reign, Côte d'Ivoire had been the "success story" of West Africa: no conflicts at all, economic prosperity, secured tourism, international culture and art, and its pearl, Abidjan, the Paris of West Africa. When the conflict started in Côte d'Ivoire some years after Houphouet-Boigny's death, Westerners were puzzled and needed an explanation. Why war in Côte d'Ivoire?

Granted, "why Côte d'Ivoire?" was a legitimate enough request, and given his work in the region, McGovern was expected to explain it to us. Yet, he preferred to take a somewhat different, and certainly more original, route. Instead of rushing explanations about the "why war", he took his time and elaborated an ethnographic and anthropological study (in some chapters becoming an apposite vindication of the Manchester school of analysis) of the "neither-war-nor-peace" situation that the country endured for many years and thus provides us with elements to answer the opposite question: why the feared war did *not* happen but was always in-the-making. In writing about this making, McGovern has produced a masterpiece in which major anthropological topics

of today's Africa (ethnicity, autochthony, extraversion, youths' expectations, popular culture, regional politics, historical models and narratives, agrarian tensions, conflict, religion) are woven together, both ethnographically and theoretically, to produce a very subtle analysis of a very complex conflict. The array of topics is matched by an impressive array of scholarly references and a strong scaffolding of overlapping theoretical frameworks, stretching from political anthropology to theories of play, and from agrarian studies applied to the ethnic tensions in southern Côte d'Ivoire to Lacanian approaches applied to the "fatherly" figure of Houphouet-Boigny.

In order for war to take place, a *lot* of things have to take place. One of the most important lessons to be learnt from this book is that for a civil war to happen, several elements in the human landscape have to be "aligned". Ethnic, regional, economic, generational, political differences, historical grievances and economic greed exist and may provoke cruelty, but none of them in themselves will provoke a fully-fledged war. All these factors play themselves out, and, in Côte d'Ivoire at least, the socio-political tissue is composed of so many different stitches as to avoid the "alignment" and the hardening of social categories into two groups ready to annihilate each other. Whether this feared "alignment" is what is happening as I am writing this review is not clear, though I suspect we are much closer to it now than we were four years ago. In any case, the dictum 'the Ivorian war has not yet happened' that opens the book sounds now almost as tragic as the impossible "the Trojan war will not take place" that gives title to Jean Giradoux's 1951 play (itself a reflection on the Europeans wars, whose title later inspired Baudrillard's essay on the Gulf war). The Greeks thought that humans cannot escape their destiny. If there is something in common in Giradoux's and

McGovern's dicta about the wars in Troy and Côte d'Ivoire is that both show us that "destiny" is the product of humans' making. So is tragedy: a mixture of feelings, histories, coincidences, intentions, manipulations, memories and expectations. "Bricollaging" with all this, humans often make do, but sometimes make war too. Whether Ivorians can escape their destiny lies indeed in human hands. Again, as McGovern writes, the Ivorian war has not yet happened, but it now seems that more and more people are very good at making it. Let us hope there is also a Penelope somewhere, secretly unweaving at night such tragedy-oriented fabric so blatantly woven at daylight. Whatever the destiny of the country might be, McGovern's original analysis of "war making" is no doubt destined to become an anthropological model to the study of conflict in Africa and beyond.

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