Gramsci in and beyond resistances

The search for an autonomous political initiative among a subaltern group in the Beninese savanna

Riccardo Ciavolella

Abstract: Stemming from a Gramscian approach, this article engages with the anthropological debate about subaltern groups' forms of resistance by using the case of marginalized Fulani groups of pastoral and nomadic origins in northwest Benin. Their experiences seemingly confirm contemporary theories on resistance, which emphasize subaltern people's capacities to tactically circumvent exploitation and exclusion and to handle contradictions between different "moral economies." Nevertheless, one should question the impact of small-scale reactions that remain on the infrapolitical level and the emancipatory role that political theories give to tactical forms of resistance of dispersed subjectivities while refusing collective strategies. Grounding Gramscian theories in ethnography, this article wonders about the possibilities and limits of margins to turn into the scene of an "autonomous political initiative" of a subaltern group.

Keywords: Antonio Gramsci, capitalism, resistance, state, subalternity

In recent decades, "resistance" has emerged as a crucial notion in critical theory debates on social movements and the transformative potential of popular politics. Slavoj Žižek (2007) has unfavorably remarked that contemporary post-Marxist and libertarian critical theorists now emphasize local, spontaneous, everyday, and immanent forms of resistance not only as the sign of the agency of subaltern people but also as the sole popular political action to effectively transform reality in the present day. This is the long wave of what Matthew Gutmann (2002) considers a replacement of "revolution" by "resistance," overloading resistance with all

the expectations of radical social change we traditionally associate with revolution. Political anthropology has theorized "resistance" for many decades (Gledhill and Schell 2012). At present, a convergence between post-Marxist critical theories and libertarian anthropologies, such as James Scott's (1985, 1990) work on resistance and infrapolitics, seems to be the mainstay of analysis. This anthropology of resistance is habitually in contrast to established as much as to new Marxist theoretical approaches and political aims (Narotzky 2015; Neveling 2015; Steur 2015). Antonio Gramsci is one of the preferred targets of this criticism, even if other

post-Marxist scholars rather take him as the founding thinker for the study of subaltern cultures and popular politics beyond the orthodox Marxist materialism.

This article aims to overcome the partiality of both positions and their mutual contradiction by arguing that a deeper insight into the theoretical framework of Gramsci can still be useful in order to understand the political potentials and limits of “resistance.” I argue that his theory allows us not only to appreciate subaltern people’s resistances as a manifestation of their *agency* and of their criticism of power systems, dominant classes, and modes of exploitation, but also to question their actual capacities to turn into effective mobilizations for emancipation—to become “historical subjects.” In Gramsci’s view, subaltern people are able to express resistance, but the problem is that this is always “subject to the initiative of dominant classes” (1975: Q3, §46, 323; Q25).¹ The material, historical, social, and political roots of subalternity put them in a position of “defense” and not in the role of politically engaged subjects transforming reality. As his famous “methodological criteria” for the study of “the history of subaltern groups” show (Q25), the problem for Gramsci is to understand how these defensive forms of resistance can turn into what he called an “autonomous political initiative,” which is different from anthropologists’ recognition and description of “weapons of the weak” inside relations of domination; it rather implies to question their potentialities in turning into an organized political initiative for changing relations of power. In Gramsci’s terms, only the historical success and failures of their attempts in engaging in these kinds of initiative could show how subaltern groups can switch from an “economic-corporate condition,” as determined by material and structural constraints, to become “historical subjects” (Q13) with a political consciousness of their identity and role in the transformation of society. Actually, Gramsci’s Marxism sees *politics* as the sole factor capable of introducing history into structure and of transforming the “historical bloc”—a combination of structure and superstructure—

sustaining the particular configuration of power that determines their subalternity. Politics, then, is the only human activity capable of bridging the material conditions of subaltern people and their cultural or ideal aspirations of emancipation, ultimately transforming social subjects into historical ones.

This article aims to participate in the debate on the “resurgence” of Marxism in anthropology by putting this Gramscian theoretical framework to test with ethnographic materials gathered among a marginalized group of pastoral and nomadic origins, known as the Fulani, in Donga, a northwestern region of Benin. Here, high levels of marginalization including poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion severely limit political mobilization. Nevertheless, some members try to emerge as potential “organic intellectuals.” Thus, the article tackles a specific context in which embryonic popular politics is emerging and an autonomous political initiative of a subaltern group is forming, but in which the process of self-awareness and political engagement of the whole subaltern group as a historical subject, to say it with Gramsci’s word, “has not yet come to the surface” (Q3, §46, 323). This case contributes to the debate on popular politicization and social movements in Africa and elsewhere by shifting the focus from what is already politically explicit to those initiatives that are still only “glimmers” of conscious politics—as Gramsci would put it—hindered by social, political, and structural constraints.

The article develops in four sections. In a preliminary step, it enlarges and specifies the theoretical discussion about Gramsci in the anthropology of resistance. It then discusses conditions of Fulani subalternity and marginality in northwest Benin as shaped by the crisis of the pastoral mode of production, their subordination to other communities in accessing land tenure, their exclusion and discrimination in local and national contexts by political authorities and institutions, and their vulnerability to old and new forms of dispossession by advancing capitalist forces. The third section expands toward an analysis of contradictory “moral economies”

that emerge among Fulani in a situation of crisis and marginality. The focus is on moral dilemmas as they try to choose between economic modernization and pastoral activities and between personal affirmation and community development. In the concluding section, I analyze the political initiatives that emerge on a local and community basis, insisting on the difficulties that new “organic intellectuals” meet in assuming the role of representing their group and in engaging it as a political subject in a historical process of transformation.

Gramsci and the anthropology of resistance

Gramsci’s thinking on subaltern resistance has been a great inspiration for political anthropologists (Smith 2004) for several reasons. The concept of the “subaltern” exceeds the modernist and purely materialist category of the “proletariat” (Liguori 2011) and includes those social groups undergoing “intersectional domination” (the poor, peasants, women) (Green 2002), like those who have been the traditional subjects of ethnography. With its “valorization of the cultural dimension” (Gramsci 1975: Q10), Gramsci’s Marxism also overcomes any flat materialism by focusing on the interplay of the material world and of cultural views as two interrelated but still semiautonomous domains. Thus, anthropologists (Li 2007: 22; Moore 2005: 23) could take inspiration from Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers drawing on Gramsci, like Stuart Hall (1987) and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), to present culture as a field of forces and conflicts and to see the eventual uniformity of thoughts and behaviors—or common sense—as the result of a historical struggle for hegemony (Wolf 1999: 44).

Despite these implicit affinities between Gramsci and anthropology, we find partial and contradictory uses of Gramsci’s ideas in the specific domain of the anthropology of resistance. Several Anglophone anthropologists have read him in “post-structuralist” terms (Ciavolella

2017 and Forthcoming), artificially reducing his ideas to the debates on coercion versus consent and structure versus agency, as stressed by John Schwarzmantel (2009). For Donald Kurtz (1996), these interpretations and uses of Gramsci’s work in political anthropology have stripped it of its Marxist theorizing. Kate Crehan (2002) has shown that anthropologists have often given a “light” interpretation of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, as in the case of Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1991: 25, 125) who consider it analogous to the Bourdieusian *doxa*: cultural uniformity politically imposed by power that mistakenly takes for granted the idea of a discursive uniformity between dominant and subaltern groups because it neglects its relation to economic structures.

The “light” interpretation of Gramsci’s thought is also that of the libertarian theorists studying resistance (Day 2005; Feerman 1990; Scott 1985, 1990). For them, subordinate groups’ resistances are expected to account for fractures in the hegemonic structure, emphasizing not Gramsci’s critique of capitalist hegemony but Pierre Clastres’s criticism of simply any form of hegemony (Ciavolella 2013: 318–334). In Scott’s view, for instance, Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony is another version of the German ideology, seeing every cultural proposition as inevitably at the service of the dominant classes (1985: 336). Accordingly, Scott criticizes Gramsci for denying any political consciousness or intentionality in the “spontaneity” of what Eric Hobsbawm (1959) called the “pre-politics” of “primitive rebels” and what Scott rather prefers to call “infrapolitics.” Other anthropologists and historians who are quite close to Scott’s ideas about resistance, such as Ranajit Guha (1999: 4) and Roger Keesing (1992: 225; see also Kaplan and Kelly 1994; Linger 1993) have nonetheless used parts of Gramsci’s work to study the emergence of anti-hegemonic discourses. But these authors generally content themselves with Gramsci’s interpretation of popular subversion as a “defensive” political action of the subalterns that manifests itself through “a series of denials” and a “generic” anger toward the powerful

(1975: Q3, 323), while they refuse his “active” call for their transformation into a conscious and organized political project.

As John Gledhill (2000: 11–12), William Roseberry (1994), and Gavin Smith (1999) have shown, these libertarian interpretations of Gramsci have not understood the historical, and therefore unstable, nature of Gramsci’s vision of hegemony and have minimized Gramsci’s ability to understand the possibilities of resistance among subaltern groups. Gramsci was certainly interested in subaltern cultures as embryonic manifestations of marginal people’s rebelliousness against cultural and political hegemony. But as postwar Italian anthropologists have remarked (Cirese 1973; De Martino 1951), Gramsci formulated, at the same time, a sharp political criticism of popular culture and resistance as unable to transform society. Instead, as a Marxist and a political activist, Gramsci thought that only a more structured political consciousness and organization could transform and then emancipate subaltern cultures: when they are in “a state of anxious defense,” people are “subject to the initiatives of the dominant classes, even when they rebel” (1975: Q3, §14). Gramsci opens to the possibility that elementary forms of resistance can be something more than mere passive resistance or, in his own words, a mere “fact.” They may not, however, be enough for emancipation, unless these molecular forms are brought “to the surface” by active political engagement towards the transformation of historical blocs connecting economy and culture.

Roots of Fulani subalternity in northwest Benin

The Fulani groups I worked with in the Donga region of northwest Benin do not form any cohesive “ethnic” or “tribal” community. Their different villages are formed by disparate migrant or descendant of migrant communities who have penetrated and then settled in the region in the past two hundred years until now. A con-

tinuous but socially fragmented wave of migration has come from the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger), while a massive migration of dispersed communities has been pouring from the eastern regions of Benin (Borgou) and from northern Nigeria, in a more condensed form, for the past decade. All these migrant communities were originally pastoral and seminomadic groups scattered in the savanna “frontier.” As typical “frontier groups” (Kopytoff 1987), they were refugees from political centralization efforts and economic exploitation by neighboring agrarian societies. Having lost or still owning cattle as herders, they came to Donga seeking to develop pastoral activities. Compared with neighboring regions, this had for a long time been a harboring space for immigrants because capitalist market incorporation and demographic pressures were weak, thus limiting conflict between pastoral and peasant communities.

All Fulani groups coming to Donga shared a history of political and social autonomy. But they soon had to submit to the local agrarian communities (called *Haabe*, a name that refers to any non-Fulani communities of the region), especially of the Yom ethnic group. As Fulani have settled in dispersed and scattered groups in different periods of time, they are now socially and politically weak, having lost the kinship links that sustained their “clans” (*leñol*) in their regions of origin. Moreover, their settlement in Donga is strictly related to a chronic and historically gradual crisis of their pastoral activities, with an increasing shift from herding to agriculture, leading to gradual sedentarization. Some newcomers from eastern Benin and northern Nigeria managed to keep their cattle and a transhumant herding system but are meanwhile starting farming as well.

With sedentarization, Fulani communities in Donga have had to accept a social, economic, and political subordination to the *Haabe*, who are “landowners” (*jewbe leyidi* in Fulfulde or *tengatiwa* in Yom), and had to accept the authority of their chiefs and recognize them as *laamiibe*, a term that extensively refers to the actual political power. Their access to natural resources, and

especially to land tenure, then depended on the permission of local peasant communities. Nevertheless, until the 1980s, land tenure was based on a customary layered “bundle of rights” (Chauveau and Colin 2007), differentiating customary ownership and rights of exploitation, of passing, of settling, and so on. This allowed Fulani communities to settle, farm, and herd on rented or free plots and to establish an economic synergy with the *Haaɓe* by developing herding-farming complementarities and product exchanges.

In recent decades, the material conditions and sociopolitical situation of the Fulani have deteriorated. Pastoral activities are increasingly limited or even jeopardized as population growth increases demand for food and cash crop plantations expand. Local policies have supported this development with the liberalization of the land tenure systems. As James Ferguson (1990) described for Southern Africa, neoliberal policies in northwest Benin foster market-oriented agricultural development and consider pastoralism an irrational mode of production. Herding activities have completely disappeared from local development plans, while governance reforms promote the enclosure of common pastures and the privatization of lands, which enter, as commodities, a capitalist market economy. Actually, the introduction of “modern” land tenure reforms (especially the 2007 Plan Foncier Rural) and more broadly the implicit recognition of customary rights by formal authorities are gradually translating the “customary” ownership of the *Haaɓe* into land titles, excluding all other “traditional” rights to access and exploit lands. This is a problem for Fulani herders who lose their rights to passing, pasture, and access to natural resources while competition over land, water, and forest resources increases. The perverse effect of these land reforms for pastoralists is that they do not have access to land property, since they are considered “outsiders” because of their nomadic and “foreign” origins. For Fulani herders and farmers alike, two more general problems emerge: one of a juridical and economic nature, the other of a political nature.

First, the translation of customary land rights of the *jewɓe leyidi*, or landowners, in privatized land titles has changed the basis of the deal between “hosts” and “guests”: the permission to access local natural resources, and sometimes even to occupy lands, can be more easily withdrawn. This is the extreme but increasingly frequent case in which customary chiefs sell “their” lands where Fulani had settled, farmed, or herded to urban entrepreneurs or foreign firms. In the context of the larger land-grabbing process in Africa (Cotula 2013), all of northern Benin receives investments for ranch farming and market-oriented agricultural activities. In the eastern Beninese region of Borgou, this has depleted cattle stocks and forced herders to change activities or to migrate to Donga, where this only further increases competition over lands and natural resources. Here, nevertheless, the same process of land grabbing is emerging. For example, in the Djougou municipality, huge parcels have been sold to French entrepreneurs by traditional—but formally recognized—“land chiefs” for world market-oriented production with higher profit margins, like rice and cashews. Some Fulani communities were previously settled on that land, according to a traditional agreement with land chiefs, but they had to leave when the new—and first—“modern” owners set up their agricultural estates. A report by the Dutch cooperation agency (Idrissou et al. 2014) on large-scale agricultural investments in Benin and specifically in the Donga city of Djougou, shows that these investments are made by traders and private investors, but the overwhelming majority are “big hats,” as people call them ironically: national civil servants, politicians, and business people. Somewhat surprisingly, these acquisitions are made through a monetary purchase in only 50 percent of cases. For the remaining cases, it is a “gift” by customary landowners, who thereby contribute to the alienation of common lands without any concern for the impact this has on local economy and society. Of these acquisitions, 63 percent resulted in evictions of the people settled. As is now widely known and debated in Donga,

this is fostered by governance directives given by international organizations, like the World Bank, to local and national institutions. Land grabbing relies on the idea (as Marx already noted) that capitalism stems from disconnecting people from their lands to create a floating labor force (see also Li 2011). But even under such conditions, local people in Donga, and Fulani people in particular, are not finding the wage employment opportunities that were promised.

For Fulani groups, the second consequence of land privatization and resource management is their increasing marginalization in the local political arena. As elsewhere in West Africa, following the structural adjustments and the democratization of Benin since the 1980s, the decentralization of state institutions, and the recentering of development and democratization on the local level have allowed the emergence of an intimate link between land and political belonging. Local governance prioritizes “indigenous” rights to citizenship and political participation. As “migrants,” Fulani groups are not “full citizens,” are often excluded from politics, and are discriminated against by civil servants and neighboring communities. At the same time, competition over natural resources escalates conflicts between herders and farmers, which have led to persecution and killings. At the national level, in 2013, the government set up the Opération Guépard (Cheetah Operation), a military initiative “against the lawless transhumance” of Fulani herders, as the minister of defense affirmed in an official press release of the Beninese government (Gouvernement of Benin 2013; Djohy 2017: 79), “to track down these outlaws to their last retrenchment” and inhibit them to continue with their “several deviances . . . such as destroying crop fields, bloody and even deadly confrontations, rape and criminal arsons.”

From a strictly political point of view, the marginality of Fulani groups is confirmed by a particular structure of power—a sort of neo-traditional and developmental “historical bloc” merging “customary” subalternity to the *Haabe* and “democratic” local governance—which hin-

ders their participation in institutions and decision-making processes. From a “customary” point of view, Fulani have a “chief” (*jowuro*) representing all the Fulani communities and villages that are on the land of a specific *haabe* landowner and are under the landowner’s political authority as a *laamido*. *Jowuro* have social prestige (*teddungal*), but “real” political power remains in the hands of the *laamido*. Historically, the *jowuro* emerges, as a “neo-traditional figure,” by request of the *haabe* chiefs, who want a Fulani representative in order to better control Fulani villages and herders on their land. Despite its claim for a participative and inclusive democracy, local democratic governance has simply been grafted onto this local hierarchy of power and representation, falsely assuming that Fulani communities’ interests are sufficiently accounted for through the screening role of the *laamido* and the mediation of the *jowuro*. In a way, Fulani communities in Donga are marginalized, if not excluded, from direct participation in the local arena of governance.

Referring to Benin, Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1998: 26–28) have argued that, since the democratization and the spread of governance projects promoting local politics of the 1990s, rural communities and the state have been closely entangled. Actually, as the above shows, this is the case for the Donga region. Nevertheless, this does not mean, for the Fulani communities, that the entanglement of their lives and spaces with the state turns into their progressive integration and inclusion into power sharing. Their incorporation into the state should be considered in terms of marginalization rather than integration. In other words, they remain excluded from a “historical bloc” of power. By this, Gramsci considered the organic integration of state and civil society but that which encompasses different degrees and multiple forms of integration of dominant and subaltern groups. In present-day Benin, this historical bloc looks like the merger of local governance, state institutions, NGOs, and customary politics (with the World Bank and other international development organizations

lurking in the background). This creates hierarchies that award different groups with different privileges. Although Fulani are incorporated, they are so in an explicitly marginalized position. Scholarship on postcolonial worlds, like the work of Partha Chatterjee (2003), has notably argued that Gramsci's theory is outdated in these contexts in which the state no longer confronts the peasantry as an external entity but has become an internal aspect of everyday peasant life. Nevertheless, this does not solve the problem that Gramsci highlighted of the uneven incorporation into the historical configuration of power of some subaltern groups, as is the case in northwest Benin for Fulani.

Disorganic moral economies

In this context of marginalization, we should wonder how Fulani communities in Donga try to react to their condition. As we will see, they actually face some dilemmas in their attempts to "adapt" to their uneven integration and dependence to the local and national historical bloc represented by governance: between resistance and accommodation, between settling in town or remaining in their scattered villages, between persisting with extensive pastoral activities or trying to "modernize them." These refer to moral rather than political dilemmas: actually, studying subaltern forms of resistance, scholars have often focused not on actions, practices, and discourses that are explicitly political, but rather on infrapolitical popular modes of resisting domination and exploitation, especially referring to people's distance to power in defining values and in thinking social justice. Many of them, like Scott, have notably referred to this by using E. P. Thompson's (1971) notion of "moral economy." Referring to the colonization of East Asia, for example, Scott (1976) has taken this concept as a set of economic and moral values inscribed in popular groups' culture as opposed to an exogenous and invading economic system like the capitalist and market-oriented one. This leads to a sort of opposition between a popular

"moral economy" and the exogenous one explained as an opposition between "traditional" and "modern" values. I will now test this theoretical framework for the case of the Fulani in the Donga region.

At first sight, Fulani communities with pastoral origins seem to perfectly fit Scott's category of "ungoverned peoples," as they prolong the forms of resistance to statehood typical of their long history of nomadism and exteriority (Ciavolella 2015). Nowadays, they develop tactics and strategies to keep the state and economic development policies at a distance. Especially the herder newcomers from eastern Benin and northern Nigeria have strategies for hiding cattle to avoid taxation, and their high mobility enables them to flee conflicts, evade administrative control, and preserve their activities. Despite social fragmentation, geographical scattering, and absence of political unity, the Fulani of Donga are even capable of engaging in a form of infrapolitical collective action, called *mabaama*. This is the act of "boycotting" people, such as urban butchers and rich cattle traders, who discriminate or try to cheat them in the ambiguous realm of market exchanges and monetary values.

From a strictly economic point of view, the crisis of rural activities and their chronic poverty impels Fulani to diversify their activities, and especially to orient themselves toward income-generating activities. First, rural villages try to integrate into the market economy by relying on their pastoral production, gaining monetary resources while preserving or even developing their "traditional" activity. But moves in that direction are often dictated by necessity rather than by choice. Fulani can work as hired herders (*biiro*) for the "big hats," who also invest in livestock. These urban investors can finance modernized systems of farming animals in big ranches so that livestock becomes a highly profitable—and self-reproducing—financial asset. The *biiro* contract mixes salaried and in-kind labor. Referring to the same process going on in the Sahel more than three decades ago, André Bourgeot (1981) considered it a system of capitalist accumulation that extracts profits from *biiro*'s work and "real-

izes” livestock value by selling it on the market. Despite this, hired herders consider their work a unique possibility to earn money. More generally, Fulani communities would like to equally engage in commercial activities, but livestock markets remain inaccessible for their undernourished and weak cattle, since marketplaces are monopolized by big traders and controlled by privileged groups.

A similar thing occurs in women’s activities, especially in their attempts to sell milk and milk derivatives, like cheese, on urban markets. Exchanging milk and cheese with neighboring farming communities for grains and other amenities is a traditional female activity among the Fulani of Donga and among pastoralist societies more generally. In the Fulani pastoral economy, this was considered a complementary activity to male herding production. Now it is a crucial gateway to the outside world and the main income-generating activity. A literate “leader of women” (*goliido e rewbe*), working for the local branch of the national association of herders, has recently been trying to support the channeling of this traditional activity toward urban markets. This strategy of grafting a traditional activity of women on the modern market should be considered an attempt to coherently “translate” pastoral notions of values associated with milk to capitalist market values. In the pastoral economy, milk (*kossam*) is both the symbol of and the material basis for subsistence and reproduction and is thus emblematic for economic autonomy. Cultural values associated with milk are likely to be clashing with its use as a commodity, while the ideal of self-reliance is likely to be clashing with the necessity of social interaction and economic dependence imposed by market and monetary circuits.

Anthropological literature has often treated pastoral societies and market economies as two different spheres, in which values attached to commodities refer to two opposing moral economies: pastoral life and the market. This is notably the case in the Comaroffs’ (1990) analysis of conflicting values attached to cattle in local and capitalist circuits in Southern Africa. In

Sharon Hutchinson’s (1996) study on the Nuer, traditional and market-related values of cattle and herding production can coexist in a sort of moral-economic duality, but in any case, there is a clear distinction between them. In Ferguson’s (1985, 1990) analysis of anti-political development initiatives for the modernization of herding activities conflicting with local and pastoral rationalities in Lesotho, the latter show to have their proper rationality in a context of integration into the market economy. Among the Fulani women of Donga, the integration of urban and monetary market circuits for selling milk and cheese is perceived as what we should call a “translation” of value from the traditional sphere to the market sphere and back. “No milk, no money” (*Kosam wallaa ceede wallaa*) is a typical adage that Fulani women have insistently repeated in our conversations, expressing their willingness to convert the traditional value of milk into money. But this is not simply a typical conversion, in Marxist terms, of the milk value to money, induced by the universal and uniformizing forces of commodification. It is also a process reinforcing the traditional value of milk. Actually, it is always milk, even in the form of money, that provides women with what they need for sustaining and reproducing their community.

These attempts to willingly engage with market circuits and to convert milk into money are risky. Actually, the women associations for the milk trade vanished as soon as their “leader” (*janguo*, i.e., “literate”) disappeared, showing local communities’ dependence on rural leaders and representatives for organizing activities. But another problem is the weakness of Fulani milk and cheese trade power in the face of big wholesalers that operate on the national milk market and export cheese to the biggest cities in the south. Cheese wholesalers are essentially “big women”—as people call them—and are members of urbanized *Haabe* communities. They source from Fulani producers and easily sideline Fulani women traders through their great bargaining power not least because they can extract a much higher surplus value by collecting

and transporting great amounts of cheese with motorized vehicles to city markets some hundreds of kilometers away.

A more significant conflict between different “moral economies” emerges in relation to the choices and aspirations of younger generations: this is a conflict of choices between elders and youngsters that the social actors themselves often translate as an opposition between “tradition” (*lawol fulfulde*, the “pastoral way of the Fulani”) and its end, alternatively represented as a settled mode of life or as “following the Whites.” With the crisis of herding activities, the hardship of farming activities, and the attraction of new modes of living and consumption, young people are increasingly eager to leave their village communities and to go for “adventure” (*wayne*). They leave occasionally for cities in the south but more often for neighboring Nigeria, where they hope to find some income-generating activities in its big informal economy. Their “moral economy” increasingly concerns values such as money and personal affirmation, which is in stark contrast with the pastoral mode of life and its values, at least as they are explicitly affirmed as collective values by the elders. This is likely to produce a sort of moral dilemma and even conflicts inside Fulani communities. Youngsters consider cattle a useless form of capital and village life boring, while their parents hesitate between sending them away to look for money or obliging them to stay and preserve the rural activities. Actually, people are aware that economic diversification and income-generating activities are the only means on which the “traditional” community could survive. But such shifts also generate problems and menaces. People often blame young adventurers for forgetting their parents and wasting monetary resources instead of multiplying them like herders did with cattle. Many young migrants often come back from Nigeria to the village with nothing but motorbikes, which, actually, allow for greater mobility between villages and cities. Young adventurers are accused of using them for stealing animals and amenities from the rural villages of their own community.

The cases presented here, from resisting herders, to women engaged in market activities, to young adventurers, show that Fulani communities in Donga find themselves in an ambiguous position when confronting their social and economic crisis and their integration into a wider system of political powers and economic circuits and moralities. Their changing exposure to market circuits and to local governance dynamics deepens their marginality while also opening a social sphere in which communities see the only opportunity to emancipate from their situation. Regarding the Nuer, Hutchinson (1996) rightly considers these ambiguous relations to “modernity” as a source of moral and ethical “dilemmas.” Actually, the Fulani of Donga hesitate in engaging completely in economic diversification (especially in trade and in state-related and NGO-related jobs) and local governance, because these domains are part of a larger social system that excludes them. But, at the same time, the nostalgia for past pastoral autonomy and traditions (*tawangal*, literally “what we found at birth”) is only a rhetorical revival. Extended herding activities have become unmanageable. In any case, this contradictory coexistence of different moral economies certainly brings to the surface people’s attempts and willingness to react to their situations and to oppose to the frustration of their individual and collective aspirations. Nevertheless, some of these actions are, to use Gramsci’s categories, only “defensive” tactics of circumvention or resistance and are unable to structurally change the position of Fulani communities in the local social, economic, and political arena. Others are only attempts to better integrate into the economic or the political systems, which exclude them, showing how they are, as “subaltern” groups, persistently “subject to the initiative” of others (Gramsci 1975: Q3, §46, 323; Q25).

Attempts of “organic” intellectuals at forming “autonomous initiatives”

In the past decade, some Fulani “intellectuals” of Donga have tried to socially organize and

politically mobilize their constituencies, with the aims of changing their condition of marginality and crisis and of fixing the contradiction between different moral economies. This introduces the issue, which is crucial in a Gramscian perspective, of political and intellectual leadership and representation—especially in situations of weak political mobilization of subaltern groups. How can an “autonomous political initiative” take form? How can it trespass limits and constraints to politicization imposed by structure and history?

The emergence of a small and still hesitating political and intellectual leadership among the Fulani of Donga is related to different factors, from religion, especially evangelism, to education and the development of an associative movement of Fulani people at the national and international level. Regarding religion, both Islam and evangelism have been expanding among these communities for the past four decades. Religious precepts and practices are certainly seen as a response to the situation of moral crisis and ethical dilemmas, but they are also perceived as a way for social emancipation. Islam in particular is linked to the possibility of connecting people to large regional economic and religious networks and a factor for increasing individual social prestige. Compared to Islam, evangelical churches involve only a small minority of Fulani, but their message insists more on the issue of a “secular” emancipation through education and culture.

According to a globally applied theory of emancipation of “unreached peoples,” the idea of the evangelical churches in northwest Benin is that, in order to obtain spiritual salvation, marginalized communities must “modernize” without forgetting their traditional cultural values. In this perspective of “grafting” modernity onto Fulani cultures, the few converted communities have been invited to approach infrastructures, markets, schools, and the administration and to send children to evangelical schools combining alphabetization in Fulfulde and a “modern” program in French. In the 1980s and 1990s, these schools only appeared in some Fulani villages

of the neighboring region of Borgou, so only a dozen Fulani children of converted villages of Djougou were educated. But after also having gained work experience in Borgou, where Fulani (*Barguube*) have been better integrated into state systems and schools since colonial times, this small minority of intellectuals became an active leading group for the “development” of their Fulani communities in Djougou. The example of the Fulani of Borgou has been very important. Here, some “intellectuals” had engaged, since the 1980s, in a series of initiatives and activities for the recognition of the Fulani people’s cultural specificity, for an autonomous form of economic development, and for their right to participate in the distribution of state and development resources and in the decision-making processes. First, the Fulani of Borgou developed autonomous cattle markets for local Fulani to circumvent the control of privileged intermediaries (*dilaali*) over the cattle trade. Significantly, this market system is called *huumooji mareefuujisago*, which literally means “the herders’ market according to their own will.” In 1986, the most important Beninese Fulani figures funded a national association for the cultural and linguistic defense and improvement of the Fulani people (*Laawol Fulfulde*, the “Fulani way”), as Bierschenk (1995) has extensively attested. This association mixes discourses and practices that promote cultural defense and ethnic recognition (like grassroots operations of alphabetization) with discourses and practices that promote cultural “modernization,” insisting on the importance of Fulani attending schools and successfully participating in state and urban affairs. Around the year 2000, this Borgou-centered national movement reoriented its efforts from cultural issues toward economic ones, with the establishment of an association for the breeding of cattle and small ruminants (ANOPER) at the regional level and then at the national level. The association’s efforts are aimed at transforming traditional pastoral activities, based essentially on extensive and mobile herding (*durude*), into “modern” ones, like breeding (*marude*) and livestock farming and ranching, oriented to the

trade of cattle products on markets (Onibon 2004).

Some of the few Fulani “intellectuals” of Donga have worked in these associations in Borgou and then tried to import them to their region of origin, especially since 2000. As the two national associations did, their local branches have tried to take roots in Donga by playing a sort of mediation or translating role between what is seen as a pastoral heritage and a necessary modernization of society. This is clear in the cultural association, with the mix between identity defense and the promotion of social improvement through culture and education, and in the professional association, with modern breeding activities being seen as a welcome innovation, changing the pastoral economy while representing a unique opportunity to preserve it under current circumstances. It is tempting to interpret these mediations between traditional and modernizing discourses as an attempt to tactically solve the moral ambiguity that we have previously seen among the Fulani, leading society toward change and development while rhetorically insisting on ethnic identity, cultural values, and traditions. In a similar way, this is also an attempt to mediate between openness and autonomy: the integration into state and local politics, to market circuits, to the development world of NGOs, and so on is presented as the opportunity to recover political, social, cultural, and economic autonomy. In a way, intellectuals try to create an “organic” interconnection between incoherent values and aspirations found in these communities.

This is even more obvious in another development in Donga. Local branches have separated from *Laawol Fulfulde* and ANOPER and have established Donga-centered associations insisting on the specificity of the local Fulani, their marginality compared with other Fulani groups, and their complete exclusion from the allocation procedures of NGO projects, development resources, and state initiatives. The new local association is called “Let’s rise up” (*En um-mee*) but is also known as “the change of mentalities” (*Waynungo hakillo*). The association aims

to reinforce alphabetization and education of Fulani communities, to modernize pastoral activities, and to promote the integration of local economies into market circuits and of villages into local governance. But all this is discursively framed with an insistence on “autonomy.” The deception with the promises of development, politics, and national association explains this reorientation to self-reliance (*sagoo*), where openings to the outer world are considered the necessary strategy for recovering a form of political, economic, social, and cultural autonomy.

These strategies are extremely clever, but their outcomes are still undetermined if we look at them from the point of view of local communities. Certainly, the people I interviewed usually consider the work of these intellectuals as necessary for collectively getting out of marginality. In Donga, Fulani use the word *janngudo* (plural *janngube*), literally meaning “literate,” to refer to their eventual “representative,” merging the idea of “intellectual” and “political leader”: someone who could operate not only as the interface between community and the outer world but also as a vanguard for negotiating their definitive integration into it. Actually, these illiterate communities generally consider the acquisition of a new type of “culture,” “knowledge,” or “consciousness” (*hakillo*, *annal*, *wumtere*) as the only strategy for coping with “modernity.” This new culture would inevitably provoke a definitive cultural drift away from what is seen as traditional, especially as it is inextricably linked with sedentarization. That is why people see having “intellectuals” represent them politically as the only solution for having a *place* in local and national development. However, the analysis of *janngube* attempts to emancipate these communities from marginality raises the question of whether these intellectuals are capable of establishing an “organic” link of representation with their constituencies as proposed by Gramsci (1975: Q4 §49).

As geographically scattered, socially fragmented, and politically unorganized communities, the Fulani of Donga need intellectuals as political leaders who know how the outside

world works and how to manage the relationship with state and market global forces. Such predisposition would seem to confirm Marx's famous statement about the impossibility of the "peasantry" to represent itself and thus its need for someone to represent them. Indeed, being a *janngube* also means to be "different" and to have a social and a cultural gap compared with the people the "intellectual" is supposed to represent. Leaders are people whose social trajectories differ from that of most of their relatives, having accessed modern schools or religious and ethnic networks that promote a cultural and moral awakening. This cultural and social exceptionality is exactly what grants them the legitimacy needed for representing their communities of origin.

As several critical theorists have argued, from Pierre Bourdieu (1981) to Gayatri Spivak (2010), political representation risks being perceived as a form of betrayal of the people's will. Creating an organic link between representatives and the people is a hard task. In Donga, if, on the one hand, people need leaders with a "different" consciousness to interact with "modernity," they have, on the other hand, a fundamental distrust for these engaged leaders—politicians or intellectuals—precisely because they perceive them as "different." Leaders have historically been incorporated into state-centered circuits and into important national networks, which have partially disconnected them from the interests and aspirations of the people they presumably represent. Their mobilizations can be very successful for the leaders themselves in political, social, and economic terms, but they hardly succeed in tackling the political and economic dynamics that determine the marginalization of their constituencies.

This seems to confirm the position of scholars, such as Spivak (2010), who have emphasized the impossibility for intellectuals to be subaltern people's representatives and to be "organically" linked to them, as long as their status puts them in a position of exteriority while subaltern people's culture and aspirations remain impenetrable. Nevertheless, despite these theorists' references to the Gramscian notion of

"subaltern," the organic quality of intellectuals vis-à-vis subaltern people was for Gramsci not exclusively of a sociological type (1975: Q12 §1). It is not a matter of measuring the degree of social difference or of identification between the base and the leadership. In the Gramscian sense, the organic quality of intellectuals should be rather cultural and political. Culturally, they must intercept subaltern forms of resistance by understanding people through an empathic "sentimental connection." Politically, they should transform and inscribe subaltern forms of resistance into a broader and political project for transforming society. Therefore, in a Gramscian perspective, a political project should be capable of not only expressing subaltern cultures and aspirations but also guiding this subalternity toward emancipation and historically transforming subaltern groups into historical and political subjects.

Janngube's attempts at social and political mobilization of their Fulani constituencies are probably not a clear, successful example of subaltern people taking an "autonomous political initiative." This is for two reasons. First, their insistence on "autonomy" as a value in the political, social, cultural, and economic realms might be misleading. Their aims are to better integrate into a system—made of schools, markets, local governance, state institutions, and translocal networks—that in fact reproduces a ladder of marginality. To use Gramscian categories, their political initiatives remain "subject to the initiatives" of others (Q3, §46, 323; Q25), without aiming at transforming the moral grammars and the structural dynamics of the current historical bloc. Thus, "autonomy" is likely to appear as a rhetorical tool not for transforming the whole society but to get social recognition of their condition of marginality to be finally included in "modern" society. Second, *janngube* certainly try to make their initiative "organic," both in fixing contradictions in marginal Fulani's moral economies and in building a political bond between themselves and their constituencies. But these often remain hesitating attempts, which their constituencies always judge depending on the actual results of their initiatives.

Conclusion

As Gledhill (2012: 13) reminds us, for Gramsci “even subaltern practices that sought to change the social order of things would never be sufficient to create a new society without the guidance of the party and its intellectuals. Yet these practices would have an impact on how rule was accomplished—through the existing hegemony—by affecting the overall balance of social and political forces.” As a Marxist and a political activist, Gramsci considered resistances and subaltern cultures as politically meaningful, but only under the condition that they are integrated into a broader political project for changing society. In his words, “popular spontaneity” and “conscious leadership” must come together, the one relying on the other. For Gramsci, a real Marxism, as a philosophy of praxis (that is, both a philosophy and a political project) must take into account social transformation by integrating even the most marginal communities and their spontaneous forms of politics into the historical process of taking political initiative. In other words, Gramsci called for a theory and a practice for elevating popular resistances to a higher degree of politicization as the sole alternative to the political inactivity of the masses in a context of depoliticization and fatalism. Considering my ethnographic experience among subaltern Fulani communities in Benin, it is fair to say that what is lacking is not the capacity to resist political domination or to produce alternative moral economies in response to economic injustices. Lacking is rather a political project to emancipate them from a condition of marginality and to change the national or global constraints that structure their lives. Nevertheless, the hesitating social and political initiatives of *janngube* leaders could be considered as the attempt of a subaltern group to mobilize and become a political subject.

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Riccardo Ciavolella is an anthropologist at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) and a member of the Interdisciplinary Institute of Anthropology of the Contemporary (IIAC) at the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, where he teaches political anthropology. His research focuses on a Gramscian interpretation of politics among subaltern groups, especially in West Africa and Europe. He is the author of *Les Peuls et l'Etat en Mauritanie: Une anthropologie des marges* (Karthala, 2010), *Antropologia politica e contemporaneità: Un'indagine critica sul potere* (Mimesis, 2013), and *Introduction à l'anthropologie du politique* (DeBoeck, 2016).

Email: riccardo.ciavolella@ehess.fr

Note

1. I use the style internationally accepted in Gramscian studies for referring to Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, in their first complete edition in Italian edited by Valentino Gerratana in 1975.

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