A Tribute to René Devisch

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It was by pure curiosity that I accepted CODESRIA's request for comments on the address by Professor René Devisch on the occasion of his acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the University of Kinshasa. As a Congolese intellectual, I am ashamed to admit that I did not know who RD was until I read this speech, which greatly impressed me by its brilliance and the lessons that this Belgian scholar of Flemish extraction has learned from his anthropological practice among the Yaka of the DRC.

My ignorance of the work of RD is symptomatic of my general ignorance of the work of anthropologists, even though some of the people whose work I have greatly admired happen to be anthropologists or have engaged in anthropological research. In addition to having read Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Balandier and Melville Herskovits, I was a student of Jan Vansina at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a close friend of the late Elliott Skinner, the Franz Boas Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. Skinner's immersion in Mossi culture and values is quite similar to the admiration and sense of kinship that RD displays with respect to the Yaka.

With Devisch, as with much of anthropological production in the era of post-imperial and postcolonial studies, anthropology has been transformed from its origin as the colonial science *par excellence* into an extremely innovative and illuminating body of knowledge on the struggles of the multitude to make sense of the contemporary world and to find security and make ends meet in the face of the challenges of globalisation. It is therefore not surprising that in the last three years, during which I served as a member of the Herskovits Award Committee of the African Studies Association (ASA) of the United States, the most interesting books among the 150 or so books submitted for the best book award have come from anthropologists and historians.

The educational itinerary of RD in the Congo was enriched first by the mental decolonisation promoted by progressive intellectuals like Auguste Mabika Kalanda, but also and more importantly by his full immersion into the life and culture of a local village community. Going to the school of the people, as Frantz Fanon advised revolutionary intellectuals to do in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, allows one to see the world from a totally new perspective, and one that differs radically with the dominant Eurocentric vision of reality.

A very interesting example in this regard is Devisch's characterisation of the popular participation in the military-initiated violence of September 1991 and January–February 1993 in Kinshasa as 'Jacqueries'or popular uprisings. From the standpoint of the authorities and the press, these events are simply described as '*pillages*' or acts of looting. So what started as officially engineered acts of indiscipline by the military in a strategy of what Amnesty International then called 'violence against democracy' was taken over by ordinary people as political protest against an unjust and repressive social order.

In this regard, the anthropologist has a comparative advantage over other social scientists by the very proximity of his/her practice to the lives, discourse and even bodily gestures of ordinary people as historical actors. Anthropological witness thus provides an objective and credible interpretation of reality by describing it from the standpoint of ordinary people, who like to *tell it as it is*, rather than from that of the dominant classes, who have a vested interest in justifying the status quo. This is the most important methodological lesson that Barrington Moore teaches on objectivity in the social sciences in his monumental work *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World.* As victims of the historical process, ordinary people have nothing to lose from an objective analysis of the realities. For Moore, as for RD, objective scholarship is attempting to tell it like it is, that is, as close as possible to the way history is understood not by the elites, but by ordinary people.

At the same time, nothing should be done to romanticise all the positions taken by ordinary people. Take, for example, the proliferation of faith-healing churches in the DRC, through which numerous people hope to find their salvation from growing poverty and its consequences for health and life in general. With scoundrels of all kinds purporting to perform miracles and solve difficult problems quickly for those who can afford to pay, anthropologists like RD, who have an intimate knowledge of these establishments, should once again put their science and knowledge at the service of the people, so as to protect them from these false prophets.

In closing my remarks, I would like to thank CODESRIA for inviting comments on this brilliant address by RD. It bears witness to an outstanding tradition of anthropological practice that CODESRIA ought to continue promoting in Africa.