

Abstract

The Politics of Moral Economy. Some considerations from the field (Ivory Coast, Uzbekistan)

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By the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, a lot of researches have been done on the subject of entrepreneurship, in developing countries. A high number of them followed a sort of culturalist trend, trying to explain for instance by cultural specificities the failure of African entrepreneurs or the success of their counterparts from South-East Asia. Indeed, most of these works have tried to enlighten the ethics (or ethos) of business activities in various contexts. It has become common, for instance, to consider the strong links between businessmen and political elite in Africa, and to characterise these two categories by their social obligations to redistribute a part of the riches they accumulate, in order to legitimate their social position or social/political rank.

Some ethnological research that I have conducted in Ivory Coast in the early 1990s show that the cultural pattern does not function so well to understand the local moral values tied to business and accumulation : the Ivoirien society itself considered as illegitimate the 'African' entrepreneurs, compared to their 'European' counterparts, precisely because they accused them of 'eating' the funds of the factories for their political allies, or for the benefit of their family or the co-villagers, exactly as they accused the political elite of having 'eaten' and consumed the nation's wealth, leading it to its ruin. I would like to argue in this paper that specific 'moral economies' that one can observe in particular contexts is, indeed, not a question of 'cultural' understanding, but rather the result of a political history. I will illustrate this point of view by two examples, in Ivory Coast and Uzbekistan, to explain how societies make sense of their economic environment to qualify the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their political and economic elite.