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Out of the Penkelemes:
The ECOWAS Project as Transformation

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Abdourahmane Idrissa*

Abstract

This paper uses the case of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to argue (1) that "development as liberalization" effectively sustains poverty and economic decline or stagnation in the types of countries that make up the membership of that community, and (2) that regionalism may be a source of alternative, more helpful policy. Despite continuous reformatory thrust, the "development as liberalization" strategy has so far failed to alter the unfair social contracts of West African states, essentially because that *would* entail altering the international economic system into which those social contracts are ultimately anchored, an impossible proposition. Taking stock of this, I examine the ECOWAS project in light of the alternative solutions that it potentially harbors, especially as it promotes "economic transformation," in addition to "development as liberalization". The key question for the future of ECOWAS, I will eventually argue, lies in the way in which it will either create a productive compatibility between these two options, or at least prevent the now dominant one from smothering the one which I claim is more promising.

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[1] A neologism coined in Ibadan (Nigeria)'s vernacular, and rendering the English phrase "peculiar mess" often used by populist politician Chief Adegoke Adelabu.

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Introduction: Development as Liberalization versus Economic Transformation

While Economic Transformation has always been with us – from the days when we moved from polishing stones to cutting them – Development as Liberalization is historically very recent and does not reach farther back than the nineteenth century. A corollary of free trade in the age of nation-states, the concept offers solutions for creating national prosperity through international commerce. It is only one concept of development among many that appeared in Europe or the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nation-states could also develop prosperity through industrialization, i.e., moving away from a prevailingly agriculture economy. However, that process is very costly in terms of capital investments, social disruptions and political stability, and is thought to necessarily involve revolutions or at least major social upheavals. Development through liberalization is apparently not so demanding. Nation-states only need to create macroeconomic stability and make the most of their comparative advantages in trade. Comparative advantages in the production of primary commodity offer only low returns at best – forms of diminishing returns at worse – but still, an income accrues, and must be soundly managed to avoid slipping further down into poverty. Liberal economic policy, it is advanced, offers the best solutions for this mode of operation.

Development as liberalization became the dominant theme in how developing countries should organize themselves in the late 1970s, and it has spawned a string of reforms (the structural adjustment programs and their follow-ups) which did produce some results. It should not be confused, by the way, with liberalization. Liberalization is an economic policy which can be applied in all kinds of economies, either "developed" or "developing", wisely or unwisely. Development as liberalization, on the other hand, is a development strategy – related therefore to developing countries – that is conceived on the basis of the economic policy of liberalization, making of the latter a full package of policies, and not just a strategy used at convenience following good advice. That is why its modus operandi ends up being so similar to that of the modernization national development plans that preceded it, and for the failures of which it claims to be a remedy. It runs blanket plans, only in this case constructed in relation to the market, or the private sector, rather than to the state (the public sector) as before. Thus, although there are small adjustments in relation to local politics, the idea is that all countries should do the same thing, at roughly the same pace, and on the basis of the same criteria. In recent times, the idea of the "sustainability" of development as well as preoccupation for "poverty" have added some new elements to the concept, and the policy packages it produces now have typically three components: trade liberalization, sustainable development and poverty reduction. But these are simply incorporated into the plans, without modifying their central procedure.

It is this blanket approach that I find deeply problematic, and opposed to the idea of Economic Transformation. The blanket approach is deductive and moves from an understanding of universal motivations and abstract values to applications in particular circumstances and specific national norms. The latter, when they are not found to be irrelevant, constitute only a set of problems to be overcome, so that the plan could work. But the plan is paramount, and nation-states must change their organization in order to meet its criteria. It is not clear that their efforts will actually be rewarded. By now, we probably have all heard of what Jeffrey Sachs said about Bolivia in this regard:

> "I always told the Bolivians, from the very beginning, that what you have here is a miserable, poor economy with hyperinflation. If you are brave, if you are gutsy, if you do everything right, you will end up with a miserable, poor economy with stable prices." (*Harper's Magazine*, May 2003, 6).

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And stable prices are the right thing to have – but more importantly, things will (barred some extraordinary windfall from the world economic stratosphere) remain unchanged. There will be no transformation.

In contrast to this, Economic Transformation – the view which I think normally predominated everywhere in the world before the nineteenth century when it comes to improving people's conditions – is inductive, nominalist and dynamic. It starts with the specific realities on the ground – social, political, environmental – to work out a response which may profit from experience (of self and others) and comparison (of self to others), but is not written anywhere in the sacred tablets of development books. Its main premise is that if the present condition is unwholesome, it must be improved. A "miserable, poor economy" is unwholesome, and must be transformed. At least – I am pretty sure – that is what Bolivians would think, and I don't see that they merit less attention than Jeffrey Sachs. Liberalization mechanisms may be relied upon only as they are understood to contribute to the improvements. And I claim, in this paper, that ECOWAS is essentially an exercise in such improvements.

To demonstrate this point and argue my central claims, I have organized this paper in the following manner: the first section describes in some general terms the "ECOWAS project", that is to say why and how it has come to propose a very specific West African doctrine of integration, mostly in the late 1980s. The second section uses empirical accounts (from Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso) to illustrate the challenge posed to ECOWAS by West Africa's reigning social contracts. And I then conclude in a third section with a very brief discussion of the relationships between Development as Liberalization and Economic Transformation with regards to ECOWAS' future.

I. The ECOWAS Doctrine and West Africa's Peculiarities

A brief description of West Africa's political-economic geography is perhaps necessary, to understand the nature of the ECOWAS project. The description offered here takes inspiration from a 1998 Sahel and West Africa Club's study of general conditions in the region, even though I do not take that study's particular slant for granted.[2]

The study divides West Africa in three sub-regions, in terms of economic orientation: the Gulf of Guinea, the Atlantic façade, and the large landlocked countries. The first group comprises the heart of the region's economy – Nigeria – , the two regional heavyweight of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria's undersized satellites of Benin and Togo and, to the east, Cameroon (which is not a member of ECOWAS[3]). Nigeria has roughly half the region's population, 50 percent of which is urbanized (above regional average), about 80 percent of the region's university graduates, high-quality

[2] The study, "Preparing for the Future: A Vision of West Africa in the Year 2020" was commissioned in 1991 and published in 1998 – so it does not register the re-activation of ECOWAS, which occurred in the mid-1990s. The authors see West African economies chiefly in terms of structural geographic/economic determinants and trade relations, providing thus an enlightening background vision of the region, albeit one that feels somewhat fatalistic. In particular, they have little regard for history.

[3] Cameroon's economy is functionally connected to that of Nigeria, but the country was historically, under colonization, part of the AEF federation (French Equatorial Africa), which evolved into the somewhat substandard (compared to ECOWAS) regional economic grouping of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC). This effectively cut off Cameroon from formal linkages with West African integration.

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infrastructure (roads and communications, though not electricity), and a dynamic small manufacturing sector despite the failure of industrialization policy in the 1980s. More importantly, Nigeria produces 50 percent of West Africa's growth rate potential and is at the controlling center of the narrow strip of economic activity along the coast, from Yaoundé (Cameroon) to Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire), which accounts for over 80 percent of regional GRP. We shall also see, in the next section of this paper, the crucial importance of this part of West Africa to the emergence of the region's social contracts.

Lining up north-west-west on the coast are the countries of the Atlantic façade, which, in their southern quarter (Sierra-Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau) might easily be integrated into the Gulf of Guinea powerhouse – provided that Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire stabilize – and in their northern quarter (Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania[4]) are turned toward Europe, North Africa and North America through trade, emigration and extensive international aid. Senegal is the regional economy most dependent on international transfers and remittance, and the level of aid it receives beats that extended to the poorer countries in the Sahelian interior.

And finally there are the large landlocked countries of the Sahel – Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – which have the region's lowest GDP per capita, lowest rates of urbanization and most vulnerable environment. While the specifics of their economy give them a distinct set of opportunities and (mostly) challenges, they are turned toward the Gulf of Guinea economy as labor reserves and trading partners.

This general context translates in a political configuration which in fact set Nigeria apart from all other West African states, in the sense that only Nigeria has the level of state revenues and implication in the world market which enables its rulers to devise independent policies.[5] ECOWAS was initially one such policy, developed in the mid-1970s as a mainstay of Nigeria's foreign policy, most likely for purely ideological reasons.

In contrast to all other West African countries (with perhaps the exception of Cote d'Ivoire), Nigeria had from the outset the option of either focusing on its own, exclusively national development agenda, or creating deep-seated relationships with and commitments to neighboring states in bilateral and multilateral agreements. The first option would not have necessarily impaired Nigeria's welfare, and might have provided specific benefits while also dispensing the country from making the sacrifices needed for the promotion of regional integration. Successive Nigerian leaderships saw however this as "isolation" and apparently did not have the insular Victorian British gusto for rendering it "splendid" (i.e., unwavering). In fact, the Nigerian ministry of external affairs continuously invested resources to build West African integration into an unimpeachable development doctrine, one which is, for all intents and purposes, Nigeria's only option forward. The main rationale is the same invoked by European countries: small neighboring countries need to pull together to resist or counterbalance the heft of the world's giants. This makes sense enough, and my objective here is not to discuss ECOWAS' origins, but to describe its project, and the best place to start may well be an examination of the self-presentation of the doctrine as elaborated by Nigeria's foreign policy people.

In 1987, the Nigerian ministry of external affairs and its academic arm, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, organized a colloquium to take stock of ECOWAS performance over the decade

[4] Mauritania left ECOWAS in 2001, attracted by the non-functional Union of the Arab Maghrib (UMA) for cultural identity reasons.
[5] While the country faces vital governance dilemma, it is certainly the fact that it never descended in the chaos that engulfed several of Africa's potential economic powerhouses (Sudan and Congo) that accounts for West Africa's relative regional success

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and so through which it had existed, and the book that was subsequently published (*Nigeria and the Ecowas since 1975: Towards a Dynamic Regional Integration*, 1991) defined West African integration as a unique form of integration, one, at any rate, that was essentially different from the European process, despite the fact that the latter might serve on certain levels as a model. In particular, it was asserted, West African integration must rely much more than the European does, on "dynamic factors of integration", and much less on "static factors", in a combination that is seen as especially relevant to developing economies. The conclusion derives from a cross-examination of the prevalent theories of regional integration (functionalist, neo-functionalist, and "traditional"), in relation to circumstances in West Africa.

The functionalist view of integration was especially fashionable in the years immediately following World War II, when the notion of developing the third world (then mostly included in European colonial empires) took shape.[6] Its central plank was to internationalize key functional needs – transportation, health, welfare programs, technical aspects of cultural activities, trade and production – without requiring that states surrender sovereignty, at least initially. Exponents of this theory assumed that the ensuing ramifications of "material interdependence" would incrementally displace sovereign egoism and develop a large web of international cooperation, rendering national borders by and large functionally irrelevant. In particular, David Mitrany (the earliest functionalist theorist of integration) thought that the political and economic functions of states are inseparable, meaning that the internationalization of economic functions would necessarily lead in due time – starting perhaps with non-controversial, low-profile collective needs – to the internationalization of political functions as well.

This contention, while compelling in the abstract, runs counter the fact that (in our context of interest) the fledgling post-colonial African states felt the critical urge to establish their sovereignty, and especially to legitimize the state through responding rapidly and as substantially as possible to demands from *domestic* society. Moreover functionalists cannot point to instances when society actually transfers expectations and loyalty from their home state to international organizations. Neither the high quality performance of international organizations (such as in some sectors of European integration), nor the failure or even absence of the state (such as for instance in Palestine) generally motivate citizens to pledge allegiance to international organizations. The authors of the ECOWAS study note that,

> "The [East African] Community had a well organised East African Airways which served the three Member States, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. In spite of this, however, Kenyan industrialists persistently argued for a separately-operated national airways, on the grounds that the sub-regional one was inefficient and did not adequately serve their growing requirements." (Nigeria and the ECOWAS, 3).

The point being that the industrialists did not press for an overhaul of the sub-regional company, but for its scrapping, chiefly because they wanted to use their relationship with the Kenyan state to further their business interests. From a functionalist viewpoint, the Kenyan industrialists should have been able to have such an enabling relationship with the ECA, but it is safe to say that this is not in the least preordained.

[6] The functionalist view of integration developed out of the interwar debate on the stabilization of Europe's fractious international politics, opposing in some sense a federalist view, and it was important in defining the early phase of European integration in the 1950s. But it was also applied in Sub-Saharan Africa, in an attempt to replicate Europe's achievement.

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Neo-functionalists distinguish economic and political functions, but posit an integration "continuum" through which countries move from a common market to political union. The power of integrative institutions gradually progresses through "spill-over" effects, as more and more decision-making come into their scope. They gain this leeway by being able to resolve disputes, stimulate the growth of transactions and consequently build international legal regimes, so that at one point, supranational markets would prevail over and replace national regulatory regimes. This process was at first thought to be automatic, based on the observation of goings-on at the European Community. But the theory was damaged when France, under President Charles de Gaulle, paralyzed the integration process in Europe through a policy of "empty chair" at the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community. This having proven that state "subjectivism" (Nigeria and the ECOWAS, 3) is not so easily soluble in automatic evolutions, the theory was salvaged by the recognition that "choices" made by member states are crucial to the process, in which, moreover, integrative and disintegrative tendencies create an inherent tension.

The ECOWAS study authors see two problems in this: (1) the process as revised by the neo-functionalists is "frustratingly gradual", which is especially perilous in a context of developing economies, and (2) the spill-over effects theory is a problem especially as spill-overs "imply a modification of national policies in industry, trade, agriculture and monetary policy" which, being vital to economic development, are highly political issues in developing countries:

> "In Africa, issues which are relatively non-controversial and solvable by technocrats in the European context, are generally problematic and require the attention of political leaders for solution" (Nigeria and the ECOWAS, 4).

We may doubt that there are (even in Europe) any inherently non-controversial issues in integration processes. Apparently indifferent or purely "technical" matters may, depending on the international climate, take an explosive salience and set out destabilizing ramifications – as has been recently the case of monetary policy in Europe's Euro zone and freedom of circulation in its Schengen zone. The important point here is that this is how the builders of Nigeria's vision for ECOWAS saw things at that critical juncture.[7]

The "traditional" theory of economic integration as developed by Jacob Viner and other liberal economists puts more emphasis on market factors of integration. Here, integration is seen not as the end (culminating in a form of political union), but as the means to enhanced economic cooperation. As such, it must be constructed (typically in a customs union) on the basis of a number of preconditions favoring "trade creation". The theory implies that all member states stand to benefit from the tariff wall created by the customs union through specializing in the industry in which they are the most efficient, and at the same time, in which they compete the least with other member states. Trade is "created" (instead of being "diverted") because in this way, all member countries gain from trading with each other while excluding third parties. For this to work, member countries must trade with each other and produce complementary, not competitive, products. In fact, integration considered in this way cannot be a universal strategy. Rather, it is an approach that can be adopted by a certain group of countries, not necessarily existing in the same part of the world, and for purely economic reasons. Moreover, it

[7] Obviously, what they had in view was not an African predisposition of not using technocrats to solve technical problems, but the lack of a developed state apparatus with large technocratic staff in member countries, which may leave much decision-making to be processed (or more generally left unprocessed) at the political level.

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is not clear that this form of integration would actually be beneficial for all member countries to the same extent, as different types of commodities do not have the same market value, and the ripple effect of specialization on domestic economies might be politically unsustainable in the long run for some parties in the compact.

Whatever the case, the ECOWAS study found this form of integration also unsuitable for West Africa, at least in its standard form. For one thing, the preconditions are missing. The bulk of West Africa's formal trade – the one which counts for state policy – is done with Western countries, and increasingly some of the BRICS countries as well, not among West African countries; moreover, nearly all of the region's countries compete in their commodities, instead of completing each other.[8]The most important problem seen here is a contradiction between the expectations that member countries, as developing countries, would have of ECOWAS, and the requisites of this form of integration. Any commitment of West African states to ECOWAS would be based on the notion that it will transform their economies, meaning, help move them from one general condition to another that is better. Static patterns of specialization do not look very enticing in this perspective, and the desired gain is sought in achieving economy of scale in production and investment, not necessarily trade creation. The hope would be that regional inputs (in terms of capital and raw material) would then displace the imported inputs that are so far – and in quite elusive ways at that – necessary to envision even low-grade industrialization.

By critiquing theories of economic and political integration in relation to the general conditions in West Africa, the study was in fact establishing a very specific doctrine, largely in opposition to the European model (idealized as a "developed countries" model), on the basis of which those theories were wrought out. In particular, it set up (mostly implicitly) the following oppositions[9]:

- European countries have firmly legitimate states; not West African countries.
- European states apparatuses are sophisticated, endowed with large technical staffs, stable revenues and a rational orientation toward cooperating with other states for mutual benefits; not West African states.
- European economies fulfill all the preconditions in the "traditional" theory; not West African economies.

The meaning of these oppositions is chiefly that, when it comes to integration, there is nearly nothing that West African "integrators" (a word used in the ECOWAS study) can take for granted and in no need of transformation. The region has "structural impediments" which must be tackled alongside the normal or formal process of integration, creating therefore West African specificities that are much more important for the reality of things than the master template. Approaching regional integration as a form of coordination for tackling "structural impediments", as well as organizing a formal process that holds state sovereignty in great respect, has indeed very specific implications, and set up a very distinctive project. The key implications of the project – those, in any case, that are important for this paper – are the following:

[8] This is far from true in the domain of informal trade, which some suspect to be proportionately as large as the formal trade with foreign lands, and which is so active in West Africa precisely because there is a high level of sectional complementarities.

[9] I am also relying for this summary on interviews especially at ECOWAS' trade department. In writing, the oppositions are described in terms of limitations of integration theories; in speech, they are described in terms of deep differences between circumstances in Europe and in Africa.

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- Given the central importance of state legitimacy, regional integration must at all cost strengthen, rather than undermine it.
- The better way to strengthen state legitimacy is to assist states in responding to "development issues" (response to "structural impediments").
- Ideally, regional integration must transform the structures of West African economy, and not simply organize them for predefined purposes ("dynamic integration").

So before concluding this section, let us examine each of these three points, as they are important in understanding the parameters of the discussion in the next two sections.

State Legitimacy: The issue of state legitimacy in African integrations is closely related, as some have pointed out (Simon, 2003; Söderbaum, 2004), to the issue of ruler's entrenchment in post-colonial regimes. The paradoxical situation of African states in the 1960s is that they had governments and a head of state, but almost no state apparatus worth the talk, and certainly no state class – such as the bourgeoisie in the West – in which to ground state power. Lacking also "traditional" or customary anchoring, rulers felt that their power was inherently fragile, and they resorted to all means to buttress it. The means that have been most charted in the literature are those tied to corruption and state violence, but there were also less destructive channels, among which commitment to regional integration must be counted. Rulers would use it only as it would be conducive to shoring up their power and staving the permanent threat of a coup d'état, and commitment to regional integration was early on included in the panoply of actions – another one being "development plans" in the 1960s-70s – which they thought would give them the air of responding to national needs. As a result, when rulers feel that regional isolation is a better strategy in relation to their particular circumstances, they do not favor integration processes – or they may favor certain kinds of integration against others[10]. Not all African leaderships are so strongly determined by the logics that derive from the post-colonial dilemma, but the parameters were general enough for ECOWAS to draw a near-principle from it. For the integration process to take off or move forward, it is thought, ruler's entrenchment and the effects on state legitimacy must be considered first, and the ECOWAS bureaucracy must defer in all circumstances to heads of state (called "The Authority" in the treatise lingo). The power of the bureaucracy itself depends on this, since much of what it does is contingent on (1) agreements reached at the summit of heads of state and (2) the actual signature of the relevant ministers in each member country, which is not an automatic outcome of summit agreements and often has to be prodded out.

This does not mean, however, that the integration process in West Africa has no autonomy in relation to the region's governments. The integration process is indeed important in the increasing change affecting the very definition of "state legitimacy" in the region. With the importance taken, since at least the mid-1990s, by the democracy norm (enshrined in the ECOWAS treaty in 1994 – Article 4j in Treaty – and 2001 – Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance), ruler's entrenchment is now challenged by the notion of ruler alternation, and development itself is seen as conditioned by democratic forms of governance. Moreover, normative definitions require a system of evaluations and sanctions, and the latter (sanctions) at least have now appeared quite suddenly in the ECOWAS' toolbox. States were suspended when their rulers conspicuously breached democratic

[10] It is well-known that Niger's first president, Hamani Diori (in office 1960-74) consistently favored linkages with other Francophone countries (*Conseil de l'Entente*, OCAM, OCBN, CEAO) mostly in order to swerve Niger away from Nigerian influence, fearing the centripetal attractions of the very large Hausa population of Northern Nigeria on Niger's own Hausa population.

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norms (Guinea, Niger,[11] Cote d'Ivoire), and there was even much talk and push in Nigeria, in January 2011, for a military intervention to restore the norm that had been upended in Cote d'Ivoire some months earlier. Interestingly enough, the only state organization in Lagos/Abuja to have clearly opposed this move was the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, which was so important in devising the ECOWAS scheme itself, in the late 1970s. The main argument put forward by the institute was that Nigeria lacked political and especially "cultural"[12] influence in Cote d'Ivoire and hence its intervention would be "illegitimate" and would entail useless sacrifices on the part of Nigeria. But officials interviewed at NIIA were fearful that the federal government would disregard their advice, which, they noted, had far less weight now than that of the civil society groupings that had sprouted as a result of democratization in Nigeria itself.[13]

More generally, by securing the commitments of heads of state and the signature of ministers to sundry programs and undertakings, ECOWAS does create a space of autonomy in which policies that states cannot develop – owing to the limitations of sovereignty – may be pursued. I clarify this important proposition in the next point.

"Development Issues": The democracy norm reveals that ruler's entrenchment and state legitimacy are not interchangeable, as they seem to have been (or still seem to be) in many African countries. But the older, more technical development norm already pointed to this. One may suspect, on the basis of the arc of post-colonial history in Africa, that entrenchment became indeed such a sine qua non for leaders precisely as they realized their inability to trigger the structural changes necessitated by development, in its 1960s sense (state-led national development). Many Africanist theorists suppose that authoritarian entrenchment reduces the need for development as legitimizer,[14] but my claim is that the arrow points into the other direction. It is the failure or difficulty of development which in fact renders authoritarian entrenchment such a seductive option for apprehensive (some would say, paranoid) rulers.

Given the geo-economics of West Africa, it is not hard to to see how regional cooperation could advantage rulers and bolster state legitimacy. The myriad informal trade flux that crisscross the region ignore borders, and develop in response to signals and evolutions in a cohesive regional market (in terms of goods and labor)[15] and currency exchange rates, and some structures of exchange and trade – especially those between the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel[16] – are vital elements of countries' general welfare. State sovereignty, on the other hand, is limited by state

[11] The case of coups-prone Niger seems to indicate that even coups d'état must now conform to the democracy norm, and would be more acceptable if they restore democratic governance.

[12] Nigerian decision-makers are ever sensitive to the Francophone/Anglophone divide. An intervention in Liberia and Sierra Leone, engineered by Nigeria in the 1990s under the banner of ECOMOG, appears in this sense more acceptable than one in a Francophone country.

[13] In the event, they were unjustified, but perhaps for reasons still tied to democracy: as the Côte d'Ivoire crisis was unfolding, Nigeria was taken in an electoral cycle to renew the National Assembly and elect a new president, which made a decision on military intervention quite impracticable.

[14] It is in particular the case of the very influential theory of corrupt patronage politics developed by Jean-François Bayard with the "politics of the belly" concept. The theory relies extensively on manducatory metaphors found in popular African characterizations of political life. The manducatory descriptions are used to support the view that leaderships in Africa use corruption, not development, as legitimating tool – this being tied to the idea that corruption is not necessarily "bad", at least in Africa's societies of extensive "networking." This work which leaves so much to be explained – and especially the violence, paranoia, excessive use of propaganda and jittery control of wavelengths and statistical information by governments– has become an Africanist "classic", perhaps because of the clever way in which Bayard uses corruption to transpose the fashionable (1989) logic of "trickle-down economics" in contexts perceived as permeated with corruption. Could it be however that corruption, especially when combined with these other elements which I just mentioned, is only a way to make up for the failure to meet basic social and economic aspirations within nation-states in Africa?

[15] That regional market predates the integration processes but has been bolstered by the provision of freedom of circulation included in the ECOWAS treaty.

[16] Also, on can easily see how formal interlinkages running through the Gulf of Guinea, in a Lagos-Abidjan axis, could considerably improve welfare in the Gulf of Guinea section – just by assessing the effects of the current informal interlinkages.

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borders, leading state agents to focus on the issues which they are entitled to directly engage with. Consequently, tackling aspects of the issues which appear upstream in regional flux requires only that they enter into agreements with foreign sovereigns, where they would do their best to defend the national interest – i.e., the combination of interests that comes within the scope of the national sovereign power – thereby striving to scuttle the national interests of others.

Regional integration substitutes to this approach a widening of the scope by creating – through transfers of sovereign rights – a regional sovereign by derivation. The regional sovereign is very much a subaltern sovereign (if that is not too violent an oxymoron), but the main point is that it sets up a new point of contact between decision-makers and groups that are directly affected by economic policy. Regional agreements are *politically* different from bilateral or simple multilateral agreements in that they entail the emergence of a regional public as a measure of their success. In this way, the across-borders fault lines between competing interests are no longer always and necessarily national borders, but may emerge at more structural, and societal, levels. This means that the coalitions which would tend to become prevalent would reduce or considerably shift pressures on states to perform, while still relying on them as adjudicators and enforcers of integrations rules and regulations. For this to happen, however, states, or political leaderships in the region must define for themselves a role which actively makes good of the space opened up by integration by anticipating the structural transformations that, in the instance, the ECOWAS doctrine calls for.

It should be noted that the 2006 restructuration of the community institutions pushes states in this direction by enshrining the principle of "supranationality". But beyond the bureaucratic proactivity of ECOWAS, only the consolidation of regional publics could consistently lead states to reform their role in the sense postulated by the principle.[17]

Structural Transformation: As one would quickly discover by flipping through ECOWAS reports, there are two ECOWAS, both officially in existence, yet clearly striving for two different sets of objectives, which, at certain points, directly conflict with each other.

The first ECOWAS – the one usually encountered in reports' preliminary pages and referred to in most assessments by economists – promotes trade liberalization, the development of the private sector, and reduction of inflation, all to be attained through a limitation of state interference in productive sectors. This general program seeks to make a regional norm of the liberalization plans which member states started to implement in the 1980s, and more rapidly, in the 1990s, and it appears also to streamline the ECOWAS process in relation to the European model, which actively promotes free trade and macroeconomic stability.

Here however a controversial glitch starts to reveal the contradictions in the efforts to abide by the master plan. Owing to close ties with France, the smaller, exclusively Francophone (plus Guinea Bissau) West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) had imported rules and norms from the EU (Claeys and Sindzingre, 2003), while adjusting them however to an economic policy wedded to "development as liberalization." WAEMU created a common market in 1998 which embraced – through the lowest common external tariffs in Africa – the unilateral role of consumer of imported

[17] The 2006 restructuration created a more autonomous ECOWAS Commission in lieu of the ECOWAS Secretariat and redefined the obligations of member states. Under the new legal regime, ECOWAS decisions are directly applicable in member states (elimination of parliamentary ratifications) and by ECOWAS institutions. These new powers assist ECOWAS in better coordinating its main "common policies" (ECOWAP for agriculture and WACIP for industry), and logically at least, leads it to develop more connections with potential regional publics.

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manufactured goods and imported food, while also adopting stringent macroeconomic convergence criteria, in line with the maintenance of the low inflation rates required from the fixed parity peg of the union's currency to the Euro. This preempted ECOWAS' own move toward the same policy development. In 2001, ECOWAS decided to adopt external tariffs harmonized with those of WAEMU, although Nigeria was unhappy with the fact that they were so un-protective of the infant industrialization policy it wished to promote in the region. In fact, Nigeria ended up stalling the harmonization process through the application (2006) for the adoption of an additional, fifth band of tariffs at the rate of 50 percent (the highest WAEMU tariffs band being of 20 percent). WAEMU's CET was attacked for being "from a global perspective, out of line with the low income status of countries in West Africa" while the Nigerian-promoted fifth band would be of "potential interest" not only to Nigeria, but also "to all industrially aspiring countries in West Africa." (Ukaoha, 2008, 11).

Moreover, the convergence criteria of WAEMU were found too rigorous by the non-WAEMU countries of ECOWAS, which instead adopted – in the framework of a second monetary union which has yet to come into being – less rigorous criteria. These were never sustained for any extended period of time by participating states, but so is the case of the WAEMU's criteria according to recent assessments (IMF, 2011).

In general therefore the "development as liberalization" strategy is rather lackluster in ECOWAS. The efforts put in common development policies – the West Africa Common Agricultural Policy, ECOWAP and the West African Common Industrial Policy, WACIP – follow a different dynamics.

ECOWAP and WACIP follow from the mandate given in 2002 to ECOWAS – by the African Union – to lead the integration process in West Africa, thereby effectively subordinating WAEMU to ECOWAS, and formally removing the issue of overlapping regionalisms in this part of the continent. Thus the common agricultural policy adopted by WAEMU in 2001, the *Politique Agricole de l'Union* (PAU), lost much of its relevance when ECOWAP was adopted in 2005.[18] The PAU again stresses WAEMU's embrace of its chosen (?) role in the international economic system, that of purveyor of agricultural primary commodities and consumer of finished goods. Its three axes of activity are related to (1) the intensification of cash crop production, (2) cooperation that deepens the common market and upgrades respect for international sanitary norms (or in other words expanding the market for export toward the EU), and (3) strengthening the region's abilities for international trade negotiations in the agricultural sector. The PAU is oriented toward market development, and its promoters at WAEMU do not seek to relate to a regional public, having in fact rather tense relations with the West African farmers coalition (ROPPA) which we will encounter in the next section.[19]

ECOWAP's agenda is very different from the PAU, and essentially wants to replicate Europe's history of the Common Agricultural Policy in the 1960s – that is to say, to organize the agricultural sector in ways that transform the region's economy and end its dominance by agricultural production. The project is clearly transformative, starting with a long and agonized debate on the dilemmas which are constitutive of West Africa's current agricultural identity, and asking frank, open-ended questions, including in the text of the policy document – and it sets a number of empirical goals which exclude in their methodology neither the market (as did national development plans in the 1960s) nor the state

[18] WACIP came into being in 2010, and so will not be addressed in this paper.
[19] One key source of these tense relations is the CET debate on the fifth band, where ROPPA firmly sides with Nigeria and ECOWAS (or more precisely, its agricultural department in charge of ECOWAP) to demand a rate of 50 percent, while WAEMU is pushing for a compromise at 35 percent.

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(as do liberalization reforms today, and indeed, WAEMU's PAU). The ECOWAP's debates led to the adoption of an ECOWAP implementation compact only in 2009, and so it is not possible to make affirmations about the policy as this time.[20]

In the next section, I will show that West Africa's agricultural identity is at the basis of the region's social contracts, which is a measure of the potential impact – in terms of political and economic governance – of ECOWAP, if the policy proves to be even marginally successful relative to its goals. This will be done through incursions in the most agricultural economies of the region, those of the Sahelian interior – Niger, Mali, and Burkina-Faso.

II. The Political Economy of the Peasant: Impediments and Unfairness

Nature and Nurture?

In 2005, Niger was the theater of two seemingly very different events, one of which drew considerable attentions from the international media: the food crisis of 2004-2005 which devastated swaths of rural Niger in the heat of the dry season, and the civic strikes organized against "high costs of living" (*la vie chère*) in all Nigerien towns during the months of March-April 2005. Interestingly, while the two events were concomitant, and while there was a sense that they were somehow related, no clear connection was convincingly established between them, either by journalists and reporters, or by social scientists and development experts. Everyone ended up treating them as if they were happening in two different spheres of life, and the sacrosanct nation-state unit of analysis was not binding enough to tie them into one single topic.[21] On the face of it, this is not unwarranted, and it is possible to see why through the (deceptive) simplicity of a chronological description of the events.

The food crisis "set in" in August 2004, when it became clear that the rainy season had been too dry through the territories of Niger and Chad – though not unusually dry[22]. In late October, the government of Niger assessed a deficit of 233,500 tons of cereals and estimated that over three million people will face food shortage in the country barring adequate measures taken in time. The following month, under advice from United Nations representatives in Niamey (Niger's capital), the government discreetly requested international assistance in the amount of 78,000 tons of cereals, but received no response. As the crisis started to develop out of hand in early 2005, the government began to sell its stock reserves at below market prices (February) while the World Food Organization launched an emergency operation to feed 400,000 people at a cost of $ 4.2 million, through grain banks and "work for food" and "work for cash" programs. At the beginning of June 2005, the government's stock ran out, but flash appeals from the WFP to rich countries had been thus far unsuccessful. The government then organized a "food loan" program to help subsistence farmers – by now unable to pay even the cut-rate prices set earlier – while the United Nations urged that it should concentrate on giving free food to the most vulnerable groups to stave off famine. However, the crisis had in fact also somewhat affected neighboring countries (Nigeria, Burkina and Mali in particular) where Niger purchases, or with which (Burkina) it competes for imports from the coastal countries, to

[20] When I visited the ECOWAS agricultural department for interviews at Abuja (Nigeria) in January 2011 in a newly-built ECOWAS extension tower, office material was still being unpacked, although much of the initial work (government actual commitments, funding liaisons) had been done. More importantly from my theoretical standpoint, the department has regular relations with ROPPA and plans to develop a regional public.

[21] Maccatory, Oumarou and Poncelet (2010) are an exception, and characteristically, they make the connection only to reject it.

[22] There was also significant locust infestation, which destroyed, according to some estimates, 7 percent of the cereal production, but again there had been far worse occurrence in the past.

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correct its chronic cereal deficits, and restricted imports failed to cope with needs. In July, relief organizations resorted to shocking the world with pictures of dying toddlers, thus creating a summer media frenzy on the "Niger famine" and finally receiving funds – at first from Sweden, and then from many other quarters. It was also only then that, (1) the main opposition party, the *Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme* (PNDS), in coordination with the newspaper *Le Républicain* (close to PNDS), started to lambast the government on its lack of energy in tackling the crisis and (2) then-president Mamadou Tandja decided to tour the affected regions.

The crisis further unfolded for a few additional months, but the rainy season in 2005 was much wetter than the one in 2004, and in September, the government stated that large-scale food distribution was no longer needed. Furthermore, experts on the ground had warned that the delayed food aid – whose arrival coincided with the harvest period – would chiefly have the effect of disrupting local markets and spurring the conditions for a new crisis. These analyses led to the official "ending" of the crisis at the close of 2005.

2004 was also an election year in Niger, and saw the victory at the presidential voting of Mamadou Tandja (incumbent) as well as the constitution of a new legislature at which in fact most deputies – from the majority as well as from the opposition – had kept their seat. In January 2005, the National Assembly issued the budget bill for the fiscal year. The bill came into force in March and immediately triggered public protests in Niamey.

The budget bill was the result of a letter of intent signed earlier by the new government and the International Monetary Fund, whereby, in order to receive funding under a Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility, the state of Niger would extend value added taxes to milk, sugar, and wheat flour at a rate of 19 percent, while also reducing VAT exemptions on water and electricity consumption. Prices of foodstuff shot up, including those which were not directly covered in the new VAT. The sack of rice went up from 12,000 Cfa francs to 18,000 Cfa francs and transport prices also suddenly increased, all combining to create an ambiance of what came to be known as "*la vie chère*" ("costly living") in the country's towns. When the government was not immediately responsive to unorganized protests a more organized movement quickly took shape with the emergence of the quaintly-named *Coalition Equité Qualité contre la vie chère au Niger* (Fairness and Quality Coalition against High Costs of Living in Niger). The coalition gathered over a hundred different civic associations, trade unions and rights-defending groupings, but its impact came from the fact that it rapidly proved to be an efficient relay for the general rejection of the budget bill. The three methods of mobilization and protest it developed – strikes, "ghost town" operations and demonstrations – were successful in measures that had never been seen in the past. Even shopkeepers and grain traders who stood to gain from the VAT felt compelled to close their businesses on the days designated for "ghost town" operations by the coalition, and on 15 March 2005, a call for demonstration mobilized nearly 50,000 in Niamey, the largest such mass congregation to be organized there since those of 1991 which had ended authoritarian rule.

Following this, the government arrested 47 association leaders, accused of complicity in the destruction of property (the demonstration was attended with vandalism). 31 were eventually released the next day, but 16 were kept in custody, evidently playing the role of hostages of the government, or of an example to the rest. However, the coalition, emboldened by its success, was undeterred, and it called for mass demonstration now in all the main towns of the country on 22 March. The government forbade the demonstrations, upon which the coalition replaced them with a call for ghost town

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operations everywhere. The call was successful in the three main towns, Niamey, Maradi and Zinder, the two latter in which demonstrators came out despite the government's prohibition, clashing with security forces.

After this, many association leaders were rearrested, with the government counting on time to wear out the movement. The coalition however concentrated on the organization of sectoral union strikes and a relentless press campaign in the private press and more damagingly, the radio stations, rising the costs of the crisis for the government in terms both of work done (much of the striking touched the civil service) and of political legitimacy. Indeed, criticism of the budget bill started to be superseded by criticism of the political class itself, targeting now the pay of deputies and the "*train de vie de l'Etat*" (state lifestyle expenditures). Moreover, since these attacks were leveled at the entire political class – which was deemed to have betrayed the people by passing the law just after having been reelected – and not only the government, pressures against the latter started to be exercised at elite levels as well. In early April, the government eased up and started negotiating with the coalition, and a ten-point agreement was finally drawn up on 19 April. The VAT on foodstuff as well as on the "social tranches" of water (15 and 50 m³) and electricity consumption (50 to 150 Kw/h) was repelled, and in compensation, the government increased corporate taxes on profit from 5 to 7 percent in the formal sector and from 3 to 4 percent in the so-called informal sector. The following month, Rodrigo de Rato y Figaredo, the International Monetary Fund's interim director, flew to Niamey where he met the leaders of the coalition and diplomatically praised President Tandja and his cabinet "for their ongoing reforms to strengthen economic growth and reduce poverty."

The civic strikes were thus completely concomitant with the food crisis, but analysts tended to see in the two events the enactment of two very different, and ultimately incommensurable, lines of causation. The civic strikes clearly belonged in the world of history, policy and human agency, while the food crisis appeared to be the result of natural phenomena: drought, locusts, peasant demography. The civic strikes were – it seemed – contingent, and would not have happened without the ill-designed budget bill. The hunger in the backcountry, on the other hand, played in the immemorial cycles of famines in the Torrid Zone. Urbanites were angry at the high cost of the baguette bread – a staple associated with riots in France and other centers of history – when rural Nigeriens were starving from the lack of humble grains, sorghum, millet. Even experts are humbled by this mysterious force of nature:

> "The truth about malnutrition in Niger is that we probably do not really understand why it is happening or whether it is, or was in 2005, significantly worse than it has been in the past." (Harragin, 2006).[23]

Meanwhile, in the towns, collective mobilization and cunning strategizing defeated a legislation whose effects were clearly understood to the last percentage point.

A number of details mildly blur these pictures however, when we pay attention to them. A good deal of why it is so difficult to understand the hunger in rural Niger lies in the fact that the countryside is a site of rapid change, more so in fact than urban areas which, moreover, evolve in relation to change in the countryside. It is not natural stasis and the immobility of suffering which confuse the mind, but the fact that causes detected and charted ten years ago, let's say, no longer seem to be active today, and the same (or similar) effects seem to occur almost out of the blue. What appeared to

[23] Of course, Harragin's extensive, detailed and sensible study belies this modesty and unerringly charts some of the key political economic factors at work in rural Niger.

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worsen the dilemma yesterday may be now considered a benefit – this happened even to the usual Malthusian suspect, demographic growth, in some reports. In fact, the economic environment of rural Niger – that is, the relationship between producers and their resources system – is highly unstable, owing to the nature (and here physical nature does play a determining part) of the land, but also the existence – quite recent in many respects – of a cash economy and the proximity, demands and attractions of large towns.

Social practices and arrangements are thus in constant flux, despite the outsider' impression of a static and immemorial rural inertia famously denounced in 2007 by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in a controversial speech at Dakar – to the plaudits of many a Francophone urbanite. The change and instability means also that there is a great amount of unregulated violence in rural areas. In fact, there are far more violent deaths in Niger's countryside than in the quiescent towns, where riots might be compared to some sort of unwitting work out, in general. The key response of rural communities to the changes – generally for the worse – to their livelihood could be described in terms of intensification and commoditization, that is to say in attempts at rendering agricultural land and livestock both more productive and diverse, even as conditions for doing so grow more constraining. This then entails a chronicle of conflicts around scarce resources and a list of growing needs for productive investments which all fall rather in the purview of governance and development than in that of humanitarian response.[24]

To describe the 2005 famine as a humanitarian crisis is therefore in itself a political decision to limit oneself with regard to just how far one wishes (or is enabled) to go.[25] We would be amply justified to impart to it the dignity of a gruesome manifestation of a social and economic crisis – in need of a very different kind of response. But the crisis is not registered by Niger's official development strategy. The letters of intent sent by Niger's finance ministry to the IMF in 2004 and 2005 mention agriculture in terms that ring almost surreal. On 15 June 2004, Lamine Zeine (Niger's then-finance minister) had written to the IMF managing director that "Niger achieved strong growth in 2003 driven by the agricultural sector and the government maintained prudent macroeconomic policies", and the only mention of the sector in the letter for 2005 was that, as part of upholding its "private sector-led growth strategy", Niger will strengthen "activities in the agriculture and livestock, tourism, services, and mining sectors, which have been identified as having strong growth potential." Which is saying rather too much or too little.

Meanwhile, the social movement in the urban areas indeed compelled the government to revise its fiscal scheme. The success, however, was inconsequential – the baguette bread costing now twice as much what it did in 2005. The protests did not address the general approach of which the specific VAT of January 2005 was only one rather minor instrument. Maccatory, Oumarou and Poncelet (2010) offer an interpretation of the event (put in a West African perspective through comparisons with similar movements in Burkina Faso) which define it as a step in the gradual

[24] As an example that relates directly to WAEMU and ECOWAS, we may point to the case of fertilizer in what had been considered somewhat unduly as Niger's grainbasket, the region of Zinder (unduly, since contemporary Niger does not really have a grainbasket !). In the 1980s, farmers in the region started to use inorganic fertilizers as a way to boost production, some of which (around 15 percent) was provided by the Nigerien state agricultural extension services, but most of which was purchased at low cost in Nigeria. In the mid-1990s, however, Niger's WAEMU currency was devalued, including against the Naira (1994) while Nigeria stepped up border controls to stem the smuggling of subsidized fertilizer into Niger. The price of the fertilizer sack shot up from 2,500 Cfa Fr. in 1990 to 12,000 Cfa Fr. today, rendering it unaffordable or dependent on credit (Harragin, op. cit., 55). Here, the pressure for intensification shows in that inorganic fertilizer is no longer able to supply the new needs. We also have a glimpse of the differences in policy autonomy between Nigeria and Niger, differences unmitigated by ECOWAS – although there was not any talk of an ECOWAS common agricultural policy yet in the mid-1990s.

[25] In a way, this self-limitation is very similar to that implicit in the poverty reduction components of the programmatic facilities offered to low income countries. Both are generally efficient or effective in what they do, all things being equal, but what they do is simply not much relative to the structural problems. Poverty and spikes of crisis are somewhat managed, certainly not reversed.

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emergence of a "public sphere" in Niger. In other words, the movement was not concerned with the overall policy orientation which successive Nigerien governments have consistently followed since the period 1994-98, when the WAEMU convergence criteria and agreements with the IMF and the World Bank combined to produce the templates of their economic policy. Protests against this constellation (WAEMU, IMF and World Bank) would perhaps appear as outlandish to Nigerien urbanites as a protest against the weather would, to the Nigerien farmer in his desiccated field. In a sense, the constellation was targeted in the phrase "*vie chère*", but again, in a way proximate to how "drought" is thought to be caused by bad weather. Certainly, urbanites had the capacity to force a measure of government intervention through agitation and riots, but Bonnecase (2010) alert us also to the capacity of hunger-stricken peasants to do the same through their own sets of strategies. In fact, the point made by Bonnecase – that hunger-stricken populations determine, through various forms of "indocility", institutional responses to crisis – is logically similar to what happened in Nigerien towns, in 2005. Urbanites used their own mode of indocility to force the government to take a largely symbolic, short-term measure to address a chronic dilemma revealed by the *vie chère*. The VAT itself did not cause the *vie chère*, as some details in the description I offered clearly indicate, and so its removal would not end it – very much in the same way as food distribution would not end drought and malnutrition. When similar movements later erupted in neighboring countries (2007-08), thereby pointing to structural and regional causes for the dilemma (instead of specific IMF directives), no regional, transnational coalition emerged to address the relevant policy implication. Instead, the various urban-based movements were all enmeshed in national politics, and their actions and speech were strongly directed at their own state authorities, an outcome which Maccatory, Oumarou and Poncelet found "paradoxical" in view of the impotence of those authorities (op. cit., 356).

What is also paradoxical, however (albeit in a different sense) is that scholars have consistently skipped the regional level between the national (or local) and the global, even as they insistently point to the sometimes quite straightforward regional dimensions of the issues they analyze. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the "region" or "sub-region" has not so far emerged as a genuine object of study in the social sciences. As a result of this in any case, analysts may fail to spot or adequately assess actors or coalitions of actors that are neither national, nor global, but regional. It might well be that the connection between the plight of urbanites and the dilemmas of peasants in Niger – and elsewhere – which is not easily seen from the national perspective, is more immediately perceptible at the regional level. This is a hypothesis worth exploring in another paper, but here, I want to point that, quite significantly I think, the most successful regional coalition that emerged in West Africa in response to those issues is not urban-based, but rural-based. That coalition, the West African Peasant Producers Network (ROPPA from its French language acronym) will be used, in the next sub-section, as an entry point to the analysis of West Africa's social contracts – which, I argue, are critical objects in terms of how we would understand the politics (and not just the economics) of integration in the sub-region.

The Producers

ROPPA was founded in 2000, with a pre-history that dates back to the Sahel droughts of the early 1970s. It therefore directly originates in the most vulnerable section of rural West Africa, even though it now straddles the coast and the Sahelian interior. While the predominant perception of the famines that followed the 1969-73 droughts outside of affected areas was that of a cataclysmic natural disaster, it was rather that of a huge letdown on the part of local governments, among Sahelian peasants. The event led national governments to eliminate taxation on the peasantry for the central treasury, but also to gradually abandon "agricultural policy", i.e., government intervention in

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the form of price stabilization and produce commercialization parastatals and public agricultural credit institutions. The peasantry resented the overbearance of the so-called “development bureaucracy” of the 1960s-70s, but that bureaucracy did establish a direct relationship between the state and the sector, generating a sense of order and opportunity. Its rather abrupt removal created acute disorganization in the late 1980s in both commercialization and credit systems, although in ways that varied according to the context. In general, for instance, the cotton producing areas of Burkina and Mali fared better than non-cotton producing areas, and Niger fared worse because its key cash crop (groundnut) had become unprofitable in the late 1970s.

In the 1990s, several national peasant organizations emerged to attempt filling the void created by the state, and it is to be noted that unlike the civil society organizations that also cropped up in urban areas for the same general reasons, these were quite endogenous, receiving little help from the outside and responding to “real economy” kinds of issues. The leading fringe of the movement was made up by “peasant producers”, those who stand at the origin of the cash crop chain, and when the West African Monetary Union (WAMU) became, in 1994, the West African *Economic* and Monetary Union (WAEMU) with a common market plan to corroborate the “Economic” in its name, peasant producers became keenly interested in regional integration. Given the extensive dependence of WAEMU states on export taxes, cash crops producers would indeed be the first group to be directly affected by the new dispensation. So gradually, and with now the assistance of global coalitions of aid workers and agricultural ideologues (such as those of Via Campesina), the WAEMU peasant producers organizations (plus those of the Gambia) came together and created ROPPA at a meeting in Cotonou (Benin), in 2000. The umbrella networks of Ghana and Sierra-Leone later joined the organization, pushing it much closer to its ambition of covering all ECOWAS states (with now only Nigeria and Liberia being outside its scope). The member organizations are umbrella organizations of national organizations, and ROPPA is therefore a network of networks.

In the 2000s, the ROPPA behaved mostly, at regional level, as a lobby promoting the cause of “family farms” and “food sovereignty”, both carefully defined in relation to the states’ policy of promoting large commercial farms and relying on imports for purposes of “food security”. ROPPA widened “sovereignty” to include the entire West African region, claiming therefore that the states’ argument that they need the international market to cater for domestic needs is less defensible in view of West Africa’s actual and potential agricultural diversity and capacities. This plank fitting well into ECOWAS’ own agricultural vision, the ROPPA has since 2005 been increasingly associated to ECOWAS activities, and it is to be expected that as ECOWAP is pushed into implementation phases through the 2010 decade, it will play a greater role in the region. The ROPPA is therefore a key player in the “transformative” or “dynamic” aspects of West Africa’s political economy, because (1) agriculture is the sector where changes occur faster in West Africa, and (2) cash crops are the basis of West African social contracts.

Before dwelling on the second proposition – which is the object of this section – let us note about the first one that by “changes” I do not necessarily mean “progress”. Indeed, as I have shown with the Nigerien case, change often means more “problems” in this context, and returns us to the conclusion reached by the 1987 ECOWAS study discussed in the first section of this paper. Given the great dynamism of West Africa’s basic social parameters (including demographic growth), processes of stabilization could be conducted only through a transformation of the basic political economic conditions. I will return to this issue in the next and last section of the paper.

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Unfairness: international and national

My first contact with the ROPPA was through interviews at the Mali *Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes* (National Coordination of Peasant Organizations), the country's umbrella peasant producers' union, at Bamako, in July 2010. I had gone there expecting to discuss chiefly economic matters, but as it turned out, the exchanges I had with peasant producers coincidentally attending a week-long workshop at CNOP headquarters were dominated by themes which I would characterize as purely political. The main theme was that "peasant producers came together because they were not considered as citizens of their country." (Salif Cissokho). In his presentation of Mali's peasant producers' struggle to have an agricultural policy law passed at the country's legislature in 2008, the union's technical coordinator, Salif Cissokho, consistently portrayed them as political militants rather than simply economic agents. They were, he asserted, the representatives of the downtrodden populations of West Africa[26]who are looked-down upon by urbanites ("*les gens de la ville*"), but who now want to be treated as equal partners of the state. A key function of CNOP and similar ROPPA affiliates in other West African countries[27]is indeed to entrench an economic-political identity of peasant producers relative to the state and national traders in agricultural produce. For Malian peasant producers, fair and equal partnership was expressed in the 2008 Agricultural Orientation Law that was to a large extent written by ROPPA experts, using openly the language and ideological concepts of the network. However, it remains to be seen just how far the state of Mali could abide by the provisions and norms of that law, having spectacularly lost control of a good deal of its agricultural policy three years earlier, during a row with the World Bank.

In 2004, Mali had beat Egypt to the top place in cotton production in Africa, with a total output of 610,000 tons of the crop. The production, up to that year, was organized by the *Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles* (CMDT), a parastatal long targeted for privatization by the IMF and the World Bank. Both the government and cotton producers were resisting the policy – the government for reasons of national policy and the legitimacy of President Toumani Touré (electoral promises), and cotton producers because they were used to CMDT's pricing, commercialization procedure and "corporate responsibility" infrastructures development in the cotton producing areas. The international financial institutions, on the other hand, were highly critical of CMDT's pricing strategy – which did not respond to real market signals. It also, quite correctly, considered the parastatal a rent-seeking organ protecting the corruption and privileges of civil servants loyal to the authorities.

CMDT was slated for privatization in 2004, but the government postponed the operation to 2008, notably pointing to the good performance of its production strategy. The World Bank countered with the 35 billion CFA Francs treasury deficit that was audited in the company's books, a clear sign of wastage and revenue diversion. The government then committed to restore the funds, upon which a joint delegation of the IMF and the World Bank traveled to Bamako to announce that unless the government accept to (1) privatize CMDT and (2) lower the purchase price to producers from 210 Cfa Fr./kg (CMDT price) to 175 Cfa Fr./kg ("real market price"), the Malian state will no longer receive the

[26] Cissokho referred to "West Africa" rather than "Mali," possibly as an act of inclusionary courtesy registering the fact that I introduced myself as Nigerien. However, he has dual Senegalese and Malian nationalities and is also active in peasant producers' movements in Senegal where he travels frequently. Indeed, his brother, Mamadou Cissokho, is the founder and Dakar-based honorary president of the ROPPA (itself headquartered in Ouagadougou), a detail which I discovered during the interview when mentioning Mamadou Cissokho in passing. The CNOP is the Malian branch of ROPPA.

[27] ROPPA has affiliates in all ECOWAS countries minus Nigeria and Liberia. All its affiliates in WAEMU countries (i.e., the Francophone club) are also the national umbrella unions of peasant producers.

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budgetary support funds from the IMF that finance its development policy ("poverty reduction and growth facility").

The threat was unprecedented and caught the Malian government by surprise, but the Washington delegation had come well prepared, with a memorandum for guiding the government in its justifications for and announcement of the measure. The minister of finance was compelled to unilaterally lower the purchase price of the crop, and the ministry of agriculture sent a mission in the cotton regions to explain the measure, to the great anger and frustration of producers.

The rationale of the IMF was that all the rules pertaining to the underlying functioning of the market should be applied in Mali, as the country did not have the resources to try something else. So the pricing of the CMDT was considered a specie of subsidy, even though it was really meant to strengthen production and seemed to have contributed successfully to that outcome year after year. More fundamentally, the actions of the IMF and the World Bank in Bamako in 2005 show just how far the international institutions are politically ready to go to enforce the requisites of market liberalization in the countries that are most dependent on commodity trade for their income. Given that the states in industrialized countries are free to introduce unproductive subsidies in their own cotton sectors, there is here an element of radical unfairness in the international system which we should not assume to be exceptional.

The sense of moral and political outrage induced by these policies – not always perceived to be coming from the government – I later found to be pervasive among the peasantry in the region, including in Nigeria.[28]It has not so far led to either mass mobilization against the prevailing economic policy – despite localized clashes on land issues – or the emergence of an agrarian labor party. But the potentials for "agrarian action" (i.e., peasant equivalent of an industrial action) appear to exist in some areas. Consider the following: on 18 April 2011, the national Burkinabe institution which sets the crop's purchase price in the Burkinabe cotton sector, the *Association Interprofessionnelle du Coton du Burkina* (AICB) met and announced that the crop would be purchased at 245 Cfa Fr./Kg and 220 Cfa Fr./Kg respectively for the two grades of cotton, while increasing the price of fertilizers to reflect the higher cost of oil, for the period 2011-12.

The meeting at which the price is set is attended by cotton companies, producers, experts, donors, bankers and state officials, and it follows the pricing technique which the IMF has now managed to have implemented in all West African cotton producing areas. When the price is set, producers receive advice on devising strategy for making a profit, notably by stepping up intensification through the right combination of technological package and a greater resort to organic fertilizers (which generally cost nothing, but are in short supply). Moreover, in the instance, Karim Traoré, the president of the umbrella cotton producers network, the *Union Nationale des Producteurs de Coton du Burkina*, showed satisfaction that the purchase price was on the increase. A dissident provincial union, the *Union Provinciale des Producteurs du Houet*, begged to differ. Immediately after the general assembly of AICB, it held its own meeting, on 19 April 2011, stating that it found the purchase price "extremely low". The president of the union stated:

[28] I, of course, do not rely for this insight on mass survey research. But the similarity in speech of peasants producers at places located at great distance from one another, but sharing in the same general conditions of living, certainly carry some statistical significance. Even though there is no doubt that systematic research will show variations.

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"In 2004-2005, the price of the kilogram on the world market was at around 820 Cfa Fr., and the price to the producer was at 210 Cfa Fr.. In 2007-2008, when it was at 620 Cfa Fr., we were paid 155 Cfa Fr. per kilogram of cotton. Today, the price on the world market is at around 2000 Cfa Fr., and they want to pay us 245 Cfa Fr. for the kilogram of cotton. That won't do. At a time when we hear of an upturn on the world market, to set us such a price is unacceptable".

He went on to demand that the price be set at 300 Cfa Fr., with the cost of fertilizers unchanged, and added:

"We are now preparing a petition to be signed by all cotton producers. If they do not listen to us, we will boycott production by downsizing fields or declining to produce the crop altogether. We also thought we might demonstrate, but then the country has known enough loud demonstrations lately. So we will demonstrate on our fields… We have helped cotton companies for too long now, we now want to also benefit from the upturn."[29]

Tellingly, the president of the UPPH compares their envisioned actions to the political demonstrations that rocked Burkinabe towns and cities in the months of March and April 2011 – with reverberations to date – although this was capped with a sense of "peasant moderation", in recognition, one may assume, of the deeper stakes at issue. These are not only the livelihood of the peasant producers – which depends heavily on cotton proceeds – but also the general income of the country itself. Burkina is (with Mali and Egypt) one of Africa's top cotton producers, and although the crop represents only 5 to 8 percent of GDP, it accounts for 50 to 60 percent of the country's export earnings, being thus the main source of foreign exchange. The production work concerns about 17 percent of the population, and makes of cotton the single largest economic sub-sector in Burkina. This is, of course, the portrait of a typical cash crop economy, that is to say the economy of all the countries in the region, minus Nigeria.

But again, since the sale on the world market of agricultural primary commodity is the lowest rung of the global economic ladder, there are elements of terms of exchange unfairness built in their trade, which are echoed in the anger of the farmers of UPPH. The most important feature is certainly that producers – or more specifically, exporters – have no influence on sales price, while states tax agricultural exports (REF), and quite heavily so, owing to the fact that the tax generally falls entirely on the side of production. The states of countries in position of near-monopoly (such as Cote d'Ivoire for cocoa) can transfer some of the burden of the tax on foreign consumers, but in general, the burden of the tax falls on national producers through higher corporate taxes and lower purchase prices to offset some of the tax. The tax can be recalculated in any which way for purposes of optimum welfare, the reality is that states dependent on cash crop – and which generally find it impracticable to directly tax farmers – must establish this kind of inherently unfair relationship with their producers.

The unfairness – now deriving more directly from national policy – epitomizes a kind of political limitation. Because of the place which the Burkinabe (or the Malian) economy occupy in the international economic system, the state and economic agents cannot alter – beyond securing minimally better trade terms – the conditions of production in the country. Even when they try to do so, they will almost certainly face the countermanding of the international financial institutions, on account of the perils of state intervention in the market. And when we realize that the economic policy

[29] From *L'Express du Faso* of 22 April 2011. My translations.

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of the country stands on these conditions of production, the political nature of the peasant producers' anger and conscience appears completely logical. In fact, here as in nearly all the other countries of the region, peasant producers are the keystone of the social contract which stabilizes the different nation-states, and yet those nation-states are too weak to protect and promote their interests.

Origins and Logics of West African Social Contracts

In theory, nation-states operate on the basis of an implicit contract between the state – its political institutions and administrative organizations – and a political society of citizens, whereby the state provides security, a number of public services and to the extent possible or reasonable, policies that continuously improve or contribute to improve conditions of living in the polity (economic policy), while, in return, citizens pay taxes and hold state leaders accountable for their missions. The "contract" is sometimes partly formalized in constitutional texts, but it is always, in its details, the expression of a longstanding domestic and international power balance adjudicated by the state, as the latter has the sovereign ability to legislate, arbitrate and sign agreements and conventions. While it does involve issues of "fairness and quality" as the Nigerien civic coalition demanded, the social contract is grounded in issues of power relations largely determined by political economic structures more so than by normative concerns. Indeed, as may have become clear by now, a key assumption in this paper is that it takes changes at the level of those structures for a social contract to evolve in any given direction, either broadly progressive or generally regressive.

Thus, historically, all West African social contracts were established when the European colonial empires introduced major changes in the region's political economy by reordering trade routes, radically transforming labor relations, creating newer economies of scale in sales and production of primary commodities, and giving the region a specific place in the world market that emerged in the nineteenth century. In this regard, West Africa specialized in the market production of a number of so-called tropical crops, shifting, with quite a revolutionary speed, the scales of wealth and poverty (and therefore of relative power in the negotiation of the emerging social contracts) throughout the region. The most telling quick view expression of the change is perhaps the transformation of the region's urban geography. In the previous era, and up to the mid-nineteenth century, urban settlements especially proliferated in the Sahel and even into the Sahara (Timbuktu and Agadez being well-known instances), functioning as trading hubs between coastal West Africa and coastal Northern Africa. With the rise of tropical crops cultivated mostly within coastal West Africa, from the Gulf of Guinea to the valley of the Gambia, southern port cities, conveniently located in the areas of interest, took over often in the matter of a decade. Most of the older Sahelian/Saharan towns went completely downhill when they did not receive a second lease of life through tourism, and the new cities which replaced them in their own area are either administrative headquarters (centers of fiscal accumulation and redistribution) or beneficiaries of the species of tropical crops that could prosper there (gum arabic, groundnut and cotton chiefly).

The economic and political institutions then put in place were designed to process and regulate the new political economy, and governance was geared into turning the region's populations (who were not citizens for most of the twentieth century) into producers of tropical crops, laborers for tropical crops' fields, customers and tax-payers from tropical crops sales proceeds. In this way, the small group of producers – sometimes, but not always, dominated by European settlers or

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companies[30]– came off at the top in terms of income and negotiating powers, virtually towering over a mass of dependents and challenged only by trading companies (all European, with second order Syrian and Lebanese operations) and the administration. Urban growth however spurred also the emergence of local business (trade and artisanal production), often organized by ethnic communities, and involved in both the international and the domestic/regional markets. Owing to their concentration on rent crops, colonial governments did not normally strive to organize and control this sector of the economy. The rather ambitiously-named "social and economic development" programs adopted after Second World War were generally dominated by investments in the building of urban infrastructures and of better-adjusted regulatory and credit frameworks for the so-called productive sector (i.e., the crops rent sector).

So at independence, when it is safe to say that all West African countries established their current social contract, the actors with real negotiating powers were the newly sovereign administration, the European trading companies, African producers and in some not quite as obvious way at first, the top-tier of African businesspeople (often women in coastal countries). Moreover, important variations existed between coastal West Africa where tropical crops had been of higher value and the Sahel where the typical crops provided considerably less returns to producers. In particular, beyond even the current market value of the commodity, Sahelian producers had no means to organize the incredibly costly transport of the crop to the ports in the south, and they also tended to maintain small landholding systems since export crops were marginal to subsistence crops in their context. Because of all this, the relative negotiating power of the different actors varied considerably depending on the basic conditions in the late 1950s. A final and decisive development, relative to the colonial period, was the emergence and rapid growth of the ersatz of a state class, i.e., a social group of modern-educated people supported by state salaries and tasked with the mission to replace colonial administrators and implement ambitious plans of state-led national development. This can be measured by the drastic jump which schooling rates registered in all West African countries in the 1960s. By 1968, for instance, Niger has had an increase of 556 percent of schooling rate (although this rate is probably accounted for in part by the fact that Niger had by far the lowest schooling rate in the region prior to independence).

The pecking order that eventually settled during the first decade of independence (the 1960s for all countries, with the exception of the former Portuguese colonies which became independent in the mid-1970s) put – in terms of share of national revenue consumed through budgetary allocations – the state class (usually seen as "the middle class") at the top, followed by producers (infrastructures investments[31]), businesspeople (public contracts and licenses) and the general population as it shares in public and social services. The legitimacy of the contract is based on the notion that the top class (the state class) has to repay its for-the-time-being privileges by working to develop the new nations, through acquiring and applying modern knowledge.

Specialists of African politics have since then pointed to a very large array of reasons why the post-colonial contract could never work, registering mostly the mood in the development literature that started – by the late 1970s – to favor liberalization and market-led strategies against introversion and

[30] Domination by European settlers was actually rare in West Africa – unlike, for instance, in Kenya or Rhodesia. The great exception in West Africa was Côte d'Ivoire prior to its transformation into an Overseas Territory (i.e., an internally autonomous colony) in 1946.
[31] But this can easily be investment in the *sector* of production, rather than in the *activities* of producers, for instance where the top rent production is a portable resource (oil, manganese, uranium, are some of this specie which are exploited in West Africa).

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state-administered plans.[32] At that point, analysts became convinced that the state class had to be downgraded from its dominant positions in African political systems so that new, more productive actors may come to the fore and energize the marketplace. The belief was couched in economic lingo, thus with an aura of expert neutrality, disapprovingly referring to “small elites” and “privileged Western-educated minorities”, but it carried with it revolutionary implications for the social contracts in West Africa as they had consolidated in the first two decades of independence.

In much of the 1980-90s decades, civil service trim-off and parastatal privatization and closure strove to shrink the state class and lessen its monopoly on state revenues. This has been quite unsuccessful, but the shakeup has had the marked effect of creating new opportunities for businesspeople and producers. The weight of the state class – as measured by the IMF’s yearly ratios of the civil service wages bill to total state revenue – has barely been dented in any of the region’s countries. The accumulation of fiscal resources in administrative headquarters, and especially in national capitals, has clearly not diminished, but the SAP reforms appear to have had the effect of strengthening the strategic alliance that this accumulation creates between the state class and the business or import-export class, thereby redistributing power positions in the countries’ basic social contracts without altering the defining traits of the contracts themselves.[33]The SAP revolutions did not happen, and could not happen, since it was assumed that the problem lays exclusively with African “big governments”, with no thoughts given (institutionally) to the “structural impediments” that come from West Africa’s kind of insertion in the international economic system.

About a decade after the beginning of SAP reforms, regional economic integration came to the fore as another development strategy adjusted to the liberalization philosophy, and its effects on West Africa’s social contracts are less obvious and certainly less studied than those of SAP reforms. I argue here that, although in ambiguous ways, regional economic integration bears the potential for accomplishing changes at the level of political economic structures, and of thereby profoundly reshaping the countries’ development agendas and attendant social contracts. The upgrading of the position of peasant producers – near the bottom, even in the countries with higher valued cash crop – in West African social contracts, which would be a major step in that direction, seems unthinkable at national levels, but more hopeful through regional organization, especially if ECOWAP manages to take off. It is often said that better educated women improve, at little cost, the structure of a society; a peasantry with higher incomes – even if some of this would be inevitably squandered in bling bling consumption[34]– is the only way we historically know to spur the kind of economic activity, in the countryside, that would change the picture there for the better. A research agenda following, for instance, the development of ECOWAP might examine in which ways positive evolutions may play out in this regard.

[32] In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, the major analyses from a political science point of view are arguably Goran Hyden’s *No Shortcut to Progress: African Development Management in Perspective* (1983) which forcefully made the case for shifting development funding from governments to non-governmental organizations, and Robert Bates’ *Markets and States in Tropical Africa: the Political Basis of Agricultural Policy* (1981) which demonstrated that industrial policy financed by a strategic subordination of agricultural policy was a destructive form of government interference in Africa. Both works were extremely influential in the Africanist development community in the West.
[33] In many democratizing countries, such as Niger for instance, this was especially made evident by the rise of merchants in political parties’ apparatus and their near-domination of parliaments, where high level of formal education is not a job requirement.
[34] But then adequate governance measures may be envisioned to provide financial counsel.

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III. Conclusion

In 1974, the Nobel Price for Economics was given to two scholars: Gunnar Myrdal and Friedrich Hayek. One could not conceive of two more different economists. When Hayek and his followers – then just starting their assent to the firmaments of national and international policy-making – had developed corrosive criticisms of government intervention in the economy and the tendency of states to create economic servitude and stagnation, Myrdal's main opus (today quite forgotten, as we might expect), *Asian Drama: an Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations* (1968), held that Asian countries were mired in stagnation and decline because their states were too "soft" (he is apparently the coiner of the phrase "soft state"), unable to enforce the discipline needed to implement development plans. Myrdal reluctantly concluded that authoritarian regimes might be better in doing the job than democracy. Hayek, on the other hand, was the author of two books (among others) whose very titles sum up his antagonism to Myrdal's views: *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), and *the Road to Serfdom* (1944). In the first one, Hayek maintained that only individual freedom in the marketplace creates progress through "spontaneous order", as opposed to centrally-planned economic policy – and in the latter, he claims that centrally-planned economic policy leads inevitably to the hardest of hard states, the fascist and socialist ("socialist" being here a bad name) ones. Myrdal took the price but later said it must be scrapped, since it was so distastefully given to reactionaries such as Hayek. But maybe Scandinavian wisdom had peered farther in the stars than did the two luminaries it honored that year.

It is safe to say – without caricaturing too much – that Myrdal and Hayek were taken in the two opposing poles of the state and the market, each radically believing that his chosen pole would be the savior of humankind. They both knew that improvements came from muddling one's way along, through planning and experimenting, trying, failing and trying yet again, but Myrdal thought this process was best done by states and governments, while Hayek asserted that it should be left to individuals, with states providing only the minimal regulating framework. Myrdal, perhaps, was more realistic than Hayek in these conceptions. State central planning has failed in the impoverished lands that became the objects of their counsel – either because states were indeed too soft[35]or because they were inherently inefficient in terms of economic policy –, and Hayek's vision has (temporarily?) vanquished that of Myrdal in the area of development policy. But the planning method was not, and perhaps could not be jettisoned altogether. Planning now occurs within dedicated international institutions, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, with states signing into it when they recognize that this is the best option they have left. These institutions do not consider that they are intervening in the economy, but rather act upon the idea that they are simply creating the right conditions for free individual engagements with the market. The claim is of course very debatable, but my main point here – and throughout the paper – is that choosing one pole against the other is only unnecessarily sacrificing one additional way to reach the common goal, improvement, prosperity, development (whatever the name). That, I suppose, is what the Nobel Committee thought, when giving the memorial prize in economic sciences to Myrdal and Hayek the same year.

A vision which combines the state and market forces in economic policy works perhaps best in regional organizations such as the European Union and ECOWAS. In this light, we might consider

[35] One reason why *Asian Drama* might seem out of date is that the idea of a soft Asian state does not hold much water today, at least in the more dynamic parts of Asia. But this seems to bear Myrdal out. In any case, it is Africa that is now seen as the "dramatic" case in general, more so than Asia.

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that these kinds of organization at the same time buttress state sovereignty (as the ECOWAS doctrine explicitly asserts) and yet limit state authority (through devolutions and regional political norms, such as democracy). They abide by free trade tenets, yet make room for selective but forceful sovereign intervention (such as what the European Union does with its Common Agricultural Policy, and what ECOWAS plans to do with ECOWAP and WACIP). Their contradictions and periodic crises result very much from their pragmatic embrace of abstract opposites, and not necessarily from what more monistic positions may consider unrealistic. More importantly, their march, success and unknown final form are conditioned by their effective responses to actual needs in specific contexts, like all large-scale *political* organizations, beyond what the theories – valuable as they are – tell us.

In the case of ECOWAS, and for the historical moment that characterizes today's West African societies, the conditions of an effective response are those of economic transformation.

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This paper is essentially a research paper and so a good deal of information was drawn from interviews conducted at various points in time (in 2010-2011) in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria. Over that twelvemonth, much written material was also ingested in preparation for this paper and others that will follow up. Here, I reference only the works directly mentioned in the paper.

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