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REVIEW ARTICLE

METISSAGE OR CURATE'S EGG?

Richard Fardon

JEAN-LOUP AMSELLE, *Mestizo Logics: anthropology of identity in Africa and elsewhere*, trans. Claudia Royal, Mestizo Spaces/Espaces métisses series, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, 224 pp., ISBN 0 8047 2431 8.

JEAN-LOUP AMSELLE and EMMANUELLE SIBEUD (eds), *Maurice Delafosse. Entre orientalisme et ethnographie: l'itinéraire d'un africaniste, 1870–1926*, Raisons ethnologiques series, Paris: Maisonneuve & Larosse, 1998, 320 pp., 145.00 francs, ISBN 2 7068 1356 3.

When *Mestizo Logics* originally appeared in 1990 (as *Logiques métisses*) it was welcomed by several historically-minded reviewers working in the anglophone world (Conrad, 1992; Launay, 1989; Robinson, 1992), among them the editor of Stanford's Mestizo Spaces series, in which this English translation now appears (Mudimbe, 1991). French language reaction was mixed (Dans, 1990, welcoming, Digard, 1993, scathing but on dubious grounds) and later anthropologically-minded discussion negative (Austen, 1992; Schilder and Binsbergen, 1993; Burnham, 1996). Since anthropology (or more particularly 'ethnological reason') is the foil to Amselle's '*mestizo* logics', and history (at least rhetorically) his alternative to anthropology, it might be thought that reviewers and commentators were simply aligning with their disciplinary interests. However, anthropological misgivings were founded on more than disciplinary defensiveness: Amselle's critique of anthropology succeeds in being both overstated and conservative. *Mestizo Logics* is itself something of a *métissage*: it veers (in descending order of plausibility) between interesting statements about ethnicity in the region of Wasolon (where Mali abuts Guinée and Côte d'Ivoire), via overbroad generalisations on this basis about the representation of West Africa in colonial sources, to pronouncements about ethnology, anthropology and the state of the world that are most charitably interpreted as strategically provocative. Revisiting this work alongside the absorbing biographical collection that Amselle has co-edited from a conference held in 1996—seventy years after Maurice Delafosse's death—reinforces a sense that Amselle's opinions are invariably expressed in two modes. The initial version of an argument is cautious, nuanced and credible; its restatement is as consistently overstated and implausible (and therefore seized upon gratefully by his critics, to the detriment of his genuine originality).

The cautious parts of *Mestizo Logics*, to look at this first, closely follow or exemplify the argument of the essay with which Amselle introduced an earlier co-edited book (Amselle and M'Bokolo, 1985). Amselle's argument there

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counterpointed two apparently contrary ideas: that *ethnies* (ethnic groups) were false archaisms—invented under colonial rule—yet contemporary *ethnies* were like their pre-colonial predecessors in being heterogeneous in composition (1985: 23, 37). This counterpoint was more interesting than some of his critics, who seized merely on its first statement (attributing the creation of *ethnies* to colonisers), had allowed (Fardon, 1996: 132–6, commenting upon Schilders and Binsbergen, 1993: 7–8; Austen, 1992: 286). Amselle could be interpreted as suggesting that the historical continuity or discontinuity of ethnicity in Africa is a matter of perspective. It could equally be true that contemporary ethnicities (in the plural) have African historical precedents *and* that contemporary ethnicity (as a type of difference with characteristic presuppositions and idioms) is unlike its historical forebears. Everything depends upon the criteria in terms of which resemblance is sought, and how the instances (ethnicities) are heuristically distinguished from the idiom (ethnicity) to see how they articulate. What survives of this argument in *Mestizo Logics* has become surrounded by broader claims that are both less nuanced and less plausible.

The central chapters of *Mestizo Logics* derive from Amselle's long-term local researches and remain close to the spirit of the 1985 article. The argument runs something like this. Prior to colonisation there existed 'chains' of societies and cultures between which boundaries were fluid and contextually variable (whether we look at them in terms of processes of ethnic or religious identification or in terms of political or economic organisation). In Wasolon these social and cultural forms would later be identified as Senufo or Minyanka (at the 'savage' or pagan end of a continuum), Bambara (at its barbarian middle) and Fulani and Malinke at its Muslim pole (pp. 148–9). Relations between these categories of identification may be envisaged as a set of transformations that occurred with economic and politico-religious prodding. The systematic properties of these interrelations were highly fluid but not unfathomable.

However, this fluidity (originary, for the sake of argument; or, going as far back as we can hope to know much) was later hypostatised in various ways: the largest responsibility was colonial (especially through indirect rule, which was as typical of phases of French as of British colonialism (pp. 11–12)). Administrative and intellectual practices reinforced one another; ethnographic conventions of writing about named ethnic groups helped to naturalise presuppositions about distinct ethnic identities. However, prior to this, some of the causal features which would be particularly important to colonialism had already made an impact: in particular, literacy and state formation. Apart from introducing more thoroughgoing forms of both, colonialism also brought to bear a classifying urge which tended to introduce a number of sharp distinctions: pagan versus Muslim, state versus stateless, white versus black. The upshot was that the terms of identification used prior to colonialism (and other terms more recently invented) acquired new meanings. Taking these terms as substantive entities, writers might fall into the assumption that all ethnic groups ought to possess the sort of things that some nineteenth-century philosophers had decided peoples should have: culture, religion, politics, etc. So, to take the most striking (and not accidental, as we shall see) instance, the Bambara were invented as a tribe from non-exclusive Banmana forebears, and this ethnic identity came to define a quest: for Bambara religion. It then became possible to pose questions about the degree to which Bambara religion was influenced by Islam, and so forth. Drawing upon and reinforcing the presuppositions in terms of which problems urged themselves upon investigators, these essentialised classifications—ethnic, religious, racial, and so

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forth—directed ethnographic attention to particular lines of enquiry. The terms in which questions were posed determined in some respects the answers that could be supplied and, as significantly, had the effect of foreclosing or truncating alternative lines of enquiry: into historical and regional interrelations that both made people similar and were the contexts in which they differentiated themselves. Thus, as Amselle had argued in 1985, in order to understand contemporary ethnicities we needed to look at how they developed regionally, and in relation to one another. Studying these processes historically, we would witness processes of essentialisation: people were increasingly defined as ethnic subjects, and ethnic groups were presupposed to have a range of obligatory characteristics. So far so good.

If this argument would find few detractors from its broad terms, neither would it beg a title like *Mestizo Logics*, let alone inclusion in a series on Mestizo Spaces. Moreover, it would not need to begin with the ominously positioned denial—'This book does not bid farewell to anthropology . . .'—since obviously it wouldn't. But Amselle means to erect something more upon the local ethnographic situation—and the first part of that supplement is basically a story about how anthropology was particularly important to the way in which Europeans managed to obscure for themselves (and eventually from African elites also, and through them from wider African populations) certain of the pre-colonial realities of the African situation. There is no originality, or I imagine controversy, in the suggestion that ethnographers (and the ethnographic genre itself, even when ethnographers made some attempt to write anti-generically) tended to reify ethnic groupings. But it is easy to overstress the case. By page xiii we are being told:

> Out of a situation of syncretism, colonization and the European gaze created societies, cultures and ethnic groups. Ethnic confrontation and tribal conflict, which characterize contemporary African societies, have resulted, without a doubt, from the imposition of rigid systems of classification on otherwise flexible groups.

The confidence of the assertions, 'without a doubt', masks a poverty of content: is contemporary widespread confrontation in Africa today explicable simply by reference to ethnicity and tribe? Few informed commentaries suggest it is the whole story anywhere. Did Africans swallow ethnicisation wholesale simply by adopting the European gaze and without cultural projects of their own? A lot would depend on what 'colonization and the European gaze' includes. (Though, on reflection, our assessment of the argument might benefit more from knowing what such a composite meta-agency excludes!) We seem to have followed in some invitingly argumentative footsteps to arrive at an overblown conclusion.

Amselle (1985) thought that S. F. Nadel began a deconstructionist movement in relation to ethnicity in his 1942 monograph on the Nupe (even if Nadel subsequently forgot his own lesson in his Nuba studies). Amselle also believed that, in 1945, Meyer Fortes had been aware of the complexities of excising the Tallensi as the subject of a monograph in the opening pages of *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*. Again, according to Amselle, writing five years before *Logiques Métisses*, numerous anthropologists (including members of the Manchester school in Britain and Marxists like Terray and Meillassoux in France) had contributed to this trend subsequently (1985: 15–23). To put it another way, the questioning of ethnic or tribal identifications was almost as old as professionalised Africanist ethnography

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itself. Virtually all this nuance disappears in *Mestizo Logics*, to the extent that the complex association between ethnology (a tradition never strictly defined or temporalised in this book) and ethnic essentialisation is simply turned into an identity. 'In the colonial perspective, the ethnological aim must be seen as the mode by which the dominant power takes form, a mode of realization that itself leads to ethnology as a discipline' (p. 4). To argue convincingly that the 'ethnological aim' antedates colonialism but that 'ethnology as a discipline' postdates it (and some chronology really would assist the reader) requires a more careful case than Amselle makes. The claim that 'the ethnological aim' is *the* mode by which the dominant power takes form is inflated; but to continue that 'Even today, the idea on which the majority of anthropologists can agree is that different human societies are specimens or museum pieces that one can appropriately classify, compare or label' (p. 10) is simply wrong (and in his nuanced mode Amselle knows this: *Delafosse*, p. 15). But no wonder the historically-minded reviewers smelled blood. And anglophone teachers of the ethnography of the region should smell fear! My local ethnographic experience confirms that students' highlighter pens alight unerringly upon the authority of Amselle's less considered generalisations for essay purposes.

Perhaps something has been lost in translation—not of the words but of their intellectual context. When he writes about 'most anthropologists' Amselle has particularly in mind a tradition deriving in France from the museology of the Musée de l'homme (*Mestizo Logics*, p. 20); and, as long-time editor of a prestigious French Africanist journal, Amselle is well placed to know how the audience he had in mind for his book would interpret him. I suppose there is little chance of the collection on Maurice Delafosse being made available to those who read *Mestizo Logics* in English, but it contains many clues to Amselle's plot. In an introduction co-written with Emmanuelle Sibeud, Amselle remarks that—aside from Denise Paulme, to whom the collection is dedicated—the idea of a Delafosse conference provoked no great enthusiasm among French anthropologists, who were amused or even irritated by this plunge into some of the murkier waters of their discipline's arcane past (*Delafosse*, p. 12). On the following page Paulme is acknowledged as author of *L'Organisation sociale des Dogon*, the odd-book-out in the Griaule–Dieterlen ethnographic project, the 'missing link' between the political and historical ethnography of Delafosse and the Anglo-Saxon political anthropology promoted in France by Georges Balandier and Paul Mercier. Much of Amselle's critique of anthropology should probably read as a critique of the particular school of Africanist ethnology that became ascendant in France after Delafosse's death. (Though I have to admit this narrower reading magnifies our problems in relating its associated 'gaze' with the alleged consequences discussed above.)

Scholar, administrator, synthesiser of ethnological questionnaires, orientalist, man-on-the-ground in Africa and institution builder in Paris, African linguist (to touch on but a few of his achievements), Delafosse was a protean figure without a single British counterpart. The bibliography of his writings has an astounding range, including those of his *alter ego* 'Broussard', author of *Les États de l'âme d'un colonial, suivi de ses propos et opinions*, the hobby-horses of the quintessential touring district officer. The relation between Broussard's seeming ironies and Delafosse's commitment to the grasp of local situations and the dynamics of African cultures is insightfully presented by Véronique Dimier. Other authors tell a fascinating story of Delafosse's original contributions to particular ethnographic corpuses, as well as his great achievement of synthesis in the three volume *Haut-Sénégal-Niger* (Jean-Louis

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Triaud), covering the then French Soudan, and his political and moral commitment to an indigenous politics in which development would occur within a proper appreciation of the particularities of African societies (the consequences of which are traced by Alice Conklin in West Africa and Emmanuelle Sibeud in France). This is a thoroughly informative collection, whether one is curious about African ethnography, French colonialism, the institutional history of anthropology in France or the contesting intellectual currents that make Delafosse now seem such a contradictory figure.

But to revert to Amselle: he is not only co-editor of this book but also editor of the series in which it appears, *Raisons ethnologiques*. The pluralisation of 'raisons' is interesting because *Mestizo Logics*, as I noted, employs the singular 'ethnological reason' to refer to the essentialising character of ethnographic description. Is the ascendancy of 'ethnological reason' typical only of one, not accidentally museological, variety of ethnography—albeit some essentialisation (or perhaps necessary objectification) is characteristic of all attempts to generalise about a group of people, their language, ideas and practices? Amselle's own contribution to the collection is one of the densest. Under the title 'An ambiguous Africanist' he neatly points out the many contrarieties of Delafosse's opinions. According to Amselle, Delafosse tended to 'orientalise' animism, which he envisaged in terms of continental themes rather than ethnic particularities, at the same time as he tended to 'primitivise' African Islam, pointing out how far it diverged from North African models. A mix of evolutionary and social functional reasoning allowed Delafosse to concur with Lugard that African societies required different forms of administration that accorded with their existing stage of political complexity. Making the administrative garment fit required the skills of a *négrologue* or *indigénologue*, one who could combine local African investigation with historical, linguistic and comparative scholarship to understand how local societies functioned.

In this sense Delafosse's administrative policies stemmed from his ethnological ideas. The relativism of Delafosse's indigenism left him open—to pick up a theme from *Mestizo Logics*—to the double critique of such views: African cultural particularity might be interpreted as proto-négritude, as by such of his readers as Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire, or understood as primitivisation and exclusion from the mainstream of development, as it was by Blaise Diagne (see Marc Michel). However, it is to the institutional entrenchment of Durkheim and Mauss's sociology, and of Griaule and Dieterlen's ethnology, that Amselle attributes a more thoroughgoing depoliticisation of French Africanist anthropology. Concern with the *Année sociologique* school's notions of cosmology and the person, set within the 'invention' of Dogon and Bambara religions, was to displace politics and policy, the terms in which Delafosse's interests, as administrator as well as scholar, have to be situated.

From this discussion follows Amselle's sense of the need to de-essentialise ethnic categories in order to reorder the ethnographic record. His 1985 essay culminated by terminologically distinguishing pre-colonial *entités ethniques* from the *ethnies* which appeared during and after colonialism (1985: 23). The historical task was therefore to understand the nature of the historical transition between what ethnicity might mean in relation to Africans' understandings of their own identities in pre-colonial and in colonial/post-colonial situations. A project complicated by his sense that ethnography, as the necessary tool of this de-essentialisation, was also complicit (even causally complicit) in the very transition he wanted to investigate. The obvious question, then, is: does the idea of '*mestizo* logics' help us understand this? Sadly, in short, no.

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Amselle's translator notes that *mestizo* is a potentially misleading term in (American) English, since it popularly means someone of mixed European and American Indian ancestry ('half-caste' or 'mixed race' are the dictionary synonyms). The French *métissage* comes from 'the crossing of two races', as the translator further confirms. However, the author apparently wishes *mestizo*/*métissage* to mean no more than 'mixture' or 'the result of a mixture' (*Mestizo Logics*, p. xix). The 'logics of mixture' does not make a catchy title—and it leaves out the human reference—but, on this evidence, 'logics of human mixture' is what the writer really wishes to convey. What are these logics? We are told that '*mestizo* logics' are the opposite of 'ethnological thinking' (which involves an 'essentialist vision of culture'); *mestizo* logics are therefore anti-essentialist (an interesting notion requiring philosophical specification of the sense of 'logics'). More particularly, *mestizo* logics suppose 'a continuist approach that would emphasize an originary syncretism or lack of distinctness' (p. 1). This is about as close as we come to a definition (at least that I could find without assistance from an index) and, looked at closely, it isn't much help. Syncretism is just a different trope for *métissage*, which we know means mixture; 'lack of distinctness' either just means mixture again, or it could mean devoid of distinction (which would be impossible to think about at all). Whatever the case, while we may understand that ethnological thinking under Amselle's definition classifies by essentialising culture, we have to conclude that '*mestizo* logics' entails no logics at all, it just claims that things were mixed before they were forcibly unmixed by ethnological thinking. Since we ought to know that classification is the outcome of classifying, what have we learnt? That *mestizo* logics is the practice of unclassifying? Or, perhaps, that ethnological thinking (whether ours or others') does not match reality. But who thought it should? Amselle apparently, since he argues (p. 44) that *pulaaku* (the code of comportment Fulani claim peculiarly their own) 'could in no way genuinely define anything unique to the Fulani', since 'these values characterize all aristocratic West African societies'. Burnham is kind only to note that this attempt to 'deconstruct Fulani ethnicity' is 'fundamentally flawed' (1996: 182 n. 6). On the same grounds, all insider accounts of identities would be dismissed by outsiders on the grounds that they were not true, and that part of the study of ethnicity which consists in asking how we and others essentialise one another, and what are the consequences of this, would simply have to be abandoned.

Is the radical character of Amselle's '*mestizo* logics' clarified in practice? Consider the following from his field area:

> Apropos of this set [Fulani, Bambara, Mandingo, Senufo and Minyanka], I make the hypothesis of an initial totality that, by a process of declension, gave birth to various societies, various cultures. [Page xi]

How does this analysis serve his avowed goal of reintegrating history? Assuming declension is not meant in the spatial sense of decline (downwards), it must mean the action of declining, or setting out the cases of a noun, adjective or pronoun. Not only is this undiluted structuralism, it presupposes a stable set of classificatory terms. Worse, since there is an initial totality, all the permutations are prefigured at the outset; history is simply a matter of working through the grammar, given a series of prompts (supplied by functional approach to politics). History consists of a hypothesised 'infinite regression' of these terms (p. 161). 'Culture,' we are told earlier, is to be seen as 'a "reservoir"—in other words, as a collection of practices internal or external to a given social arena

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that actors mobilize as a function of one or another political conjuncture' (p. 4). Quite how the actors are encultured in order to know what to do with the practices waiting in the reservoir is mysterious, but what we have here is a theoretical mixture of a transactional approach to action functionally related to a structuralist account of ethnic classifications. Historicity, '*mestizo* logics' and anti-essentialism play only rhetorical roles. But then Amselle's practice is not anti-essentialist at all, rather it is pluri-essentialist: 'we must advance the idea of a mixture or an originary interbreeding among different groups that have formed throughout human history' (p. 21). If he wants to say only that we are historically mixed up with one another through all that we share in the past, the image of interbreeding populations does not seem the happiest metaphor in which to embed the point. But, regardless of this, it clearly is not anti-essentialist; on the contrary, it is hyper-essentialist and multiple.

The problems—at least, so it seems to me—derive from attaching some genuine insights about ethnicity in Africa (in Amselle, 1985) to a hyperbolic and over-freighted restatement (in Amselle, 1990) that then loses the particularities of its intellectual context in translation (in *Mestizo Logics*). Like many other commentators, Amselle is right to worry over a skein of resemblances that run from nineteenth-century cultural romanticism, through cultural relativism and cultural anthropology, to cultural essentialisation, multiculturalism, nationalism, cultural fundamentalism, religious fundamentalism, ethnicism, racism, apartheid and genocide. But it is a long skein and has to be treated carefully if its connecting threads are not to break; simply conflating the entire series and dumping it at the door of 'ethnological reason' does not help. Amselle is prone to such statements as 'Fundamentalisms thus represent the quintessence of culturalism . . .' (*Mestizo Logics*, p. 39), as if one particular exaggeration of a way of seeing the world contained its soul. If we must analyse by conflating real phenomena with ideal types, why not 'Mutual respect for and toleration of cultural difference represents the quintessence of culturalism'? It's just as plausible (or implausible) an ideal type.

Suggesting that 'The notion of mestizo logics could offer the interesting possibility of resolving a contemporary, confusing false dilemma: the dilemma that opposes the universalism of human rights to cultural relativism' seems wildly optimistic. *Mestizo* logics suggests only that we can unclassify what has been classified. How, and for whom, does that operation resolve the problem that contemporary claims are made in the names of individuals (asocially/aculturally) and collectivities (socially/culturally) and that these claims conflict? What we are left with after declassifying is socially and culturally decontextualised individuals and deconstructed claims to collective identities. Wherein lies the resolution? If we only want to demonstrate the 'processes of identity construction', then it might reasonably be countered that (not only) anthropologists have been doing that for a long while. To suggest that doing so will 'relativize the claims of social actors so as to strike a compromise between the interests of the individual and the interests of the collectivity' (p. xvi) invests enormous, and laudable, hope in that little phrase 'so as to'; but it also embraces a compromise between the very two terms we were told represented a 'false dilemma'.

Having written positively about Amselle's 1985 article, I had expected to welcome *Mestizo Logics*. Its ethnographic chapters were endorsed on publication by reviewers expert in the region where he has carried out intensive research over a decade and a half, and will certainly be studied with profit. Amselle's attempt to embed African ethnography into a broader context is well taken and well intended; his sense of what matters in this broader picture

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strikes me as sure. However, his argument is so flawed in construction that one cannot be swept along by it, even when wanting to share many of his conclusions. Less a *métissage*, as I suggested initially, than a curate's egg.

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