

1993

Jean Ensminger. Making a Market: The Institutional Transformation of an African Society (Book Review)

Sandra F. Joireman

University of Richmond, sjoirema@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/polisci-faculty-publications>Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), and the [Political Economy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joireman, Sandra F. Review of *Making a Market: The Institutional Transformation of an African Society*, by Jean Ensminger. *APSA-CP Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (1993): 8,16.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Sandra Fullerton Joireman is a Ph. D. student in Political Science at the University of California, Los Angeles.

JEAN ENSMINGER. *MAKING A MARKET: THE INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION OF AN AFRICAN SOCIETY*. NEW YORK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 1992.

The publication of *Making a Market* marks yet another excellent contribution to the field from the Cambridge Series on Political Economy. Similar to the other volumes in the series, it emphasizes the interaction of political structures and institutions with economic change. Yet whereas most of the previous volumes in the series have been written by political scientists or economists, this book stands out as unique in that it is written from an anthropological perspective. Unusual as this is, the book gives an extremely sophisticated and readable application of the new institutional economics to the developing world.

The explicit intent of the book is to analyze the interaction of ideology, institutions, organizations, and bargaining power among the Galole Orma in Northern Kenya. Ensminger notes that the book is significantly influenced by Douglas North and the implicit goal of the volume seems to be pressing forward with the model of institutional change presented in North's book. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). North stated that institutional change results from a change in relative prices, or a change in preferences or tastes. Ensminger moves ahead with this formulation by attempting to determine whether it is preferences or prices that have a greater effect on institutional change. Understandably the results are inconclusive, yet the process of arriving at this uncertainty is quite intriguing.

Several sections of the book are worthy of specific note. First is Ensminger's contribution to the arguments against a moral economy. She notes in her research that assistance to those less well-off among the Orma was diminished with sedentarization and the development of the market. This is consistent with James Scott's findings in *The Moral Economy Of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). However, Ensminger identifies the cause behind the decrease as the higher cost of donations to the poor. The price of alms increased with sedentarization because pastoralists once dependent upon milk as their staple food chose grain as a staple once sedentarization occurred. This transformation was largely due to the fact that cattle could no longer supply the necessary calories to sustain the Orma without the exchange of meat for grain at the market. Thus, the "moral

economy" ended when sedentarization occurred, and the cost of alms became defined in monetary terms. Yet Ensminger notes that this market development and sedentarization did not lead to an increase in the amount of poor within the community. On the contrary she notes that as a whole the poor seem to be better clothed and better fed in the late 1980s, after a severe drought that led to increased settlement, than they were in the 1970s when she first began her observations. This seems to empirically refute any vestiges of truth in the concept of a moral economy.

Empirical evidence collected over a long period of time, as exemplified above, is a strong suit of the book. Over a decade of observation lends striking empirical data to the arguments presented. Ensminger gives statistical evidence on interest rates, market prices, and levels of education that correspond to sedentarization. Additionally she is able, due to the breadth of data, to trace the rate of sedentarization throughout the study.

Africanists will find the book particularly appealing in that, while it is strong in theory and empirical data, it is correspondingly rich in detail and description. Of particular note in this respect is a chapter devoted to the application of agency theory to Galole herding relationships. The chapter explains the reduction of principal-agent slippage through non-wage employment that allows evaluation of performance before payment. Full payment may take place after many years of service, with the principal paying the bridewealth for his agent herder. As awkward as this might seem, reading the chapter leaves one convinced that the new institutional economics has tremendous potential for

Please turn to page 16

Joireman (continued from page 8)

application to changing African societies.

Criticisms of *Making a Market* are due, in large part, to its anthropological nature. Though the anthropological foundation benefits the book in some fashion, due to the extended time frame, parts of the book can be frustrating for political scientists to read. Specifically aggravating is the lack of consideration of the state as a separate institution with an independent agenda. The state is mentioned peripherally in the book as an exogenous force affecting local institutions. Its policies are given without specific explanation of its goals. Additionally the reader is never given an assessment of the ability of the state to intervene, or its interest in the institutions that may develop. Throughout the book Ensminger views the state through the eyes of the Galole Orma. This is more than likely desirable for most anthropologists, towards whom the book is targeted, yet political scientists may be left feeling as if something is missing in the analysis.

Moreover, there is no attempt at comparison of the Orma to other groups or other experiences of market development. The develop-

ment of a broader perspective would have been helpful in making a strong case for the applicability of new institutional economics to developing societies, as well as placing the Orma experience in the context of other developing markets. Yet, this is not in the tradition of anthropological analysis which favors participant observation to comparative analysis. The burden of comparative studies in market development will have to fall on other scholars of new institutional economics.

The book as a whole is a remarkable achievement. Ensminger has combined years of observation and careful analysis into a theoretically relevant and empirically specific volume that bridges the disciplines of anthropology, political science and economics. The longitudinal breadth of the study leaves one with the feeling that Ensminger has taken the pulse of the society as institutions in its social, political, and economic spheres have been transformed. *Making a Market* is an important book for all those claiming interest in Africa and political economy.