

BOOK REVIEW

## The Challenges of Transforming Political Consciousness

### *Making New People: Politics, Cinema and Liberation in Burkina Faso, 1983-1987*

By James E. Genova. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2023. Pp. 286. \$34.95, paperback (ISBN: 9781611864397); \$34.95, ebook (ISBN: 9781628954777).

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The revolution in Burkina Faso, under the National Council of the Revolution (CNR), had an outsize influence on leftist politics of the 1980s across Africa and beyond. Indeed, few had even heard of Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) until the revolution, with its charismatic leader Thomas Sankara. James Genova's informative new book, *Making New People: Politics, Cinema, and Liberation in Burkina Faso, 1983-1987*, on the Burkinabé revolution, provides a fast-moving and engaging political narrative of the revolution, arguing that it was the revolution's cultural politics, and in particular film, that ensured its place in history.

*Making New People* is a well-written book that manages to convey the excitement that the revolution generated at the time. Drawing mostly on published sources, the accounts of journalists, and the films themselves, it covers the main highlights of the four-year (1983–87) revolution. It is best understood as a work of synthesis, using secondary accounts in presenting a cohesive narrative of revolutionary politics and policies. For specialists, the book doesn't contribute much new information that is not already widely available, and it does little to challenge the existing literature on the revolution or to advance our understanding of how the revolution was experienced by ordinary people. But for those who are just becoming interested in the revolution, it's a very useful and, with its focus on film, an original introduction.

Theoretically, *Making New People* makes the argument that the revolution was driven by a "Fanonist ideology." In providing an analysis of "the cinema industrial complex as revelatory of the philosophical framework that structured the CNR's policies," Genova argues that "Fanon's theories of the colonized mentality," with their emphasis on building new societies, "permeated the revolutionaries' rhetoric, framing of programs, and interpretation of history" (xxi). However, Genova's argument is based primarily on observing ideological or philosophical isomorphisms between Fanon's writings and various statements by revolutionary leaders, rather than providing evidence of Fanon's direct influence on the revolutionaries themselves.

If the theoretical grounding is more aspirational than realized, *Making New People's* sections on film are much stronger and more persuasive. Genova expertly situates Burkina Faso within the wider context of African cinema history by accounting for a wide range of African films and the institutional

history of African cinema. Genova succinctly recounts how cinema became part of broader liberation struggles, and how Sankara and the CNR promoted cinema in turn. Although cinema is the stated focus of the book, I counted only 30 pages of the book's 193 pages (not including notes) devoted to film and some sections on cinema provide only brief summaries of potentially fascinating subjects. A case in point would be the references to the "mobile film units" (106) which were the primary method that the CNR used to bring cinema to people in rural areas. Important as they are, we learn little in particular about this institution or how it worked. Thus, readers looking for an exploration of the social history of cinema within a revolutionary context will be dissatisfied. In this vein, even as the book asserts the importance of "making new people," there isn't much discussion of how state policies were understood, embraced, rejected, or experienced in rural areas. It remains highly Ouagadougou-centric. "The people" are encountered mainly in the speeches of revolutionary leaders, in the statistics on social and economic progress, and a few anecdotes. The heart of the book is about the internal factionalism within the revolutionary leadership, with cinema in a supporting role.

In striving to cover the entire revolutionary history in a balanced manner, *Making New People* falls short in delivering depth to many subjects, leading to mischaracterizations of key episodes in the history. For example, Genova draws questionable conclusions about the Liberian involvement in Sankara's assassination, while downplaying the roles of other foreign powers, notably France and Côte d'Ivoire. The assertions that, leading up to Sankara's murder, Liberian soldiers "were being trained in Burkina Faso," that "Taylor had headquarters in Ouagadougou" (175), and that, on 15 October 1987, Liberian forces under the command of Charles Taylor were at the Conseil de l'Entente (182) where Sankara was murdered, are simply not substantiated by credible sources. On the other hand, however, Genova has provided a wonderfully detailed account of the internal political struggles leading to Sankara's overthrow, drawing on an array of published memoirs and secondary sources in French.

In the end, despite these methodological choices, the bulk of the book will be highly useful for those interested in learning more about the revolution in Burkina Faso. Given the remarkably small literature on the revolution in English, especially in light of Sankara's popularity, *Making New People* is a welcome addition and should be read widely. It is comprehensive in its coverage of the revolution's history, and, albeit lacking maps or photographs, it delivers a very informative account. That is to the book's credit. Given its title and purported subject, readers seeking to deepen their knowledge of cinema's role in making "new people" during the few years of Sankara's government may find that the book falls short of this goal.