

Jacques Depelchin, *From The Congo To Zaire (1885-1974): Towards a Demystification of Economic and Political History*,  
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In this era of fervent Afro-pessimism when even 'liberal' voices in the West advocate the recolonization of Africa to save it from the alleged failures of independence with its haunting and perennial images of poverty, famine and warfare, the task of the historian is more important than ever. It has become fashionable in the popular and academic media to ignore the historical roots of the African crisis, to see it as a recent phenomenon, unconnected to colonialism, which is increasingly depicted as a golden period of economic growth, political stability, and social cohesion. And so 1960, once the great year of African independence, becomes the starting point of all discussion, seen as the time when Africa began its relentless slide from grace. Given the temporal focus of their discipline, historians are probably better equipped than other social scientists to challenge, demystify, or deconstruct the current dominant paradigms and perceptions on contemporary Africa.

If there ever was a country that exemplifies Africa's 'failure' it is Zaire, a large country that is immensely rich in natural resources, but whose potential has been squandered by a repressive, kleptocratic regime. In this book Depelchin demonstrates quite compellingly that the Zairean malaise has deeper roots than Mobutu's accession to power in the mid-1960s. There was no radical break, he argues, between the political economy of the Congo and that of post-independence Zaire. The colonial and post-colonial states were both authoritarian and they both employed the predatory methods of 'primitive accumulation' to advance the interests of their functionaries and as well as capital. Thus Mobutu is nothing more than a reincarnation of the venal Leopold II who, like the former, also treated the Congo as his personal property. In its construction Mobutu's Zairianization program bears uncanny resemblances to the patterns of colonial accumulation by Belgian capital.

Depelchin argues, therefore, that present-day Zaire cannot be understood if it is divorced from its colonial history. The country as presently configured was a colonial construct as a territorial and political unit, and in its economic structure, in short, as a social formation. His objective is not to absolve the Mobutu regime of its corruption and authoritarianism, but to demonstrate the depth of its roots, that its rise was not fortuitous, a tribute

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simply to Mobutu's ruthless cunning, rather it was spawned by a specific history of colonial capitalism and the country's process of decolonization.

The book is divided into two parts. The first presents a critique of economistic, colonialist and Africanist historiographies, while the second examines the development of the Zairean economy during the colonial and post-independence periods. In the historiographical chapters Depelchin queries the inherent biases of the official company and colonial sources used to reconstruct economic history, although he ends up depending on similar sources. This is because this is essentially a history of Belgian companies in Zaire, rather than a broad-based economic history. Peasants and workers are periodically invoked, but not analyzed. Depelchin also questions many of the analyses of Zaire's economy, especially those informed by the universalist pretensions of neo-classical economics with its dualist conceptualizations, and the compartmentalization of historical periods, as well as the Eurocentric tendency in Africanist historiography to produce historical information based on European reference points. He notes wryly that many of Mobutu's severest academic critics in the West today, such as Crawford Young, once applauded him for delivering the country from the 'chaos' of its immediate post-independence years.

The first two chapters in the second section marshal convincing evidence to show that Belgian companies in colonial Zaire not only made enormous profits, but repatriated the profits to the metropole, thus rendering invalid the question of Belgian colonialist historiography: how much did the Congo cost Belgium? As a justification of colonialism, this mode of inquiry, Depelchin argues, is akin to asking, 'how much did the Jews cost Germany?... These days, the only groups capable of posing such an obscene question would probably be neo-nazis' (p.67). Like Walter Rodney, Depelchin finds the whole balance-sheet mode of discourse ahistorical.

The data on different sectors of the economy from trade and agriculture to transport, banking and mining clearly highlights the contrast between the spectacular prosperity of the joint-stock companies and the mediocre progress of the colony. Many companies recouped their investments after a few years, sometimes as little as ten. Colonial state intervention was far more extensive than in the post-independence era and played a crucial role in ensuring the profitability of private enterprise. Just before and after independence most of these companies, including Union Minière, transferred their assets and began diversifying their investments abroad in order to prevent the incoming government from taking control over the economy. Union Minière helped orchestrate the secession of the mineral-rich Katanga province, and when this failed and Zairianization began it moved and opened new mines in Canada, Mexico, Brazil and Spain.

Zairianization was, therefore, launched because the Zairian ruling class wanted to clip the hegemonic tentacles of Belgian capital and to consolidate

their own material base. The new rulers proved good pupils, for they used many of the same exploitative and repressive methods employed by their former Belgian colonial masters. And they landed the country in the same economic and political mess. Hence, the continuing popular struggles against the state, this time for the 'Second Independence'.