

The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja. London: Zed Books, 2002

Reinventing Order in the Congo: How People Respond to State Failure in Kinshasa, Edited by Theodore Trefon. London: Zed Books, 2004

The history of the Democratic Republic of Congo¹ is a catalogue of domination and robbery. Situated in central Africa, Congo is one of the most mineral-rich countries in the world. Throughout the twentieth-century, its wealth was pillaged: first by the Belgians, then by the neocolonial rulers, with the complicity of international companies and, finally, by its neighbours – again with international involvement. Congo is economically important not only to formal trade, but also to global informal networks, which profit from the porous nature of its borders with nine countries and from the lack of effective legislation or regulation within the country.

Congo's political story is also significant, reflecting the shifting patterns in global politics through the colonial period, the Cold War and the post-Cold-War era. From 1885, it was the possession of King Leopold of Belgium, and the administration was taken over by the Belgian government in 1908. Demands for independence were made in January 1960 and, by June, the Belgians had left. For the population, the transition to independence was complicated by the desire of the Belgians to retain control of resources and the growing interest from the superpowers in Congo's positioning in the Cold War. Patrice Lumumba, the elected prime minister, was killed in January 1961 by a coalition of CIA, Belgian and Congolese forces, and power was seized by Mobutu Sese Seko, an important ally for the USA.

Marxist literature on Congo is sparse, and of the books reviewed here, only Nzongola-Ntalaja's has a Marxist perspective. Some earlier contributions are worth noting: Bézy focuses chiefly on the underdevelopment of Congo under colonial rule.² Depelchin, criticising Bézy, argues that the underdevelopment of Congo was accompanied by an – also under-researched – process of capital accumulation by Belgian companies, claiming that it is in the light of this that Congo's frequently cited 'potential' should be assessed.³ However, Depelchin's work analyses capital more thoroughly than labour and, published in the early 1990s, it predates the major upheavals in Congo and the interests they represent. Nzongola-Ntalaja focused his early work on class and revolution.⁴ The question of whether classes existed in postcolonial Congo, though, is contentious: whilst there were distinct social groups, the evidence of class consciousness is weak, and Nzongola-Ntalaja's work falls short

1. The country now called the Democratic Republic of Congo was Congo Free State from 1885, The Belgian Congo under colonial rule, The Congo at Independence, and Zaïre from 1971 to 1997.

2. Bézy 1957; Bézy, Peemans and Wautelet 1981.

3. Depelchin 1992.

4. Nzongola-Ntalaja 1970.

of a comprehensive analysis of class.⁵ In a more candid appraisal of the mechanics involved, Callaghy notes that the lack of industrialisation, bureaucratisation and formal economic integration limits the depth of capitalism and classical multi-class politics.⁶

By the 1990s, the rule of Mobutu was stuttering to a close and he was of no further use to his patrons in the USA. Mobutu maintained power through his increasingly brutal treatment of the population, by orchestrating pillages, funding death squads and retreating from public view. Decades of warped decision-making had privileged Mobutu and left the country in political and economic devastation. Whilst Mobutu kept a grip on the formal institutions of power, informal economies and the political arrangements they required were the real means of survival and organisation for much of the population.

The wars

In 1994, the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda led to a massive inflow of fugitives as the ousted government, army and followers arrived over the border into the Kivu region of eastern Congo. This destabilised the area and established the dynamic for a conflict that continues today, between the old Rwandan régime, which is perceived by the new Rwandan government as posing a security threat, and the new Rwandan government, which is perceived as illegitimate and authoritarian by the old régime.

Since the mid-1990s, Congo has witnessed two major wars and numerous other forms of violence, including local and provincial level fighting, cross-border attacks, state repression and debilitating neglect. These wars were a long time coming. Various disciplines propose theories on the causes of violence: neoclassical economists argue that resources are significant, particularly when a country has a heavy dependence on primary commodities.⁷ Theories of ethnicity suggest that the dominance of a particular ethnic group and the differences between ethnic groups contribute to the outbreak of violent conflict. Much political theory holds that inequality or exclusion potentially results in reprisals and war. According to such theories, Congo's past provides a puzzling combination of extraordinary provocation and remarkably little direct violence. Since the first Congo war broke out at the end of 1996 that has changed and there has been massive violence: estimates suggest that the wars have claimed over four million lives, making this conflict the deadliest since the Second World War.

The first war began in late 1996 when Laurent Kabila, long-time adversary of Mobutu, forged a coalition between interest groups in the east of the country. Heading the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo, he marched across the country and toppled Mobutu. Kabila ruled from Kinshasa for a year, but, in August 1998, Rwanda and Uganda, which had supported Kabila, were angered by his perceived anti-Tutsi stance and his inability to secure the Kivus, and backed the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) in a rebellion against him. Violence in Congo has been used to establish political processes and

5. Schatzberg 1980, pp. 17–32.

6. Callaghy 1984, p. 25.

7. In particular, Collier's work on 'Greed and Grievance' presents the case that economic opportunity is the most significant factor accounting for the outbreak of civil war (2000).

systems of resource acquisition and distribution. This has rewarded the use of violence, and has implications for how state power is built or diminished, and of how alternatives to it are mounted.

The violence and its associated power have given rise to forms of resistance. Resistance in Congo is remarkable for its longevity and ingenuity and can appear to be a paradigm of adaptation, upholding the notion that 'where there's a will, there's a way'. Such a maxim, though, does not recognise the unsuccessful struggles of millions of people who have been faced with violence and have not found a way out. Resistance in Congo is not a story of conventional bravery, as there have been too many victims: resistance has provoked killing and lack of resistance has resulted in many deaths.

This article reviews three recent books on Congo. The first, by Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, presents the popular political struggle in *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*. Adopting a narrative style, Nzongola-Ntalaja details the events, alliances and forms of resistance in chronological order from the formation of the Congo Free State in 1885. The second book under review is an edited volume by Theodore Trefon, *Reinventing Order in the Congo: How People Respond to State Failure in Kinshasa*. This addresses a different kind of resistance – that of everyday survival in Congo's capital city. The chapters address aspects of life in Kinshasa, all of which have been compromised and mutated by the vicissitudes of a state in the throes of collapse. The third book is edited by John F. Clark, *African Stakes in the Congo War*. Assuming the broader perspective of international relations and politics, and particularly relations with neighbouring countries, Clark and the other contributors examine the dynamics of aggression, and its effects on people in Congo. These books are brought together in a single review to explore the complementarity (or otherwise) between their differing perspectives. The strengths and weaknesses of each notwithstanding, these books offer a plethora of expressions and interpretations of power and resistance.

Domestic struggle

Nzongola-Ntalaja is a Congolese academic and activist. He has written extensively on nation-building and politics, and works at the Oslo Governance Centre of the UNDP. His book is a political account of Congo's history: starting with the acquisition of the territory by King Leopold of Belgium, Nzongola-Ntalaja examines the forms of leadership that emerged and the types of opposition that arose in response, tracking popular resistance to exploitation and repression. He distinguishes a number of eras: that of imperialism and colonialism, which gave rise to the independence struggle, that of the neocolonial state and the second independence movement, that of the Mobutu régime and the struggle for multiparty democracy, and that of the conflict in the Great Lakes region.⁸ He argues that the struggles for democracy and for national liberation are linked, and he perceives a continuity in the popular will from the time of colonial oppression to the present day victimisation by neighbouring countries and international powers.

8. The conflict in the Great Lakes region is the violence that has affected Congo, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda since the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, and especially in the period of the second Congo war, from 1998 to 2002.

Political arrangements are legitimised by their authors: King Leopold – heading a violent regime of resource extraction – described his mission as humanitarian, a word that requires no further justification. The colonialists, continuing the exploitation, conjured up the notion of a ‘white man’s burden’: the duty to improve the material and moral lot of the Africans. Nzongola-Ntalaja notes that the very existence of an indigenous culture in Congo was threatening to these régimes and so was subjected to institutionalised racism that claimed and promoted the superiority of the colonial agenda. But the Congolese have resisted. Political initiative, he asserts, was taken most commonly by the intellectual leadership but has been sustained through the struggle of the popular classes.

Peasants’ and workers’ revolts took place in the era of 1900–45. According to Nzongola-Ntalaja, this period also saw the formation of social classes: a large and constant working class, and the *évolués* – those who had table linen, spoke French to their children and could be appointed to minor administrative posts. Nzongola-Ntalaja charts how the pettiness of the concessions made by the colonial administration caused frustration amongst the *évolués*, leading them to join the ordinary people in the independence struggle in an anticolonial alliance. This alliance broke up at Independence when it transpired that the petty bourgeoisie had wanted the Europeans out of the country and a transfer of power to their hands, but the other classes were militating for more radical change.

The meddling of the Americans throughout the 1950s and the ascendance of Mobutu – initially described as a pro-Western moderate – to dictatorship is recorded in persuasive detail. This includes an account of the nationalist project of Zaïrianisation, which placed companies within the control of the political élites and simultaneously increased dependence on outside players. The manipulation of economic and political assets led to an inversion of values, described as ‘Zaïrian sickness’ and epitomised by the rule of Mobutu. The quality of Nzongola-Ntalaja’s writing on the Mobutu era contrasts with that of the report of the conflict in the Great Lakes which is over-ambitious and brief. It gives a summary of the history of Rwanda, the significance of which is to set the scene for the conflict in Congo. Its treatment of the politicisation of ethnicity, the rallying of alliances and the subsequent instability in Congo may provide those unfamiliar with the region with a broad-brush understanding of some elements of the conflicts, but the chapter offers little of analytical or empirical importance.

Throughout the book, the style is arresting, partly due to Nzongola-Ntalaja’s familiarity with the characters involved. Nzongola-Ntalaja derives his intellectual direction from Fanon and Cabral. Fanon’s influence is perhaps strongest in Nzongola-Ntalaja’s rejection of the first Independence, which, in his estimation, amounted to a change of guard rather than a genuine liberation. As such it led, in accordance with Fanon’s thesis,⁹ to disastrous rule in the first half of the 1960s and the use of further violence. With regard to the work of Cabral, Nzongola-Ntalaja elucidates a number of forms of domination. One of Cabral’s tenets is that imposing domination is easy under certain circumstances, but that it can be maintained only by permanent suppression or by killing the population.¹⁰ These two means of dominance, and the accompanying attempts to instil foreign culture, have been evident in the colonial era and since. Other themes in Fanon’s and Cabral’s writing that are taken

9. Fanon 1961.

10. Cabral 1970.

up by Nzongola-Ntalaja include the national nature of the struggle, the need to maintain cultural values and the challenges of doing so. Nzongola-Ntalaja makes no pretence of neutrality. On the contrary, he presents himself and his work as part of the movement for democracy, and devotes attention both to the interests of powerful external actors in directing affairs in Congo and to the struggle of the people of Congo against their leaders.

There are two features of the book that attract critical comment. The first is its descriptive style. This has the advantage of delivering an accessible narrative. The disadvantage is that, in presenting a singular story, the approach leaves the reader with little in the way of a framework for analysis. This is a limitation as far as developing an understanding of Congo is concerned, and also means that the book does not contribute to a theoretical understanding of events elsewhere. In addition, Nzongola-Ntalaja adopts an informal diction, reports hearsay and frequently does not cite sources. Again, this is an advantage in offering an engaging account, but the numerous unsupported stories undermine the academic merit of the work.

Secondly, this book is not an account of politics but a political account. Nzongola-Ntalaja declares his political hand at the beginning of the book, but while he presents his work as part of the democracy movement, at times his contempt for external parties or for politicians of a stripe other than his own descends into the construction of conspiracy theories. There is little subtlety in his interpretation and he frequently works with a binary categorisation of 'good' and 'bad' when judging the motivations and capacities of politicians. Whilst this may be intended to guide the reader, its impact is to compromise the author's ability to make a sound appraisal of the state or the opposition movement in Congo.

The impression of methodological shortcuts and political bias is reinforced by the fact that Nzongola-Ntalaja makes assertions that are, in a literal sense, not wholly true. His presentation of Laurent Kabila as incompetent and universally disliked, for example, is contested by people in Congo, many of whom have respect and fondness for him, and portraits of him remained on billboards on the streets of Kinshasa five years after his death. Nzongola-Ntalaja's project is ostensibly to promote democracy, but his assumption of an undifferentiated 'ordinary people' with shared political views and interests forecloses a more careful disaggregation that would have granted greater credibility both for his writing and for his political struggle.

Some of the shortfalls relating to the use of evidence and argumentation are redeemed by the concluding chapter, which impressively brings the threads of the book together, and, notwithstanding some reservations, Nzongola-Ntalaja's work offers an important insight into Congolese politics. The difficulty Nzongola-Ntalaja faces as an author is to make the failures of the resistance movement intellectually problematic: the evidence of the resistance movement is sparse, even with the reports of the successive heroism of Lumumba, Mulele and Tshisekedi. Nzongola-Ntalaja is writing along an analytical edge – his task is to persuade the reader that the failures he documents are both surprising and explicable.

Evading the state

In a sense, Theodore Trefon's *Reinventing Order in the Congo*, encounters a similar problem: in recounting stories of survival in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, the book throws light on something that it presents as unlikely. This is difficult, though, as Trefon acknowledges at

the outset that many people die in Kinshasa and in the rest of Congo – the ‘miracle’ signally fails them. As in Nzongola-Ntalaja’s book, it seems overall that the phenomenon is neither entirely surprising nor fully explained. The people of Kinshasa do not offer a successful political challenge to the incapacitating power of state abuse and neglect, and their means of survival are uncertain in terms of avoiding further devastation or death.

Trefon provides a comprehensive opening chapter, introducing the question of how people survive in the unusually awkward conditions of Kinshasa. He identifies a number of themes that are elaborated on through the book, including the subjects of dependencies, food, faith and children. Whilst this introduction constitutes a strong start and demonstrates a commanding knowledge of Kinshasa, there is no concluding chapter and there is some impression of a random series of events after the introduction. The only chapter that engages significantly with the background to the disruption of social and political life is that by de Villers and Onasombo, placed towards the end of the book. For analytical purposes, it would make more sense to have this near the beginning.

Some distinction can be made between the first half of the book, which concerns the methods by which people access services, and the second half, which – broadly – concerns particular sectors of society, although there is no class analysis. With regard to the former, the book reports on the ways in which the population of Kinshasa, faced with a lack of state provision, has moved towards the formation of co-operatives and other informal social innovations to secure food, water and medical care. The second half of the book offers perspectives on civil society, and on groups such as single mothers and street children and the social space they occupy.

The book is strictly circumscribed in geographical and temporal terms. This is a strength in that the chapters are, without exception, interesting and focused. They provide insights into the way that people live in Kinshasa and, as they deal with contemporary events, they preserve a snapshot of this juncture in history. Nonetheless, describing a city devoid of its historical context restricts the analysis of how the conditions described came about, whose interests they serve and of the dynamics that exist between sectors. Similarly, as the book only addresses life in Kinshasa, it disregards the linkages between the capital and other parts of Congo, or between Congo and the rest of the region or the world.

A more serious hazard is posed by the methodology. There is variation in the approach of the chapters, some authors preferring an authoritative tone whilst others present a greater degree of detail. Throughout, there is greater attention to description than to analysis, and many of the chapters rely on anecdotes as opposed to evidence and argumentation. As the book gives very little contextual explanation, it is not obvious what its purpose is: there is little opportunity to learn from it, save for the particulars of everyday survival. Furthermore, on the few occasions when authors do comment on events in the rest of Congo (for example, p. 61), there is a loss of specificity and relevance.

Also within the scope of a critique of the methodology, the central theme of the book – survival – is presented in almost mystical terms, and the ‘miracle of Kinshasa’ is accompanied by a gauche engagement with magic and spiritualism. Trefon explicitly distances himself from the ‘heart of darkness’ interpretation of events in Congo, but – in line with many of the other contributors to the book – does not come to terms with the full normality of what happens. Even the chapter by de Villers and Onasombo, despite its political analysis, ends with the possibility that the crowd mourning Laurent Kabila was ‘trying to exorcise the demons and malicious spirits that haunt the tragic history of Congo/Zaire’ (p. 154).

The phenomenon of the miracle of Kinshasa is in some ways an attractive notion, but not one that offers analytical insight, and the constant reminders of mystery risk portraying the Kinois as a pathologically dreamy population. The opposite interpretation is what emerges from the stories themselves – of practical responses to enduring problems. The assumptions of magic infect the narrative: the chapter by de Boeck on child witches, for example, explains the increase in the number of street children as being the result of increased witchcraft accusations. No data is presented, except an excerpt from an interview conducted at a Church of the Holy Spirit, which cannot be admitted as an impartial source on such a subject. Assumptions are also made about the psychological state of the Kinois. One author claims there has been a ‘rise of selfish individualism’ (p. 23), another that ‘jealousy is a very powerful emotion in Kinshasa’ (p. 94), but no evidence is brought to bear on these assertions.

Another feature of the book is its uncritical attitude towards sources. Despite some warnings about the perils of collecting and accepting figures, for the most part reports from aid agencies are liberally recited. The work of international agencies, apart from in the chapter on NGOs, receive extremely bland treatment, and they are presented simply as organisations that fill the gaps left by the state. This frailty results partly from the general lack of political analysis and partly from the paucity of empirical work, which necessitates reliance on the work of others: NGOs provide statistics that are easily integrated into the narrative.

As the book avoids political engagement, it is unsurprising that few contributors mention the wars, and none gives them considered attention. Whilst the events described do attest to the various dimensions of crisis, the tendency to maintain the discussion at the micro-level renders the wars practically irrelevant, as little fighting has taken place in Kinshasa. A more thorough investigation would have identified that the *effects* of the fighting are relevant to the way that trading is done, to international relations, to urban migration and to the role of the state in conducting civil and military affairs.

There is a clue to the book’s weaknesses in the subtitle, *how people respond to state failure in Kinshasa*. The book is essentially about how people *react to* state failure, whereas a more interesting question would have been how people *interact with* state failure. Devoting some attention to how the events described relate to the informalisation of the economy and the repression of political resistance, along the lines of the analysis of MacGaffey,¹¹ would have allowed for some understanding of how people find themselves needing to buy out of a system, and the conflicts between the short- and medium-term implications of doing so. The role of the population and their strategies in accelerating the demise of state infrastructure and services would have made a more significant story.¹²

11. MacGaffey 1991. Through an analysis of the second economy, MacGaffey argues that such forms of trade are political as well as economic events, in that they deny the state revenue and other support. It is a theme she takes up with Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga in *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Africa Issues, 2001). In this book, the authors consider the second economy on a transnational scale, arguing that engagement with it enables people to confront and reject the marginalisation imposed on them by formal political and economic structures.

12. Schatzberg argues that dichotomies between exploited and exploiter do not hold, and particularly in situations of conflict. He gives an example of an unpaid police officer who extorts

Regional political economy

Clark's edited book, *The African Stakes of the Congo War*, presents a framework of analysis in the introduction and the contributions are of a consistently high standard. Written from the perspective of international politics, this book gives a straightforward analysis of power, as seen from a political-economy angle. This book identifies the political and economic involvement of neighbouring countries and a number of players in Congo itself, focusing primarily on the second Congo war – that started with the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) rebellion in August 1998. The book is elegantly ordered, with Part I giving the historical context to the war, Part II examining the post-Mobutu régimes and the regional support they received, Part III looking at the contestants to the Congolese state, and Part IV investigating non-state phenomena. There is an illuminating coherence achieved by bringing these components together in an edited volume.

Clark identifies three perspectives on the war in Congo:

The first perspective sees the Congo war largely as an issue of state collapse, succeeded by a scramble of unscrupulous neighbors for the lush spoils left unguarded and unclaimed.

The second, 'that the species of war that we now observe in Congo is part of a larger, continental trend' and that 'recent changes in international policies may have impacted the stability of African states' (p. 2). And the third that sees the war 'not as a result of internal collapse but as primarily the result of external intervention' (p. 4). Attention to these perspectives allows for consideration of international politics, the Cold War, its end, the changing nature of sovereignty, and the need for regional allies.

In analysing the post-Mobutu regimes and their supporters, the rule of Laurent Kabila (1997–2001) and of his son, Joseph Kabila (2001–present), is examined alongside analyses of Angola and Zimbabwe. These are important contributions as the incentives and involvement of these two countries are not commonly subject to the same degree of scrutiny as those of the countries on Congo's eastern border, particularly Rwanda and Uganda. In addition, these chapters stand as testimony to the speed at which situations change. The fight against UNITA was a primary factor in Angola's involvement in the war in Congo and, as far as Angola was concerned, a fight that was preferable on Congolese soil. The study of Zimbabwe also offers a fascinating example of how shifts, even over just a few years, can greatly alter the political economy and alliances of the region.

The chapters on the opposition movements within Congo and of the involvement of Rwanda and Uganda offer useful examination of players whose activities have attracted international attention following the publication of the UN's Panel of Experts Report on the exploitation of natural resources from Congo.¹³ The territorial invasion of a country by

money from a poorer farmer, and asserts that to explain this as false consciousness, 'neither provides a way out of the dilemma nor contributes significantly to our understanding of human behaviour' (1970, p. 25). The collusion of the population in Mobutu's pillages and the violent relations between nearby social groups in Congo similarly demands a more plausible and more enlightening explanation.

13. UNSC 2001.

two foreign armies is exceptional in Africa and, whilst – in line with mainstream thinking¹⁴ – economic opportunities are found to play a role in the violence, particularly in its perpetuation, the analysis goes far beyond that offered by neoclassical economics. The authors study a number of competing hypotheses to establish a range and ordering of priorities that influenced decisions to invade. The chapters arrive at nuanced conclusions relating to the economic and political motivations, and also to the constraints on, and personal ambitions of, the presidents of Rwanda and Uganda.

The closing section of the book consists of an investigation into the small arms trade, a political-economy evaluation of the costs of the war, and an evaluation of the impact of internally displaced people and refugees. This section ambitiously aims to enumerate, if not to quantify, the contributing factors – in terms of arms, and the costs for people in Congo and for others in the region. Nonetheless, some of the analytical precision is lost in this section on account of the broader approach, and the argumentation is less rigorous and less conclusive.

The notion of African ‘stakes’ in the Congo war is significant in framing the analysis – the question is not only about motivations, but about how events evolve politically. As many of the players have found, incentives for involvement may conflict or change over time, and the possibility of withdrawing is not always available. According to Longman’s analysis (Chapter 8), for example, the RCD and their Rwandan backers made political miscalculations in attempting to take Kinshasa a second time in August 1998. Despite the similarities in the political climate with the invasion one year earlier, the Congolese military did not desert, and the armies of Zimbabwe and Angola came to the assistance of President Kabila. The Rwandans found their situation inextricable: they had security concerns and needed to exert influence, but were perceived by the Congolese as invaders and oppressors.

Power & violence

All three books attest to the fact that political power is closely connected to the use of violence and to the acquisition and distribution of material wealth.¹⁵ Mobutu’s violent repression secured his authority by crushing competition and concentrating resources – both the natural and commercial resources from Congo and aid from donors – into his hands and the hands of his supporters. The motivations for neighbouring states to become embroiled in the fighting, according to Clark’s account, hinged largely on the political or economic gains they could make. These were sometimes contradictory, for example when making economic gains had political costs, or when political expediency, such as Museveni’s support for Kagame, involved significant financial outlay. Decisions over involvement included considerations about long-term alliances and the need for secure borders, as well as the possibility of profiting from weak borders and economic risk-taking to extract mineral reserves.

14. See, for example, Collier 2000.

15. On account of the use of violence, *control* of the means of production, including mining, forestry and agriculture is more significant than *ownership* in the Congolese context (Schatzberg 1970, p. 25). The lack of a predictably functioning state tends to render formal property rights or labour rights (or organisation) irrelevant.

Just as increases in power are associated with the use of violence for economic gain, disempowerment is associated with neglect by powerful actors (notably the neglect of the material needs of the population in Kinshasa), and the destruction of wealth, trade and systems of production, particularly in the occupied areas in the east of the country. The dilapidation of infrastructure and services led to the political disenchantment and incapacitation of people in Kinshasa and elsewhere. Moreover, as their situation deteriorated, they had less time and fewer resources for engaging with or challenging the institutions of state power. The pillaging of shops and businesses across the country at the beginning of the 1990s weakened the ties between Mobutu and the population, increased poverty, and diminished the capacity for organised political dissent.

Thus, the acquisition of power and the suppression of rivals or rebellion polarise political positions and make way for further forms of violence. The inequality that is evident from all accounts of Congo has not provoked the poorer or weaker to rise up and claim, demand or take their share. On the contrary, violence has been the *result* of inequality, but in the sense that the differential in power between rulers and ruled has allowed for and, indeed, sanctioned the violence meted out by the powerful on the powerless, and the rich on the poor. From the rule of King Leopold and the colonial era onwards, superior military and administrative organisation enabled the Belgians and then the neocolonialists to plunder Congo. More recently, Rwanda and Uganda have used their superior military power to loot the population of Congo, and the Congolese state has preyed on or neglected the people in Kinshasa at no expense to its own power.

Power has not always been realistically assessed in Congo. Nzongola-Ntalaja claims that, since Independence, Congo has been seen by many external actors as posing a set of technical problems arising from the fact that there is an insufficiently skilled workforce. The imposition of financial austerity through structural adjustment and the more recent aid discourse of good governance similarly position the solutions within national borders, and offer a standardised blueprint for technical and financial success. Excluding Congolese politics and its relationship with regional and international interests justifies particular responses. Fairhead, regarding the role of resources such as diamonds, gold, timber, uranium, copper, cobalt and coltan in the conflict, argues that, to the extent that the war has an environmental component, it must be viewed from an international perspective, as it is foreign countries that provide the market for the resources extracted (and foreign firms often extract them). He concludes that perceiving the war as a national or sub-national resource contest is dangerous, chiefly because it is likely to prompt policies that are unhelpful or counterproductive as they do not address the true nature of the conflict and may exacerbate tensions.¹⁶

The tendency to perceive the conflicts in Congo as national and stemming from apolitical problems is not politically neutral. Nzongola-Ntalaja identifies a pattern, as early as the colonial period, whereby political issues in Congo are resolved according to how best to service the demands of the market and, particularly, in favour of Northern countries. The claim that this has been the priority is consistent with the fact that the integration of some elements of the Congolese economy into the world market and the marginalisation of others has been uneven and often violent. The extraction of rubber under King Leopold,

16. Fairhead 2000, p. 175.

the exploitation of gold and ivory by the Belgians, the lucrative concessions that kept the Mobutu ship afloat and the recent predations of Uganda, Rwanda and their international backers comprise a seamless tale of Congo's economic significance to external powers.

Understanding the dimensions of power makes the question of resistance all the more profound: can such power be resisted and, if so, how? The message from these three books is dismal. For the most part, Nzongola-Ntalaja is accounting for failure: the independence struggle was successful, but it relied on a continent-wide shift towards independence and a coalition of convenience between classes within Congo. Thereafter, the revolt against the post-colonial state, the resistance to dictatorship from 1969–97 and the contemporary struggle for democracy have all – largely – failed. Trefon and the other contributors, similarly, do not identify ways in which the people of Kinshasa engage with or overcome their oppression or exclusion. Various chapters in Clark's book identify the Congolese as the greatest losers of the wars, with economic costs from destruction and disruption overlaid with huge loss of life and other long-term impacts.

Will & no way

The aggressors in the wars in Congo have elicited little organised military resistance. Laurent Kabila's march across the country in 1996/7 that ended Mobutu's rule faced negligible armed opposition and, indeed, a great deal of support. Whilst there were probably over 100,000 casualties, most were killed in massacres rather than in resisting Kabila's advance. In seven months Kabila's army had captured Kinshasa and a passable calm had returned to the country. The second war experienced more resistance. Angola and Zimbabwe came to the assistance of Kabila against the Rwandan army and, in the east, the Maimai movements¹⁷ provided some local obstacles to the invaders. Nonetheless, the Rwandan forces made a determined assault on the capital and, in collaboration with the Ugandan army, imposed an administrative structure on the eastern part of the country.

The story of political opposition is also ambivalent. Nzongola-Ntalaja claims that the legacy of the second independence movement was that of resistance to illegitimate rulers. Conditions for the opposition, though, are complicated by the constant attempts of actors outside Congo to foster conditions for market opportunities, including the removal of leaders who threaten the project and the nurturing of those who promote it. Nzongola-Ntalaja recounts how direct political engagement has failed to move forward, and leaves the reader with the assertion that there has been a shift from hope in the earlier forms of resistance to despair in the second half of the 1990s. Whilst something of a democratic movement continues, its vision has become dimmed by the failures in its own project and the increasingly hostile political environment in which it finds itself. Whatever the will, there has been no way of realising the democratic dream.

17. The Maimais are locally organised militias. The groups are loosely connected to each other, particularly with respect to alliances, but there is little formal command structure. The Maimais supported Kabila's invasion but fought against the occupation of the Rwandan army and its militias. The Maimais were preceded by similar units in previous struggles, particularly the Simbas, who fought for the 'second independence'.

There are, though, smaller and less glorious acts of defiance. Schatzberg, who addresses the era before the wars, finds ways in which people operate at the edges of formal institutions to meet oppression with small – but significant – acts of distortion and prevarication.¹⁸ Trefon's book, whilst it is concerned chiefly with the informal sector, in some ways reflects this work. The mechanisms identified by which people obtain goods or services are similar in that they enable people to evade the state and thus evade state control. Trefon writes,

People are poor, sick, hungry, unschooled, underinformed and disillusioned by decades of political oppression, economic crisis and war. The toll of marginalization, exclusion and social stratification has been heavy. Outbreaks of violence have reached frightening proportions. (p. 1.)

He argues, though, that the ways that people find to survive amount to a process in which order is re-invented.

The implication of Trefon's claim is that the abusive neglect by the state led directly to the population's originality in finding alternative strategies; in doing so, some power is restored to – or more properly re-claimed by – the people. This is a phenomenon explored by Wood in her study of El Salvador, in which she argues that people joined the rebellion even when they were unlikely to succeed, for emotional reasons, such as the sense of agency and playing an active part in one's future validated the decision to risk one's life. She writes,

the resolution to the puzzle of collective action depends on emotional processes, moral perceptions, and shifting political culture as well as on the emergence of insurgent social networks and widening political opportunities.¹⁹

In Congo, too, there may be other returns on evasive or obstructive action, even if responses to power do not always confront it or offer much in the way of opposition. Do these activities constitute resistance?

Scott explores how, conventionally, resistance is defined in terms of being collective and organised, principled, having revolutionary consequences and negating the basis of domination. Using anthropological research from a village in Malaysia, Scott disputes these definitions, arguing that overt rebellion is rare as people need to survive, but that covert acts of rebellion – verbal confrontations, strikes and petty theft – are expressions of a deep-running ideological challenge. Thus, whilst there is outward conformity, he argues that this is calculated by the peasants, rather than being a manifestation of false consciousness or a consequence of hegemony. A battle is fought in thousands of tiny ways, by means of what Scott terms 'weapons of the weak'.²⁰

Within the constraints of the need for inventiveness and the desire for survival, the activities of Congolese people reflect elements of the rebellion in El Salvador and the muted conformity described by Scott. They too fail to comply with conventional definitions, but

18. Schatzberg 1991.

19. Wood 2003, p. 20.

20. Scott 1985.

are acts of resistance in that they pose ideological challenges. The use of greater military capacity and the ability to exploit resources have, in large part, sealed the physical effectiveness of the violence. Nevertheless, people have avoided being ruled: by operating outside formal structures in Kinshasa, hiding in the eastern part of Congo, or maintaining a resistance movement in contravention to the law. These activities demonstrate a tenacity that influences the historical development of Congo, even whilst there have been numerous individual casualties. The legitimacy of foreign violent rule has been rejected: Mobutu was removed from power and the Rwandan army and RCD were never able to establish themselves fully.

By surviving in conditions that are murderous, by evading forms of control and delinking from the system, people in Congo ultimately limit the reach of the power imposed on them. They have to a great extent isolated and, to a lesser degree, diminished the leadership of Congo and the power of the invaders. The forms of economic survival challenge authority by depriving the state (or predatory non-state actors) of revenue, whilst maximising the opportunities for survival irrespective of – and in defiance of – the coercion to which people are exposed. The violent régimes in Congo have broken the country as far as they were able, but the fact that have been unable to break it completely attests to the resistance against them. For the powerful, as for the powerless, there may be a will, but there has been no way to achieve it completely.

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