

University of Groningen

Decarbonization, democracy and climate justice

Pesa, Iva

Published in:
Journal of Modern European History

DOI:
[10.1177/16118944221113607](https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221113607)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2022

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Pesa, I. (2022). Decarbonization, democracy and climate justice: The connections between African mining and European politics. *Journal of Modern European History*, 20(3), 299-303.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221113607>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Decarbonization, Democracy and Climate Justice: The Connections Between African Mining and European Politics

Journal of Modern European History

2022, Vol. 20(3) 299–303

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/16118944221113607

journals.sagepub.com/home/meh**Iva Peša**

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Keywords

environmental justice, resource extraction, democratic accountability, Dr Congo

Democratic support for measures to combat climate change has been increasing throughout Europe across the political spectrum, among liberals, social democrats and confessional parties alike.¹ Acknowledging heightened environmental concerns among voters, most European governments have set up generous subsidies for windmills, solar panels and electric cars in order to stimulate decarbonization.² Yet, consumers, voters and politicians rarely notice that these ‘green solutions’ are extremely resource-intensive, as they rely on the mining of metals and minerals such as copper, cobalt and lithium.³ This mining largely takes place outside of Europe, in formerly colonized localities in the Global South and thereby risks entrenching what Sovacool calls a ‘decarbonization divide’, as low-carbon technologies ‘depend on dirty flows of mineral extraction which only perpetuate neocolonial dependence, economic inequality, and degradation of the environment’.⁴ Effectively, the ways in which low-carbon transitions in Europe are implicated in mining pollution

1. T. Hoerber, *The Origins of Energy and Environmental Policy in Europe: The Beginnings of a European Environmental Conscience*, London 2012.
2. Decarbonization is a central goal of the ‘European Green Deal’ launched in 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.
3. N. Bainton / D. Kemp / E. Lebre / J. R. Owen / G. Marston, ‘The Energy-Extractives Nexus and the Just Transition’, in: *Sustainable Development* 29 (2021), 624–634.
4. B.K. Sovacool A. Hook / M. Martiskainen / A. Brock / B. Turnheim, ‘The Decarbonisation Divide: Contextualizing Landscapes of Low-Carbon Exploitation and Toxicity in Africa’, in: *Global Environmental Change* 60 (2020), 1–19, 2.

Corresponding author:

Iva Peša, Contemporary History, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 716, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands.

Email: i.pesa@rug.nl

and waste streams in Africa, Asia and Latin America are externalized and invisibilized in the democratic process, which focuses primarily on national emissions targets and decarbonization goals. This article will examine the ‘democratic deficit’ of global climate change politics – in terms of representation, accountability and responsibility – as European ‘elected representatives are not institutionally obliged to answer to any community other than their electorates or their nation for the ecological consequences of their decisions, even when it can be clearly foreseen that other communities, now and in the future, will be seriously harmed’.⁵ Instead of this national focus, European governments should adopt a global perspective that seeks to minimize transnational unevenness by emphasizing accountability and equity. Calls for ‘climate justice’, involving attempts to redress global environmental inequalities, are fundamentally moral and democratic issues. Striving for climate justice is particularly urgent in our planetary and entangled Anthropocene times, involving a common but differentiated responsibility in tackling climate change.⁶

Using two examples, which illustrate the relationship between copper and cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Belgian environmental concerns, I argue that adopting a historical perspective is crucial to attaining democratic accountability. As Sultana emphasizes, contemporary ‘climate injustices are historically and spatially produced’, built on long histories of colonialism and highly unequal capitalism, which disproportionately burden ‘racialised post-colonial communities and countries of the Global South’.⁷ Attention for history and planetary entanglements ‘raises awareness on interconnections across places and issues’⁸ and thus enables escaping the domestic focus that lies at the root of the democratic deficit of global environmental politics. Attentiveness to longstanding historical climate injustices and global patterns of capitalist extractivism also reframes debates about climate adaptation funding for countries in the Global South and the possibility of ‘climate reparations’.⁹ These debates, I will show in the final section, are integrally about accountability and justice in global democratic systems.

Mining, pollution and transnational entanglements

The foundation of the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga in 1906 marked the beginning of large-scale Belgian copper and cobalt mining in Congo. From the outset, resource extraction was embedded in highly unequal colonial and capitalist relationships. In 1960, on the eve of the country’s independence, Congo’s mines exported 329,000 tonnes of copper to Europe, fuelling the process of electrification in Belgium and neighbouring countries. In the post-colonial period, mining production has risen further, with production still mainly for export to Europe, America and, more recently, Asia.¹⁰ The environmental costs of more than a century of mining in Congo are blatant: giant waste heaps, the absence of vegetation close to smelters and dead fish in the river after an acid spill are poignant reminders of toxicity. Although the full extent of this ‘slow violence’, which has accumulated historically, is still becoming evident, it is clear that colonial and post-colonial officials had long been acutely aware of pollution and environmental disruption. Reports from the 1930s speak of lethal levels of sulphur dioxide emissions in Congolese towns, while others mention sulphuric acid

5. R. Eckersley, ‘Ecological Democracy and the Rise and Decline of Liberal Democracy: Looking Back, Looking Forward’, in: *Environmental Politics* 29 (2020) 2, 214–234, 218.

6. K. Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis, MN 2018.

7. F. Sultana, ‘Critical Climate Justice’, in: *The Geographical Journal* 188 (2022), 118–124, 120.

8. *Ibid.*, 122.

9. O.O. Táiwò, *Reconsidering Reparations*, Oxford 2022.

10. M. Larmer / E. Guene / B. Henriët / I. Pesa / R. Taylor (eds.), *Across the Copperbelt: Urban & Social Change in Central Africa’s Borderland Communities*, Oxford 2021.

and sodium carbonate in river effluents, which killed aquatic life and vegetation.¹¹ Still, the colonial state and powerful mining interests knowingly accepted these risks as a by-product of profitable copper production. This invisibilization of environmental harm persisted after independence. In 1974, a doctor who worked for the post-colonial state-owned company Gécamines recognized pollution as a cause of occupational disease but still maintained that ‘to secure production, industries are obliged to accept these permanent risks’.¹² Colonial power structures thus laid the foundation for a perverse sense of economism, whereby environmental destruction was considered the price to pay for mining profits. These power structures have left lasting legacies on the ways in which pollution is perceived in Congolese mining localities today.

The acceptance of pollution in Congo as ‘collateral damage’ differed markedly from the reactions to pollution in Belgium itself. In the late 1970s, a ‘pollution scandal’ gripped the Belgian neighbourhood of Hoboken in Antwerp. A major Union Minière refining plant, Métallurgie Hoboken-Overpelt, was established there in 1887. Throughout the 20th century, a lot of Congolese copper and gold was sent to Hoboken for smelting and processing. The results of decades of industrial activity in Hoboken caused suspicious cattle deaths in 1973 and, following a detailed investigation among school-aged children, doctors confirmed heightened lead levels in their blood in 1978. Lead poisoning can cause asthma, kidney disease, nervous system failure, permanent brain damage and, in severe cases, even death. Métallurgie Hoboken-Overpelt first responded that it had not known about the negative environmental impacts of its operations but, as media attention and legal charges were brought, the company changed its course and consciously started limiting pollution and emission levels through costly technical measures.¹³ Ateliers du Zoning even produced a song, ‘*La Ballade d’Hoboken*’ (1978) about this affair, containing a highly controversial line: ‘When one has so much money, after all, it’s normal / That one can kill for commercial reasons’.¹⁴ By 2000, once this scandal had settled down, the company, now renamed UMICORE, tried to assert a ‘green’ image by adopting cutting-edge technology to reduce emissions.¹⁵ Yet, remarkably, throughout this whole affair, as Meynen and Sébastien note, ‘not a comment was made on the ecological debt they incurred in places like Katanga, Congo, where they have a very long history of mining’.¹⁶ Media coverage, popular pressure and legal charges led to a change of course among UMICORE management, which benefited the inhabitants of Antwerp, but it hardly addressed the colonial legacy and environmental devastation of copper mining and pollution in Congo itself.

Global environmental injustices have started to attract more attention in the new millennium, informed by (social) media attention and the lobbying of environmental NGOs. Rare metals such as cobalt, of which 70% of global production takes place in Congo, are essential enablers

-
11. I. Peša, ‘Between Waste and Profit: Environmental Values on the Central African Copperbelt’, in: *The Extractive Industries and Society* 8 (2021) 4, 1–8.
 12. K. Nzanga, ‘Quelques conditions de rationalisation et de développement des services médicaux des grandes industries extractives’, in: *Maadimi* 3 (1974).
 13. Archives générales du Royaume 2, Brussels, Belgium, UMICORE catalogue files 171, 172 and 173.
 14. ‘Quand on a tant de fric, après tout c’est normal / Qu’on puisse assassiner pour motif commercial’. <https://www.bide-et-musique.com/song/12967.html>.
 15. Archives générales du Royaume 2, Brussels, Belgium, UMICORE catalogue file 244, UMICORE Annual Report, ‘Environment and Security’, 2001.
 16. N. Meynen/L. Sébastien, ‘Environmental Justice and Ecological Debt in Belgium: The UMICORE Case’, in: H. Healey / J. Martínez-Alier / L. Temper / M. Walter / J-F. Gerber, (eds.), *Ecological Economics from the Ground Up*, London 2012, 430–464.

of electric cars and other battery-powered ‘green solutions’.¹⁷ Optimists argue that ‘in the face of catastrophic climate change, cobalt offers the hope of a clean-energy future’.¹⁸ Cobalt has been mined as a by-product of copper in Congo throughout the 20th century, but only since the ‘cobalt boom’ from 2010 onwards has the metal started to attract significant attention of its own. Despite its potential to contribute to ‘clean energy’, cobalt is also associated with severe environmental degradation, child labour and conflict. Human rights organizations have even denounced cobalt as the blood mineral of the 21st century, fuelling civil war and conflict, particularly in the eastern part of Congo.¹⁹ Allegations of child labour, figuring in major news outlets,²⁰ have tempered expectations of cobalt being the key to a ‘green transition’. Denis Mukwege, the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018, reflected on the sizeable costs of resource extraction in Congo:

The troubling reality is that the abundance of our natural resources – gold, coltan, cobalt and other strategic minerals – is the root cause of war, extreme violence and abject poverty. [...] When you drive your electric car; when you use your smart phone or admire your jewellery, take a minute to reflect on the human cost of manufacturing these objects. [...] Turning a blind eye to this tragedy is being complicit.²¹

Mukwege appealed to European consumers and politicians, admonishing them that it is a moral failing to treat the suffering of those far away from us as being less important or urgent.²² Despite attempts at traceability schemes along cobalt’s supply chain and public accountability measures, such as the ‘Responsible Cobalt Initiative’ and the ‘Clean Cobalt from Congo (3C) Initiative’, the problems associated with cobalt mining are still very much framed as distinctly *Congolese* problems. Without accounting for the coloniality of environmental injustices, it is easy to dismiss the malpractices surrounding cobalt extraction as part of Congolese ‘bad governance’ and a sign of a ‘failed state’.²³ Underscoring the deep historical roots of environmental injustice, however, urges European voters to see pollution in Congo as part of a planetary Anthropocene condition. Such a stance would also lead to a reconsideration of the necessity of climate adaptation funding and climate reparations.

Democracy and climate justice

How does considering histories of climate injustice in places like Congo influence European environmental politics, which are so often confined by national and presentist frameworks? Can paying attention to historical and spatial entanglements mend the democratic deficit that enables the perpetuation of the decarbonization divide? First of all, this approach shows that, since the beginning of the 20th century, Congolese mines have been linked directly to European centres of

-
17. B.K. Sovacool S. H. Ali / M. Bazilian / B. Radley / B. Nemery / J. Okatz / D. Mulvaney, ‘Sustainable Minerals and Metals for a Low-Carbon Future’, in: *Science* 367 (2020) 6473, 30–33.
 18. C. Angus, ‘The Dark Side of Cobalt, the Digital Age’s Miracle Metal’, *Toronto Star* 30 January 2022, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2022/01/30/the-dark-side-of-cobalt-the-digital-ages-miracle-metal.html?fbclid=IwAR21YsERectjX22kaLLcuRcuFzsHHd6t16Jl-DGUKC3Lx-a9c8Pa1GougsQ>.
 19. S. Kara, *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives*, Oxford 2022.
 20. Two examples are as follows: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/05/31/the-dark-side-of-congos-cobalt-rush>; <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/08/cobalt-drc-miners-toil-for-30p-an-hour-to-fuel-electric-cars>.
 21. D. Mukwege, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech 2018, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2018/mukwege/lecture/>.
 22. P. Singer, ‘Famine, Affluence, and Morality’, in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972) 3, 229–243.
 23. T. Trefon (ed.), *Reinventing Order in the Congo: How People Respond to State Failure in Kinshasa*, London 2004.

consumption, enabling electrification and huge profits for multinational enterprises. The roots of pollution in Congo's mining regions today thus lie in highly unequal structures of colonialism and extractive capitalism, connecting Congolese mineworkers to European businessmen and politicians. These structures have made the silencing of environmental harms for the sake of continued copper and cobalt production an integral part of Congolese mining throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Secondly, the explicit acknowledgement of this historically uneven distribution of burdens and benefits by European voters would lead to a reframing of contemporary debates about climate adaptation funding and climate reparations. Accounting for the climate debt incurred by Europe through years of unequal ecological exchange would underscore climate reparations as 'the acceptance of this responsibility of historical and contemporary harms and injustices'.²⁴ As Táiwò and Cíbralic argue, in order to 'mitigate climate change effectively and fairly, the international community needs to broadly redistribute funds across states to respond to inequalities in resilience capacity and the unjust system underpinning them'.²⁵ While only watered-down agreements for climate adaptation funding for countries in the Global South were agreed upon at COP26, framing such funding as part of European accountability and responsibility for historical climate harms would help underscore its moral and democratic necessity.

Global environmental politics, as Christoff and Eckersley highlight, suffers from 'a political accountability crisis between those who generate and/or benefit from the production of ecological risks and those who involuntarily suffer the consequences'.²⁶ Democracy, thus, needs to 'be deepened, extended, and adapted to an interdependent world'.²⁷ One way to do this is by embracing forms of extended responsibility that acknowledge the historical roots and coloniality of our extractive Anthropocene. Such a stance, which looks at historical transnational interdependencies and tackles climate injustices head-on, would not only address the current democratic deficit of climate politics; it would also better equip us to live on our entangled Anthropocene planet and face its daunting future.²⁸

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

24. Sultana, 'Critical Climate Justice', 121.

25. O.O. Táiwò / B. Cíbralic, 'The Case for Climate Reparations', *Foreign Policy* 10 October 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/10/case-for-climate-reparations-crisis-migration-refugees-inequality/>.

26. P. Christoff / R. Eckersley, *Globalization & the Environment*, Lanham, MD 2013, 162.

27. *Ibid.*, 178.

28. P. Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, Fakenham 2021.