

Benoît Henriët, *Colonial Impotence, Virtue and Violence in a Congolese Concession (1911-1940)* (Berlijn: De Gruyter, 2021). xiv, 191 p. ISBN 9783110648782.

DOI: 10.52024/tseg.13102

*Colonial impotence* tells the story of the palm oil concession of the *Huilleries du Congo Belge* (HCB) in the Kwango-Kwilu region of the Belgian Congo during the first half of the twentieth century. In this region, the local population traditionally exploited the oil palm trees (*Elaeis*) that grew in dense, natural groves. In 1911, the area was one of five ‘circles’ on the Belgian Congolese territory given in concession by the colonial state to HCB in order to develop a commercial palm oil industry.

The objectives of this ambitious project were manifold. First of all, in its drive to generate income from Belgium’s colonial possession, the colonial state was keen that the Belgian Congo should gain a share of the global palm oil market. Secondly, the aim was to expand colonialism into an area of the Congo that until then had hardly been touched by it. Recruiting local workers for the palm oil industry would inevitably lead them to abandon their traditional ways, turning them into wage labourers and, most importantly, taxpayers. Palm oil was the obvious commodity to enable the integration of this remote area into the capitalist colonial economy. Finally, the colonial state wanted to make a clean break with the disastrous exploitation model of Leopold II’s Congo Free State. The infamous red rubber campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had thoroughly discredited the concession company model. If large-scale concessions were still to play a significant role in the Belgian Congo’s development – and colonial planners believed they did – it was important to show to the world that a different concessionary model was feasible. A model that this time not only benefited the colonial state and the private concession companies, but also the indigenous population by improving their income and living standards. In this last objective, the colonial state found a like-minded ally in Lord Leverhulme (1851-1925). As the co-founder of Lever Brothers, Leverhulme had an interest in securing palm oil supplies for his global soap business. As a liberal philanthropist, he believed in guaranteeing his workers decent living conditions, as evidenced by the model workers’ village of Port Sunlight near Liverpool. To Leverhulme the concession granted to HCB in the Belgian Congo provided a unique oppor-

tunity to transplant his philanthropic, but thoroughly paternalistic, ideals to a tropical context.

Henriet demonstrates how the ideal of a model concession, shared by the colonial state and by Leverhulme, quickly fell victim to the realities on the ground. The economic foundations of the HCB concession were not sound. The exploitation of palm oil trees in their natural habitat required fruit cutters to venture ever deeper into the palm groves, obliging them to cover huge distances to and from Leverville where the fruits were bought and processed for transport. After World War I, when large quantities of palm oil produced cheaply on landscaped plantations in South-Asia flooded the market, the HCB business model faltered. HCB could only hope to compete on the international market by keeping its production costs extremely low – including the wages it paid to its workers. Moreover, the huge installation and transportation costs the company faced, meant that very little was left to invest in building schools, dispensaries and hospitals for the indigenous workforce (as had been agreed with the colonial state when the concession was created). Indeed, according to Henriet, throughout its existence HCB rarely turned a profit.

This story of economic failure provides the basis to analyse the broader theme of the implantation of and resistance to colonialism and (monopoly) capitalism in this region. Henriet does this by looking in turn at the different stakeholders in the HCB concession project, reviewing their often contradictory objectives, behaviours and interactions. The common theme, as referenced in the book's title, is that of 'colonial impotence'. The HCB's impotence was reflected in the company's failure to realize the philanthropic ideals of Lord Leverhulme. The colonial state and its agents, often supporting HCB on the ground, but also clashing with it, for instance over labour recruitment and policing issues, failed to live up to their own proclaimed standards and goals. The Congolese were remarkably successful in devising strategies to evade some of the most oppressive demands made on them, but were ultimately impotent in resisting being coerced into concessionary labour. In 1931, resentment over forced labour recruitment and harsh working conditions combined with ever lower wages erupted into open rebellion, which was put down mercilessly by the colonial army. This was a far cry from the 'virtuous enclave' Lord Leverhulme and the colonial planners had had in mind.

This excellent book is well-researched and well-written. Henriet makes good use of the abundant colonial archives, while highlighting

their one-sidedness and other limitations. Rightfully, the book gives pride of place to African agency. The logical structure of the book serves the main argumentation well. As an economic historian I would have welcomed more quantitative data and analysis on the economic performance of the HCB concession over time. Was it really as unprofitable as suggested by Henriët? How did wages paid to HCB workers compare to world palm oil prices and to wages paid in other Congolese industries? Answers to these questions would have further strengthened the argumentation by adding more context, but I also recognize that such figures are notoriously hard to come by.

The interest of the book reaches well beyond the topic of the history of a palm oil concession in a remote region of the Congo. It analyses the mechanisms by which both colonialism and capitalism were imposed on a traditional society, the consequences this had and how these societies reacted trying to regain control of their own lives. Of course, force, coercion and violence – in other words ‘potency’ – are integral to this story. However, by focussing on the real and relative impotence shared in different ways by all actors involved, Henriët has succeeded in providing in a multi-faceted, balanced and convincing narrative.

Piet Clement, Independent researcher

Andrea C. Mosterman, *Spaces of Enslavement. A History of Slavery and Resistance in Dutch New York* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021). 230 p. ISBN 9781501715624.

DOI: 10.52024/tseg.13052

The last few decades have seen an explosion of research on slavery in places – like New Netherland – where it has long been considered economically and socially marginal. The central thrust of this research has been that even where enslaved people were a small demographic minority, slavery had wide-reaching effects that profoundly shaped society. Andrea Mosterman’s study of slavery in New Netherland and Dutch New York makes an important contribution to this literature. By centering physical spaces, from the kitchens, garrets, and yards where enslaved people largely lived and worked, to the churches where they and their enslavers worshipped, to the larger geographies of control that shaped their movement in public spaces, Mosterman offers new in-