

Doomed to Disaster?

Long-term Trajectories of Exploitation in the Congo

Andreas Exenberger*, Simon Hartmann**

Paper to be presented at the Workshop “*Colonial Extraction in the Netherlands Indies and Belgian Congo: Institutions, Institutional Change and Long Term Consequences*”
Utrecht, December 3-4, 2010

[Rough draft, do not cite without permission by the corresponding authors]

Introduction

Violence is a recurrent phenomenon in human history. To channel or transform, or at least to suppress it, is a major achievement of societies and most probably an indispensable building bloc of any kind of ‘development’, “the most fundamental problem societies face”, as North et al. (2009:258) mention. Surprisingly, violence is clearly underrepresented even in social science analysis, not to speak of economic or historical ones, where it is a clearly secondary issue or hardly an issue at all. At least, in (post-)colonial studies and in related development theories (most pronouncedly maybe in dependency theories), violence is regarded as an element of explanation, since colonial relationships (powerfully shaping post-colonial societies as well) are almost per definition – when understood as a power relationship between unequals, particularly if ‘culturally’ or ‘racially’ ‘different’ – regarded as ‘violent’, even if in the somewhat mildest form of paternalism.

Today’s Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly known as ‘Zaire’, the ‘Belgian Congo’ and the ‘Congo Freestate’) is an almost ‘perfectly’ failing state particularly in that respect. In the words of Lemarchand (2002), it is much more a country where one can see ‘the tunnel at the end of the light’ than the opposite. From a historical perspective, this is far from surprising. This failure is certainly the result of a long-lasting heritage, part of which is post-colonial (the ‘Mobutu system’), part of it colonial (be it ‘Belgian’ or ‘Leopoldian’), part of it even pre-colonial (while already included into the global economy), and hence it is a combination of internal and external factors. In sum, violence is fully ‘normal’ in the Congo, it is not at all an anomaly disturbing the proper function of institutions, but it is the very result of their proper functioning.

In the following, we want to put special emphasis on the historicity of the underlying ‘violence culture’, which is deeply rooted in the character of the region’s integration into the global economy and power relations, and a certain path, which institutional trajectories from that moment on followed. This violence culture is not simply a ‘natural state’, but has been established and was continued by human action and (sometimes) decision. There would have been – and there still are – alternatives, but there are also powerful incentives, some of them ‘perverse’ in the sense of practically violence-promoting, and always related to the violence culture itself. Hence, departing from an institutional perspective, the exploitative history of

* Affiliation: Department of Economic Theory, Policy and History, University of Innsbruck, Austria; Univesitaetsstrasse 15, A-6020 Innsbruck, andreas.exenberger@uibk.ac.at. Corresponding author.

** Affiliation: Austrian Research Foundation for International Development (ÖFSE), Sensengasse 4, A-1090 Wien, s.hartmann@oefse.at.

the Congo region will be embedded into a structural narrative, revealing long-run connections between institutions and what we call ‘transactions’. Given the purpose of the workshop, special emphasis will be given to the colonial period(s). However, the major contribution of this paper is not revealing new facts about that period(s), but to re-contextualize and thus shed a different light on it/them. Further, since we regard our explanatory system as useful on a general basis, it is aimed at being applicable to the history of other countries and regions as well, including for example Indonesia. Consequently, three steps will follow: systematising the theoretical base of the endeavour; briefly describing five cycles of exploitation shaping the long-run history of the Congo region; and finally summarizing and concluding with special emphasis on the (dis-)continuities during the Belgian involvement into the story.

(1) Some theory

Our analysis rests on a combination of three ideas from rather different branches of the social sciences. On the very basis, the historical approach of Fernand Braudel (1984) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) provides a system of ‘timespaces’ as organizing principle for thinking about developments by combining their chronologies and geographies. Based on Braudel’s concept of analytically different ‘times’, Wallerstein invented five types of timespaces: a rather short-run ‘episodic-geopolitical’ timespace (the locus of events), a medium-term timespace of ‘conjunctures’ (the locus of cycles), and a long-run ‘structural’ timespace (the locus of trends), as well as a more anthropological, ‘eternal’ timespace (where forces like those of evolution are in place), and a ‘transitory’ timespace (in times of *kairos*, the time of decision). Hence, Wallerstein enriched Braudel’s theory by pointing to the importance of the spatial dimension of developments in time, adding to certain speeds and durations also the appropriate geographical locations and depictions (which may also change in relation to certain connections to time). This works two ways and in the case of ‘the Congo’, it becomes particularly relevant, because while throughout this study the name remains the same, the geographical area denominated by it changes considerably (it moves from the Atlantic coastlands of Angola and Gabon to the north of today’s DRC and to Katanga and the Kivus, which are both even closer to the Indian than the Atlantic ocean).

The second element comes from economics and is provided by Oliver E. Williamson (2000) who – without giving reference to Braudel or Wallerstein – introduced a comparable systematic view on recent achievements in institutional economics (not the least inspired by economic historians like Douglass C. North) organized around four temporal dimensions. There is long-lasting ‘embeddedness’ (the world of customs, traditions and religions; in general informal ‘rules of the game’), medium-range ‘environment’ (the world of constitutions, polity, bureaucracy; in general, formal rules), short-run ‘governance’ (the world of laws and contracts, which is more in the field of North’s ‘playing the game’) and every-day ‘allocation’ (buying and selling or otherwise getting access to resources). Clearly, all lower levels are shaped by the higher ones (traditions shape constitutions and these laws and so on), but also feedback loops from lower to higher levels have to be considered, making it an interdependent system. However, the most important element of this approach with respect to violence cultures and colonial history is the difference in adaption speed. The longer-lasting the dimension, the more difficult it is and the longer it takes to change the logic of transaction. Hence, each higher level directly influences the levels below by defining their constraints, and each lower level gives feedback that may lead to changes in higher levels, which last the longer, the higher the level is.

To combine the two approaches, we will use the concept of ‘spheres’, named in Williamson’s terminology, but in a temporal-spatial understanding in the sense of Braudel-Wallerstein, from where we additionally directly adopt the concept of transitional timespace. However,

there is still a third element missing as well as any theoretical approach directly related to violence. Thus, the third theory comes from peace research and is the categorization of violence by Johan Galtung (1969, 1990), who distinguishes between ‘direct’, ‘structural’ and ‘cultural’ violence. In Galtung’s understanding, the major difference between direct and structural violence lies in the victim-perpetrator-relationship: it is personal in the case of direct violence, where victim and perpetrator know each other and are also rather unambiguously observable to bystanders and outsiders, but impersonal and indirect in the case of structural violence, where victims can be identified, but perpetrators are absent – at least at first site. Further, direct violence results in killing, maiming and repression, while structural violence mainly results in exploitation. Galtung also distinguishes the extents of violence: killing, physically harming, penetrating and marginalizing; and linked these to four different forms of ‘needs’, understood hierarchical: survival needs, well-being needs, identity needs and freedom needs. Finally, cultural violence has its main function in legitimizing the other forms.¹ It is at least potentially (maybe even necessarily) in place, when justifications for violence are given, which are indispensably socially constructed. In its most obvious form (of racisms, for example) it provides ‘good reasons’ for direct or structural violence, for example in ‘othering’ certain groups of people to make them an enemy or in dehumanizing an ‘enemy’ to prepare its political, cultural or even physical extermination. Cultural violence makes structural or direct violence look or even feel right. It makes it socially acceptable or even necessary. Together, these three forms of violence form a vicious triangle: no matter in which form violence occurs, any kind of violence also strengthens the other two, although generally, in the words of Galtung, “a causal flow from cultural via structural to direct violence can be identified” (Galtung 1990:295).

Since there are of course manifold reasons for violence besides sustaining uneven power relations (which is essentially what is Galtung’s theory about), in explaining them in historical situations we will refer to some other theories as well, notably economic explanations along resource curses (Collier 2005, Sachs and Warner 1995) and psychological explanations along mimetic circles and scapegoating (Girard 1985). Particularly explanations of the recent conflict are already manifold, some of them rather ahistorical indeed. Clearly, political power is closely connected to the use of violence and the acquisition and distribution of material wealth (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, Clark 2002, Trefon 2004). More interesting are other power relation theories like Bayart’s ‘reciprocal assimilation of elites’ (Bayart 1993) by which a ‘national’ elite is constructed (although fractionalized), which is distinctly different from its own people and a perfect container for the continuation of colonial relationships.² “African political and epistemic elites decided to unite themselves with their intra-continental and western colleagues, while creating intrastate institutions that disunite the people. This pathological unification has its background in the inferiority complex that developed during colonization. To overcome this inferiority complex it is indispensable to be part of the Western civilizing process of the New World Order.” (Gebrewold 2007:27)

Finally, in an even more historically informed analysis, two interesting questions may be raised: How and why did Africa, in large parts not ‘under-developed’ in around 1500 compared even to Europe, did fall behind since then (Ehret 2010), a question related to the reversal-of-fortune debate (Acemoglu et al. 2001 vs. Austin 2008)? And more specific: Why

¹ “At the bottom is the steady flow through time of cultural violence, a substratum from which the other two can derive their nutrients. In the next stratum the rhythms of structural violence are located. Patterns of exploitation are building up, wearing out, or torn down, with the protective accompaniment of penetration-segmentation preventing consciousness formation, and fragmentation-marginalization preventing organization against exploitation and repression. And at the top, visible to the unguided eye and to barefoot empiricism, is the stratum of direct violence with the whole record of direct cruelty perpetrated by human beings against each other and against other forms of life and nature in general.” (Galtung 1990:294-5).

² Since there is no division between bureaucracy and bourgeoisie within the elite, class theories do not work well in the African context.

has African warfare not been more ‘developmental’ over the last centuries (Reid 2010), as it was in Europe, where warfare or the preparation for warfare often directly promoted innovation? Connected to these questions, in the (very) long run, also geography plays a role, indeed, like the distribution of population and its (low) density, the scarce (and not easily navigable) waterways, the presence of extended mountainous, tropical-forest and desert terrains or the problem of certain infectious diseases. But, from a social science perspective, the adaptive capacity of societies (North 2005) for the challenges posed on them by their natural environment seem to be even more relevant.

However, Galtung’s theory is particularly valuable because it is not only a rather abstract framework but especially easily to be combined with the above mentioned framework. Although categorization is not always clear-cut, idealistically his types of violence can be related to the four spheres of social analysis: direct violence is usually a question of ‘allocation’ and cultural violence is usually a question of ‘embeddedness’, while structural violence (depending on its actual form) is mainly connected to ‘governance’ and ‘environment’.

(2) Cycles of Exploitation

However, there is some hope, even in economics. As North, Wallis and Weingast mention in their latest book *Violence and Social Orders*: “Violence must be at the heart of an explanation of how societies behave. The necessary prerequisite for forming durable large social groups is a way to control violence. Natural states do not deal with violence by consolidating control over it. Instead, utilizing the dispersion of violence in the population, they create a pattern of interlocking economic, religious, political, and social interests that provide powerful individuals with incentives not to use violence. All states are organizations of organizations. Rent-creation combines with the internal structure of organizations with the dominant coalition to limit violence in a natural state.” (North et al. 2009:258) Consequently, they place violence as a fourth power to shape human history (besides organizations, institutions and beliefs), which is clearly in line with the approach we propose here.

The Congo region is a place where recurrent violence is easily to be observed already for centuries. Political entities there hardly managed to control it. Quite the contrary, institutions were built which actually promoted violence. However, to interpret the empirics is not easy, and it is not a recent phenomenon that this violence is regarded as ‘natural’ with respect to ‘the Africans’ in general and ‘the Congolese’ in particular (whoever they may be). This is well reflected in the broad discourse of a ‘colonial mission’ to ‘civilize savages’, with which imperialists – among those the Belgian – usually backed their endeavours (clearly an example of cultural violence).³ But it is also persistent and still in place in the 21st century, when Westerners as well as Africans reproduce the colonial picture of the Congolese being brutal, barbarous and savage ‘by nature’. (Autesserre 2009) On the other hand, in the *long durée*, African conflicts also can be viewed in terms of embedded rationality rooted in pre-colonial patrimonialism (Chabal ???), today in the clear-cut form of a ‘neo-patrimonialism’.

We propose a re-contextualization of the Congo’s history in the light of six distinct ‘cycles of exploitation’ and along political and economic ‘transactions’ which transcend the usual pattern of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial heritage. Violence in the Congo is neither ‘natural’ in the simple sense of a master-savage-discourse, nor is it a ‘colonial’ issue in the simple sense of formal colonization: “Economists who treat the colonial period as if it began with the Berlin Conference and had nothing to do with the preceding slave trade create an abstract, artificial historical framework [...]. The matter under discussion is a historical

³ Also Leopold’s primary justification (and public relation strategy targeted towards his population as well as his royal colleagues) was bringing civilization to the heart of darkness.

process that has transformed African societies, and that transformation did not start with the Berlin Conference.” (Depelchin 1992, 35)

The empirical material will now be presented in brief and along the concept of economic, political and cultural ‘transactions’ (summarizing exchanges and relationships between people in different spheres of human activity). Anyway, it has to be remarked that the reformulation of this history of exploitation is still an unfinished and ongoing work in progress.⁴

(a) Slaves

Itself a result of power relationships (and cultural violence), not much is known about pre-European history in the Congo region. The Eurocentric concept of history as such as well as the ignorance for African forms of traditions contributed to the old view that there is per definition no such thing like ‘African history’ and – together with colonial education and the patterns of science – to the fact that hardly any Africans engaged in the autochthonous ‘writing’ of history.⁵ Hence we could only speculate about pre-1482 exploitation and consequently do not include it into the analysis (which does not imply that there was none).

Soon after Diogo Cão discovered the estuary of the Congo River in 1482, the local population was forced into a global trading system essentially based on the demand for slave labour from the newly colonized Americas. European traders most probably gained the most from this process of (from their view) wealth creation, while local merchants and kings of course gained as well, although much more in the sense of wealth diversion: the coastlands and their local elites profited to the expense of the hinterland, which was losing importance and increasingly as well population, which promoted political disintegration (Ekholm, 1972; Hilton, 1987). For that diversion effect, this system was much more disturbing than earlier intra-African slave trade. From the sixteenth to eighteenth century, this ‘African’ slave trade was transformed into a large scale, globalized ‘Atlantic’ business, for the most part based on private capital (Klein, 1999; Curtin, 1969).

Broadly speaking, we see intensifying transactions between Africans and Europeans connected to the slave business, which were essentially political-economic: an intensification of slave raids (increasingly affecting the stability of hinterland societies), an inflow of prestigious trade goods exchanged for the slaves (considerably influencing domestic power relationships) and a serious disturbance of African labour relations (since domestic societies were depleted from part of their productive potential, particularly important given the relevance of labour in a land-abundant economy). Cultural transactions were less intense and the most important one seem to be the introduction of Christianity already in the 15th century, which was an early example of promoting the alienation of an African elite from its population.

The high tide of this business was reached in the 1790s (focusing on the ports of Loango and Luanda), but already in the early 18th century large parts of the hinterland from today’s Gabon to Angola were affected, and already in the middle of the 17th century the power relations between the Congo Kingdom, entity of ‘first contact’, and some neighbours had considerably changed (to the former’s disadvantage). The character of the Atlantic slave trade made Europeans the main beneficiaries as carriers (of slaves and goods), producers and consumers (of colonial goods). But of course African slave hunters and traders also gained, mostly to the expense of the enslaved Africans and their families (Inikori and Engerman, 1998).

⁴ For an earlier work see Exenberger/Hartmann (2007).

⁵ That history is essentially ‘written’ and not ‘told’ is already part of the power relationship between Europe and Africa (those in place from the moment when history as a scientific discipline emerged) and hence cultural violence justifying the negligence of African tradition.

With respect to violence, in addition to the inherently violent character of slave trade and slavery, the loss of large quantities of young workers threatened the existence of kinship groups and entire kingdoms whose political, social and economic structures were virtually disappearing (Klein, 1999:125-9). Hence, the equilibrium of power changed, when some communities became mainly slave producers while others primarily were among the enslaved (Ekholm, 1972:139). The demographic impact is unclear in numbers, but definitely large. At least five million (Klein 1999:208-11) slaves were 'exported' from the Congo-Angola region in three centuries (most of them in the 18th century, particularly its second half), particularly those 'most productive' in economic terms, and at least the same number died between capture and arrival (Miller, 1988:440-1).

While the degree of endemic violence in the region most probably increased with the intensification of the slave business, already making it seemingly 'natural' (which, again, is not to deny pre-1482 domestic violence, which was certainly in place), as the most important long-run consequence of that cycle the redirection of trade relationships appears. Also due to its continuous and long-run development, a rather stable system of institutions could emerge, by which the extraction of 'resources', in this case mainly labour, was organized. This system consisted of societies subject to slave hunts (and organized around that issue), people actually hunting and transporting the slaves (intermediaries), people in power of exchange channels with Europeans (local elites), the European traders themselves (at that time less of a 'master' than of a mediator of world market demands, but of course guided by a clear-cut self-interest), and finally European elites, who were in a privileged position comparable to the African elites as managers of the channel of international exchange, but already with the serious advantage of possessing a truly global view (different from their indirect counterparts in Africa). To keep the analysis simple, we leave effects on American and European population, which were clearly relevant, out of consideration for the moment.

(b) Ivory

While the prices of slaves did increase further during the nineteenth century (Miller, 1986:70-2), because – among other reasons – trade became more risky, in Africa merchants found other even more profitable items, ivory in the case of the Congo (Rempel, 1998). These new products, again driven by world market demands, replaced the receding slave trade and were a main incentive for occupation of the Central African hinterland (Shayt, 1992:401-2). In the Congo, the shift accelerated when the world market price for ivory (mainly used in arts or for equipping pianos and billiard tables) increased by a dramatic 300 per cent in 1836 alone. Nevertheless the pattern remained the same: "the ivory trade, like the Atlantic slave trade, was essentially an extractive type of enterprise: it neither stimulated the growth of subsidiary industries nor encouraged greater productivity on the part of common people." (Harms, 1981:43)

Coercion included the dangerous 'gathering' of the resource, but as the Atlantic slave trade, it took place without effective territorial occupation. However, European influence was present and increased, when the Belgian King Leopold II commissioned Henry Morton Stanley to 'explore' the Congolese hinterland and to arrange 'treaties' with the locals to assign their land cheaply to the king. The main motivations were imperial aspirations and the hope for economic profits from resources like ivory.

Already in this cycle, the pattern of transactions did change to some degree. Again, we see an intensification of inland raids, although now directed against animals (but ivory 'harvesting' was a dangerous business also for the people involved in it), but the inflow of traded goods – in relative terms and as far as can be told from scarce sources – is stable at best and on average decreasing (already reflecting changing power relationships between Europe and

Africa in economic as well as political terms) and the geographical focus changed to the equatorial region (remaining rather close to the coast and the river, while the distant hinterland was not even touched before Stanley's expedition).

The degree of endemic violence was hardly touched as well as the institutional pattern: ivory 'harvesting' was an essentially violent business (against the animals, but also against local populations which were at least partially forced to participate in the hunts) and extraction took place in a framework comparable to one established for trading slaves: still there are local societies mainly affected negatively, there are local intermediaries and elites profiting from selling the resources, and there are European 'partners' giving access to the valuation of a resource (although it was a true invention of value, since ivory did not play a role in the African economy as crucial as did slaves).

(c) Rubber

The invention of the pneumatic tire in 1888 and the development of diverse industries demanding rubber (rain coats, shoes, isolation, etc.) made natural rubber an even more demanded resource than ivory – not the least because rubber was much closer related not to the production of luxury but to industrial demands. In this period also the formal acquisition of land in the region by European is dated. At first it was officially a private business by the Belgian King, Leopold II, who managed to establish the 'Congo Freestate' (with the empty promise of free trade on the territory) as some kind of personal property and manifestation of his imperial aspirations between 1876 and 1892 (as already accepted at the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884/85).

The business was not fully 'royal', however, and private capital played an important role: while private enterprises actually executed business and police force in the trading posts on the countryside, the colonial state provided the resources necessary, particularly weapons and ammunition (Gewald 2006:475). But the King remained in charge of granting concessions, indeed, and hence fully controlled the colony, some territory even directly (the *Domaine de la Couronne*). Also speculative land transactions to listed companies generated large profits (Morel, 2005:142-5; Nelson, 1994), as did a rubber tax and systems of compulsory work in rubber rich areas – for the crown as well as concession companies. Anyway, the colony had to pay – and it did, at least from 1898 on, when the value of exports surpassed that of imports. This was achieved by a system of coerced labour, production requirements and extensive and dangerous non-paid work for approximately 24 days a month. Due to two decrees (October 1891 and 1892), the King formally achieved monopoly for ivory and rubber in his colony (Emerson 1979:152) and continuously increased production requirements (Singleton-Gates/Girodanis 1959:88), while the construction of railways reduced production costs (Emerson, 1979:147-8; Edgerton, 2002:63). The legal instrument to allow exploitation was called *carte blanche* (Cline 1963:48, Slade 1962:181), and it gave colonial officers virtually free hand to play god in their realms,⁶ further a domestic army were built up, the *Force Publique*, itself a place where to exercise coerced labour. Also all 'unoccupied' land was confiscated by the colonial administration already in 1885, which was a considerable problem in an agrarian system still relying on migratory cultivation and thus on land only seemingly unoccupied (Young 1994:77). Consequently, a former district officer concluded: "If a man's inclined to degeneration and brutality, the Congo Free State is a good forcing-house for his evil qualities." (Nelson, 1994:93) Brutality, introduced via perverse incentives related to

⁶ "Well, they must have *carte blanche*, or the natives would not respect the State'. Sometimes 'might is right', would be the curt reply. What could one say? There were no judge or courts of appeal, and the officer, often at his wits' end, would say, 'What can I do? I must get ivory. I have no law or regulation book. I am the only law and only God in Katanga'." (Morel 2005, 45).

exploitation quotas and connected to virtual exemption from the rule of law, and thus necessarily resulting in an increase of production by any means, became even more endemic than it already was.

International protest against this regime induced by Edmund D. Morel's *Congo Reform Association* finally forced Leopold to hand over his private colony to Belgium in 1908 – certainly only when the King himself was close to death and the colony nearly bankrupt. However, privately the colony was an astonishing success: according to precautionous estimates of Jules Marchal, Leopold gained up to 50 million francs of annual profits (Marchal 1996:353). On the other hand, an unclear number of Congolese died from direct as well as structural violence, with best guesses around 5 to 10 million people.⁷ Also birth-rates dropped significantly and all this caused another demographic disaster and irrevocable deterioration of the pre-colonial political and social life.

In this cycle, the most dramatic change in the pattern of transactions took place. Politically, we see a complete subjugation of local entities to the colonial state to the point of complete destruction. Economically, we see a full redirection of local economies towards the needs of the colonial elites, in the most brutal form of extraction of globally valuable resources as well as in the form of providing foodstuffs for the administration and workers. This time, also cultural transactions intensified dramatically, when missionaries (who were among the most pronounced critics of the system and hence also a counterbalance) entered the country and a hierarchical relationship between the 'whites' and the 'blacks' was introduced. Transactions also became more formalized in the form of treaties and decrees, certainly alien to the local population.

During the Leopoldian age, the degree of endemic violence increased to unprecedented heights. While the European side became more complicated, on the African side the level of local elites practically disappeared. The Congo was brutally and directly ruled with only some 'collaborators' (often unwilling ones), particularly in the *Force Publique*, still acting as intermediaries, and the big majority of the population subject to continuous exploitation (although this all too simple picture of course completely neglects African agency, which certainly existed). On the European side, colonial officers and private enterprises interacted with one another and with the outside world in a framework dominated by the King. However, things became more complicated at least when the international campaign of the *Congo Reform Association* against the regime gained resonance, which met with the interest of other European powers to discredit the Congo Freestate as completely inhumane (not the least to make their own, often also problematic endeavours look more 'normal').

(d) Copper

In a mixture of public demand and increasing own disinterest (also due to financial problems), Leopold handed 'his' colony over in 1908 to the Belgian state. The now Belgian Congo was installed as a more humane, more civilizing enterprise – but still of rent extraction; after all, the colony still had to pay.

⁷ Estimations range from "well below 100,000" (quoted in Castryk 2007:4) to about 22 million (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1995), both completely implausible. On the other hand, a contemporary (although certainly not fully objective) source, the 'Casement Report' reasonably estimated 3 million until 1904 alone. This is in line with the somewhat official position of the Royal Museum in Belgium accepting a depopulation of 20 %. However, most often cited is the number of 10 million (or 50 % of population), popularized by Hochschild (1998). While not so many people died from execution and slaughter, there is certainly a large number of people dying from famine, exhaustion, diseases and crude violence, including the large-scale cutting of hands. Anyway, Jean Stengers is certainly right when emphasizing that "any attempt to translate the phenomenon of depopulation into precise or even approximate figures, is an almost impossible task" (Critical Note A in: Morel et al. 1968:252).

But the financial situation of the colony was deteriorating, when natural rubber production dramatically declined after 1905, as the resource – due to ruthless overexploitation (Coates, 1987:101) – and the work force depleted. Later, the rubber trade in the Congo was nearly wiped out when world market prices plummeted after the East Asian plantations came into full production in the 1910s. At the same time, a supply shortage of raw materials, particularly minerals, occurred on the world market, which was aggravated by World War I. Thus the detection of valuable minerals paved the way for economic change in the Belgian Congo, which also shifted the geographical focus of exploitation to the mining districts in the East. With the extension of the railway system to resource rich Katanga, the Congo became one of the largest copper producers worldwide and already during World War I the value of mineral exports outperformed that of agricultural exports (Jewsiewicki 1972:233). Again, concessions to Belgian companies ensured that three quarters of colonial business was dominated by only five trusts (Edgerton 2002:169; Hillman 1997). Hence, the development of the colony was still in the hands of private capital. The Congolese economy, however, only changed from gathering to mining and thus from one to the other strictly extractive business. During the 1920s the main exports consisted of copper, gold, diamonds and tin. Particularly during both world wars, the Belgian Congo achieved extraordinary high copper exports (Edgerton 2002:168-73), which remained highly vulnerable to business cycles (Nelson 1994:154-6). Compulsory work and cruelty was again the basis of ‘development’, although no longer to the point of mass killings. Administration became more bureaucratic and exploitation of natural resources more ‘efficient’ (McCalpin 2002:35), in which the colonial state played a quite important role: “l’Etat devait tirer parti de ses pouvoirs étendus en matière minière pour soutenir les grandes sociétés, seules capables d’organiser une exploitation systématique” (Vellut 1982:328). But organization was different: the focus shifted from compulsory labour to indirect methods of coercion in the form of taxes. However, also the old system remained in place, at least partially: “Consul Campbell recalls that the forced labour Decree of June 1906, was remodelled by that of February, 1910, and that under the latter, natives are still called upon to furnish labour, under three years’ contracts, for works of ‘public utility.’ It is hardly necessary to state that no native of Africa will voluntarily contract for a three years’ term of service. There seems to be no obstacle to this Decree being made to apply to Government rubber plantations since they are to be instituted for the purpose of raising revenue.” (Morel 1912:42) Also an *impôt indigène*, introduced in 1914, forced many Congolese to work in dangerous mines for cash (Northrup 1988:89),⁸ while surplus was transferred to Belgium and the colony left scarce of resources for domestic investment (Higginson, 1989:209). This was also necessary, because the mining regions were only scarcely populated and it was not easy to get wage labourers, also since occupation in the production of supplies for the emerging industries was far more profitable for the local populations. Infrastructure was developed, but primarily in resource rich areas. Although the old system of coerced labour and hence of direct violence was generally replaced by the more structural form of taxation, which made an engagement in cash-earning occupations necessary, also working conditions were malign, and in case of a lack of money, labour (which was practically compulsory) remained an option. Hence, the character of transactions changed, importantly as far as the degree of violence and also considerably as far as the degree of formalization is concerned, but only marginally as far

⁸ This tax also served the purpose of overcoming ‘African laziness’. Nelson (1994:129) provides a quote by a member of the concessionary SAB on the *impôt indigène*, serving as an example for the ‘colonial attitude’ in the case of the Congo (emphasis added): “Taxes have a higher purpose, which is to accustom the Negro to work [...] The native from the Upper Congo region *has not as yet reached that stage of evolution* where he would increase his comfort by trade and work, and for this reason the tax system will continue to provide for a long time the main incentive to work. The trader can of course steer the native in the right direction, but in the long run, he has to be helped by the State. A tax system judiciously and regularly applied is the only efficient tool that can do this job.”

as institutions as such are concerned. Cultural transactions intensified, but in a clear-cut hierarchical way of a ‘civilizing mission’ in its Belgian variant. Political and economic transactions mainly consolidated. The decisions of colonial administrations may have become more concerned with the development of the colony and its people (as it was often repeated by former colonial officials), but in a clearly hierarchical way: in the end, these decisions were made exclusively in Bruxelles.

This extractive cycle as well as the institutional framework behind it easily survived independence and served the purpose of regime stabilization of the autocratic Mobutu state. During the first decades, minerals, predominately produced in the Eastern and central provinces, remained the by far most important export item (Young/Turner 1985; Akitoby/Cinyabuguma 2004:9; Dunning 2005:465), and represented a considerable share of total world market exports. During Mobutu’s first years, resource abundance in connection with high world market prices ensured economic performance (Akitoby/Cinyabuguma 2004:6). Problems occurred during the oil crisis, when resource prices generally decreased. At the same time, Mobutu personally profited from all legal and illegal businesses by driving kleptocracy, corruption and cronyism to remarkable levels (even by African standards), including a nationalistic programme of ‘Zairianization’ (Lemarchand 2003:31; Reno 1999:154). Once again predatory structures, boring close resemblance to colonial rule, were employed. As for example Wilson Perez shows from a game theoretical analysis: “the ruler in [... Nigeria and the DRC] has chosen an appropriation/distribution strategy, instead of a production/taxation one. This will have an additional effect: The regime does not care in providing a safe environment for business, enforcing property rights and contracts, or providing other public goods, since taxation is not the source of his income.” (Perez, 2004:36) Consequently, the economy is getting locked in a ‘staple trap’ (Schedvin 1990; Auty 2001) which makes it increasingly vulnerable to economic collapse from price shocks due to a low degree of economic diversification. To secure his reign over a predatory state, Mobutu even actively promoted further de-diversification of the already not well-diversified economy, which trapped the country in an “inefficient, ‘no-investment’ equilibrium” (Dunning 2005:467). Again valuable resources were traded on global markets whereas the vast majority of the Congolese population was excluded from profits and the domestic economy deteriorated dramatically.

In short, the pattern is quite comparable to patterns already revealed for the slave and for the ivory cycle. It consequently resulted in large scale bankruptcy of the state and of the economy: Mobutu established and developed a system of rent-seeking, leading to an extraordinary wealth discrepancy between the ruler and the ruled (Lemarchand 2003:32-8; MacGaffey 1991).

(e) Diamonds and Coltan: ‘Prizes’

Exaggerating, while proceeding in time the Congo moved backwards in terms of the extractive pattern: from a business at least somehow connected to industrialization (including some kind of technology), it moved back to an extractive business related to luxuries (and essentially low-tech in production technology, which is essentially alluvial). Prototypical for that process, diamonds, part of the Congo’s potential economic wealth for already a century, became more and more important – but also, as the major ‘prize’ (Olsson 2006; Young 2002), for fuelling the intensifying civil war in the 1990s (Samset 2006). The same holds for coltan and the 2000s, from which valuable metals like tantalum can be extracted, although the resource is essential for space technology, microelectronics and medical technology and hence for high-tech production. But the Congo does not at all profit from the promising end of the value chain, but only from the virtually dirty, when people dig for it with their bare hands.

For this resource, the Congo region, especially the Kivus, is the main source worldwide (Jackson 2002; Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002:28; Tegera et al. 2002), and extraction is possible by limited control over resource-rich enclaves by foreign armies and private military companies (Keen, 2000:29), all too comparable to colonial patterns.⁹

All this resulted in informal and illegal networks of plunder spreading over inter- and intra-continental borders (Taylor 2003). They are characterized primarily by controlling national assets and at the same time they essentially depend on “all forms of external support and supplies” (Duffield 1999:27). The largest purchaser of coltan has always been the electronics industry (USGS 2005), which boomed at the same time as the conflict in the Congo escalated. During 2000 tantalum demand promptly rose by 38 percent, temporarily causing an extraordinary high price of up to US\$ 500 per pound (Hayes/Burge 2003:22). By comparison, Congolese miners – in many cases forced to work in the mines – obtained for approximately four times that quantity only between US\$ 4 and 8 (Jackson, 2003:25-6). However short and unequal, relatively it was a rush, whose consequences were lasting: after giving up agricultural production due to the boom, many Congolese became highly dependent selling resources, but vulnerable to food shortages, which also fostered illegal and illicit activities (Jackson 2005:164). After all, the local population remains largely excluded from the profits of the mining sector and is far from being the “real villains” to be punished (Jackson 2002), mainly because they have no access to global markets, where “value” is created.

A systematic comparison of the recent conflict economy in the Congo with pre-colonial cycles of resource-extraction is still missing, but obviously promising. Anyway, due to the different focus of the actual workshop underlying this paper, we also leave that aside for the moment.

(3) Conclusion

(a) (Dis-)Continuities in the ‘Belgian’ Congo

It is not possible to talk about the Congo and Belgium without becoming part of an also political debate, also related to ‘national’ identity (and identification with the royal family).¹⁰ However, the purpose of this paper is neither excuse nor accusation, but re-contextualization of the Belgian endeavour within a more extended framework.

However, while we are focussing much more on long-run continuance than on short-run differences in our structural macro analysis on the region, in this concluding section some more arguments shall be provided referring to the seemingly seminal change from the private,

⁹ In local areas, a large number of unofficial airfields were constructed as direct links to global demand (of valuable resources) and supply (of weapons). Valuable resources were also transported to neighbouring trans-shipment centres (particularly Eastern border towns in the Congo, as well as Kigali in Rwanda, Kampala in Uganda and Daressalam in Tanzania), which provide additional ties to the world market (Nest, 2006:35; UN, 2001:29-36). Countries like Rwanda (diamonds) and Uganda (gold, diamonds, tropical woods) are even exporting resources which can not be found on their territories (Dunn, 2002:68; UN, 2001:19-26). Even foreign aid (development assistance, debt relief, and military aid to Rwanda and Uganda) largely contributed to looting actions in Eastern DRC (Reid, 2006:82-4).⁹ Also a lot of companies from Germany, Belgium, and other countries were involved in illegal trade (UN, 2002:46-7). Further, not only had the East of the country disintegrated, also the border region to Angola gets out of control (De Boeck, 2001).

¹⁰ In an informed analysis, which is certainly itself part of the surveyed debate, Castryck (2007) provides an overview, directly referring to the controversies related to Hochschild (1998) and the screening of the TV documentary *White King, Red Rubber, Black Death* around the turn of the century and also briefly surveying the earlier Belgian historical writings on the Congo (which are often regarded as non-Belgian and non-historical within this debate), among those particularly the works of Stengers (1957, 1989), Marchal (1996) and Vansina (Stengers and Vansina 1985).

Leopoldian system of exploitation to the public, Belgian one in 1908. There are certainly changes, for example with regard to labour relations (switch from formally coerced labour to more indirect forms of compulsion) and to resources exploited (from the gathering of rubber to the more specialist processing of minerals), and also the location of extraction changed considerably and consequential (for example for infrastructure provision). With respect to administration, formalization and ‘modernization’ took place, control clearly intensified, while the degree of direct violence decreased. In the words of Samset (2002:467): “While King Leopold II set a precedent for conflict promoting activities through large-scale looting, the Belgian state brought exploitation into more regulated forms”. At the same time, profits, although remaining essentially private, had to become more ‘Belgian’ (with provisions to direct demand towards the motherland, Nelson 1994:119) and ‘development’ became an issue (with provisions to also invest in hospitals, schools, and housing, Edgerton 2002:169-70). Consequently, the *impôt indigene*, while strongly increasing particularly between 1920 and 1940, was strongly decreasing in relative terms as a source of revenue for the colony (from almost half in 1900 to less than 5 % in 1958; Leclercq 1965:112). Also, while revenues generally expanded, only in the 1950s those from ‘domestic’ activities surpassed those related to export (Lacroix 1965:158) and extreme economic inequality between the ruling elite and the ruled masses remained an issue in the colony until its end (Peemans 1968:386), as did working and living conditions. There was also still a death toll in the Belgian Congo, although much lower than in the Leopoldian, indeed: Rudolf J. Rummel estimated that Belgian rule in the Congo resulted in up to one million casualties (Rummel 2005).

(b) An overall picture

In the end, there was some change indeed, but the patterns remained essentially the same throughout the colonial period. Summarizing all the above, the following picture (see table 1 at the following page) emerges, in which we – roughly – locate direct violence at the level of allocation, while we – equally roughly – locate structural and cultural violence relatively close to one another (in terms of scope, not of content) between the levels of environment and governance. However, this picture is idealistic and there is certainly an overlap, because for example also the pattern of unequal exchange has to be regarded as structural violence. While the level of ‘allocation’ is subject to further – exemplar – elaboration and thus rather schematic so far (and will necessarily remain scattered, since it is impossible to fully assess all kinds of everyday transactions properly, especially in truly historical settings), the other levels of social analysis reveal interesting trajectories. The most vivid levels are clearly in the areas of environment and government. Particularly interesting is a sequence of certain patterns or economic and political relations of and with Africans: while the slave cycle is characterized by hardly more than European ‘influence’ and the ivory cycle by a kind of ‘proto-colonialism’ (and both with a low level of actual involvement), the rubber cycle is characterized by practical and increasingly also formal ‘colonization’ (although geographically rather scattered at first), the copper cycle by ‘colonialism’ (much more of a state than a process) and later a form of ‘independence’ which as truly post-colonial was very much shaped by colonial heritage and already transforming into a conflict economy, and finally the ‘prize’ cycle by an almost proto-typical (not to name it exemplar) ‘war economy’, which is not the least also shaped by global interests. To detect the level and character of mutual involvement is a complex question: in pre- and post-colonial settings relations are only seemingly less invasive and more centred around domestic affairs, while in case of a colonial state and bureaucracy relations are equally only seemingly more dominated by external forces. In the end, both are subject to interwoven patterns of agency. This is good to be seen on the level of governance, when during the colonial era indirect and at the same time formal means of control (laws, directives, taxation, military and police forces) dominate, while in the pre- and post-colonial

eras rather direct and informal means of control (domestic ‘relationships’ and flexible organizations of exchange) dominate.

Table 1: Levels of social analyses and cycles of exploitation

	Slave Cycle	Ivory Cycle	Rubber Cycle	Copper Cycle	‘Prize’ Cycle
Embeddedness	(sustained) violence culture / (increasingly) unequal exchange				
Environment	domestic and global trade relations, local power relations, external influence	domestic and global trade relations, local power relations, proto-colonialism	colonial state, colonial bureaucracy, colonisation	(post-)colonial state, (post-)colonial bureaucracy, colonialism, ‘independence’	domestic and global trade relations, local power relations, war economy
Governance	relationships between traders, local ‘labour lords’ and domestic slave hunters	relationships between traders, local ‘chiefs’ and domestic ‘harvesters’	seizure, certain laws and directives, taxation (quotas), <i>Force Publique</i>	structural violence occupation, infrastructure provision, certain laws and directives, taxation, domestic ‘security’, authoritarianism	temporal alliances and control over territory, establishment of trade channels, ‘democratisation’
Allocation	day-to-day ‘business’ (mode of resource extraction), provision of ‘security’, i.e. direct violence				

Finally, at the level of embeddedness, in the case of the Congo we reveal a violence culture, which is sustained in the long run by the actors involved, following incentives provided in the context of this very culture, and also self-sustaining in a systemic sense, i.e. the system produces these incentives, and a pattern of unequal exchange, which is – in the long run and on average, if ‘Africans’ and ‘Europeans’ are taken as groups (which is certainly idealistic) – becoming increasingly unequal, at least until the Leopoldian era, but to some extent also later on. It is subject to further research to analyse the procedures by which this violence culture is shaped and consequently also, where possible points of intervention are. What is clearer already is its function within the overall framework: at least in the case of the Congo it is the very force producing cultural, structural and direct violence in the form of lacking legitimacy as well as patterns of political and social exclusion. Violent practices paid throughout history, but interestingly they paid on an individual level and not on the societal, since the innovative potential of warfare, one key to European colonial domination, was hardly utilized by the Africans. In the end, through all colonial deformation and with all relevant differences in detail, the post-colonial society returns to pre-colonial patterns, although the structural differences between the three are relatively insignificant.

(4) Concluding Remarks

The ongoing civil war in the Congo region is only the visible tip of an iceberg of a well-established system of structural violence, which is neither simply a result of post-colonial nor colonial heritage. Rather, it is the latest manifestation of a ‘violence culture’, a framework of multi-layered violence-promoting and -preserving ‘extractive’ institutions shaped over centuries. Remarkably stable, it dates back (at least) to the very beginning of the integration of the Congo into the global economy. Since the first contact with Europeans, it has experienced a vicious cycle of exploitation promoting violence, driven by internal power relations but also by international politics and world market demands. While the object of these demands (slaves, ivory, rubber, copper, diamonds, coltan) changed over the centuries and decades, the structures of dependence and the patterns of exploitation did not change fundamentally. However, the actors in each of the identified cycles also did not break the vicious trajectories, but perpetuated violence as a wilful decision. Hence, every effort to sustainably improve the economic, social and political conditions in the Congo must take this heritage into account.

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