

Notes from the Underground

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The Historical Underground

The Congo Project, Part II

Capitalism and Congo's Resources: A Continuing Nightmare

By: Greg Kosc, Faculty

A month or so ago this publication printed a story about imperialism in Congo, which alluded to the fact that there are still some who refuse to acknowledge the extent of the genocide that took place there. And, it also pointed out that capitalist exploitation of Congolese resources continues apace today. Sadly, that article was accurate on both points, and the cautionary tales of cognitive dissonance and turn-of-the-20th-century imperialism have not been heeded. Over the last 16 years, millions of Congolese have been killed, raped, and dislocated because of the very same impulse to loot raw materials from the people's land.

Throughout the colonial period when Belgium governed the area, the primary focus of the regime was plundering raw materials. Congolese rubber was used to fuel the growing bicycle and automobile tire industry, and palm oil was used to make soap for Westerners. Companies such as the Anglo-Belgian India Rubber Company, Unilever, Ivory and Colgate-Palmolive grew incredibly profitable by exploiting these resources.

Eventually, mining became the preoccupation of the Belgians. Beginning in the 1920s, uranium, plutonium, gold, diamonds and cobalt were all extracted from Eastern Congo by forcing Congolese to work in the mines. It should be noted, though, that this practice of forcing Africans to work in mines or fields or forests in order to produce commodities for export was rampant all over the colonial world, and it was also one of the major reasons why Africa and India struggled with famines in the 19th and 20th centuries. So many workers were taken away from their fields and homes in order to work for European companies to pay their taxes that crop yields suffered. Anyhow, the Belgians found many Western consumers for these valuable metals and materials. In fact, a Belgian company operating in Congo sold the United States 1,200 tons of uranium, which helped the U.S. construct the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

Since gaining its independence in 1960, Congo has struggled to take ownership over its vast resources. During the Cold War (1945-1991) the U.S. was part of an effort to make sure that a dictator inimical to communism was empowered. That dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, toed the line of anti-communism in order to receive critical military and diplomatic aid from the United States. In exchange, American companies had access to Congolese resources, and the U.S. government had assurance Congo would not become communist. Once the Cold War ended, however, the United States slowly distanced itself from Mobutu, clearing the way for his ouster in 1996. One of the many reasons that the U.S. looked the other way in

countries that sought Mobutu's removal included Tutsi-led Rwanda. Just two years before, the Tutsis of Rwanda were slaughtered by a Hutu-led regime inside Rwanda, and, therefore, there was tremendous sympathy for the new Tutsi regime globally. In addition, many of the Hutus that perpetrated the genocide sought refuge in Eastern Congo, so there may have been an element of payback operating here. Regardless, as a result, Mobutu was expelled and replaced by a new leader who also had dictatorial tendencies, Laurent Kabila. A struggle for territory and power over Eastern Congo developed as Kabila sought to exert his independence from his former patrons, Rwanda and Uganda. This geopolitical struggle quickly escalated because of a new mineral unearthed in the area: coltan.

The personal computer revolution of the late 1990s placed a significant strain on global supply chains to meet the demand for these products. Over time, coltan became an increasingly important commodity because of its properties. Electrical current can run through metals composed of coltan without heating it up. This revelatory metal allowed computer companies to get rid of their bulky monitors, which had to have fans inside in order to cool them down. Almost overnight, bulky monitors were replaced by flat screens that required no cooling because they were wired with coltan. The electronics industry was being revolutionized, but there was one problem: sixty percent of the world's supply of coltan is in the Eastern Congo. The geopolitical struggle that began in Eastern Congo in the late 1990s quickly metastasized into a global economic struggle that continues to this day. Complicating the situation is that many Congolese have also joined militias fighting on all sides of this conflict attempting to turn a profit from smuggling coltan out of the country. More recently,

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~ Greg Kosc



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Capitalism and Congo's Resources... (continued)

British-based multinational corporation Soco International has begun exploring for oil in the Eastern Congolese national park Virunga. Investigative journalists have definitively tied Soco to funding rebel groups that are trying to destroy the wildlife of the area in order to obviate the need for a national park. The Virunga park rangers' valiant fight to preserve this world heritage site is portrayed in the new documentary film *Virunga*.

In the midst of this war zone, cultural and social prohibitions against rape have eroded, and rapes are being perpetrated at an astonishing rate. Rape is used to subordinate and humiliate women and men, and many soldiers infected with HIV have been sent out with the task of specifically spreading the disease in certain areas. On top of the human catastrophe here, neighboring countries of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, which have absolutely no coltan mines of their own, are now exporting millions of dollars' worth of coltan every year to subsidiaries of Western multinational corporations. While many of our cell phones, televisions, and monitors are wired with Congolese coltan and drenched in the

blood and psychological trauma of Eastern Congolese, and our multinational corporations profit from this illegal trade, the United Nations peacekeeping mission has largely failed and our government stands still – unwilling to take a comprehensive approach to the world's largest ongoing struggle. Additionally, American media outlets, which notoriously struggle covering complex stories, have largely shied away from covering this complicated and deadly conflict.

In conclusion, just as many justified murder, rape and exploitation in the early 20th century by saying Westerners were bringing “civilization” to colonies all over the world, we now use a multiplicity of justifications to continue pillaging Congo. Among the most common excuses are that such events are out of our control, that Africans themselves are to blame for this madness, or – worse still – the bold assertion that our corporations must have unfettered access to Congo's minerals to drive the digital revolution forward. In reality, our companies' insatiable greed, our consumption of electronics, and our unwillingness to expose these crimes against humanity (for which we are

all complicit) underpin what is happening in Eastern Congo. If Congo was able to actually control its borders and industry, then the price of such minerals would rise – something no businesspeople want. Thus, just as we have set up a system to regulate the traffic in “blood diamonds” and bring a measure of political stability to Sierra Leone, perhaps we should be doing the same in Congo. Our State Department needs to be lending as much assistance as possible to the Congolese state in order to stabilize the political and military institutions in Congo. With true sovereignty, perhaps Congo will be able to harness its resources for the good of its people.



CULTURE, SEXUALITY AND THE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE MOMENTUM

By: Jennifer Schoen, Student

October was National LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) awareness month and although it has passed, it still serves as a good time to point out some of the divisive issues that concern America regarding societal sexuality. Same-sex marriage in particular is being thrust into the spotlight once again because of recent court case rulings that favor its recognition and is gaining national attention and support. Gay Americans have been fighting for this right since 1970, and numerous efforts have been made nationwide to extinguish these honorable attempts at equality. With the introduction of DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) which defined marriage strictly between a man and a woman in 1996, it appeared that marriage equality had been halted in its tracks permanently. This act was passed by Congress and supported by President Clinton, who readily signed it into action. Shortly after being signed into law, the federal court ruled that the issue of gay marriage was to be decided by individual states instead of at the federal level.

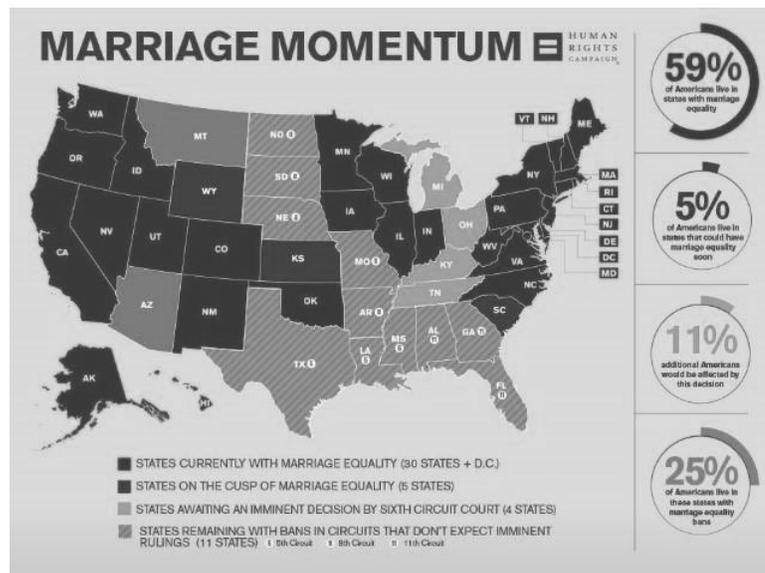


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Join Us: Fridays/1 p.m./ESEE 1224

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

It is with great pleasure, profound energy and powerful commitment that we bring you the first edition of the fifth volume of *Notes* to read at this early stage of the semester. We have planned excellent events, programs and articles lined up for this spring, so bring your A-game with you to campus everyday this semester to soak it up. Most significant are the events planned for the Smithsonian/NEH-funded grant our campus was rewarded through the library, with lectures that will teach you something fresh and powerful about the struggle for equality in America that took place from the Civil War to Civil Rights in America. The NEH event was kicked off January 12 by TCC Professor Tramaine Anderson, who introduced the themes scheduled for the Judith J. Carrier Library's *Changing America*, an exhibit made possible by the grant. This exhibit showcases lectures on socio-cultural history with an emphasis on civil rights. It runs through February 19, so try to swing through and check it out when you can. We hope you will join us to welcome these exciting and forward-thinking educators who continue to reshape the historical narrative of U.S. history.

Speaking of reshaping the narrative, we are proud to offer two new history courses at TCC Southeast Campus. Professor Greg Kosc is eager to teach African American History, while Professor J. Joel Tovanche is working excitedly on his Mexican-American History course. We hope these courses will become staple courses at TCC Southeast in the coming semesters.

Finally, in this issue, we continue the conversation on the conflict in Congo, with Professor Greg Kosc's "The Congo Project," a piercing indictment of Western imperialism in Africa. Kosc's article nicely complements Professor Borougerdi's piece in our last issue, in which he examined Adam Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost* and thus set the stage for the incisive discussions held at the Book Workshops last semester. We also have a timely submission by TCC student, Jennifer Schoen, whose article on same-sex marriage comes on the heels of the Supreme Court's recent decision to hear arguments on whether the 14th Amendment requires states to recognize gay marriage. Lastly, TCC student Parisa Khaghani's artwork "The Mask of Manifest Destiny" offers a palpable critique of territorial and political expansionism, which is too often "justified" by an inflexible devotion to dogma. Her piece is particularly timely given recent events in France and other parts of the world.

Of course, February is Black History Month. While the *Changing America* exhibit pays tribute to civil rights in general, it includes lectures on the black experience by many of our own faculty, as well as Tiffany Gill, who is coming to our library all the way from the University of Delaware on February 12 to school us on black beauty shop politics. We hope you will enjoy all of these events with us, and join us at the Underground on Fridays at 1.

~ Joel Tovanche, Bradley J. Borougerdi, Greg Kosc and Eric Salas