

Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 368 pp., ISBN 9781478018377).

Congolese youth have not enjoyed a good press. Already in the 1960s, the future doyen of Congolese political science, Crawford Young – a former official in the CIA-sponsored United States National Student Association (119, 127) – described the youth who formed ‘the “muscle” of the nationalist movement’ as ‘highly volatile’ and ‘disoriented’ (Young, *Politics in the Congo*, 1965). Similar characterisations inform several later works, including my own long-term history of warlordism in the Congo basin, where successive generations of youth feature mainly as agents of predation and as the armed followers of entrepreneurs of violence connected to global supply chains (Macola, *Una storia violenta*, 2021; ‘Warlordism in the Congo Basin’, 2023).

Monaville’s deeply researched book, the latest addition to a number of recent analyses of 1960s student politics outside of Europe and North America, provides a welcome alternative perspective. Written with real empathy and historical sensitivity, *Students of the World* foregrounds the political aspirations and transnational engagements of a group of (overwhelmingly male) Lovanium-based student activists, whose significance – according to the author – lay not in their number (they represented a microscopic minority of the population until at least the end of the decade), but rather in their visceral cosmopolitanism and privileged position ‘at the interface of the Congo and the world’ (166).

Subdivided into nine substantive chapters arranged in loose chronological order, and enlivened by much biographical material painstakingly assembled over several years, *Students of the World* begins with two tightly packed chapters that show how long-distance postal exchanges – which an earlier generation of so-called *évolués* had pioneered in previous decades – shaped the political imagination of young Congolese students, enabling them to take part ‘most enthusiastically in the transnational circulation of political affects that was facilitated by the context of decolonization’ (14).

Two additional chapters (III and IV) are dedicated, respectively, to the fundamental contradictoriness of colonial education (a means both of control and liberation) and to the early social and political experiences of students at Lovanium, the Catholic university founded on the outskirts of Leopoldville in 1954. Then the book comes into its own with three exemplary chapters (V–VII) on the growing radicalisation and leftward turn of Congolese students in the aftermath of the assassination of Lumumba early in 1961, and during

the great neo-Lumumbist uprisings in the Kwilu and in eastern Congo, to which a handful of university activists participated alongside, *inter alios*, future president Laurent-Désiré Kabila.

The two concluding chapters of the book (VIII-IX) focus on the period after Mobutu's coup of November 1965. Here, Monaville charts the complex and changing relationship between the dictator and the student movement. Initially, Mobutu was successful at co-opting several student activists by capitalising on the discourse of radical nationalism to which many of them subscribed. This changed after the bloody denouement of 4 June 1969, when a peaceful street protest by students, now alienated by Mobutu's broken promises and increasingly manifest authoritarianism, was crushed by the army, resulting in perhaps forty dead. The period of intense repression that followed finally 'unmasked the colonial atavism of the Mobutu regime' (180). Notwithstanding the intellectual creativity that it may have given rise to, Mobutu's *authenticité* was a poor replacement indeed for the internationalism that the student movement had studiously cultivated for several years.

This brief summary does no justice to the skillful manner in which Monaville reconstructs the intellectual milieu of Congolese students in the 1960s and the development of their visions for decolonisation. Even though the representativeness of Monaville's student activists, as well as the ultimate steadfastness of their political convictions, remain open to question, there is no denying that *Students of the World* is a highly original and beautifully crafted book. Its portrayal of a lost political generation that was once a significant force in post-independence Congo attests to the sophistication and diversity of contemporary Congolese historiography. Congo and decolonisation specialists will ignore it at their peril.

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