

Emizet François Kisangani, *The Belgian Congo as a Developmental State: Revisiting Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2023, 264 pp., ISBN 9781032254319).

The Belgians transformed their colony, the Belgian Congo, into a prosperous economy characterised by high profits, rapid industrialisation, and the large-scale export of raw materials. Therefore, Belgian colonial rule cannot be seen as the primary cause of the post-colonial malaise in the Congo. This is the central argument of Emizet François Kisangani's monograph, which examines how Belgian colonialism established the rule of law, critical infrastructure, property rights, and stable state revenues in Congo. While the author claims that applying the developmental state paradigm to the Belgian Congo (1908-1959) allows for 'a more nuanced analysis of African history', I found his account to be outdated, simplistic, and ahistorical. Although Kisangani, Professor of Political Science at Kansas State University, addresses a legitimate question – how the Congo declined from an investor's paradise in the 1950s to one of the world's poorest economies now – he employs a flawed conceptual framework to reach an unrelated conclusion. Even if Belgian colonialism allowed for (unequal) capitalist success, this does not explain why postcolonial Congolese leadership failed to sustain economic growth.

In line with scholars of the so-called development state paradigm – conceived to explain the rapid economic growth of Asian countries in the 1980s and 1990s – the book relies on an anachronistic conception of development as a universal and linear process involving industrialisation, technological progress and institutional reforms. By projecting this notion of development back to the period of the Belgian Congo, the author overlooks the historical specificity of twentieth-century colonialism. This is particularly evident in his complete disregard for Walter Rodney's seminal *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). Even for those who reject Rodney's ideological beliefs, his work remains essential for understanding 'development' in African societies as a broader social process and for examining the political economy of colonialism. Rather than addressing (or challenging) Rodney's dependency approach, the book uncritically aligns with the historiography of New Institutional Economics. Following scholars such as Douglass C. North and Barry R. Weingast, Kisangani approaches the Belgian Congo as an isolated state that created key institutions to check governmental power, thereby fostering economic growth. To make the case of the Belgian Congo as a development state, the book posits three working hypotheses in its introductory chapter: first, economic development requires a minimum supply of public goods; second, more political veto players generate greater

investment opportunities; and third, large ruling coalitions increase the provision of public goods. The author argues that the Belgian colonial administration met these conditions for economic growth by providing various figures and graphs (showing GDP, exports, and wages), and by making comparisons with the predatory Leopoldian regime and President Mobutu's corrupt rule. The remainder of the book follows a chronological structure of eight chapters, each with its own thematic focus.

The second chapter focuses on the period of the Congo Free State, analysing how Leopold II established a system of exploitation based on predatory taxation. The next four chapters, which form the core of the book, examine the policies of the Belgian Congo (1908-1960) that, according to the author, contributed to economic development. Chapter three discusses how the colonial administration's supposed introduction of law and order created the political stability necessary for foreign investments to boost economic productivity. Invoking the traditional 'colonial trinity' consisting of State, Church, and private enterprises, the author argues that the creation of a professional army and the division of power between colony and metropole fostered political stability. Chapter four explores the flexible economic planning that supported infrastructure development in transport, energy, and social sectors such as education and healthcare. Key themes include state involvement through the Great Works programs in the 1920s, the ten-year plan in the 1950s, and import substitution policies. In chapter five, the author examines how the colonial state protected property rights, essential for business growth according to development economics. The focus is on European-owned agricultural land and the state's role in the mining industry. Chapter six details how the Belgian Congo maintained revenue by balancing direct taxes, indirect taxes, and non-tax income, while offsetting tax cuts on African labour with increased import duties.

The final three chapters cover post-independence Congolese history, allowing for comparison with the colonial period. Chapter seven analyses Mobutu's rule (1960-1997) and attributes the Country's economic decline to his hubris syndrome. Chapter eight examines the Kabila regime (1997-2018), identifying corruption and persistent warfare as major factors in the further deterioration of the state apparatus. In the final chapter, the author compares the Belgian Congo's economic performance with other European colonies, the Congo Free State, and post-colonial governance, concluding with a positive assessment of the Belgian Congo as a development economy.

Kisangani's revision of Belgian colonialism offers no new or unique insights for three key reasons. First, from an empirical perspective, the book relies solely on published annual reports, outdated secondary literature, and official government statistics. It fails to incorporate unpublished archival materials, which would have provided a deeper understanding of the complexities of colonial rule. This limitation is evident in the author's

repeated but unsubstantiated claim that the colonial administration functioned as an independent Weberian bureaucracy and a powerful veto-player (79, 85, 98, 149, 255). For example, the author asserts that colonial bureaucrats considered 'the Belgian Congo their home and they wanted to make it the best place for themselves' (79). However, research into the archives of the former Ministry of Colonies' personnel service reveals that most magistrates only stayed in the colony for two or three terms of three years each.

Second, by focusing solely on the economic performance of the Belgian Congo, the author denies its colonial essence. While acknowledging that state rule in the Belgian Congo was racist and violent, the author also claims that colonialism brought infrastructure, healthcare, and education (15-18). This so-called balance sheet approach contrasts the 'positive' aspects of colonial rule with the negative ones. Yet, these elements cannot be morally separated. The author himself notes, for example, that forced labour in agriculture functioned as a form of taxation up until at least World War II (137-138, 157). Despite this, he views the Belgian Congo's effective taxation system as a positive aspect of colonial development, conveniently downplaying the coercion involved as 'gradually disappearing' (165-167).

Lastly, applying the development state paradigm to the Belgian Congo leads to anachronistic comparison across distinct periods of Congolese history. The author employs this paradigm for instance to highlight the productive nature of state-business relations in the Belgian Congo (134), contrasting it with Mobutu's 'small winning coalition' (195), or subsequent kleptocratic elites (207). However, such comparisons obscure the oligarchic nature of the colonial private sector, where by 1937, just 28 individuals occupied 400 company board seats, and where most capital inflows were controlled by the 'Jadot-Cousin-Gillet' clan. A neutral analysis would thus not assess the sector's role as that of a 'major non-partisan veto player' (134). Consequently, the comparison is flawed, as historical developments unfold chronologically rather than as direct analogies. While the colonial legacy undeniably affected postcolonial economic performance, the failures of the Mobutu regime cannot serve as a nostalgic, favourable assessment of Belgian colonialism. Unsurprisingly, the book's strongest sections are those analysing the historical dynamics of decolonisation as they avoid the static rigidity of the developmental state paradigm. All in all, the book reads as somewhat redundant thought experiment, largely overlooking the complex historical realities of Belgian colonialism.

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