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Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity. Kevin C. Dunn. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 236 pp.

Kevin Dunn's path-breaking book offers an illuminating look into the imaginings and re-imaginings of the Congo from the beginning of the colonial era to the present. Dunn effectively maneuvers through international relations theory, political history, literature and other sources to analyze the most common portrayals of this greatly misunderstood country. From early depictions of Congo as a "Heart of Darkness," hopelessly backward and savage, through contemporary allusions to the "New Barbarism," Dunn takes us on a fascinating ride through these changing "discursive landscapes," to use his phrase. Along the way, he argues that these shifting (although almost always racist) portrayals have framed the world of potential political decisions open to the Congolese and, more importantly, to the outside influences that have played such crucial roles in fashioning Congolese politics over the last century and a half. To Dunn, the "Congo's identity has been authored largely by outside actors to the overall detriment of the people on the ground." (16) While he overstates the point, he backs up this contention brilliantly with a thoughtful assessment of the most important periods in the Congo's history, keenly outlining both the forces that worked to define Congolese identity and the repercussions of these identities.

Dunn points out that while most people in the western world know very little about the Congo, they ironically feel as though they know it very well because it is "enveloped in a century of powerful imagery." (4) "Imagining the Congo" traces this imagery, starting with the "invention" of the Congo under Belgian colonialism. In particular, Dunn looks at the ways King Leopold II and explorer Henry Morton Stanley depicted the Congo as a land in dire need of Belgian civilization, a land of savages that would only reach true humanity under colonial rule. Unfortunately, the Congolese themselves had limited means to contest these racist images due to their lack of access to printed media. This helped to solidify the role of Leopold and Stanley as key authors of the entire region to western audiences. That the western world overwhelmingly envisioned Congo through the lens created by these two people made possible the violent oppression of the Congolese people, a cruelty widely seen as one of the most brutal in all of colonial Africa.

Eventually, the number of potential authors of Congo's identity expanded, and this ruthlessness became a source of shame for Leopold, as critics of his colonial regime produced alternative depictions of the Congo focusing on Leopold's excesses. The Congo Reform Movement, for example, developed the image of "Red Rubber" to connect the wild rubber from the Congo with the blood spilled by the Congo's inhabitants, who were forced to gather it." (51) Importantly, the identity given to Congo by the Reform Movement still stressed the inferiority of the Congolese and the necessity of colonization; it simply promoted a more "humane" form of rule. Ultimately, the Red Rubber image stuck and Belgium took charge of the Congo,

presumably to eliminate the unrestrained behavior afforded Leopold during the days of his personal “ownership” of the colony.

Perhaps the most interesting section of Dunn’s book focuses on the image of Congo as chaos during the period leading up to and directly following independence. The image of Congo as chronically crisis-prone and inherently unstable led the U.S. (and others) to intervene in the country after independence in order to prevent a Soviet takeover. The assassination of Lumumba, and the support for Mobutu, Dunn argues, must be viewed through this context, i.e. one can only conceive of intervening in such a way when one imagines Congo as literally on the brink of disaster, unable to fight off the “Red Menace” on its own.

Dunn moves from the era of chaos to the Mobutu period to demonstrate how Mobutu himself re-imagined the Congo (and himself) as simultaneously a bulwark of anti-communism in the heart of Africa and a model of Third World nationalism. Dunn analyzes the policy of *authenticite* and, in one of the most unique and insightful portions of the book, shows how this policy was consumed by the international community. Rather than focus simply on how images of the Congo were created, then, he delves into the ways in which these images were viewed by outside sources. In particular, Dunn points to the little-known reality that Mobutu rarely mentioned *authenticite* within the Congo. Rather, the policy served as an integral component of Mobutu’s foreign policy, i.e. his attempts to fashion himself as an authentic African leader. That *authenticite* became the official doctrine in Gabon, Togo and the Central African Republic is a testament to the effectiveness of his efforts.

The final section of Dunn’s book looks at the current war and the image of Congo as a cancer, destroying the region. As the country descended into violence, support for Mobutu waned, but the international community did little to address the situation. To Dunn, the West’s images of the Congo (remarkably similar to those of a hundred years ago) precluded more positive actions to deal with the humanitarian crisis in the region. Dunn’s point is clear and persuasive. The imaginings and re-imaginings of the Congo have “cumulatively helped make the current situation possible.” (141)

“Imagining the Congo” serves as a much-needed addition to international relations theory, a discipline heavily deficient in perspectives from Africa and African affairs. The book’s lively and accessible writing style and the interdisciplinary nature of Dunn’s approach will interest anyone concerned with African politics, whether they know much about the Congo itself or not. International relations theorists, and those interested in identity politics, in particular, will appreciate this excellent look into the role of identity-formation in shaping Congo’s turbulent and captivating history.

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