

On how not to write about being colonized:  
By way of Jan Vansina's *On Being Colonized: The Kuba  
Experience in Rural Congo, 1880-1960* (University of  
Wisconsin Press, 2010 - [www.eurospanbookstore.com](http://www.eurospanbookstore.com))

Jacques Depelchin<sup>2</sup>

**Summary:** The objective of this essay is to assess the impact of Jan Vansina's and Cheikh Anta Diop's work on how African history has been constructed since 1960.

This is only the beginning of a longer project related to framing "history" as such through "African history". The intellectual framework (or starting point)

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<sup>1</sup> The starting point of this essay is that violence, as grown and nurtured under capitalism, has been under studied. This neglect is deliberate, as can be seen in the selective ways in which histories of violence are produced and reproduced. One of the twin byproducts of this kind of selective histories has been racism and sexism. How violent racism can be, even (or one should say especially) when it seems invisible can best be observed/ tested in places where its manifestations have been most extreme. See Nicolas Boursier (Correspondent of *Le Monde* in Rio de Janeiro), "Au Brésil un racisme cordial" 16.09.2012. [http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2012/09/13/au-bresil-un-racisme-cordial\\_1759964\\_3246.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2012/09/13/au-bresil-un-racisme-cordial_1759964_3246.html) - Accessed on September 19, 2012. With regard to violence against women, rape is not only the most extreme manifestation of violence between human beings, its consequences and impacts could also be argued to be the least understood and the most deliberately understudied. If the measure of its impacts and consequences on the direct and indirect victims were to be known, it is fair to assume that rape might be ranked as the primordial crime against humanity. How to ensure that such a recognition would make a difference still remains problematic. The lack of understanding is best illustrated by Lynn Nottage's play on the epidemic proportions of rape in DRC. *Ruined* (inspired by Berthold Brecht's *Mother Courage*) was meant to raise the alarm on this phenomenon. Its winning of the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 certainly achieved some level of visibility; however, given the impacts and the consequences of rape, it is obvious, at least to this reader, that the language and the drama displayed in *Ruined* fails to render, with fidelity, what has happened to the person who has suffered that kind of violence. It is beyond words.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh le May Fellow, Rhodes University/History Department, South Africa, Universidade Estadual de Feira de Santana, Bahia, Brazil.

of the essay is provided by Fanon's call to arms in his conclusion to *The Wretched of The Earth*. His call to arms was not violence, for the sake of violence. It was a call for "stopping to pay tribute to Europe". In the name of humanity, he called for moving away from imitation. Fanon's understanding of Africa did not come from a study and/or understanding of African psychiatry.

African history, as seen by Jan Vansina and his students, has been constructed in the manner of "paying tribute to [altruistic-jd] Europe", as if there was no other way to understand African history but through the intellectual and theoretical lenses borrowed from European intellectual history. This can be seen by looking at the work of two major figures: Jan Vansina, on the one hand, and, on the other, Cheikh Anta Diop.

The title of this essay has been inspired by the title of Vansina's latest book: *Being Colonized* (2010) that provides clues to how he understood colonization through his own research among the Bakuba. Besides using research data that had been collected in the 1950s (during Belgian colonial rule), Vansina assumes that his familiarity with the Bakuba puts him in a privileged position to understand colonization from their perspective. This is not different from the perspective of the missionaries and/or goodhearted Europeans who, as Fanon pointed out, speaks about humanity while slaughtering it wherever they met it.

**Keywords:** African History, Jan Vansina, Cheick Anta Diop

**Sumário:** O objetivo deste texto é avaliar o impacto do trabalho de Jan Vansina e Cheikh Anta Diop sobre como a história da África foi construída desde 1960.

Este é apenas o começo de um projeto mais longo relacionado ao enquadramento da "história" pensada como "História Africana". A estrutura intelectual (ou ponto de partida) do ensaio é fornecida pelo chamado de Fanon às armas em sua conclusão para *The Wretched of The Earth* (*Os condenados da terra*). Seu chamado às armas não foi violência, pela violência. Foi um apelo a "parar de homenagear a Europa". Em nome da humanidade, ele clamou pelo afastamento da imitação. A compreensão de Fanon sobre a África não veio de um estudo e / ou compreensão da psiquiatria africana.

Já a história africana, vista por Jan Vansina e seus alunos, foi construída na forma de “pagar homenagem à [altruísta - jd] Europa”, como se não houvesse outra forma de entender a história africana senão através das lentes intelectuais e teóricas emprestadas da história intelectual europeia. Isso pode ser visto olhando para o trabalho de duas grandes figuras: Jan Vansina, por um lado, e, por outro lado, Cheikh Anta Diop.

O título deste ensaio foi inspirado no título do último livro de Vansina: *Being Colonized* (2010) (*Sendo colonizado*) que fornece pistas de como ele entendeu a colonização por meio de suas próprias pesquisas entre os Bakuba. Usando dados de pesquisa que foram coletados na década de 1950 (durante o domínio colonial belga), Vansina assume que sua familiaridade com os Bakuba o coloca em posição privilegiada para entender a colonização a partir de sua perspectiva. Isso não é diferente da perspectiva dos missionários e / ou de bom coração dos Europeus que, como Fanon apontou, falam sobre a humanidade enquanto a abatem onde quer que a encontrem.

Palavras-chave: História Africana. Jan Vansina. Cheick Anta Diop

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This essay is meant to challenge the Jan Vansina’s understanding of colonization as a benign system, one that did resort to violence so that it could be imposed, but, crucially, one that may not be reduced to violence. This essay starts off from the exact opposite understanding, namely that because of its roots, its objectives, its nature, colonization must be understood as part and parcel of the current system of social, national and international relations which have at their centre violence as the fuel that keeps the system going. The objectives of colonization were to make sure that the natives were so sufficiently shocked and awed that they would hesitate to rise up again. Moreover, European colonization of Africa and other parts of the world having followed from Atlantic and Oriental Slavery created within the European ruling cliques a mindset that states, explicitly and/or implicitly that they can never ever be wrong. From the outset, it should be remembered, colonization was always presented as an altruistic exercise. The abolitionist movement, particularly in

England, helped present a dehumanizing process as a humanizing one.<sup>3</sup>

In his introduction, Jan Vansina (JV) explains that the book was written as “[an introduction] to colonial history that emphasizes the African experiences and place them at the heart of the tale, where they obviously belong.” (BC, p. 4) The objective, in writing the book, was to move away from the usual top-down accounts that dominate the field. He is keenly aware of the limits of such an approach: “Such an endeavor [from the side of the colonized] cannot fully succeed, mainly because “the colonized” is a collective noun that includes myriad points of views, experiences, voices, and agents, yet it is one that to my mind presents a history that is more concrete, more realistic, richer, and more meaningful than any top-down alternative.” (BC, p. 4) He also provides background information to buttress the differences between himself as a trained historian (as an undergraduate) and social anthropologist.

About approaching history from below, he seems to be convinced that this book will stand out as one of the few that places the Africans and their experiences at the heart of the tale. He does not know “of any introductions to colonial history that emphasize[d] African experiences”. Given the emphasis, the key word here is “introduction”, i.e. a book meant for college undergraduates and the non-specialist readers. For those who need to know more he offers at the end of each chapter additional readings.

However, reading the conclusion, it becomes clear that JV himself is not so sure about what “being colonized” really means. He realizes that he has to be more specific and/or more precise. The conclusion ends up reading like a continuation of the introduction. In a paragraph that starts off by pointing out the difficulty of generalizing, he concludes: “In other words, the book rest on inductive generalizations, and without a generalizing process it could not have been written. Furthermore, in so far as most Bushong and Kete have shared many of their common experiences of colonial rule with other rural Congolese, the experiences described here are also representative, and therefore valid, generalizations for rural Congo in general.” (BC, p. 328) In the conclusion, titled “The experience of Being Colonized”, JV responds to criticism and comments from various readers of the manuscript.

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<sup>3</sup> For this, see for example, Marcus Reddiker’s *Slaveship - A Human story* and Adam Hochschild’s *Bury the chains*. In both cases, they rely heavily on archives from the abolitionist movements, among other sources.

## 2. BEING A HISTORIAN OF THE (BELGIAN) CONGO<sup>4</sup>

JV has been considered by many as one of the best historians to have taught African history in the US academic system. *Being Colonized* (BC) could be seen as an exclamation point to his career. It also sums up his understanding of history, African history and within the latter, his understanding of Belgian colonization as it took place in a rural area (Bakuba) that he studied while researching (in the 1950s) for his Ph.D. in Social Anthropology in England. For those who are aware of the controversy that erupted upon Adam Hochschild's publication of *King Leopold's Ghost*, BC can be read as an attempt by JV to rectify his earlier agreement with Hochschild's use of the word genocide to describe what had happened in the Congo, under King Leopold II (1884-1908).

It is as if JV was eager to demonstrate his loyalty to an understanding of Belgian colonial rule as seen through the eyes of the establishment of Belgian conservative historians. The latter's main contention, as conveyed through a book that was meant to be a response to Adam Hochschild's, sought to demonstrate that Belgian colonization must not be reduced to its most violent manifestations.<sup>5</sup> While this may sound true at first sight, upon closer examination, it becomes obvious that the violence is meant to impact the targets in such a way as to leave a lasting impression (shock and awe) aimed at ensuring lasting submission, lasting fear.

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<sup>4</sup> Readers might be interested in Jan Vansina's autobiographical account of how he became a historian and social anthropologist of the Congo (then Belgian). What JV does not seem to be willing to take into account is how colonial violence in its most extreme manifestations created unrecoverable silences among key witnesses of the process. On this particular aspect, see the first chapter (but not only) of *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition*. See footnote 7 of the first chapter, page 22. When the first draft of this paper had been completed, I had not yet read two major books on 1) how to reproduce silencing, and 2) how to break it. On the former, see David Van Reybrouck's *Congo: une histoire*. Actes Sud, Paris, 2012. For the latter, see Thomas Deltombe, Manuel Domergue, Jacob Tatsitsa: *Kamerun: une guerre cachée aux origines de la Françafrique 1948-1971*. Paris: La Découverte, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> This essay had been started long before the Marikana massacre at the Lonmin mine had occurred, but it does help force one to look at history not just from below, but also from within the individual and collective psyche of those who were meant to be silenced by the violence. Violence, as has been demonstrated over and over, is meant to terrify the target. One of the consequences is that the violence ends up terrorizing not just the intended victims, but also those who are inflicting the violence, as so well shown not just by Fanon and others, but also by experiments like the well known prison experiment by Stanford psychologist Ph. Zimbardo, conducted in 1971. See:

<http://www.prisonexp.org/links.htm#materials> accessed on September 19, 2012.

As a process, Belgian colonization did not stop with Independence on June 30 1960. Following Independence (June 30 1960), the physical elimination of Patrice Lumumba within months of his becoming Prime Minister, and the manner in which it was carried out cannot be presented as though it had nothing to do with colonization in the DRC. In order to function Belgian colonial rule always had to work hand in hand with Congolese willing and ready to accept the notion that colonization was an educational, civilizing process. JV, in BC, does mention (and condemn) the violence that went with colonization, but JV fails completely as a historian to examine all the ways in which colonial violence was carried out, and the subsequent impact. There is no attempt on JV's part to question his own role in the reproduction of the notion that colonization was really no different from any other historical period in DRC, as historian Isidore Ndaywel once stated. Indeed, for JV, colonization can be compared to a lottery: sometimes one wins and sometimes one loses (JV, BC, p. 327).

As with slavery earlier, so with colonial rule and other systems of exploitation and oppression: it is always better and easier to cut one's losses than facing the possibility of losing much more. At one point, JV raises a question about what could have happened if the area that he was studying in the 50s had come under Portuguese colonial rule.<sup>6</sup>

JV would like to convey, through this book, what it means to be a historian (and not a journalist).<sup>7</sup> By presenting the facts as he saw them, he hopes that the readers will be able to figure out for themselves what being colonized in rural Congo really meant. He goes out of his way to present additional readings, but the unprepared reader will not be aware of which items have been

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<sup>6</sup> However, in his musings, it does not occur to JV to ask the question (presumably too outlandish for him) of what could have happened to the teaching of African history in the US, had the foundation that recruited him had gone out of its way to recruit Cheikh Anta Diop, instead.

<sup>7</sup> In this book, Jan Vansina seems to have forgotten that, regarding Adam Hochschild's (AH) book, he had agreed with him on the use of the word genocide. According to AH himself (*personal information*, jd), it is Jan Vansina who provided the statistics. It is almost as if Jan Vansina had second thoughts regarding the impact of AH's book, especially in Belgium, his native land. For a review of another attempt at softening the impact of AH's book, see Sylvie Ayimpam's review of another book which sought to argue that while there was violence, there were also other processes (something that was not denied by AH): Jean-Luc Vellut, ed., *La Mémoire du Congo: Le temps colonial*, reviewed in *l'Homme*, n° 184, octobre-décembre 2007, [En ligne], mis en ligne le 21 novembre 2007. URL: <http://lhomme.revues.org/index13092.html> - Accessed on September 19, 2012.

left out for reasons best known to JV himself. The context in which this colonization took place is mentioned in such a way as to reduce the importance of Atlantic Slavery to an encounter that determined the colonial language used in the area he was studying (BC p. 325). It is not stated in the book, but it is obvious that, for JV, there is only one entry into History, and that is through the doors of European history as initially framed for the people discovered and/or enslaved by Europeans, and later colonized.<sup>8</sup> What is not dealt with in this book is the multifaceted forms of violence and their psychic impact on the populations that suffered from the violent encounter with Europe.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. FROM THE AMERICAS TO AFRICA<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for example, the direct and indirect consequences of Atlantic slavery, colonial rule, apartheid on humanity as a whole continues to be downplayed. In general, these specific histories are disconnected from some of the most extreme regimes as if they have nothing to do with each other. For example, can any historian affirm, without any doubt, that, how the Native Americans were liquidated, had absolutely no impact on the mindset, the consciences of those who decided to purify the Arian race of all those who were considered less than human, later on?<sup>11</sup> The task of the historian cannot

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<sup>8</sup> A belief still widely shared by well-educated Europeans like Nicolas Sarkozy as demonstrated by the lecture he gave at the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar [July 26, 2007. For a collective African response to that lecture, see the article by Noël Kodja here: [http://www.libreafrique.org/Kodja\\_revue\\_dis-cours\\_Dakar](http://www.libreafrique.org/Kodja_revue_dis-cours_Dakar); and *L'Afrique répond à Sarkozy*, sous la direction de Makhily Gassama. Éditions Philippe Rey, Paris, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> JV could not have helped being aware, for example, of the controversies triggered by, say, Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* or Frantz Fanon's writings on colonization, in particular, of the latter's critique of O. Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (London: Methen, 1956).

<sup>10</sup> Too often, African history is restricted to the continent's geographical borders even though its history (following the European encounter) is intimately tied to the Americas and the West and East Indies.

<sup>11</sup> There are numerous examples of downplaying crimes, criminal behavior when they are connected to figures that have been consecrated as heroes of western histories. One of the best examples is how Napoleon Bonaparte reinstated slavery after it had been abolished by the Convention (1792-4). In his *Les Crimes de Napoléon*, Claude Ribbe argues that, given the brutality and viciousness Napoleon insisted upon, the reinstatement of slavery could be looked at as the precursor of what Hitler was to do later. The connection is not as preposterous as it may seem at first sight. After all, upon visiting Paris, Hitler made a point of going to the Pantheon to pay homage to Napoleon. Is it not a fair question to ask oneself what Hitler (an enemy of France) thought he and Napoleon (a hero of France) had in common? Or is it the case that, in reinstating slavery,

be reduced to just simply recovering the “facts”. As David E. Stannard captured it:

We must do what we can to recapture and to try to understand, in human terms, what it was that was crushed, what it was that was butchered. It is not enough merely to acknowledge that much was lost. So close to total was the human incineration and carnage in the post-Columbian Americas, however, that of the tens of millions who were killed, few individual lives left sufficient traces for subsequent biographical representation. (STANNARD, 1992: xi).

In order to remedy the absence of any traces, Stannard suggests historians “...shall have to rely on [our] imagination to fill in the faces and the lives”. (STANNARD, 1992: xii)<sup>12</sup>

The conquest of the Americas, with rare exceptions, continues to be framed, written and told by historians and non-historians, as it was seen, felt, understood by the conquerors. The conquerors may not have been historians, but they certainly knew of the existence of history and how the conquest and its consequences would later be explained, understood, by historians. Paraphrasing and adapting Bob Dylan’s famous lyric [With God on our side], it is fair to say that the Conquerors were certain that history’s Goddess (Clio) was and would continue to be on their side. However, given the abuses, the crimes committed against those who were conquered, and the fact that their side of the history does not receive the same kind of credibility, should one not try to make a distinction between history as such and history as framed, written, told by historians working directly and/or indirectly for the conquerors’ (the winners) side?

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one should look at Napoleon as a figure that transcends national histories? On the other hand, a historian like David E. Stannard begins the prologue of his book, *The American Holocaust – The conquest of the New World*, with a reminder of the link between 1492 and what happened at the Trinity site in the New Mexico Desert where the first testing of an atomic “gadget” (as it was known among the scientists based at Los Alamos) on the morning of July 16 1945. Stannard reminds the readers of the number of “Indians” (according to Columbus) who subsequently die and those who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Stannard is not the only historian to point out the connections between the Jewish Holocaust, the African slave trade, like Todorov, for example.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding the role of imagination in history, the tendency has been a one way street dominated by the imagination of those who do not question the dominant narrative. For example, in the case of David Van Reybrouck’s *Congo, une histoire*, the author likes to rely on fiction whenever the reality is not comfortable.



#### 4. IS COLONIZATION PART OF THE HISTORY OF CAPITALISM?<sup>13</sup>

With regard to this essay, history can be divided into four categories, even if, formally and informally speaking, many more do exist:

1) texts written by specialists trained to research and write history;

2) histories that are written by non-specialists, but do reproduce the specialists' narratives;

3) historical narratives coming from non-professional historians (e.g. social scientists, specialists in other disciplines – e.g., theology, military science, philosophy – that have grown as a direct and/or indirect byproduct of conquest), but which do reproduce the narratives produced by the conquerors' versions of history;

4) historical narratives rooted in the preservation of humanity.<sup>14</sup> Their primary archives could be referred to as the conscience of humanity.

This essay will argue that it is this fourth type of history that should be striven for. The objective, or the task, of such a history is simple: to maintain fidelity to humanity. In a more explicit way, it could be argued that the task of any historian (regardless of her attachments) concerned with reclaiming the commons could replace “commons” with “humanity”. Provided that “humanity” remains above any appropriation. In this sense, humanity is understood as it was by Frantz Fanon, in particular, in the conclusion to the *Wretched of the Earth*.

This essay is written with the following axiom in mind: capitalism, once viewed by K. Marx as emancipatory, clearly was never going to be so. Could

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<sup>13</sup> Most defenders of colonization (like JV) tend to shy away from looking at colonial rule as an integral part of the history of capitalism. Yet, its pertinence is crucial for understanding the socio-economic, financial and political interconnections that led, for example, to WWI, WWII, and the current destabilization of Africa. The classic references remain Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and the works of Eric Williams and Joseph Inikori on Slavery and Capitalism.

<sup>14</sup> Given the times and context in which we are living today (May 2012), discussions on/around what is understood by humanity have become more contentious. For example, libertarians (say like Ben Pile) who, in the US, are for the least government possible might denounce organizations like the Club of Rome, while at the same time, without necessarily saying so, denouncing organizations (like Greenpeace) for holding back human progress. Humanity is understood, here, as that which is common to all human beings, not only at the present time, but also from its earliest times to the present.

he have seen it, during his days? Arguments could be made on both sides: its emancipatory potential, while plausible, could also be seen as severely limited from the very beginning. Various technological advances attributed to the nature of capitalism, can be looked at as having freed humans from the drudgery of repetitive movements and the subsequent strain it had on the individual and the collective. However, while this may be true, what is rarely examined is the cost it has inflicted on those who extracted the raw materials that went into the manufacturing processes. Marx was aware of part of this cost, but never went further than what his own social situation dictated. He wrote about slavery in the US, but he remained on the outside of the lives lived by the slaves, and, more to the point, outside the histories that shackled human beings who were free in their own land, to a status that reversed emancipation.<sup>15</sup>

What the colonization of the Americas did to Native Americans contributed to the production of wealth for the conquerors, but for the Native Americans, it was a painful, long process of liquidation of a part of humanity, and its history. The process of annihilation impacted both physically and psychically those who stood in the way. Just being a Native American, just being alive on that path, the treatment inflicted by colonial occupation and later slavery meant that all forms of suffering were going to be inflicted. Suffering cannot be measured, but it does have a history, it does have a memory. While the existence of a history of suffering cannot be denied, historians of denial of specific suffering abound. The most spoken history of denial is the Holocaust. That does not make it, necessarily, the most unbearable form of suffering. Moreover, the Holocaust itself does have roots in other abuses of humanity which went unexamined and, sometimes, completely ignored. The ignorance of that kind of suffering has been such that the term denial becomes difficult to apply because its existence was not even acknowledged. Furthermore, history being a continuum, it is difficult to deny a connection between the denying of earlier genocides and the Holocaust. Impunity for earlier unacknowledged crimes against humanity prepared the ground for the Holocaust.

The predatory nature of capitalism was visible, right from its earliest

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<sup>15</sup> Being shackled, enslaved and then going through emancipation abolition of slavery tends to erase from the history of capitalism the part that did the exact opposite of emancipation. Indeed, in the history of those societies that enslaved Africans, abolition came to be presented as one of those battles that can be looked at as a positive achievement of capitalism.

roots wherever any serious historian cared to really look as one might do at a document in any archive. As it rose from the European Middle Ages, historians may have been misled into looking at those roots and manifestations with a forgiving mind. After all, given the colonial and imperial conquests of many European nations, capitalism had mostly brought positive things. Capitalism took centuries to emerge as it now appears to us. For example, historians of Belgium can easily write about the history of (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century) Belgium in a way that barely mentions the fact that its economic, financial and social wellbeing owed a great deal to having had a colony from 1875 (informally) and 1885 (formally), when Leopold II recruited Morton H. Stanley to explore and take over that part of the continent as his own private property.<sup>16</sup>

The teaching (and writing) of capitalism in the educational system of the countries that most benefited from it will tend to downplay the predatory impact it had on the so-called periphery, while highlighting its benefits.<sup>17</sup> However, as one of the worst systemic crises of capitalism unfolds and affects the countries that had been benefitting from it, its predatory nature is also becoming more and more evident, especially to those who, structurally speaking, find themselves in the position of those who, in the past, faced colonial conquest, slavery and other destructive processes.

A clear and uncompromising understanding of the history of Atlantic Slavery, colonial occupations, etc. is still far from having permeated the consciences of the majority of the population in the US and Europe. There is a deeply set conviction that, overall, European expansion or Western expansion has been beneficial to the world, including the people who experienced slavery and colonization. The histories of colonial occupation, slavery and its deriva-

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<sup>16</sup> At the theoretical level, the benign way of looking at capitalism has been facilitated by the uncritical reading of Fernand Braudel. See chapter 4 of Jacques Depelchin, *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition*. For a more detailed critique on the Congo, see *De l'État Indépendant du Congo au Zaïre contemporain (1885-1974)*, Codesria/Karthala, 1992. Also available in English.

<sup>17</sup> Thus, while teaching Development Studies at UC Berkeley, around 1990-1, I explained to the professor in charge who was (t)asking me (presumably after complaints from one or several students) (on) how I taught DS 100, I responded by pointing out that it was focused on how capitalism impacted those at the receiving end. He disagreed and that was the end of my teaching that particular class. I should have predicted the outcome of the meeting, except for my optimistic outlook leading me to expect that we were going to talk about how to improve the class. He had, by then, worked as a consultant for the World Bank in Latin America.

tives continue to be contentious, in great part because of the deception and the propaganda that have grown out from the pens of those who have written about it from the outside, and, in the process, consciously or unconsciously sought to minimize its impact.

## 5. COLONIALISM AS ALTRUISM

There are many other reasons, but it is worth focusing on two that have helped maintain the above mindset of colonial rule as an altruistic exercise, and/or as a phase that one does not have to worry about once it ceased to exist. As transitions from colonial rule to independence have shown time and again, colonial rule never completely ceased because what followed was more a modernized/reformed version of colonial rule. The independent colonial state found itself in a position where it could not compete with the colonial corporations that had been implanted during colonial rule.<sup>18</sup>

How colonial rule came to an end is not just of interest to the histories of colonies, it is crucial to an understanding of the current financial crisis because one can observe how the most powerful financial corporations have reproduced the colonial practices toward and against their own people. The transition from colonial rule to independence was referred to as the beginning of independent nations when, in fact, it was the beginning of the end of nations. It was to the advantage of the colonizing nations to maintain the fiction of nationalism, just as it was to the slaving nations to present themselves as abolitionists of something that never was abolished. Colonization was resisted, more often than not violently. The suppression of that resistance was conducted with extreme individualized and collective violence. How that suppression impacted the colonized (and the colonizers) has been far from being assessed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> There is no space in this essay to deal with the obvious following fact: more than 50 years after the end of colonial rule, the same nation states that controlled colonial empires find themselves at the mercy of the same corporations that pursued colonization by other means. The political decision making centers have shifted from the colonial offices to the corporate boardrooms.

<sup>19</sup> In spite of the works that have come out, for example, on the Mau Mau rebellion, on the repression by the French colonial government in Cameroun in the 1950s.

## 6. ABOLITION OF SLAVERY AND THE MILITARIZATION OF HUMANITARIANISM<sup>20</sup>

There came a time (see Eric Williams, Joseph Inikori) when features of slavery had to be abolished IF the benefits that had been achieved, thanks to slavery, were going to be maintained. From such an angle, the correct term might be “modernization” of slavery because abolition was never followed by something comparable to a process of restitution.

For the beneficiaries of slavery, enslavement was never seen as a crime against humanity. Yet, it is possible to delve into the consciences of those who were being dragged to the slave ships and hear them say, if only to themselves: “how can this crime be allowed? Aren’t we the same?” During and through the process of slaughtering the Native Americans and, subsequently enslaving Africans, the mindset that nothing wrong had been committed, kept growing. This unfettered growth meant that individual and collective mindsets grew accustomed to accepting crimes as acceptable. The growth also affected perception of justice and injustice, and how injustices were being perpetrated without perturbing witnesses of these injustices. Institutions like the Catholic Church, on the surface, defenders of the poor, have benefitted immensely in financial terms from this growth even though it should have been one of the first institutions to raise objections against the slaughtering.

One of the most obvious impacts of capitalism is how it has split humanity apart, first setting a divide between owners and owned, conquerors and vanquished, enslavers and enslaved, colonizers and colonized, and then by letting the divide be seen as a given, as something that had always been so. That splitting apart was a crime. The damage that has been inflicted is still difficult to measure. From that splitting apart, the system has maintained the process, making it worse as it grew while blinding the victims and preventing them from understanding the source of their inability to reclaim their own humanity. The system has grown in such a fashion as to lead every single member of humanity to conclude that “reclaiming one’s own humanity” is impossible unless one does it through the helping hand of “humanitarian organizations”. The so-called UN R2P slogan, the “right to protect” fits like a glove on the hands

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<sup>20</sup> There should not have been surprise at the fact that humanitarian missions have become increasingly militarized; the expansion of capitalism, especially, but not only, outside of Europe, was conducted through the use of military expeditions.

of those who wanted to make sure that the colonized people continue to look at the colonizers as benefactors, protectors against criminals. Humanitarian interventions (backed implicitly and/or explicitly by military force) must be seen as part and parcel of the violation of Humanity's unity, and as a violation of that unity's conscience.

One of the primary objectives of these humanitarian organizations is to prevent an understanding of history based on the reality as experienced by the Wretched of the Earth, and not as interpreted by those who are convinced that capitalism can be improved so as to benefit more and more people. Historically, it should be remembered that colonial rule could not have been imposed itself, its way of thinking/structuring social, political, economic, cultural, religious relations without resorting to the entire spectrum of violence, going from its softest, most seductive to its most lethal. As the currently unfolding crisis has made clear (2007- ...) in order to grow capitalism must constantly improve its predatory performance. The economists (and others) call this competitiveness.

## 7. IMPOSING THE FEAR OF THE END OF CAPITALISM<sup>21</sup>

Various terms have been used to describe how a given history, its reality gets hidden, clothed in such a way by historians as to completely hide what happened, what is going on, so that it (the crime) may go on, unaccounted for and unimpeded. Terms like obfuscation, denial, deception, hypocrisy, lies, do not help very much if it were to be agreed that the challenge is to understand the true and unchanging nature of capitalism, in relation to humanity. Indeed, the use of such terms can be misleading because it may lead to the conclusion that capitalism is actually not bad, if it were not for the misuses and/or abuses.

Behind the play on words, the use and abuse of terms that say one thing

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<sup>21</sup> Through propaganda, financial corporations have managed to present themselves as the protectors of a way of living that (in their view) most people are afraid of losing, and/or losing the opportunity of achieving some day. If one looks at how the cigarette companies have taken control (colonized?) of the habits of large segments of humanity, the following question becomes pertinent: could it be that capitalism has become humanity's nicotine? If so, how would one assess the violence inflicted in the process of accepting an addiction that has had (and continue to have) consequences way beyond the impact of those who smoke and their immediate and extended families? See Robert Proctor's *Golden Holocaust: Origins of the Cigarette Catastrophe and the Case for Abolition*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

at one place and something else in another, lies something that is craved by all of humanity: security. However, in a world that has been molded by crimes that have not been accounted for, security is going to be framed in the manner that has always been used, i.e. to benefit the richest of the rich (ROR) to the detriment of the poorest of the poor (POP). The practice of splitting humanity apart and getting away with impunity has been the subconscious lesson learned by the leaders and managers of a system that has become more and more anonymous while the crimes it commits go unnoticed.

My interest in African history as an academic field started rather late even if, in high school, I did like studying history as written by the winners, the griots of the powerful. Still in high school I remember encountering the phrase “Leopold II sacrificed his fortune to provide a colony to Belgium”. I am quoting from memory. I cannot remember the author of the textbook that we were using, but the phrase is typical of the mindset that permeated Belgian historians writing about their colony, the Belgian Congo. Jean Stengers did write a volume with the title “How much did the Congo Cost Belgium?” Colonization was perceived, with rare exceptions, as an altruistic venture. This perception may explain, partly at least, why the Belgian intellectual establishment balked at Adam Hochschild’s book on King Leopold’s rule. Could JV be critical about Belgian colonization? Part of the answer could be found in the essay he co-authored with Jean Stengers published as a chapter in the Cambridge History of Africa, edited by John Fage and Roland Oliver, “King Leopold’s Congo, 1886-1908”.

It could be argued that one of the many incentives for JV to write this book may have come from defending himself and Stengers for not having seen what Hochschild saw with such clarity, i.e. to look at the Congolese people under Leopold II as if they were his own kith and kin. What is crystal clear from the historiography of the European encounter with Africa, starting with slavery, followed by colonization, apartheid, and now globalization is a determination on the part of most European writers to downplay what colonization did to people whose lives were taken over by a foreign system characterized by predation.

Belgian historians and/or intellectuals are not worse than their counterparts in other countries with an imperial and/or conquering past. For example, the histories of the US as taught in schools and colleges do not differ that

much in their tendencies in seeking to present a history with few warts. Even Howard Zinn's famous *People History of the United States* ends up treading the same line. It is one thing to list the massacres that took place, it is another to produce a history that pointedly raises uncomfortable questions not just about facts, but also about the predatory nature of a system geared to reproduce itself through predation.<sup>22</sup>

## 8. ON COLONIZING AND DECOLONIZING AFRICAN HISTORY

As early as 1897 they [colonial authorities] had organized the first exhibition in Belgium about Congo, decorated the hall of honor with embroidered Kuba textiles, and celebrated Kuba sculpture elsewhere in their exhibition. *By then it had become commonplace among well-informed colonials to believe that the Kuba were somehow heirs to the old civilization of pharaonic Egypt.* (BC, p. 182, italics added)

What is at stake is not just to understand colonization as a phenomenon and/or a process, it is, above all, to understand how unacceptable crimes eventually became acceptable. It is this sequence of impunity, of injustices that can help explain why, to this day, it continues to be difficult, if not impossible, to implement a justice system that treats equally the most powerful and the weakest members of society.<sup>23</sup>

From how JV explains what he understands by colonization, it is obvious that his understanding, in spite of his attempts to present it differently, falls far short of how the colonized lived that experience.<sup>24</sup> One of the difficul-

<sup>22</sup> For a critical look at 1492 and its symbolic significance to historians like Howard Zinn, see Charles C. Mann's *1491: The Americas before Columbus*, London: GRANTA BOOKS, 2006. For the readers who might be skeptical about the evidence brought out in this book, Charles C. Mann wrote a sequel, appropriately titled *1493: Uncovering The New World Columbus Created*. A.A. Knopf, New York. 2011.

<sup>23</sup> How successful the propaganda machine of how to see reality works can be seen, for example, through the adoption of terms like "social justice" as if it should be different from "justice".

<sup>24</sup> Throughout the book JV is at pains to argue that on the one hand, yes atrocities were committed, but colonial rule should not be reduced to that. He does not deny the rebellions against various aspects of colonial rule such as taxation, forced labor, military conscription. In his rebuttal to Adam Hochschild's description of population losses under the Leopoldian regime (especially, but not only in chapter 3) he sums up as follows: "No credible population counts had been conducted during the period, and hence all the figures we have are more or less well-informed guesses. In any case, *such population losses as occurred did not result for the most part directly from the atrocities themselves.*" (BC, p. 59, italics added).



ties with regard to understanding colonization is similar to that of understanding what slavery was, not how it was seen by the enslavers, but how it was actually lived by those who were enslaved.<sup>25</sup> There is a world of difference between both understandings.

Although the practice is not to do so, colonization, as a history, cannot be separated from how it is connected to Atlantic Slavery. Both processes took place on the same continent, with the same objective in mind: extract the most valuable resources.

This is only the beginning of a longer project. The intellectual framework of the essay is provided by Fanon's call to arms in his conclusion to *The Wretched of The Earth*. His call to arms was not violence, for the sake of violence. It was a call for "stopping to pay tribute to Europe". In the name of humanity, he called for moving away from imitation. Fanon's understanding of Africa did not come from a study and/or understanding of African psychiatry. However, the framework does not stop at Fanon's work. As an approach it is more multidimensional than multidisciplinary, especially as framed by academia.

## 9. CONCLUSION: FOR HUMANITY AND ITS HISTORY

African history, as seen by Jan Vansina and most of his students, has been constructed in the manner of "paying tribute to [altruistic--jd] Europe", as if there was no other way to understand African history but through the intellectual and theoretical lenses borrowed from European intellectual history.

For most students of African history, it is easy to single out Hegel's distortions of Africa, Africans and African history. Yet, by the same token, it will be difficult for most scholars familiar with the work of Vansina and Cheikh Anta Diop to see the former as having had a colonizing impact on African history, by preventing the latter's work from being recognized as contributing significantly to decolonizing African history.

From what happened after the end of formal colonial rule to today, it is arguable that colonization as such never ended in DR Congo. It has conti-

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<sup>25</sup> Fiction writers have done better at showing those histories from within. See, for example, Maryse Condé's *Segu*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, *KMT*, Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances*, Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and his movie, *Ceddo*.

nued by other means. To put it in another way: ever since Africa fell into the grip of capitalism, its subjugation never ceased. Slavery was never abolished. A segment of those who had most benefited from slavery began to notice a downward trend in their profits from the slave trade. It was from within this group that emerged the agitation for abolition. However the consequences and profits brought by slavery were never abolished. Indeed, it was crucial for those who had most benefitted from the predation process to carry on.

Being colonized stands out as one of the best illustrations of how historians trained in a Europe that became what it was/is thanks to a process of enslaving and colonizing other peoples. Is it not symptomatic that while discussing and rejecting Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, JV did not add Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* to his list of additional readings?<sup>26</sup> Surely that work was written from the perspective of those who were at the bottom. However, JV might say, his book is about experiences, and not about theorization of what colonization meant.

Yet, is it not through theorization that it is possible to analyze the current global crisis as a direct consequence of those long forgotten processes. The financial ruling cliques that currently decide the fate of the Planet through controlling the production, manufacturing, marketing of mineral and natural resources did not emerge out of the blue. They are the inheritors of systems and mindsets that are rooted in slavery, colonization, Nazism, apartheid, globalization.

These ruling cliques have a conscious and unconscious understanding of how they came to control the world economy. Their subconscious narrative tells them that they never did anything wrong. What may appear to writers like Adam Hochschild, Walter Rodney, Eric Williams, Joseph Inikori, Frantz Fanon, Césaire, as crimes against humanity is (for the ruling cliques) not a crime at all, but altruistic behavior meant to lift the poorest of the poorest out of their misery, barbarism.

Most readers of JV's works, even if they are aware of all of the above writers, are likely NOT to ask why JV preferred not to mention any of these writers. In their understanding colonization (or colonialism) is a thing of the

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<sup>26</sup> A graduate student in African history at a major university in the US was told that Walter Rodney was not a historian, but a politician and that, therefore, his work could not be the object of a paper on African history (personal information).

past. Thus, colonial rule in the Congo is just a phase of the past that one has to understand in the same manner one might understand, say the history of Ancient Egypt, in its relationship to the Africa of today. JV's way of looking at history, any history, helps understand why history, as a field of knowledge, has been relegated to the margins of academia.

And yet, JV and his colleagues do understand the relationship between, say, Western European histories and the ancient histories of Greece and Rome. While that relationship is taken for granted, one can also notice that it has not developed into a way of writing history that makes sure that the connections and the relationships are studied with the same care that archival documents are searched. This rupture from antiquity in Egypt as relevant and pertinent to Roman and Greek antiquity must be understood as deliberate. It is part and parcel of a practice deeply rooted in the development of capitalism, as a system of production but also as a system of ideological reproduction of the necessity to keep humanity split apart.

Humanity is a legacy that belongs to all. There is no such a thing as a hierarchy of humans that go into the making of humanity, now or humanity in the past. An injury to one is an injury to all. However, from the expansion of Western Europe and, more specifically, from the creation of a socio-economic system built on predation and the reproduction of predatory behavior, the study of history has suffered greatly from those predatory processes. Given the current context dominated by an ongoing process of liquidating humanity and its history, is it not time to listen to voices like Ayi Kwei Armah's calling for healing and Remembering the Dis-membered?<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> In *Healers*, a novel, Ayi Kwei Armah responds to Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*. This view is a conclusion I have drawn from reading both novels, side by side. *Remembering the dismembered continent* was Armah last book of essays, until the publication, in 2013, of *Resolutionaries* (fiction). They are both available from Per Ankh Publishers: [www.bbkwan.com](http://www.bbkwan.com)