

Review: Thomas Hendriks, *Rainforest Capitalism: Power and Masculinity in a Congolese Timber Concession*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022). 294 pp.

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It is a cliché to look at the Democratic Republic of Congo's immense abundance of natural resources as a curse. Although the story of Western exploitation of Congolese labor and raw materials is all too well known, *Rainforest Capitalism* joins recent work by other researchers such as James Smith in trying to understand the agency of Congolese as workers.¹ Thomas Hendriks' study explores the actions and words of Africans and Europeans working at a timber camp in rural Equateur province through the lens of a post-critique model of analysis. Eschewing the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (to paraphrase Paul Ricoeur), Hendriks deliberately avoids the genre of the exposé in order to consider the complex negotiations between the firm, Congolese workers, and the surrounding Congolese community. Instead, he concentrates on moments of ectasis—when aging European management and African workers alike experience a loss of control over what is happening.

The study begins with laying out the methodology and ethical dilemmas of conducting ethnography at the camp before turning to the organization of how the camp actually operated. Chapter 2 vividly describes the division of labor of logging in terms of both race and the advantage and risks of particular tasks (such as prospecting, cutting tress down, and management). Chapter 3's genealogy of labor relations in this region adeptly exposes how past experiences furnished workers opportunities to criticize the company, especially with the withdrawal of most European-owned enterprises from the end of colonial through the 1990s. The Congolese state's failure to maintain roads and the disastrous nationalization of many businesses in the 1970s led to the abandonment of older European-owned firms. While these companies rested on sharply-defined racial hierarchies and violence, some Congolese nostalgically recalled this paternalistic order in comparison to the collapse of wage labor over the course of Mobutu Sese Seko's rule.

Chapters 4, 5, 7, and 8 examine how workers and people living around the camp sought to take advantage of the camp's

resources. The surrounding community sucked away resources from the camp by stealing fuel. Workers confronted with their European managers' commitment to maintaining segregated living spaces speculated that individual Europeans had made secret pacts with malevolent spiritual forces. They also led collective action against the company by shutting down roads vital for the operation of the concession. Chapter 7 connects a strike with a particular large tree in the concession which became a symbol of indigenous Mbudza control over land despite both the arrival of the European firm and Congolese from outside the area. Even as male Congolese workers at times joined together, they also felt obliged to compete against one another to perform a dominant form of masculinity that celebrated material success, often at the expense of other Africans.

Hendriks also considers the contradictions of the European management's views of their employers and the Congolese around them, particularly in chapters 6 and 9. Managers often asserted their love and hate for Congolese at the same time. Even as they performed masculinities that celebrated male sexual prowess and white superiority, they also lamented their lack of control over everything around them, from duplicitous Congolese workers to their own superiors back in Europe. For anyone who has spent significant time with white expatriates in contemporary Africa in extractive industries, Hendriks' descriptions of the appalling racism and sexism of European personnel will not be particularly novel. Thankfully, the study highlights how Congolese cope and understand the chaos of precarity rather than allow the predictable angst of Europeans to dominate the narrative.

It is laudable to take Congolese traders and workers as actors willing to defend their interests, rather than passive victims. However, what is striking in this account is the lack of clarity regarding basic material interests. We learn what Congolese workers earn, but not much about household expenses. For all of the swirling and contradictory discourses in European managers' love/hate relationship to the Congo, perhaps the banal opportunity to make more money might best explain why they ended up in the rainforest. One can hardly blame Hendriks' post-critique theoretical framework for the lack of information on these issues. The company undoubtedly would have been unwilling to unveil its finances to an anthropologist, while Congolese workers did not

force the author to sign non-disclosure agreements like the company did. This paucity of information, however, leaves obscure much of the daily struggles between labor and capital.

Even with his post-critical orientation, Hendriks also exposes the advantages of timber companies working in rural Equateur province over their workers. Hendrik provides haunting glimpses of rural Congolese desperate to renew opportunities for social and commercial advancement, such as a community maintaining a French company's long-abandoned facilities in the vain hope the firm would return. Congolese laws theoretically imposed obligations on the firm to furnish funds for social and educational programs. Much as anthropologist James Smith shows in his work on mining in contemporary eastern Congo, neoliberal state rhetoric of transparency offered only a soothing veneer for foreign observers instead of seriously forcing the company to change in its daily operations in Equateur province. Hendriks recognizes how European staff knew full well they could not satisfy demands or afford to pay for improvements in the infrastructure entirely neglected by the Congolese government. Even so, he also notes suspicions that official representatives of these communities in negotiations with the firm had been bribed to acquiesce to the company. Despite these points, *Rainforest Capitalism* is a significant and innovative contribution to the literature on labor, foreign investment, and Congolese society.

Notes

¹ James Smith, *The Eyes of the World: Mining the Digital Age in the Eastern DR Congo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

