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Crisis and the Postcolonial State: Human Rights and Contemporary Emergency

Abstract: If the twenty-first century can be defined as the Age of Crisis, ‘crisis’ in the peripheries of the world-system is in many ways a continuation of the state of emergency imposed by colonization, whereby external powers install arbitrary dictatorial rule (Césaire 2000 [1950]; Fanon 1969 [1964]). In this way, countries from across the periphery of the world-system are subjected to a unique form of crisis: one which not only traverses national borders but consolidates the displacement of the state of emergency away from the capitalist core and into distant regions. In the twenty-first century, this imposed state of crisis comes through the instrumentalization of discourses surrounding human rights, enabling neo-imperial humanitarian interventions which fail to ‘solve’ ongoing crises but succeed discursively in reinforcing the kinds of colonial cultural hierarchies identified by postcolonial theorists (Slaughter 2007; Fanon 1969 [1964]). Employing a theoretical framework inspired by the works of Slobodian (2018) and the Warwick Research Collective (2015), I relocate Fanon’s and Césaire’s critical analyses of the colonial state of emergency into the twenty-first century. This provides the basis for an analysis of Bofane’s *Congo Inc.* (2018) as a literary registration of the ‘postcolonial state’ as the site of the externally enforced law of arbitrary rule. Departing from the onslaught of biopolitical explorations of the contemporary state of exception (Agamben 2005), this essay aims to explore the ‘Age of Human Rights’ as a discursive device enabling the neo-imperial situating of the state of emergency within the peripheral zones of the world-system.

Keywords: crisis, human rights, humanitarianism, Congo, colonialism, state of emergency

1 Introduction

“The algorithm Congo Inc.,” states the narrator of In Koli Jean Bofane’s 2018 novel, *Congo Inc.*, “had been created the moment that Africa was being chopped up in Berlin between November 1884 and February 1885. Under Leopold II’s sharecropping, they had hastily developed it so they could supply the whole world with rubber from the equator” (Bofane 2018: 174). Bofane’s novel, aligning with the critiques prevalent in the works of other contemporary Central African

writers such as Alain Mabanckou and Fiston Mwanza Mujilla, is thus premised on an analysis of the patterns of global exploitation prevalent in the modern world-system. In particular, Bofane concentrates on the idea that Congo is part of a wider “algorithm” which was created at the inception of colonialism and which has maintained Congo’s position as a space to be exploited throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods. The newly commodified, *incorporated* Congo is defined by Bofane as a part of a wider formula of accumulation, established “the moment that Africa was being chopped up in Berlin” (Bofane 2018: 174). Taking this historical moment as its starting point, this chapter proposes an analysis of literary representations of colonial and postcolonial interventions in Congo. In doing so, I suggest that, whilst the twenty-first century might be dubbed the “Age of Crisis” (see, for example, Saad-Filho 2021; Vickers 2019), crisis for the peripheries of the modern world-system is in many ways a continuation of that imposed at the onset of colonial intervention. This peripheralized crisis, however, is a very specific form of crisis, one which not only traverses national borders but consolidates the displacement of the state of emergency away from the capitalist core and into distant regions. When referring to the “peripheries” of the world-system, I am of course borrowing from the work of world-systems theorists, particularly Immanuel Wallerstein, and later building on this through the literary-cultural interventions of the Warwick Research Collective (WReC). In particular, in defining the “peripheries,” I utilize Wallerstein’s discussion of “peripheral states” as those in which mostly peripheral economic processes take place, those processes which “are truly competitive [and thus] when exchange occurs, [those] competitive products are in a weak position” (Wallerstein 2004: 28) as compared to those products from the “quasi-monopolized” core (Wallerstein 2004: 28). As a result, “there is a constant flow of surplus-value from the producers of peripheral products to the producers of core-like products. This has been called unequal exchange” (Wallerstein 2004: 28). This process of unequal exchange, I argue, is vital in enabling both the historical and ongoing exploitation of Congo, facilitating its position within the world-system as the *incorporated* Congo.

The Democratic Republic of Congo becomes a central case study for analysis of colonial and postcolonial crisis because “the DRC has been wracked by internal conflict [and subsequent international intervention] since its independence from Belgium in 1960” (Hultman et al. 2019: 148). As critics have pointed out, postcolonial Congo has faced one of the deadliest conflicts since World War II (Sawyer 2018). Since its decolonization, Congo has thus remained almost constantly in a state of humanitarian crisis requiring urgent and long-term resolution. As a result, the region has been subjected to almost continual foreign intervention from the United Nations (UN), beginning with the Opération des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC) (Deibert 2013: 21) in 1960, and has consequently been described by

Claude Kabemba as “the land of humanitarian intervention” (2013). Congo can thus be seen as a region in continual crisis from colonization up to today, with Congolese president Félix Tshisekedi only this year requesting support from the East Africa Community “in tackling the dozens of armed groups that have fought each other and the authorities in the eastern DRC for years” (Walle 2022).

I therefore examine the installation of crisis in the peripheries of the world-system through an exploration of the way in which Bofane’s *Congo Inc.* presents the neo-colonial¹ logic at the heart of much contemporary humanitarian intervention in the region. I then explore how the text reflects the violence and coerciveness inherent to many of these interventions, drawing parallels with the increasing militarization of the UN’s missions in Congo and showing how this serves frequently to reproduce rather than to terminate the conflict and thus the state of crisis in Congo. Finally, I highlight the way in which these interventions are made futile by their economic motivations, showing how Bofane presents crisis itself as a profitable, economic endeavor. To begin, however, I examine the way in which the colonial project ensured that crisis was written into the logic of the world-system from its inception and thus, remains at the basis of the contemporary system.

2 Crisis as a world-systemic project

Both Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, in their analyses of systems of colonialism, originally published in 1950 and 1964, respectively, contend that the colonial state represents the archetypal state of emergency, one of enforced crisis through disruption of sovereign law or, as Bricmont puts it, an “undermining [of] the principle of national sovereignty” (2012: xi). Nazism, for many critics, represents the archetypal state of emergency because of the introduction of the Nuremberg laws which legalized the genocide of millions of Jews under the auspices of the protection of the state and national sovereignty (Agamben 1998: 132). And yet, “before they were its victims,” argues Césaire of Nazism, “they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had only been applied to non-European peoples” (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 36). Césaire thus examines the role of European colonizers’ activities as horrific laboratory experiments for the later Holocaust in Germany. He contends that the arbitrary installation of rule and dis-

¹ I use the hyphenated “neo-colonial” in reference to Kwame Nkrumah’s definition of the term as “attempts to perpetuate colonialism while at the same time talking about freedom” (2004 [1965]: 239).

ruption of sovereign governance which is inherent to colonial intervention can be understood as the archetypal state of emergency. Fanon makes a similar point, suggesting that Nazism represents, “the apparition of ‘European colonies,’ in other words, the institution of a colonial system in the very heart of Europe” (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 33). In a recent theorization of the framework of postcolonial studies in the twenty-first century, the WReC suggest that “it is only in the ‘long’ nineteenth century, and then as the direct result of British and European colonialism, that we can speak both of the *capitalisation* of the world and of the full *worlding* of capital” (original italics) (WReC 2015: 15). Following this conception then, alongside those of Fanon and Césaire, the modern world-system has at its very inception and written into its very logic the installation of crisis in the peripheries.

And yet, as Fanon and Césaire make clear, these impositions on the sovereign rule of law rely on the discursive situating of the recipient region as somehow inferior and thus either exploitable or in need of intervention. Fanon argues, “it is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior through and through” (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 40). He therefore speaks to the linkage between the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of colonialism in terms of “the common wretchedness of different men, the common enslavement of extensive social groups” (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 33), highlighting both of these enforced states of emergency as based first upon an inferiorization – in Fanon’s sense of the term (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 40) – of a particular social group. Césaire builds on this in his suggestion that humanism’s conception of the rights of man “has been – and still is – narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist” (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 37). “What [the European] cannot forgive Hitler for is not *the crime* in itself” states Césaire, “it is the crime against the white man [. . .] which until then has been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the ‘coolies’ of India, and the ‘niggers’ of Africa”² (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 36). In this way, the state of crisis experienced by those regions subjected to colonization becomes one in which a state of emergency is imposed on the basis, or with the justification of, a logic of inferiorization.

This particular form of crisis can clearly be seen in Congo’s own colonial history. After the Belgian King Leopold II made Congo his own personal property in 1885 to access its huge supply of natural resources (Hochschild 2006: 87), the region was subjected to a 44-year rule so violent that it has been described as “the holo-

2 I quote directly from the source here to maintain Césaire’s evident critique and sarcasm, however the terms he uses, both in the original French and English translation, are of course now obsolete and considered offensive.

caust in central Africa,” with “burned villages [. . .] mutilated bodies [and] the depopulation of entire districts” (Hochschild 2006: 225). As Kabemba tells us, “Leopold presented the pre-colonial history of the Congolese as backward and uncivilized, operating without any agreed system and values and freely trading their neighbors as slaves. It is this representation which necessitated a humanitarian intervention” (2013: 142–143). He thus highlights the distinctly humanitarian and yet inferiorizing logic which underscored Leopold’s intervention. Furthermore, Samuel Moyn argues that “the most notorious humanitarian imperialist of the polite age [the nineteenth century] was probably King Leopold of Belgium, who took the gift of the Congo from the great powers, promising to eliminate vile slavery and bring civilization, then turned the country into his private extraction ranch and nest of untold cruelty” (2017: 53). Importantly, Moyn emphasizes not only the inferiorizing logic of this intervention, but the violent exploitation that it enabled. Colonialism can thus be recognized as an exploitative economic endeavor, reliant on a discursive inferiorizing logic. As such, when in the post-WWII period, a series of anticolonial movements led to the decolonization of the majority of Africa including Congo itself in 1960, there was a need, in Slobodian’s terms, to “protect the world economy from a democracy that became global only [through decolonization]” (2018: 4). The global market and natural resource accumulation which previously relied upon the colonial exploitation of regions across the peripheries of the world-system now needed to be protected, for the benefit of core accumulation, by a new form of “world governance” (Slobodian 2018: 5) which would “insulate market actors from democratic pressures” (Slobodian 2018: 4). Therefore, in Slobodian’s analysis, continued interventions into national sovereign law, or some form of continued state of emergency, is written into the logic of the modern world-system itself, initiated through colonialism but then maintained through continual interventions following decolonization.

This chapter therefore looks to explore the way in which the writing of a specific form of crisis into the logic of the modern world-system means that the peripheries of the world-system are subjected to a unique form of crisis: a set of discursive, economic and military relations following decolonization in which “every form of coercion is brought to bear to keep [former colonies] under Western domination” (Bricmont 2006: 36). Bofane registers this unique form of crisis in his novel, *Congo Inc.*, a text which examines contemporary resource conflict in postcolonial Congo from the perspective of a young man, Isookanga, whose understanding of the world around him is framed by his playing a fictional video game entitled “Roaring Trade.” The text moves smoothly between the actions of the game and Isookanga’s own life in Congo, making use of the game’s framing to satirically critique the violence of Congo’s entrapment in local and global resource conflicts, including a searing critique of the role of the UN in this conflict. In my particular focus on the presentation of the crisis in the Democratic Repub-

lic of Congo in Bofane's *Congo Inc.*, I focus on humanitarian interventions as a case study of the way in which human rights discourses can be co-opted to become an inferiorizing logic which enable interventions which are not only violently exploitative, but which enter into a dialectical relationship with crisis itself. These interventions in fact work to reproduce the very crisis they apparently intend to solve. Although Bofane incorporates analysis of a multitude of forms and valences of crisis into his text, he dedicates the novel, "to the UN / to the IMF / to the WTO" (Bofane 2018). Whilst in his foreword to the novel, Dominic Thomas poses that this may be another example of Bofane's irony (Thomas 2018: xvii), I instead argue that Bofane here directly addresses the United Nations, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization with his text, asking his reader to consider specifically the implications of these organizations. I thus follow his lead in focusing specifically on humanitarian interventions, especially from the UN.

3 The neo-colonial urges of contemporary interventions

In order to understand the way in which human rights are instrumentalized through so-called humanitarian interventions to reproduce crisis in the peripheries, it becomes vital to understand how these discourses are used to discursively reinforce neo-colonial hierarchies. Bofane uses satire throughout his text to highlight this, ironically, and obscenely, presenting the Congolese people as lacking any knowledge to deal with the crises of their region, instead entirely reliant on the "savior" provided by foreign humanitarian workers. We hear how "humanitarians in their immaculate vehicles were distributing rations of sanctified cookies throughout the land and attempting to comfort the poor genuflecting souls, muttering dogmas they'd memorized in the humanities departments in the northern hemisphere" (Bofane 2018: 115). The idea of "poor genuflecting souls" reminds us of Césaire's analysis of "millions of men whom they [colonizers] have knowingly instilled with fear and a complex of inferiority, whom they have infused with despair and trained to tremble, to kneel and behave like flunkies" (2000 [1950]: 43). Once again, then, Bofane makes use of satire to highlight the neo-colonial inferiority discourse at the heart of the intervention, a discourse which relies on the notion of the periphery as defined by crisis and the core as savior or repairer of that crisis. Furthermore, a semantic field of religious language surrounds the humanitarian workers, with the ideas of "sanctified cookies," "poor genuflecting souls" and "dogmas" creating a relationship between the workers and the Congolese people of a form of Godly saviors

for the masses. More specifically, the “dogmas” these workers share are “memorized in the humanities departments in the northern hemisphere” (Bofane 2018: 115), ironically aligning the “northern hemisphere” to an idea of godliness or extreme superiority, whilst simultaneously emphasizing the inapplicability of this knowledge given its vast distance from the object of its study. Humanitarianism holds a particular discursive power to reinforce ideas of inferiority and saviorism through the specific power which human rights discourses hold. Philip Alston suggests that “the characterisation of a specific goal as a human right elevates it above the rank and file of competing societal goals, gives it a degree of immunity from challenge and generally endows it with an aura of timelessness, absoluteness and universal validity” (1988: 3). In this sense, part of the discursive victory of the so-called “Age of Human Rights” – namely the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century – is that humanitarian intervention (the act of enforcing human rights within the borders of a sovereign state, in its proper definition) itself holds the status of a kind of ultimate savior project. Therefore, as Slaughter contends, in the “Age of Human Rights,” “the banalization of human rights means that violations are often committed in the Orwellian name of human rights themselves” (Slaughter 2007: 2). Like the discourse of human rights itself, the humanitarian mission holds a “degree of immunity” which is registered through Bofane’s presentation of the workers as almost godly. Their transportation “in their immaculate vehicles” (Bofane 2018: 115) reflects this sense of “immunity” (Alston 1988: 3), as the vehicle represents a physical barrier to those outside, one which remains unharmed and unchallenged as it is described as “immaculate.”

However, Bofane pushes his presentation of humanitarianism as encoded with neo-colonial discourses further. Take this description from the text, of a restaurant situated in the Gombe district of DRC, an area which, importantly, houses much of the Congolese elite as well as Europeans living in DRC (Kasongo and Perazzone 2021) and state headquarters of international organizations such as the World Bank:

The many customers under the large thatched roof consisted of Congolese and Westerners, most of whom were experts in culture, humanitarianism, or conflict resolution – subject matter that the autochthones didn’t seem to practice as they should. Consequently, the international community had mobilized and dispatched entire legions of experts to compensate for these serious omissions (Bofane 2018: 114).

The term “experts” is used ironically, reflecting the designation of those with no lived experience of a situation as “experts” and the consequent imposition of that knowledge, valued above the knowledge of local people with lived experience. Furthermore, Bofane’s emphasis on those who are “experts in culture” harkens to Fanon’s suggestion that, “there is first affirmed the existence of human groups

having no culture” (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 31), an affirmation on which colonial intervention relies. In this sense, humanitarian intervention and conflict resolution are aligned to and seemingly brought about by the same “experts” as is “culture,” those who enforce the “adoption of the new cultural models” (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 38). In Bofane’s text, the narrator speaks scathingly of this idea of spreading “culture,” discussing how, “as for those in charge of conflict resolution, rather than silencing guns, they struggled to identify the acronyms represented in the east of the country – RCD, CDNP, FDLR, FNL etc. – their observers’ eyes focusing on a line that an inescapable United Nations resolution had drawn” (Bofane 2018: 115). In this passage, Bofane directly undermines any sense of expertise held by peacekeepers, as their inability to remember the names of key political groups engaged in the conflict in Congo highlights the futility of their efforts, and an utter misunderstanding of the very “crisis” they intend to “solve.” By phrasing the sentence in this way, Bofane sets up a direct contrast between the failure of peacekeepers to “[silence] guns” and their focus instead on futile attempts to gain basic knowledge about the conflict. In doing so, he presents a violence associated with this lack of knowledge; the idea that the ineptness of these efforts directly corresponds to the continuation of conflict and violence. Bofane thus seems to critique not humanitarianism itself, but rather the underlying neo-colonial logic which seems to infect humanitarian efforts to the point that they become violently inept.

4 Intervention or compulsion?

Bofane’s presentation of the neo-colonial logic at the heart of these interventions thus allows us to explore not only the inferiorizing rationale present in these interventions, but also the violence that exists as a consequence of this. Pushing further his analysis of this inherent violence, Bofane suggests that interventions frequently serve directly to reproduce crisis itself. Césaire argues that there is a “boomerang effect” (2000 [1950]: 41) inherent to colonial exploit in his suggestion that,

colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other men as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal (original italics) (2000 [1950]: 41).

Césaire’s argument rests on the idea that interventions and activities which rely on a logic of inferiorization, “seeing the other men as *an animal*” (original italics),

create within the individual conducting the action itself a sense of violent *animalism*. What Césaire calls *animalistic*, we can understand as somehow violent and exploitative since Césaire later speaks of “relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production” (2000 [1950]: 42). Bofane responds precisely to this idea of the animalistic nature of colonial exploit through various rape scenes in the text, many of which make use of obscene and crude imagery. A key example is the image of a MONUSCO worker having sex with a young girl repeatedly described as an “adolescent” (Bofane 2018: 60) and a “child whore” (Bofane 2018: 60), immediately setting up an uncomfortable power relation between the pair. We are given limited description of the man himself, only of his “stiff sex organ” (Bofane 2018: 60), “pulsing penis” (Bofane 2018: 60) and later how he is “breathing heavily” (Bofane 2018: 60). The sense of abstraction in the description seems to dehumanize the man, defining him only by his sexual organs. Given the repeated emphasis on the girl’s age and the power dynamic between them, we are arguably supposed to read this interaction as another extremely crude form of enforced intervention (or intrusion), drawing uncomfortable parallels with the broader interventions which the rest of the text discusses.

The text also highlights the way in which this animalistic violence becomes inherent to military forms of peacekeeping intervention. Humanitarianism in Congo since the region’s independence has not only relied on a colonial logic but has also become increasingly militarized and thus increasingly embodied by the violence which Césaire suggests grows from these forms of interventions. After its first post-independence mission into Congo between 1960 and 1964, the UN established the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) in 1999, in an apparent attempt to bring about a ceasefire in the region (“UN Organization Mission” 2000). What was initially mandated for less than 2 months (“UN Organization Mission” 2000) achieved little in terms of ceasefire in 10 years (Hultman et al 2019: 158), and in July 2010, the UN established the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO). This mission “ha[d] been authorized to use all necessary means to carry out its mandate” (“MONUSCO Fact Sheet” n.d.), an authorization which, in 2013, was extended to “[enable] ‘Offensive’ Combat Force” through the formation of the Intervention Brigade (“‘Intervention Brigade’ Authorized” 2013), shifting to a focus on “enforcing peace rather than keeping it” (“‘Intervention Brigade’ Authorized” 2013). This gradual militarization of the mission is vital to an understanding of the dialectical relationship between contemporary human rights and crisis because this militarization challenges the UN’s own principles of intervention: impartiality, and non-use of force except in self-defense and defense

of the mandate (“Principles”). This, combined with the history of anti-UN protests in the country which reflect a “crisis of consent” (Dayal 2022) – with the irony in language here not lost on our discussions in this chapter – in these operations, reflects the effective abandonment of these principles (Khalil 2018; Russo 2021), and thus, the apparently increasingly coercive nature of this “humanitarian” intervention.

Bofane highlights the abandonment of these key principles by the UN mandates in his text, emphasizing particularly the lack of impartiality and consequent lack of generalized consent from all parties. Instead, Bofane presents the UN as a coercive force, complicit in racialized violence. From the safety of “the thirty-second floor of the United Nations building in New York” (Bofane 2018: 135), a UN official states, “to make peace, it was often necessary to know how to wage war” (Bofane 2018: 137). The logic then stands that violence is necessary to enable a better outcome later, a logic which Michael Ignatieff controversially discussed in terms of, “the lesser evil” (2005). Bofane goes further, however, with his satirical account of this logic highlighting its contribution to a cycle of violence in the region and to the reproduction of crisis on a global scale. The text is premised on the idea of a virtual game played by the protagonist, Isookanga, called *Roaring Trade* (Bofane 2018: 6). To win the game, players must try to build up the most resources and, as Isookanga tells us, “to reach its objectives, the game advocated war and all its corollaries: intensive bombing, ethnic cleansing, population displacement, slavery” (Bofane 2018: 7). Throughout the text, the narrative moves between the game and the (semi-fictional) reality of Congo so smoothly that it becomes confusing to try to tear the two apart. In this sense, the game becomes a mode through which Bofane comments upon the economic, political and military situation of Congo itself. The merging of the irrealist and realist features of the game and the central narrative, respectively, reflect, as the WReC suggest, a registration of “the temporal and spatial dislocations and the abrupt juxtapositions of different modes of life engendered by imperial conquest, of the violent reorganization of social relations engendered by cyclical crisis” (WReC 2015: 72), thus, reflecting the specifically (semi-)peripheral experience of this particular form of colonial and postcolonial world-systemic crisis. The game’s “[advocation of] war and all its corollaries: intensive bombing, ethnic cleansing, population displacement, slavery” (Bofane 2018: 7) thus reflects the use of all of these as part of the conflict within Congo. The idea that these are “advocated” reflects in a horrifically casualized way the justification of such violence.

As part of the game, states Isookanga “one could acquire arms as well as foreign allies [and] a ‘first aid kit’ that included peace treaties to lull the UN – because there, too, as in real life, one couldn’t really run a war without being sheltered by resolutions from the international organization” (Bofane 2018: 7).

Once again through the guise of the game, but also making a specific comparison to “real life”, Bofane here highlights the way in which UN interventions become contributors to the violence in the region. “Peace treaties to lull the UN” are listed as commodities to be bought alongside “arms as well as foreign allies” (Bofane 2018: 7), immediately militarizing these treaties and reminding us of a sense of their inherent violence. And yet, whilst seemingly presenting the UN’s role as passive, emphasizing the ability to “lull the UN,” Isookanga states, “one couldn’t really run a war without being sheltered by resolutions from the international organization” (Bofane 2018: 7). In this sense, the UN is presented not only as playing a vital role within the conflict (as opposed to taking an impartial position, as per its principles [“Principles”]), but in fact as vital to the initiation and maintenance of conflict itself, not simply a catalyst but rather a basic ingredient of war.

5 Investing in crisis

In fact, as Bofane goes on to show, the violence of humanitarian intervention is underwritten and driven by a profit motive, one which returns us directly to our proposal of reading crisis in the DRC through the lens of the specifically economic and profit-driven modern world-system. For this reason, humanitarian intervention becomes not an attempt at ending crisis but a financial exchange. Of colonial intervention, Césaire argues,

they pride themselves on abuses eliminated. I too talk about abuses, but what I say is that on the old ones – very real – they have superimposed others – very detestable. They talk to me about local tyrants brought to reason; but I note that in general the old tyrants get on very well with the new ones, and that there has been established between them, to the detriment of the people, a circuit of mutual services and complicity (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43).

Césaire’s description seems to ring true for the type of intervention which Bofane presents in post-independence Congo, as well as during colonial Congo. Once again, there is a return to the colonial logic underlying intervention, that of saviorism in the way in which “they pride themselves on abuses eliminated” and yet, whilst these abuses are “very real” (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43) – there is no denying the conflict and violence present in post-independence Congo – interventions simply replace old violence with new. The idea of “a circuit of mutual services and complicity” (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43) is particularly striking given Bofane’s presentation of intervention in the text. As we know from Fanon, “war is a gigantic business” (1969 [1964]: 33), and Bofane presents the particular way in which this logic of profit-making impedes any progress towards ending conflict in Congo. In the text’s quasi fictional and theoretical style, we hear, “you couldn’t have an army

that functioned with troops coming from so many different places under various commands. [. . .] The result was here: catastrophe for a long time to come” (Bofane 2018: 136). In these lines, Bofane reflects much of the critical literature on the ongoing conflict in Congo which highlights the inherent issues with the international interventions in the region. Instead of a singular, united mission to create peace and safety, the mission was and continues to be thwarted by competition between national interests, mostly stemming from interests in the region’s rich mineral reserves (Kabemba 2013: 144). As Kabemba has stated, “humanitarianism [in Congo] has always been the mask for economic intervention” (2013: 140). Bofane goes further than establishing the futility of humanitarian intervention in the region as a result of its economic motives. He also emphasizes specifically the role of intervention forces as active agents in “a circuit of mutual services” (Césaire 2000 [1950]: 43). We hear how, “in exchange for gold ore or diamonds, the Blue Berets delivered armaments, ammunition, and a little information” (Bofane 2018: 119), reflecting the contemporary moment in which, “for all the talk of human rights, the imperative for most NGOs that want to remain operational is to cooperate with murderers and torturers” (Rieff 2002: 327). UN forces are presented as engaging not in peacekeeping and conflict resolution but in financial exchange, even providing “armaments, ammunition and a little information” (Bofane 2018: 119), apparent drivers of conflict.

Therefore, through the use of humanitarianism as an aspect of analysis, Bofane highlights a broader system of crisis as a mode of profit extraction and production. We hear how a UN representative, “did some wicked lobbying and has now procured a non-permanent member seat at the United Nations Security Council. He can do anything there. He can acquire depleted uranium arms at market prices, order satellite photos, build himself a steel dome if he feels like it” (2018: 113). The UN becomes an organization built not for the purposes of conflict resolution, but rather a set of individuals using their influence and power to benefit their own private accumulation of resources. The UN, an organization premised on “finding shared solutions” to “common problems” (“About Us” n.d.) is presented instead as a place for individuals to benefit from precisely those problems. In this sense, global crisis governance and resolution becomes a method of profit accumulation, or economic governance. Elsewhere in the text, we hear that, “true power was found in wealth, obtained thanks to infallible pragmatism and firepower that needed to be kept going. Only with these key elements was it possible to conquer vast territories overflowing with minerals” (Bofane 2018: 47). In Bofane’s classic half-satirical, half-non-fictional way, he aligns arbitrary governmentality – power through almost dictatorial control over a region – with the accumulation of wealth through resources.

“This is business,” we hear later, in a discussion relating to one of the many armed groups operating throughout the text; “when they sign peace accords everything is liquidated, they file bankruptcy like any other company, then they recreate the armed group but with a different acronym; that’s how an economic system functions when it wants to forge ahead” (Bofane 2018: 118). There is the same tone of an unstoppable sense of forward movement in the need to “forge ahead,” the idea that this economic system cannot possibly pause and instead must keep functioning, despite the human cost. Furthermore, Bofane seems to complete his merging of military and economic systems here, as armed groups literally function “like any other company” (Bofane 2018: 118), the “other,” assigning these groups the status of “company” themselves, going further than only making the broad comparison. In doing so, Bofane aligns the continual reproduction of crisis to the cycles of capitalism itself. As Wallerstein has discussed, these cycles work in a continual process in which the system repeatedly reproduces itself under new guises (2004: 30–31), “recreate[d]” with the same function but “a different acronym” (Bofane 2018: 118), in Bofane’s metaphorical comparison. Fanon argues that “the nations that undertake a colonial war have no concern for the confrontation of cultures. War is a gigantic business and every approach must be governed by this datum. The enslavement [. . .] of the native population is the prime necessity” (Fanon 1969 [1964]: 33). Arguably, this is precisely the argument that Bofane makes through his text. Bofane’s ultimate project is to link the violence of contemporary Congo to that which begins with the inception of Congo as a colony. Through his satirical account of the inferiorizing logic of much of the humanitarian intervention in the region, Bofane shows how this intervention is frequently encoded with a distinctly colonial logic, meaning that it is not only violent and exploitative, but that its central basis lies in a motive not for peacekeeping but for profit. It is this hunt for profit which, both in the text and, as Kabemba reminds us (2013: 140), in contemporary Congo, result in the reproduction of crisis, not its termination.

6 Conclusion

On 26 July 2022, 15 people died and 50 were wounded in protests demanding United Nations (UN) peacekeepers leave the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Dayal 2022). Whilst these are not the first anti-UN protests in the region, they bring to light a worrying and recurrent pattern in relation to UN interventions in Congo: “the UN mission in the DRC, MONUSCO, has the government’s weak consent to operate and wield force, but it has failed to build legitimacy and

consent among the ordinary people who are most affected by the conflict” (Dayal 2022). Prompted by the recent protests, Anjali Dayal argues that UN member states must “authorize [humanitarian] peace operations that build consent and support for peace and for their presence and goals at multiple levels – including both the state and its people” (Dayal 2022). A postcolonial analysis of contemporary so-called “humanitarian” interventions highlights the colonial logic at the heart of many of these interventions in Congo, and thus begins to explain their seemingly coercive nature. Arguably, then, until we engage with the colonial conception of foreign intervention and the form of crisis it brings, we fail to truly understand crisis in the peripheries of the contemporary world. Continual intervention, in its colonial form, breeds only further crisis and further intervention. And yet, in his foreword to *Congo Inc.*, Thomas argues that “In Koli Jean Bofane’s novel strives to delineate the contours of a universe in which fiction can address the indignation and gradually pave the way for moral imagination” (Thomas 2018: xvii). If the problem with existing potentially well-intentioned humanitarian interventions lies with an inherent misunderstanding of the crisis itself, arguably we are facing a further crisis: a crisis in the ability to think of crisis in ways other than what we already know, and thus to think of “solving” those crises in any alternative, sustainable way. As Thomas suggests, literature provides a route to reimagining crisis by understanding the very logic which upholds it. In tapping into this power of reimagination, we can explore modes of interventions that do not enforce and reproduce pre-existing structures of the world-system but begin to move beyond them.



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