



FELIX LÖSING

A »Crisis of Whiteness« in the »Heart of Darkness«. Racism and the Congo Reform Movement (Cultures of Society, Vol. 45)

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For the past few decades, the historical profession has increasingly applied race (and therefore racism) as a mode of analysis of historical eras and phenomena. With this book, Felix Lösing undertakes to examine the racism of a major humanitarian movement, the movement to reform the Congo Free State of Leopold II, King of the Belgians, who was its founder, despot, and exploiter. While some scholars, such as the present writer, have acknowledged the racist attitudes that appear in the discourse of even the most well-intentioned reformers, others have not addressed the subject at all.¹ Lösing asks us to think about racism and racial ideas as pervasive in the reform movement as they were in the movement's opponents. In this analysis, racism and related ideas are the most important forces among the motives of the reformers, thus pervading their methods and ultimately compromising their effectiveness. As Lösing argues, »a critique of its [the reform movement's] imperialist and racist ideology seems desperately needed« (29), and his book demonstrates the truth of this argument. Lösing's prose sometimes suggests that everything was motivated by and expressed through racism, with all other considerations playing secondary roles, but he decisively shows how racial attitudes played a significant role in motives, methods, and outcomes than previous authors have appreciated, including the present reviewer.

The racism of the reform movement, Lösing shows, is essentially fighting fire with fire: a racist counterpoint and complement to racist ideas, structures, and actions in the wider culture and imperial projects of Europe and the United States. Although his analysis sometimes treats racism to a simple yardstick by which all participants can be measured and found wanting, he is aware of the concept's many meanings and applications, as well as to the varieties of racial thought that co-existed and competed in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. These ideas did not simply exist in opposition to each other; they were entangled both in the public sphere and in the minds of individuals in ways that can be perplexing to a modern observer; the most dramatic

¹ Dean Pavlakis, *British Humanitarianism and the Congo Reform Movement, 1896–1913*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 128; Kevin C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 21-60.

example of this is Edmund D. Morel, the leader of the humanitarian reformers, who subsequently went on to participate in the »Black Horror on the Rhine« campaign – a racist diatribe against the presence of African soldiers in the French forces occupying the Rhineland. (24-29) Many kinds of racism, reflecting essentializing narratives about whites as well as blacks percolated among European leaders and societies.

Lösing weaves many threads into his analysis, including concepts drawn from the work of other scholars. A key element is Neil Macmaster's exploration of »humanitarian racism« (36), which accepts common humanity of all people but posits that backwards, immature (38), or degenerate people need to be lifted up by the white race – whether through missionary work, colonization, or (per Morel) trade.² Another strand is how white societies used racism (38-41) to situate their own place in the racial order. Their racial status was a source of cohesion and pride, while simultaneously generating a field of anxiety that Lösing calls the »crisis of whiteness«: degeneration, military defeats, or demographic shifts threatened to end white superiority. Nascent expressions of racial solidarity similarly threatened the racial construction of whiteness. Similarly, exposure of oppression and atrocities in colonial rule corroded the comforting contrast between the civilized white imperial regime and the savagery of colonized people. In Lösing's insightful reading, the humanitarian movement redeemed the virtue and superiority of the white race by rescuing the African from the worst forms of oppression.

A few examples will have to suffice to convey the depth and richness of the many arguments in the book, as well as of the wide range of secondary and primary sources consulted.

Lösing's brilliant analysis of Henry Morton Stanley's widely read depiction of Africans in general and the people of the Congo in particular (128-148) elaborates on the widely acknowledged racism of these depictions. Lösing then makes a persuasive and innovative argument – building on the work of scholars such as Kevin Dunn – that what we might perceive as »anti-racist« or (more realistically) *less* racist rhetoric from the Congo reformers served to instead construct a new set of racial stereotypes that in turn could be used to generalize, essentialize, and discriminate. While apparently more benign, these stereotypes, designed to inspire white saviors, could also serve as a refreshed ideology of imperial rule, perhaps less murderous than that of the Free State, but nonetheless geared toward subjugation and exploitation. In this way, the new images might move Europeans to pity and outrage, but not empathy.

But Lösing does not confine his gaze to representations of Africans. He also examines how Congophobe literature, especially but not only Joseph Conrad's and Mark Twain's contributions, dramatically othered and even Orientalized Leopold's regime, thus expelling the Congo exploiters from the ranks of the civilized world. By discursively and accurately identifying the Free State regime with all the sins of European colonial powers and then ejecting it from their community like a scapegoat of old, colonialism and therefore European civilization was redeemed in its own eyes, despite the presence of exploitative, oppressive, and brutal practices in other colonies.

Occasionally, Lösing draws a sweeping conclusion from limited or particularist evidence. For instance, he makes the argument that the reformers believed that the Congo atrocities were fundamentally the fault of the African (180), contradicting his insightful analysis of the attack on Leopold's government. This thinner analysis cites Conrad and Arthur Conan Doyle as if their arguments represented the bulk of the reformers, but this opposes the trend of most reformers' writing, including that of Morel, Harris, Casement, and many others, which puts the blame on the Europeans, particularly the inventors of the Congo system, most of whom, including Leopold himself, never set foot in the Congo. Similarly, he insists »the Congo reformers did not fundamentally oppose the idea that a colonial administration had to rely on forced labour«, (153) relying on a statement from the diary of Edward Glave, who had participated in the founding of the Congo Free State by working for Stanley, for Leopold's International Association of the Congo, and for Leopold's ally, Henry Sanford. Glave was not a Congo reformer; he was an imperial agent who, shortly before his death, noted in his diary that he was disturbed by the dystopia that had emerged from his work. The reformers held many ideas about forced labor, but it is safe to say

² Neil MacMaster, *Racism in Europe, 1870-2000* (Houndstooth, Palgrave, 2001).

that Morel, John Holt, and John Harris disapproved of forced labor; indeed, Harris became one of the instigators of the Forced Labor Convention of 1930.

The most sweeping conclusion of all, asserted without argument or evidence, is made on page 29: the Congo Reform Association »promoted and possibly prolonged the violent subjugation of Congolese«. This appears to be based on the common feeling among most reformers that what was wanted was a better colonial regime, not the end of colonialism. In this way, the reformers accepted the idea of continued colonial rule. But the counterfactual notion that colonial rule would have been briefer without the reform movement is not substantiated in this book.

The book has some factual errors, which is not surprising given its scope and the extensive use of factual evidence, some of which could have been avoided by consulting this reviewer's history of the reform movement: Harry Johnston was never a member of the executive for the Congo Reform Association, Jane Cobden Unwin was not the president of the Women's Auxiliary, and Morel did not force John Harris to resign from the Association in 1909, though he might have liked to. John and Alice Harris remained until they resigned in March 1910 to take leadership positions at the merged Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society. The Congo Free State was never even close to the world's leading supplier of rubber (307, 310); Brazil held that position by a wide margin until the rubber plantations of the Far East became productive in the 1910s.

Notwithstanding these missteps, the book is quite valuable in providing a new perspective and new insights on the Congo reform movement. The bonus for scholars more broadly is the model he provides for examining other movements and geopolitical events in the decades before and after the First World War. Lösing may be trained as a sociologist, but with this work he makes his mark as a historian.

Zitierempfehlung

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