

FINAL PAPER

2/ Three Men, Three Exposures of Leopold's Congo

Tintin in the Congo, a comic written and illustrated in 1930 by Belgian cartoonist Hergé and taking place in King Leopold's Congo, exemplifies racism's ambiguity and relationship to imperialism. Despite its commercial success and widespread popularity, it was only later in the 1950's, four decades after King Leopold's brutal regime ended in Congo, that the cartoon was first criticized for its naïve racism. Its late shift of popularity and approbation reflects a mainstream positioning on European colonialism. Congo tribes—or 'savages'—were depicted as "good at heart but backwards and lazy, in need of European mastery" (McCarthy; 2006). No matter how popular the cartoon has been for children and adults, its core pro-colonialist statement and its views on the 'good savage' reveal how racism may affect people on different scales and, subsequently, people's experience of colonialism. Through the study of three different experiences of King Leopold's Congo, I will argue that there are ultimately two distinct forms of racism. Each is intimately intertwined with the nature of colonization and its connection to war. George Washington Williams, Edmund Morel, and Joseph Conrad are three men that arrived at the Congo around the same time to venture in Leopold's kingdom. Their different written responses to what they witnessed there, along with their different perceptions of the overall situation, vary and may help us understand the fundamental difference between what I will call active and passive racism—or racism, and ethnocentrism. Even though both forms of racism contribute to the dynamics of colonization, each influences specific aspects of imperialism that I will further clarify, and calls for different responses.

To start with, two main forms of racism must be dissociated in order to understand their relation to war-like imperialism and to the different perceptions of colonialism: a passive racism originating from deep-rooted and subconscious socio-cultural principles; and an active racism motivated by the research of profit, based upon racial evaluation.

Throughout his research, former French anthropologist Claude Levy Strauss stressed out the impact of a mental process called ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism, or what I call passive racism, is based on an inherent human behavior that leads people to judge, despise and underestimate other cultures when confronted to them. The judgment is made upon one's own cultural values, customs and behaviors as opposed to those of the other culture. Ethnocentric individuals' culture is perceived as the one true model of civilization on which other societies should take example. Whether ethnocentrism is a matter of cultural difference, it is also closely intertwined with the notion of race, insofar as physical differences tend to enhance the phenomenon. As today's world is characterized by melting pots, exchanges in a globalized economy and where transportation has progressed in such ways that we see the disappearance of country borders, the world in the early 19th and 20th century was, on the contrary, still very divided by racial and cultural enclaves. Because of the lack of inter-cultural interaction, the majority of people were thereby subject to ethnocentrism. Claude Levy Strauss thus emphasized the importance for anthropologists –and for any individual really – to rise above the innate discernment by immersing themselves in a different culture.

Joseph Conrad in this sense hasn't succeeded in overcoming his ethnocentrism when traveling in the Congo. His most renowned fictional novel *Heart of Darkness* indeed depicts Charles Marlow's traumatic trip in Congo's upcountry. The novel's outlook clearly mirrors Conrad's vision of British imperialism, the Congo, and its inhabitants. My claim is that rather than being racist, Conrad is in fact victim of his own ignorance and ethnocentrism. Marlow's first main misconception is his stereotypical idea of Africa as a simple and unsophisticated

continent: even before he sets foot in the country, he saw Congo as “one of the dark places of the earth”, where a “casual spree on shore suffices to unfold for him the secret of a whole continent”¹. His first perception of Congolese is rather relevant to his quick judgment. On page 15, he describes them as “nothing earthly [...] nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation”². Not only do his misjudgments formulate wrong stereotypical ideas, but they also dehumanize the natives from the Congo. Their humanity is questioned all throughout the book in the way that they are fundamentally limited to bodies, “phantoms”³, “creatures”⁴, “dusty niggers”⁵, generally incapable of talking. The narrator’s incapacity of understanding their language becomes the main factor of his underestimation. Conrad’s failure to comprehend the mystery that the Congo and its people represent, therefore leads to a simplification of their society. Like most Europeans at the time, Conrad was not actively racist, but rather ignorant – which let ethnocentrism overtake his judgment. In the same manner, Achebe’s conclusion of his celebrated book *Things Fall Apart* perfectly reflects European’s inability to understand and embrace the complexity of other civilizations: “as [the Commissioner] walked back he thought about that book. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate.”⁶ After reading the complex story of a native *Ibo*, diving into intricate characters’ lives and tribe’s customs and values, the white man’s conclusion reduces the whole novel to a distressing, plain anecdote -- as much as Conrad reduces individuals to black bodies.

In addition, whether my claim is that passive racism is what created an adequate context for the extension of colonialism, insofar as “it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings. All colonial empires are in reality founded upon that fact”⁷; I will examine how active racism is what truly exploited the context in order to establish a

war-like imperialism. What I call 'active' racism is the honest and unrestricted undervaluing of a different race that allows for some individuals to exploit and seek profit through beliefs of racial superiority. Imperialism is therefore based upon a misappropriation of a 'humanitarian' context created by passive racism. In this sense, both Edmund Dene Morel and George Washington Williams, known for their battle against the atrocities committed in Leopold's Congo, supported colonialism and contributed to the creation of the context that degenerated into what can be considered a bellicose conquest. Adam Hochschild interpreted E. D. Morel's point of view in his book *King Leopold's Ghost*: "there was nothing inherently wrong with colonialism, he felt, if its administration was fair and just. He believed this to be the case in the British colonies in West Africa"⁸; "he believed with all his heart that Leopold's system of rule constituted a unique form of evil"⁹. In a similar fashion, George Washington Williams specifically attacked King Leopold in his open letter of 1890 for his "government deficiency in the moral military and financial strength" and for its "excessive cruelty"¹⁰; not for the act of colonization. E. D. Morel and Williams thus reveal another scale of ethnocentrism that enabled the ideology of Europe's superiority and duty to educate less civilized countries to spread, and to establish the context exploited by active racist individuals.

Active racism is therefore what especially diverted the colonial context and granted it with war-like characteristics by seeking for power and benefits. Imperialism, rather than motivated by humanitarian goals, was driven by profit. It was not a mission for education, but a conquest. Leopold once answered to a newspaper's denunciation of the atrocities committed in his name: "cut off hands – that's idiotic! I'd cut off all the rest of them, but not the hands. That's the one thing I need in the Congo!" The real motive of racist individuals like King Leopold was indeed the exploitation of natural and human resources, justified by racial inferiority. Similarly conveyed by Hochschild's statement: "young European and American

adventurers hopping to get rich quickly off the ivory boom, filled the Congo River”¹¹; along with Conrad’s: “Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out of that stream”¹². The latter, however, made the difference between conquest and colonialism by differentiating the Roman Empire’s deeds with European’s colonization: “what saves us is efficiency”, “they [the Romans] were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force”, “it was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale”¹³. In reality, what makes the difference of judgment between being a conqueror and a colonist is the nature of the land you are conquering. If an ‘uncivilized’ country is being invaded by the military and political powers of another country, it is justified by the import of civilization, education, and technology; it is then called colonialism. Yet, what if Belgium had conquered another ‘civilized’ country like Great Britain, stole its natural resources like it stole its colonies’, established a new government, and imposed a new form of cruel slavery? Would have it been called colonialism; or war? Colonialism is indeed merely the conquest of another territory and its people; colonialism *is* “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale”.

Active racism genuinely aroused the excessive and violent exploitation of the Congo’s resources and the enslavement of the Congolese. The consequences were no different than those of war. Congo’s governor general called one expedition a “hurricane which passed through the countryside leaving nothing but devastation behind it”¹⁴. The insatiable need for profit as depicted by Hochschild, led to a “rubber terror” characterized by an extremely violent repression specifically documented: “sliced-off hands and penises”; “acts of refined cruelty”¹⁵. Williams describes the Congolese from the ‘Majesty’s government’ point of view in these terms: “they are enemies, not patriots”¹⁶. Likewise, Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of The Earth* -- in which he attempts to understand the mechanisms and dynamics of colonization and decolonization -- argues that “in fact the colonist never ceases to be the

enemy, the antagonist, in plain words public enemy number 1”¹⁷, thus reversing the relationship. It seems that the reciprocal perception of opponent between the colonized and the colonizer uncovers a deeper sense of warfare entailed in the process of colonization.

However, no matter how strongly E. D. Morel and George Washington Williams disapproved of the colonial system established by King Leopold in the Congo, their perception of imperialism as a whole was yet positive. The reasons that urged them to take action by writing expository arguments against Leopold’s regime were the atrocities and the unrighteous model of colonialism that were used. Both of them as a matter of fact highly agreed with Imperialism’s pedagogical purpose; but what they perceived as the contradiction of their ideals, along with the particularly great cruelties committed in the Congo, is indeed what prompted the two men to actively express their resentment. Certainly not the nature of colonialism itself. Morel’s expository report clearly conveys his indignation for what he sees as an imposture: “never before has hypocrisy been so successful. For nearly twenty years has the Sovereign of the Congo State posed before the world as the embodiment of philanthropic motive, high intent, humanitarian zeal, lofty and stimulating righteousness”. He openly denounces the wicked regime: “stripped of its trappings, the policy of King Leopold stands naked before the world, a loathsome thing”¹⁸. In his open letter, Williams analogously reprobates the treacherous and deceptive methods used by Belgian colonists in order to win the trust of Congolese native tribes. He accounts for the white man basic measures: “all the sleight-of-hand tricks [including fake shooting and electrical hand shake] had been carefully rehearsed, and he was ready for his work”; “by such means as these, too silly and disgusting to mention, and a few boxes of gin, whole villages have been signed away”¹⁹. Whereas Morel adds that “it is the old, old story: the story of evil and greed and lust perpetrated upon a weaker people”, his statement reflects the strength of his belief in a beneficial and efficient

colonialism. He has faith in ‘just’ colonial laws, “laws of land-tenure that have been found to repose upon just principles, to be thoroughly well understood, recognized, and adhered to by the people of the land”. Colonization should be based upon “worthy and sympathetic study”¹⁹. Having said that, Morel and Williams were in fact very blind to the plain nature of colonialism. Despite their aversion for King Leopold’s form of colonization, their faith and conviction in imperialism – driven by a shallow ethnocentrism -- prevented them from seeing the wrongness and the inevitable misappropriations of such a system. To borrow Hochschild’s words, “Morel was so enraged by Leopold’s villainy that he ignored his own country’s use of forced labor [...] in its African colonies”²¹. Even though their written expository works efficiently castigated Leopold’s crimes and monstrosities, they still believed in the illusion of a pedagogic colonialism. In a sense, Morel and Williams were reproducing the very same context active racists like Leopold were manipulating; by defending imperialism, they were contributing to the very system they condemned.

Joseph Conrad, on the contrary, certainly chose to express his experiences of Leopold’s Congo through fictional writing because of his greater ethnocentric perception. The man -- who went through the same as Morel and Williams -- was perplexed, but not offended by what he had witnessed. The opening of *Heart of Darkness* – along with the very name of the novel – illustrates his need to tell the story: to release the pressure and free himself from the disorientating journey. On page 3, Charles Marlow breaks the silence that has settled upon the four guests on *The Nellie* as he declares “and this also, has been one of the dark places of the earth”, hence beginning the tale of his unsettling adventure. As the narrator unravels his disturbed vision of The Congo, of a place of ‘darkness’, Conrad simultaneously liberates himself from the burden of silence through fictional writing. Throughout the novel, Marlow indeed expresses the need to talk; to find Kurtz and speak to

him. His obsessive desire for conversing – or expressing his incertitude – can be understood as the consequence of mental issues developed through the life-changing experience: “the changes take place inside, you know”²². Before Marlow embarks for the Congo, the doctor indeed warns him in a certain way: “ever any madness in your family?” he asks, pointing out that it would be “interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot”²³. Whether Marlow’s perceptions really changed throughout the journey or were in this condition prior to the trip; he however, shows a great insensibility to the atrocities he witnesses in Leopold’s Congo – whom he never mentions in his narration at any rate. Marlow --mirroring Conrad’s perception-- is never shocked by acts of violence or by the death of the Congolese. When the “fool nigger” dies next to him on the boat, killed by an arrow, the narrator mentions that his “feet felt so very warm and wet that [he] had to look down”. “His shoes were full; a pool of blood lay very still”. He reckons: “to tell the truth, I was morbidly anxious to change my shoes and socks”. His reaction to that dreadful scene is relevant to his perception of the natives: “‘he is dead’, murmured the fellow, immensely impressed. ‘No doubt about it’, said I”²⁴. As opposed to Morel and Williams, Conrad is not at all impressed or offended by the death and atrocities suffered by black people. Rather than being an active racist, he is merely underemphasizing the humanity of individuals of color because of the gap of civilization he conceives. He is a ‘victim’ of his own ethnocentrism, which explains the choice of a fictional story rather than an expository essay. His very goal is to put into words the great mystery the Congo represents to him, not to attack a violent regime he agrees with.

In conclusion, the fundamental difference between racism and ethnocentrism (or active and passive racism) has a major impact on the relation between imperialism and war, its different perceptions, and various responses. Whereas the European ethnocentric context made the process of colonialism possible, it is the pursuit of profits that allowed the violent

exploitation of 'human resources' to happen. The different scales of ethnocentrism call for different responses from those who experienced violent regimes like the one in the Congo. E. D. Morel and George Washington Williams on the one hand produced expository essays in order to denounce the unfounded and cruel governmental actions, while still believing in Europe's duty to provide less civilized countries with technology and progress. On the other hand, Joseph Conrad never manifested revulsion for the violent aspects of imperialism and colonization: his fictional work was solely motivated by a sense of exotic and perturbing mystery.

¹ page 3, Heart of Darkness, 1899; Dover Publications, INC. New York

^{2, 3, 4, 5} pages 14, 15; Heart of Darkness, 1899; Dover Publications, INC. New York

⁶ pages 208-209; Achebe, Things Fall Apart, Anchor Books, A Division of Random House, INC. New York

⁷ page 1; George Orwell; Marrakech

^{8, 9} pages 210, 213; King Leopold's Ghost, Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston New York

¹⁰ page 2, George Washington Williams' Open Letter to King Leopold on the Congo, 1890

¹¹ pages 196, 224, King Leopold's Ghost, Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston New York

¹² page 2, Heart of Darkness, 1899; Dover Publications, INC. New York

¹³ page 4, Heart of Darkness, 1899; Dover Publications, INC. New York

¹⁴ page 196, King Leopold's Ghost, Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston New York

¹⁵ pages 203-204, King Leopold's Ghost, Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston New York

¹⁶ George Washington Williams, Letter

¹⁷ page 14, The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon 1961, Grove Press, New York

¹⁸ page 161, Morel's Reports

¹⁹ page 1, George Washington Williams' open Letter to King Leopold on the Congo, 1890

²⁰ page, 163, Morel's Reports

²¹ page 210, King Leopold's Ghost, Hochschild, Houghton Mifflin Company; Boston New York

²² page 9, Heart of Darkness, 1899; Dover Publications, INC. New York

²³ page 9, Heart of Darkness, 1899; Dover Publications, INC. New York

²⁴pages 41, 42, Heart of Darkness, 1899; Dover Publications, INC. New York