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Bamanya: Books in the Jungle



Honoré Vinck

Portrait by Ingrid Bouws

Mbandaka is the centre of the world, if you stand in front of a world map and draw a diagonal cross. It is where Henry Morton Stanley founded an 'outpost of progress': Equator Station, the beginning of the history of this small town on the equator. Nowadays Mbandaka is one of the biggest towns in Congo, with an estimated population of 100.000-150.000 inhabitants. Located on the river Congo, it is a poor town, with little or no industry.

Traces of '*l'époque coloniale*' can be found in the town centre. Along wide streets stand beautiful houses, or their remains, where the colonials once lived. Thirty years of decay have not left much intact. Mbandaka is the capital of the province of Equateur. The region is looked upon with some condescendence by the rest of Congo: it is the land of hunters and fishermen.

The mission village Bamanya is located ten kilometres outside of Mbandaka. The sandy road that leads there is paved with gaps and holes, many of them filled with yellowish water.

On the first morning of my stay there, the sound of jubilation wakes me up. Some two hundred children's voices singing make the best alarm ever. Once a week the children of the mission school walk to a village nearby, singing the whole journey. It is six thirty. I take a cold shower and when I get dressed, sweat is running down my face.

Annales Aequatoria

The one hundred and fifty subscribers of *Annales Aequatoria* must be patient a little longer. The aluminum plates for the printers in Kinshasa have been waiting for clearance in the port of Matadi (Congo's main port) for months. It is just one of the many problems you encounter when trying to undertake anything in this country. Setbacks are met with a '*C'est L'Afrique*' and, well yes, it is.

Centre Aequatoria, Centre de Recherches Culturelles Africanistes, publishes the yearbook *Annales Aequatoria*. The Centre Aequatoria is part of the mission post and has a library of over 10.000 books and extensive archives. The books mainly focus on the history of Congo, with an emphasis on local history, and on African languages. The language of the region, Lomongo, occupies a special place. The archives consist in unique materials on the history of the region and the mission post.

The climate has surprisingly slight effect on the condition of the books. The most

dangerous enemies come crawling from outside: termites.

The collection of the Centre Aequatoria library is incomplete. It is no miracle that important books are missing, considering the annual budget for books and magazines is around 1000 euros. Furthermore considering other obstacles - no mailmen in Congo, only 3 hours of electricity a day at the mission, and no modern means of communication - it is a miracle that the library still exists and is maintained.



Library Aequatoria - Bamanya

A library is an oasis of calm and culture. If you sit reading surrounded by thousands of books, it does not matter where in the world you are. You are always at home.

Aequatoria is an oasis to Prof. dr. Motingea Mangulu. He has his own room in the guesthouse, with his books and a computer. Prof Mangulu received his title with a study on Ngiri-languages in Leiden, 1996. He lived there for a year and a half. *'Aequatoria is the only place where I can work. Not only because of the library, but because of the peace and quiet.'* My question whether it is hard to work here, after spending nearly two years in an academic environment of endless possibilities, is met with a melancholic smile. *'That is difficult. It is different here. Here you have to survive.'* I don't ask, but know that the average income of a professor in Congo is little under the price of a crate of beer. *'You don't compare',* says Professor Mangulu. *'I have to work here now with these possibilities. And I am glad to have this place. I can work here. I can have discussions with Father Vinck. And I get intellectual stimulation.'*

Father Honoré Vinck (1941), member of the Congregation of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, is the director of the Centre Aequatoria. Dreamer and activist, Flemish nationalist and citizen of the world, modest and dominant, solitary and a people's person, eloquent and silent, an ascetic with a glass of beer in his hand.

One morning while musing over the small graveyard, I hear behind me: *'I love to dream. A person has to dream. Otherwise you don't make plans. And you have to make plans before being able to accomplish them. When I start doing that, nobody and nothing is going to stop me. That is my nature.'*

After finishing secondary education Honoré Vinck studied theology and philosophy. At the end of the nineteen fifties the church was still traditional and devout. He still holds his classical education in great esteem. In the first two years he was introduced to Aristotelian philosophy, which provided him with the tools to think for himself, and create his own worldview. Above all, his study time in Belgium brought many pleasures. Whether it was science or literature, Vinck devoured everything. He specialized in church history, and especially liturgy. Meanwhile the church started changing in the sixties, and after his studies Vinck moved to Paris for a degree in theology.

May 68

One morning Vinck rides the subway to read mass to the sisters near the Unesco-building. *'Révolution'* is written on a wall in thick letters. It is May '68.

'That has been a crucial experience in my life. My political thinking has been shaped by it, in many ways. How does power relate to the people, to society? How do ideologies relate to society? It is no small thing. There you saw the enormous power of thought, of thinking. The power of pressure groups. The miracle of idealism.'

Everything must end, and the revolution is no exception. Honoré Vinck receives his degree and heads for Congo. He lands in Mbandaka in February 1972. After his arrival in Bamanya he gets three months to learn the local language, Lomongo, taught by Father Gustaaf Hulstaert.



I had already noticed them in Mbandaka: men and women wearing fabrics with Father Hulstaerts picture. *'Nkumu ea Mongo'* (the nobleman of Mongo), *'Bondjea W'elemo'* (knower of everything), is the message. Some lives will not fit into a single paragraph. Father Hulstaert (1900-1990) is the founder of Aequatoria, and started recording Lomongo in the thirties, and became an authority in bantuistics. In 1937 Hulstaert was co-founder of Aequatoria, an influential magazine in the Belgian colonies, which ceased existing in

1963.

Honoré Vinck discovers Hulstaert's library when he is put in charge of the mission post in Bamanya, after working as a traveling father for years. Once acquainted with the books, he finds a new vocation. Vinck dreams and starts making plans, and finds a lot of scepticism on his way – from Hulstaert, but even more from the order. But Vinck is not to be deterred, and in 1982 publishes a Festschrift, the first copy of Aequatoria in its new shape. That year he also tours Europe in search of people to support his plans. Vinck pitches the idea to expand the library and move it, preferably nearer to Mbandaka. But alas, the order nixes the plan. *'My plans met a lot of resistance, nobody believed in them. I searched for money and finally a German order donated 100.000 DM. The money helped built the library and guesthouse.'*

Scriptoria



What keeps Vinck going is his love of books, and passion for his work. *'I see Aequatoria as a church service. There is a strong tradition within the church, represented by the Jesuits and other groups, that allows for marginal thinking. During the Middle Ages the church kept scriptoria in her bigger convents. They are the ones who spread classical culture by preserving it and copying manuscripts. I look at Aequatoria as a scriptorium, in that sense of the word. It is my private vocation to keep this open. Even if not fully functioning.'* The goal of Annales Aequatoria is quite simple: to record, publish and preserve dialects and historic documents, without discussions or grand theories.

The library and the guesthouse are situated in an idyllic spot. The rural tranquillity is only disturbed by the sound of birds, which continues all day. Yesterday morning I noticed Vinck walking over to the rose bushes and watched him cautiously cut a few roses and smell them. Now they stand in a small vase, spreading a soft, sweet smell.

But there is always a flipside. Three years ago the mission post was attacked. There was shooting, and the sisters house was plundered. Vinck spent fearful hours hiding in the woods, together with his secretary. Last year the mission had to be abandoned when Mobutu's reign was coming to an end. The mission was left unguarded for some months. On return everything appeared to be intact,

although there was a lot of damage. The local people had buried everything under ground. Every machine, many papers, everything they thought to be valuable.

I ask him if his surroundings still think of Vincks work as slightly useless, and whether that is a threat to his work. *'It has become clear to our confrères from Congo that the Centre Aequatoria is one of the few good things in this field, in this country. It has become a prestige project. They are the first to defend us.'* But obstacles remain, and of much the same nature as the one Father Hulstaert ran into.

The last evening of my stay we sit at the table, beer in front of us, and I ask Vinck if he is content with his work in Centre Aequatoria. *'Considering the problems we had, yes, definitely. Of course I would want things to be ten times better. My wish would be one million dollars.'* Then what? Vinck smiles, but recites a wish list without hesitation. Books, many books and magazines would be bought. And a computer. *'Then we would go online with our own homepage. I'd double the income of my staff. And I would organise summer schools, at least twice a year, for 14 days. For the mission I would buy a new car, and for myself a new bike.'*

Reveries of a solitary walker, or profession of faith of a Savoyard vicar?

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February 1998

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Epilogue

January 2011

12,5 years have passed since I visited the library in Bamanya. Father dr. Honoré Vinck (MSC) has been living in Flanders for years now, but the library still exists. It is open for business three days a week. The future of Centre Aequatoria is uncertain, but that goes for many things in Congo.

The last issue of Annales Aequatoria has been published in January 2011 and with it Honoré Vinck ends a chapter of his working life.

As a tribute to his work RQ republishes this story about his Centre Aequatoria.

November 2018 ~ Stolperstein Paula Bermann

November 2018. De Stolperstein voor Paula Bermann is gemaakt. Plaatsing in Konken volgt op nog te bepalen tijdstip.



Historiek - Paula Bermann ~ Deze ontspoorde wereld

Peter de Brock ~ 'Elke dag is een

stap dichterbij onze ondergang' - Het Parool

Het Parool – 10 november 2018: *‘Elke dag is een stap dichterbij onze ondergang’*

De Duits-Joodse Paula Bermann, getrouwd met de Joodse zakenman Coenraad van Es uit Amsterdam, houdt tijdens de Duitse bezetting een dagboek bij. De eerste twee bezettingsjaren is ze in Amsterdam, later schrijft ze vanaf een onderduikadres in Jutphaas (nu Nieuwegein). Na verraad wordt ze met echtgenoot Coen en dochter Inge op transport gezet naar Bergen-Belsen. Haar dagboek is nu ontcijferd en alsnog uitgegeven als *Deze ontspoorde wereld*.

‘Is er in Duitsland geen medelijden en erbarmen met het Joodse volk? Verheft zich nooit een stem die ertegen in opstand komt?’ vraagt Paula van Es-Bermann zich in november 1940 af in haar dagboek. Ze woont dan op het adres Valeriusstraat 135-huis in Amsterdam-Zuid, met echtgenoot Coen, zoon Hans (20), die geneeskunde studeert, en dochters Inge (16) en Sonja (13). Daar worstelt ze met haar leven als ‘huissloof’ voor haar man, die sinds de beurscrisis werkloos is, en met het onbegrip van de kinderen, ‘die niet houden van mijn manier van doen, die hun vaak Duits voorkomt, aan mijn accent hebben ze een hekel.’

Lees

verder: <https://nowheretostay.blogspot.com/2018/11/paula-van-es-bermann.html>

Climate Change Is The Product Of How Capitalism “Values” Nature



Professor John Bellamy
Foster ~ Photo: University
of Oregon

Climate change is the greatest existential crisis facing humanity today. Capitalist industrialization has led us to the edge of the precipice, and avoiding the end of civilization as we know it may require the development of a view in direct opposition to the way in which capitalism “values” nature, according to John Bellamy Foster, professor of sociology at the University of Oregon and editor of the socialist magazine *Monthly Review*.

C. J. Polychroniou: We live in a period of massive environmental disturbance, such that it has led to the claim that we are no longer in the Holocene epoch but instead in the midst of the Anthropocene era. Assuming that this claim, popularized in the West by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, is scientifically correct, to what extent can economic growth itself be blamed for the catastrophic effects of human activities on the environment, including influencing the climate by burning fossil fuels, cutting down rainforests and farming livestock?

John Bellamy Foster: It is worth noting that the Anthropocene concept originated in the early USSR. It first appeared in the English language in the translation of *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* in the 1970s. This arose out of discussions of anthropogenic change and the biosphere pioneered in Soviet science, pointing to today’s Earth System perspective and to our current, more developed notion of the Anthropocene.

It now appears to be the consensus in natural science that the Anthropocene epoch in geological history commenced in the early 1950s, marked by a Great

Acceleration of anthropogenic impacts on the Earth System. The 2018 special report of the IPCC released last month emphasizes the shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene as signifying that anthropogenic factors are now the leading sources of change in the Earth System, most notably in the form of climate change. Economic activity at present, as you note, relies heavily on burning fossil fuels, cutting down rainforests, and livestock farming, all of which lead to the emission of greenhouse gases that are accelerating climate change.

Today's planetary ecological crisis is due first and foremost to the increasing scale of the capitalist world economy. The greater the scale of the economy the more it rivals the fundamental biogeochemical cycles of the planet. All of this is connected to the nature and logic of capitalism, understood as a system directed at the accumulation of capital. Capitalism is a grow-or-die system. If accumulation declines, the result is economic crisis. The answer of the system is to boost accumulation. This, however, intensifies global environmental crises as the already visible impact of the economy on the Earth System increases.

To speak of economic growth as a principal problem, and of the need for a steady-state economy as a solution, immediately raises the specter in people's minds of the end of human progress. However, we should be careful not to identify economic growth, as that term is used today, with human advancement as a whole. Economic growth was deified in the 1950s, following the introduction of national income accounting during the Second World War. The system of national or Gross Domestic Product (GDP) accounting is rooted in capitalist notions of value added, profit and accumulation. It accurately reflects the logic of capital accumulation but it is far removed from growth in the wider sense in which people usually think of it.

This can be understood by looking at some of the details GDP measurement. The work of subsistence workers in agriculture (or women working in the household) is not included in GDP since their production is outside the commodity market. If an oil tanker hits an iceberg causing an oil spill, GDP increases, due to all the cleanup costs, insurance payments, and lawyer fees. However, there is no deduction in GDP for the effects of the oil spill on the environment. Social and environmental costs, in this sense, are treated as "externalities," that is to say, they are excluded from national-income accounting. The growth of a forest adds nothing to economic growth. But the cutting down of the same forest (viewed as so many millions of board feet of standing timber) for sale on the market counts

as growth. A war that kills millions drives up economic growth, and leads to faster growth afterwards because of the need to replace capital destroyed. The lives lost in the war, however, count for nothing in economic growth terms.

The problem here is not GDP accounting itself. Rather this way of measuring growth accurately reflects how the capitalist system works. It conceives progress only in terms of the cash nexus (whatever passes through the market), as opposed to what benefits people or the planet. In the advanced capitalist economies by far the greater part of production consists of waste in terms of negative use values, that is, products that are unproductive, superfluous, and destructive, while the most basic human needs are often not met. This is “rational” for today’s monopoly-finance capital, but it is irrational for society as a whole. All of this means we have to move away from economic growth as it is understood in the current system and toward a society of sustainable human development.

Some mainstream environmentalists believe that the problem is that nature is not fully internalized within the system of market value, and that all of nature should therefore be seen as “natural capital.” However, we must remember that *value isn’t everything*: real wealth, life itself, cannot be reduced to the logic of market valuation without undermining the very basis of its existence.

You have been arguing for doing away with the concept of “value” when it comes to nature. Does this mean that capitalism is unavoidably bad for the environment?

As far as its inner logic is concerned, the answer is yes. For capitalism, accumulation of capital is everything, the Earth and its inhabitants nothing. If value is created by the exploitation of labor, this nonetheless requires constant expropriation of a natural environment which is considered a free gift to capital. In its narrow pursuit of profits, the capitalist system points inexorably to creative destruction on a planetary scale. Karl Marx theorized this as the problem of the metabolic rift, in which capitalism robbed the Earth itself as a basis of the accumulation of capital.

At the current carbon-emission rate, the world will break the global carbon budget (i.e., will [reach the trillionth metric ton in cumulative carbon emissions](#)) in seventeen years, threatening out-of-control climate change. Other planetary boundaries are also being crossed: resulting in the sixth extinction, ocean acidification, the disruption of the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, loss of forests,

global freshwater shortages, etc. These urgent problems have to be addressed in the context of the present reality. This requires creation of a massive, irrepressible, global *movement toward socialism* that goes against the logic of the system: igniting a long ecological revolution.

I suppose then that you are not optimistic about technological solutions curbing climate change and dealing with other environmental challenges like air pollution, cleaning up the oceans and so on.

New technology is indispensable in addressing global problems. But we have to have a critical social theory of technology, and not see it as a *deus ex machina*. Today's planetary emergency is partly the result of technologies aimed almost exclusively at promoting profits. Destructive technologies are employed, undermining living beings and the planet as a safe home for humanity. We need a massive shift to solar and wind and other alternatives, but the fossil-fuel economy and the goal of capital accumulation stand in the way. Rational development and application of technology in accordance with scientific and human criteria necessitates a major transformation of our social relations.

The big mistake is to fall for a crude technologism, viewing technology as a magic solution to all problems. This ideology is heavily promoted by the system because it inculcates the idea that the current acquisitive order can continue unchanged in its social relations. We are told that some futuristic technology will enter in to save the day. The fact is that a simple technological fix that would make it possible for capitalist business as usual to continue indefinitely defies both the laws of physics and the results of critical social science, which are set aside in such technological fantasies ...

The consumerist strategy — that is, the idea that we can in effect do good things for the environment and bring about overall social and economic change — is probably hopelessly romantic, at least for those of us who subscribe to the materialist view of history. The question, then, is this: What is needed to ensure that we can go on improving the standard of living without causing harm to the environment?

As a teacher, I have found that one of the hardest things to convey to my students is that “consumer sovereignty” is a myth. Most individuals in our society, absorbing the received ideology, have come to believe that as consumers they

dictate what happens in the economy and the society. Hence, if they were to choose as individuals and in the aggregate to change their consumption habits and only buy Green products, the market would turn Green. All the problems of the environment, they are convinced, are due to consumers themselves.

There are a lot of reasons to reject such views. First, power in the capitalist economy rests on ownership and control of the means of production, not with the consumer. Second, if all the household waste in the United States going into municipal landfills were eliminated this would only take care of about a small portion, [maybe as little as 3 percent](#), of the total solid waste generated in the economy), the rest occurs in the realm of production under the aegis of corporations. Third, John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* pointed to what he called "the dependence effect": What is consumed depends largely on what is produced. Fourth, [over a trillion dollars](#) are spent per year in the US economy on marketing with the object of getting people to buy things they neither need nor want. Fifth, the sales effort has penetrated into the production process to such an extent that there is little distinction nowadays between a product and its brand image. Sixth, the enormous surveillance system in the private sector organized around the Internet is mainly a means of manipulating consumers. All of this suggests that gaining political control over production is essential if the tendency toward environmental devastation (together with the exploitation of labor) is to be surmounted.

Given the disastrous legacy of "actually existing socialism" with regards to the environment, let alone political repression and other human rights violations, how do you envision socialism in the 21st century?

Soviet-type societies were destructive of the environment on a level comparable to the West, and turned into repressive class societies *sui generis* (of their own type). Nonetheless, a vast environmental movement developed in the USSR in the 1970s and '80s, led by scientists, along with the emergence of the largest conservation organization in the world. There were proposals by some Soviet economists, to revise the USSR's planning system in terms of indicators of "gross social wealth," considering ecological factors. All of this went away with the dissolution of the USSR. But it is important to understand that there was a powerful ecosocialist critique developing among leading critical Soviet intellectuals. What we see today as China's notion of "ecological civilization" was first developed by ecosocialist thinkers in the Soviet Union. Meanwhile,

ecosocialism arose separately in the West in the 1980s and '90s, and now has spread across the world.

Ecosocialism thus emerged as a radical movement both in capitalist and “actually existing socialist” societies. Unlike mainstream Green theory, it recognizes that to overcome the greatest historical challenge humanity has ever faced it will be necessary to carry out a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large. More and more people, especially in the global South, are concluding, as a result of their own material experiences, that the degradation of the environment and the exploitation of human beings have a common basis in an alienated system that needs to be transcended. This takes us back to the classical historical-materialist tradition associated with Marx and Engels, which emerged at a time when struggles over the workplace, the urban environment, and the land were seen as inextricably connected. Understood in these terms, ecosocialism, is based on the dual necessity of substantive equality and ecological sustainability. *System Change Not Climate Change!*

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