

Book Review

Ideological movements that inspire the possibility of a radically different future

Pedro Monaville, *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* Cornell University Press: Durham and London, 2022
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Historical research on the Global 1960s has flourished in the last decade. ‘The Routledge Global 1960s and 1970s Book Series’ produced books like *The Global 1960s: Convention, Contest and Counterculture*, and also launched the re-named *Global Sixties Journal* which have provided us with a deeper and more nuanced understanding of this important historical decade in the twentieth century.¹ The focus of much of this new research has shifted towards the Third World, now commonly referred to as the Global South. For much of the Global South, the 1960s marked a period of significant turbulence and transformation. People in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America were guided by new ideological movements that inspired the possibility of a radically different future. A feeling of transnational solidarity buttressed this moment of optimism. Young people across the world, including those in Africa, were often the conceivers and drivers of such change.²

Pedro Monaville’s *Students of the World: Global 1968 and Decolonization in the Congo* fits elegantly in this upsurge of scholarship on the Global 1960s. Monaville skilfully illustrates how, during the Democratic Republic of the Congo’s decolonisation process, young, educated Congolese youth became increasingly progressive and radical in their political outlook. He traces the rise and decline of the young student left from the end of Belgian colonialism in the 1950s until Joseph Mobutu’s increased authoritarian rule at the beginning of the 1970s. This period in Congolese history was defined by significant political turmoil and great youthful energy. While university students formed a small social group in Congolese society, their impact on the country’s trajectory during this turbulent era was noticeable.

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1. ‘The Routledge Global 1960s and 1970s Series’, Accessed on 25 February 2023 at, <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Global-1960s-and-1970s-Series/book-series/GLOBALSIXTIES>; T. Chaplin and J. Pieper Mooney, eds, *The Global 1960s: Convention, Contest and Counterculture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); ‘Global Sixties Journal’, Accessed on 25 February 2023, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsix20>.
2. See for instance: B. Hendrickson, *Decolonizing 1968: Transnational Student Activism in Tunis, Paris and Dakar* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2022).

Monaville creates a compelling historical narrative of how these young men (as few women had access to higher education at the time) tried to make sense of the decolonisation of Congo and how they attempted to influence its trajectory. Their views, aspirations and actions were shaped by local and international forces that opposed colonialism, neo-colonialism, and social and economic injustices. *Students of the World* illustrates that such educated Congolese youths were well-informed about what was happening outside of Congo. They consciously and consistently connected their domestic struggles to those of the wider world, especially in the Global South. From the 1950s onwards, Congolese youths began corresponding with like-minded individuals from other countries, studied abroad, and became widely read and versed in popular leftist ideologies. Mobutu violently subdued this moment of youthful zeal to fight for a new Congolese future when he cracked down on student activism in Congo in the late 1960s. Throughout the book, Monaville uses the life trajectories and experiences of various Congolese educated youths to construct this narrative.

He divides *Students of the World* into four sections that centre around a particular theme. Section one examines how the postal service was central to the further education and intellectual growth of the first generation of educated youth in the 1950s and early 1960s. While initially highly controlled by the Belgian colonial state, young Congolese used the postal service to connect to external intellectual networks and support systems. This included receiving information and exchanging views about leftist ideologies, applying for overseas scholarships and requesting support from international organisations. After Congolese independence on 30 June 1960, there was a shift in the purpose of such correspondence, moving away from 'personal advancement' to 'collective emancipation' (p. 49).

In section two, Monaville explores how the emergence of higher education (especially university education, particularly Lovanium University) created a new type of educated and politicised Congolese youth. By the early 1960s, the views of this small but vocal social class did not always align with those of early missionary-educated évolués like Patrice Lumumba. The unique nature of the university space allowed these young men to form their own ideas about the future of Congo and rally for the decolonisation of the university space. Throughout the first half of the 1960s, the first examples of student protest on campus emerged, which acted as an outlet for Congolese university students to express their discontent with the state of Congolese decolonisation and align their struggle with others across the continent and Global South.

Section three explains how this new generation of university-educated youths became increasingly drawn to leftist politics and how their political views were inspired by and connected to broader leftist ideologies and movements that defined much of the global 1960s. While most of these youths supported Congolese nationalism, many did not favour Lumumba's leadership, and after Mobutu's first

military coup in September 1960, several Congolese university graduates eagerly served in the College of Commissioners-General. The assassination of Patrice Lumumba was, however, a turning point for Congolese student politics. The tragic event galvanised many young Congolese studying in Congo and abroad to adopt a more radical and leftist political position. This radicalisation cumulated in the direct and indirect support of Congo's second independence movement. Such students conceptualised their support of this revolutionary moment as part of a national struggle to rid Congo of its exploitative political elite and as part of a global struggle against Western imperialism and neo-colonialism. Various interpretations of this movement existed among the Congolese students left, and Cold War politics influenced their views and actions.

Finally, in the fourth and last section, Monaville zooms into the relationship between Mobutu and Congo's student left. While Mobutu initially accommodated university students during the first years of his rule and tried to coax them for support, the relationship quickly soured, and student protests on the Lovanium University campus increased from 1967 onwards. Students once again demanded that university education be decolonised and began critiquing Mobutu's regime, especially its continued relations with the United States of America. Such Congolese student activism was linked to the global youth protests in 1968, particularly those in France. Subsequently, Mubutu's government made a concerted effort to target students it deemed radical, crushing this moment of heightened Congolese student activism. As a result, Lovanium university students were forcibly conscripted into the military, and Congolese university education became state-controlled in 1971. This marked the symbolic end of an era of youthful vigour and vocality among Congo's new university-educated youth.

Overall, *Students of the World* is an impressive piece of scholarship. Any reader will immediately notice the extensive research that has gone into the production of this book. Monaville visited a wide variety of archives on three continents, including several Congolese archives that are (to my knowledge of Anglophone Congolese studies) rarely used. He also conducted extensive oral history interviews with Congolese individuals who formed part of this special generation. The richness of this primary material — especially the interviews — shines through and is neatly woven into the book's narrative. Furthermore, Monaville's commendable understanding and use of secondary sources, including by many Congolese authors, further enrich this study. *Students of the World* is a shining example of how academics can innovatively use sources to gain new perspectives on neglected parts of African social and political history.

When reviewing a book, one should avoid highlighting how one would have written it according to one's own idiosyncrasies. We should accept books for what they are, a momentary but detailed snapshot of the author's thoughts and ideas. My

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only critique is that the book's chronology sometimes felt disrupted; occasionally I had difficulty following the structure of the different sections and the content within the chapters. The focus often jumped from one topic to the next, moving the narrative back and forth in time. This complicated the overall narrative of this nevertheless fascinating history. Despite this minor critique, *Students of the World* is undeniably a valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship examining the Global South's impact on the 1960s. Monaville has illustrated with commendable skill how the actions and ideas of young people in Africa were shaped by global events and how, in turn, they shaped global events during this impactful decade in the twentieth century. It is a welcome addition to the historical scholarship on Congo, African youth and education, and the Global 1960s.

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