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Recensione di Timothy Raeymaekers al libro:

Roadblock Politics: the origins of violence in Central Africa

Peer Schouten, Cambridge University Press, 2022

Roadblock Politics analyses the most fastidious, but also most central node of Central Africa's contemporary war economic complex through an in-depth account of the everyday functioning, economic logic and political ramifications of today's militarised checkpoints. From peasant saleswomen to bulk traders to international emergency NGOs, literally every mobile actor circulating on Central Africa's shabby road network contributes willingly or unwillingly to the maintenance of parasitic armed actors by paying them a right of roadblock passage. As its central objective, the book aims to disentangle Central Africa's roadblock geographies: the aggregate landscape of militarised checkpoints where the threat of the use of force is deployed to regulate and tax the circulation of people, goods and capital.

The book consists of two sections, nine chapters and a conclusion. It is nicely edited, with a short index, a thorough bibliography and several maps, which are, to be precise, often too loaded with detail to be readable, and lacking an indication of scale: rather odd for a geography manuscript. Though nominally discussing two countries – the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – the book favors the latter in at least six out of nine chapters. The first part of the book predominantly uses published historical references, and the second is based on a meticulous study: the team of researchers of which Schouten was a member documented over 800 roadblocks in DRC alone, and in CAR and DRC, the author claims to have interviewed 'many dozens' (no precise number is given) of direct and indirect roadblock users – from international conflict and human rights experts, aid workers, transporters, truck drivers, state agents, artisanal miners, rebels, artisanal miners and 41 saleswomen at and on their way to the market.

After a short conceptual introduction, in which the author proposes his main objectives, the first three chapters delve into the 'pre-history' of precolonial, colonial and post-colonial 'roadblocks' from the mid-19th century (1830) until the end of Mobutism and the start of Congo's protracted armed conflict (1996). The first chapter offers a discussion of historical sources, exposing the often-tense manners in which precolonial polities in the Congo Basin crafted geographies of circulation in their encounter with mercantile (Arab and European) agents. The central feature of African polities along precolonial trade routes was the imposition of hongo, which Schouten depicts as a sort of prefiguration of the contemporary roadblock, interpreted by road users as transit tax, and by African communities as a gift and right of passage for the benefit of communal chieftaincy.

The rest of the book narrates Central Africa's recent history as we know it. While during the immediate post-colonial era (chapter four sections 1–3), the deterioration of road networks paralleled the gradual collapse of territorial state administration, the rapid informalisation of Central African economies from Bangui to Bukavu led to a resurgence of roadblocks as both coping mechanisms and a predatory politics of repression during the war years (chapter four sections 4–6, roughly covering the period after 1998). The final chapters of the book offer insights into the shifting alliances of armed actors and the role of transnational business (particularly the Dutch beer producer Heineken) but they unfortunately do not go much beyond what we already know from other sources: that the militarised business of protection remains a key factor in the regionalised war economy, that warmongering and profiteerism are mutually reinforcing, and, for this reason, Central Africa's warscape remains unstable, unpredictable and armed groups increasingly resemble a form of politicised banditry.

While the book's empirical richness definitely deserves praise, I also found several weaknesses that make me doubt its wider conceptual contribution. First, the book's conceptual frame is rather eclectic: in the course of its 273 pages, I encountered over a dozen cursory references to the most disparate theories, from Pierre Clastres' society-against-the state to Igor Kopytoff's, James Scott's and Anna Tsing's concepts of the frontier, to Achille Mbembe's notion of 'discharge', to Mancur Olson's concept of roving and stationary bandits, to Karl Polanyi's notion of market exchange, to Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. This should not be a problem in itself: after all, there is nothing worse than a study that exclusively seeks to confirm foregone theories.

The second problem, however, lies in the book's theoretical premises, some of which are problematic. The book constantly risks overstating its claims by pinning down the entire argument on the assertion that roadblock taxes are economic institutions, making them central nodes in globalised supply chains. In doing so, Schouten partly ignores the fact that they are important political infrastructures, too. In particular, they served to underpin state authority, undergrid the circulation of labourers from the colonial 'hinterlands' to the productive 'centres', open up new land markets and stimulate rural capitalist accumulation during colonial times. Later, they also forged the foundations of new forms of regional autonomy, which resulted from a mediated engagement between indigenous commercial entrepreneurs (commercial Big Men) and local state administrators who continue to live at the mercy of Central Africa's expanding (cross-border) informal economy, as studies by Kate Meagher, Kristof Titeca and others have successfully argued.

A related, and more important gap concerns the question of political legitimacy: though he does pay some attention to the presumed 'sense of community', sociability and opportunity roadblock economics generate in the everyday (pages 115–127), Schouten fails to bring to the fore what he calls the 'back office', or how roadblock taxes are redistributed and legitimised politically. The question of risk perception and assessment, which forms the foundation of market institutions in any global context, is only briefly touched upon in chapter six, but never geographically or ethnographically explored. This is a major analytical gap, because it fails to account for the political significance – or insignificance – of roadblocks in the regionalised war complex. Rather than an emancipatory form of local autonomy, the systematic predation on petty market sales and artisan miners as an 'alternative subsistence strategy' (page 108) rather represents proof of the fact that Central Africa's armed actors today have little more to bolster their political clout than to show their potential threat of violence which, at the same time, represents the main source of their fragmentation. In my view, the consequence of this dynamic could have been explained a little more in-depth, especially since – as Schouten says – the deck of cards is definitely stacked against the little man and, especially, woman, when it comes to predatory randomised extortion (page 123).

A final issue concerns the assertion that, because roadblocks are informal, they should also be treated as non-capitalist. To me, this sounds like saying two opposite things at once. While road taxes are largely informal, they do simultaneously feed into the formalised and informalised spheres of capital accumulation. Comparing roadblock occupants and users to agents circulating in the non-capitalist sphere leaves the reader with the confusing idea that supply chains keep expanding globally, but the capital they generate remains somehow confined to the central corridors of multinational corporations. Not only has this contradiction been refuted, but it also highlights a misunderstanding around the social construction of scale which is, again, rather odd for a book in geography.

To end on a positive note, Roadblock Politics definitely shows the relevance of informal and militarised taxation for global value chain analysis, not just with regards to market exchange, but also more generally in areas where armed conflict and sporadic public authority make circulation a risky and unpredictable endeavour. The policy relevance of this book should not be understated, as OECD,

UN and other international institutions are urging companies to show their due diligence when it comes to such risky logistics. Inviting us to move beyond a narrow 'conflict economy' perspective, which, as the author rightly confirms, has only reinforced existing inequalities in the distribution of profit and risk, he carefully reframes the issue as one of uneven global development. As long as there will be a need to outsource the risks associated with so-called 'nonconventional logistics' to the brokers and agents running commodities in conflict-prone areas (of which the globe is paved increasingly), erecting roadblock astride obligatory points of passage will be a logical move for actors who feel excluded from the wealth generated by global capitalist supply chains and have the violent means to do so. Especially for this reason, the book should warrant a more precise analytic and the furthering of a research agenda that builds on the shoulders of existing studies.