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ROGUE EMPIRES: CONTRACTS AND CONMEN IN EUROPE'S SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA, by Steven Press, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.



This book is based upon Steven Press's unique work as Associate Professor of History at Stanford University in sharing his deep understanding of the European scramble for African lands and its unexpected roots in prior south-east Asian private-treaty endeavours. The book is divided into an impressive introduction, five chapters, an epilogue which acts as a concluding chapter, references, and an index. Press's book moves well beyond the normative discourses on the African land grab such as Thomas Pakenham's comprehensive history *The Scramble for Africa* (1992) and provides readers with a markedly different explanation. Hence, this book uncovers how the "legalistic or quasi-legalistic manipulations of the sovereignty principle" enabled private entrepreneurs (or sometimes conmen) to assert they had "established European governments" (p.10) in Africa with the complicity of (then) international law. This is clearly an area of scant and indeed unusual academic research and Press is to be commended for his efforts detecting the uncomfortable fact that "the process proved devastating to many Africans; they were often victims of treaty fraud" (p.10). The Berlin Conference in 1885 struggled with this problem and hence resulted in the "weak humanitarian declarations agreed at Berlin" (p.244). Press recounts that irrespective of the promises made in 1885 at Berlin to "watch over the preservation of the native tribes" (p.244), individual European states such as Belgium would do what they wished.

The author injects a personal touch which is both the great strength of the book as well as its relatively minor shortcomings. The book is obviously limited to African examples, however, an opportunity was forgone not providing and encouraging comparisons with much earlier private proprietorship examples such as Suriname in 1663 (Parker, 2015) and Canada in 1670 (Smandych and Linden, 1995). Also,

the personal touch of the author sometimes interferes with the flow of the story, so much so that at times the text becomes somewhat confusing at least until later in the book when his intent becomes clearer.

Press intersperses the various chapters with his own crucial interpretation of the various events occurring rather than just recording without comment those events. He is fully conscious of the unfamiliar style of land contracts in the African polity, at least to Europeans who preferred the written document rather than other local contractual forms. He explains that ritual performances involving the exchange of one's blood with the other contracting party was not uncommon. As well, the various forms of currency (e.g. cloth, seashells, or brass rods) in contracts were unlike conventional European currency but no less valuable even "by the 1870s, the items still carried enough legitimacy that indigenous traders, in times of famine, attempted to use them to buy food from Europeans (p.101).

The author indicates early in the book his proposal that European land annexation in Africa was based (doubtless somewhat surprisingly to many readers) on land grabbing experiences in south-east Asia, notably the island of Borneo. That is, in *Rogue Empires*, the overarching story Press sets out to tell is the impact private-treaty making in Borneo had as one of the precursors to European colonization of Africa. The subsequent use of such private-treaty making in Africa led to debate at the 1885 Berlin Conference as to whether firstly, the treaties had a legal basis, and secondly whether they truly represented the initial entry of European law to the particular African territory. Press provides the reader with fulsome details of the various arguments advanced by the European powers for and against private treaties and the resultant rogue empires, and reveals the underlying intractable legal problem for colonizing European states. If the private treaties alleging to transfer land and sovereignty from indigenous leaders to private European parties were to be viewed as legitimate "then Europe had to recognize the buyers, whether traditional states or individuals and companies, were endowed with absolute power over their African territories" (p.243). Alternatively, Press provides an exquisite observation that if the transfers were illegitimate then the European powers necessarily had to cede occupied "territory to indigenous leaders, thereby confirming the latter's legitimacy as a counter party" (p.243).

In the Epilogue, Press succinctly sums up his assessment stating very clearly "one must not overlook how indelibly the rogue empires and their ideas interacted with the European continent proper" (p.249). Statements like this appear to haunt Press in his tenacious exploration of the rogue empires, suggesting the territories acquired were probably viewed 'as a simple commodity, and this view resembled, and even reinforced, patrimonial conceptions of Western statehood" (p.249) The persistence of the European old regime is posited, and the reader is left with the strong feeling Press is uncomfortable with the fact the rogues still saw territory as a marketable commodity after the 1885 Berlin Conference.

Notwithstanding the minor limitations, *Rogue Empires* is a rich treatise of 371 pages taking the reader on Press's own journey garnering a deep understanding of how Africa came to be so impacted by Europeans in the aforesaid scramble for land, other natural resources, and sadly slaves.

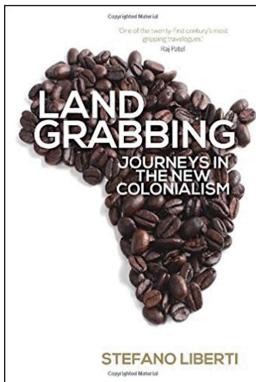
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LAND GRABBING: JOURNEYS IN THE NEW COLONIALISM, by Stefano Liberti. London, New York: Verso, 2013; ISBN: 13-978-178168-117- 6 (hard back), i-xii + 226 pp.



So much has been written on land grabbing that it is difficult to find anything new in books on the subject. Titles such as Fred Pearce's, *The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth* (2012), *Handbook of Land and Water Grabs in Africa: Foreign Direct Investment and Food and Water Security* by Tony Allan, Martin Keulertz, Suvi Sojamo, and Jeroen Warner and *The Great African Land Grab?* (2013) by Lorenzo Cotula sound so comprehensive that they might easily be taken to represent finality on the topic.

It is within this context that Stefano Liberti's *Land Grabbing: Journeys in the New Colonialism* was written. The cover photo of the book is an African map, so the impression is that the book is about Africa. In fact, its coverage is much wider with chapters about Brazil, Switzerland, USA, and Saudi Arabia along with Ethiopia and Tanzania. The cover photo, then, echoes the story in the book: Africa may be the source of the most vibrant land grab processes, but the story does not begin and end in Africa. Indeed, land grabbing as ideology, process, and practice has roots and branches all over the world.