



## Book review: *Géographie et impérialisme: de la Suisse au Congo entre exploration géographique et conquête coloniale*

**Gretchen Marie Walters**

Institute of Geography and Sustainability, Faculty of Geography and Durability,  
University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

**Correspondence:** Gretchen Marie Walters (gretchen.walters@unil.ch)

Published: 17 July 2023

*Rossinelli, F.: Géographie et impérialisme: de la Suisse au Congo entre exploration géographique et conquête coloniale. Éditions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses, Neuchâtel, Switzerland, 748 pp., ISBN 978-2-88930-401, CHF 39, PDF freely downloadable at <https://www.aphil.com/livres/1134-geographie-et-imperialisme.html> (last access: 12 July 2023), 2022.*

What was Switzerland's role in colonization? If you have ever wondered about this, Rossinelli's historical account can provide a rich and detailed interpretation of a lesser-known part of the story: the role of Swiss geographic societies and Swiss participation in Belgian King Leopold II's project to colonize a vast part of central Africa (today's Democratic Republic of Congo). Rossinelli's conclusion shows how political the discipline and practice of geography is, bringing geography beyond a technical exercise, showing how expansionist politics by Swiss geography associations were part of a broader dynamic typical of other European geography associations at the time. What makes the Swiss endeavour different is that although Switzerland never formally colonized another country, it supported the efforts of others, benefiting economically from these efforts, while also identifying new places, such as Brazil, for Switzerland's economic migrants.<sup>1</sup> Swiss imperialism, as skilfully demonstrated by Rossinelli, was presented publicly under the guise of a "civilizing" mission of African peoples along with anti-slavery campaigns, led by the Swiss bourgeoisie. But as Rossinelli

shows us in great detail, this contradictory mission was often overshadowed by economic and other aspects. How does the author lead us to these conclusions? Rossinelli draws on archival sources to immerse the reader in the national and international meetings in which the imperialistic Swiss projects were discussed and in the texts which these institutions published. The reader often feels as if they have attended a conference in question, knowing the order of events, speakers, and key aspects of their speeches and conclusions.

The book is divided into four parts. After the introduction, the second part of the book is dedicated to understanding the foundational objectives and operations of eight Swiss geographical associations. Each of these associations held different objectives: some focused on furthering the textile or watch-making markets abroad by using the colonies of other European countries as a place of commerce, other associations were interested in finding places for Swiss to migrate, while yet others focused on collaborating with Swiss missionaries to document local cultures or make natural-history collections. Some of these efforts resulted in Switzerland's largest collections of ethnographic and natural-history objects. Such collections today contribute to current debates on the restitution of these objects (Sarr and Savoy, 2018), as well as the modern role of these institutions (Vergès, 2023). Rossinelli demonstrates how Switzerland's geographic associations contributed to imperialistic ideologies and created a pressure from within Switzerland to participate in colonization projects in Africa in particular. The third part of the book reviews and analyses the Swiss production of academic journals, their context, and their influences. Here we see the diffusion of geographic journals throughout Europe and in relation to other European colonization projects.

<sup>1</sup>This latter issue was recently explored by the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève's exposition in 2022–2023 on Helvécia, a Swiss settlement by economic migrants in Brazil explored by Swiss-Brazilian photographer Dom Smaz and journalist Milena Machado Neves (Smaz, 2022).

In the fourth part of the book, Rossinelli explores how Swiss geographic societies supported one of the largest colonial projects in Africa: that of the former Belgian Congo. The reader finds out how the project was launched internationally through the International African Association, soliciting support of European countries to the king's private project, including Switzerland. Geographic exploration is seen as a catalyst of colonial expansion in Central Africa. Swiss geographers formed a national chapter to support the initiative and held a series of conferences throughout Switzerland. One of the more interesting roles explored is that of arbitrator. Given that Switzerland had not directly colonized any part of Africa, the country was seen as neutral and able to judge cases of conflict between colonizing countries such as Belgium and Portugal disputing rights to trade at the mouth of the Congo River. During this time, we see Switzerland launch geographic journals as well as the monthly *Afrique explorée et civilisée* (1879–1894), as part of a communication campaign to the general public. Rossinelli makes connections between Swiss bourgeoisie involvement in both the Red Cross and colonial developments and discusses the role of Swiss banks in the Belgian project.

I can critique two aspects of this highly engaging and informative work. First, the attention to detail is sometimes to an extreme. The author often opens and closes long detailed parenthetical statements about specific people, events, or places. This sometimes makes reading through parts of the work laborious. But this detail is also at times necessary to make his arguments. Secondly, Rossinelli at times uses the word *indigène* rather than *autochtone* to refer to African peoples. This is surprising but perhaps not intentional. In the Francophone literature, especially regarding movements for Indigenous rights and from the United Nations (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2005; Bellier, 2009), this word is expressly avoided because it links their identity to colonialism. The colonial-era policy of the *indigénat*, a regime in French colonies which classified Africans as French nationals without citizenship rights, viewed local people as labourers for colonial projects (Tsanga et al., 2022). Even if this book recounts colonial expansion in Africa, the African people affected have histories well beyond their colonial encounters with Europeans: their history does not start or stop with colonialism (Táíwò, 2019), and so the word *indigène* could have been replaced with *autochtone* more regularly to strongly signal this issue.

Throughout the book, Rossinelli interprets the racist history of Swiss geographical associations vis-a-vis Africa, examining why these associations viewed Africa – unlike Asia – as a place without history. The author shows how despite the critical report about the Belgian Congo's treatment of Congolese people by African-American lawyer George Washington Williams highly reported in European newspapers, the Swiss press defended the Belgian project, insisting that treatment was no worse than that of agricultural work-

ers in Switzerland. Rossinelli also details several racial discourses found in the geographical-society journals, how missionaries were vectors of racism and cultural-superiority exercises, and how cartographic exercises and related reports held a colonial gaze of racial superiority and environmental determinism.

Rossinelli's work joins others on the topic of Switzerland and colonization.<sup>2</sup> This book situates geographical societies of Switzerland in their colonial roots. And it joins works querying the colonial history of Switzerland (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné, 2015); racial aspects of colonial history (dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022); and recent efforts focusing on decolonizing it, such as those of the city of Zurich (Brennard et al., 2020), the Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève (de Genève, 2020), requests for removals of colonial-era statues (Fall, 2020), or efforts to decolonize the Zoo Zurich (Sithole et al., 2021). Overall, this work, in all its detail, is a must-read for those who are interested in Switzerland's imperialist agenda at the time and the various roles it held in Europe's colonial expansion in Africa.

**Disclaimer.** Publisher's note: Copernicus Publications remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Acknowledgements.** The author thanks Jevgeniy Bluwstein for his review of the text.

## References

- African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs: Rapport Du Groupe de Travail d'experts de La Commission Africaine des Droits de l'homme et Des Peuples Sur Les Populations/Communautés Autochtones, The Gambia, Banjul, Copenhagen, Denmark, Somerset, USA, Transaction Publishers, 2005.
- Bellier, I.: Autochtone, EspacesTemps.Net, <https://www.espacestemp.net/articles/autochtone/> (last access: 12 July 2023), 2009.
- Brennard, M., Schubert, F., and Zürcher, L.: Die Beteiligung Der Stadt Zürich Sowie Der Zürcherinnen Und Zürcher an Sklaverei Und Sklavenhandel Vom 17. Bis Ins 19. Jahrhundert, Universität Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland, [https://www.media.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:29963073-c0ef-4adf-954f-723b67f327cd/200902\\_Sklaverei\\_Bericht\\_UZH\\_def.pdf](https://www.media.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:29963073-c0ef-4adf-954f-723b67f327cd/200902_Sklaverei_Bericht_UZH_def.pdf) (last access: 12 July 2023), 2020.
- de Genève, V.: Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève, Plan Stratégique, 2020–2024, [https://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/pdf/MEG\\_PS\\_2020\\_2024.pdf](https://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/pdf/MEG_PS_2020_2024.pdf) (last access: 12 July 2023), 2020.
- dos Santos Pinto, J., Ohene-Nyako, P., Pétrémont, M.-E., Lavanchy, A., Lüthi, B., Purtschert, P., and Skenderovic, D.: Un-doing race:

<sup>2</sup>See a good collection of works on this topic at <https://www.meg.ch/fr/media/2311/download?attachment> (last access: 12 July 2023).

- la racialisation en Suisse, Seismo, Zurich, ISBN 978-2-88351-105-7, 2022.
- Fall, J. J.: Dear Carl: thinking visually and geographically about public figures, *Geogr. Helv.*, 75, 337–348, <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-75-337-2020>, 2020.
- Purtschert, P. and Fischer-Tiné, H. (Eds.): *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, ISBN 978-1-137-44273-4, 2015.
- Sarr, F. and Savoy, B.: *Rapport Sur La Restitution Du Patrimoine Culturel Africain. Vers Une Nouvelle Éthique Relationnelle*, Présidence de la République de France, <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/content/download/280266/3238780?version=1> (last access: 12 July 2023), 2018.
- Sithole, S. S., Fernandes, M., Hymas, O., Sharma, K., and Walters, G.: Stuck in the Colonial Past?: Perpetuating Racist, Environmental Myths of Kenya in a Swiss Zoo, *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 30, 95–111, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2021.300207>, 2021.
- Smaz, D.: *Helvécia: A Swiss Colonial History in Brazil*, Lars Müller Publishers, Zurich, ISBN 978-3-03778-701-4, 2022.
- Táíwò, O.: Rethinking the Decolonization Trope in Philosophy, *Southern J. Philos.*, 57, 135–159, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12344>, 2019.
- Tsanga, R., Assembé-Mvondo, S., Lescuyer, G., Vermeulen, C., Wardell, D. A., Kalenga, M. A., Boutinot, L., Bigombe, P., Oyono, P. R., Walters, G., Hymas, O., Abanda Ngono, F., and Nguinguiri, J. C.: Les droits des populations locales et autochtones à l'épreuve des politiques forestières et de conservation, in: *Etat des Forêts, Bassin du Congo 2021*, edited by: Ebaá Atyi, R., Hiol Hiol, F., Lescuyer, G., Mayaux, P., Defourny, P., Bayol, N., Saracco, F., Pokem, D., Sufo Kankeu, R., and Nasi, R., CIFOR, Bangor, Indonesia, <https://doi.org/10.17528/cifor/008565>, 2022.
- Vergès, F.: *Programme de Désordre Absolu: Décoloniser Le Musée, la Fabrique*, Paris, ISBN 9782358722490, 2023.