The abandoned employees of the Gecamines

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Although Gecamines (formerly known as the Union Minière) was, for a long time, the economic hub of Katanga and the primary source of foreign exchange earnings, it became a gigantic industrial wasteland during the chaos of the 1990s. It was only when peacetime resumed at the beginning of the following decade that the company began working again, under the aegis of the World Bank, following the transfer of its mineral deposits to private investors and a drastic downsizing of its workforce.

The new book (1) by Benjamin Rubbers gets right to the heart of the "great transformation" of the mining fields of Katanga. The wealth of these mines has been a "world issue" for more than a century and continues to be much coveted. Beyond this fact, however, the great merit of this book lies in the fact that it focusses our attention on the plight of the 10,000 employees of Gecamines who suddenly found themselves abandoned. How have they reacted to being made redundant and what has become of the solidarity that once united the "children of the Miner Union"?
Benjamin Rubbers, a Professor in the Laboratory of social and cultural anthropology of the University of Liege, knows Katanga very well. Being the committed anthropologist that he is, he has returned to Katanga twice a year since 1999. He is part of the new generation of researchers that returned to Central Africa at the beginning of the 2000s to explore subjects that are different from those of the past. "Lubumbashi (formerly Elisabethville) has changed a lot during the last ten years. A new middle-class has emerged there. Money is circulating, the roads have all been repaired and the shop fronts have all been given a fresh coat of paint. However, in terms of development, this dynamism has had little or no impact on the local economy. In fact, inequality has grown and the population is experiencing a sharp increase in the cost of living", he explains.

Between 2006 and 2011, Benjamin Rubbers made several trips to the city of Panda, each lasting at least a month, on the outskirts of Likasi, in order to meet the Gecamines' 'old-guard'. "The choice of this encampment
of around 15,000 inhabitants, one of Gecamines’ oldest, was determined by the fact that I knew some Congolese nuns who were happy to provide me with accommodation and to assist me in my endeavors. A student in the area by the name of Bernard helped me to translate questions and answers in the Swahili language”.

During many interviews with the workers of Panda, but also with those of the city of Kikula, in the center of Likasi, and with former Gecamines managers, the Belgian researcher was able to collect an impressive volume of information-and reactions- on the Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) that was offered to Gecamines workers in 2003-2004. Staff members with more than 25 years’ service were offered voluntary retirement in the form of a lump sum (which was lower than the statutory sum that should have been offered in law). Insofar as they had 36 months wage arrears, no fewer than 10,000 employees (out of the 24,000 that the company was made up of) accepted the offer of voluntary redundancy, many of them intended to switch to agriculture, small business or transport.

"This scheme, orchestrated by the World Bank, was clearly part of a neo-liberal agenda. The objective of drastically cutting staff levels to prevent the company from suffocating was certainly achieved, but contrary to claims made by a subsequent World Bank report, the reinsertion of former Gecamines employees into the local economic system has been far from successful. Many of them have been reduced to a state of poverty", recalls Benjamin Rubbers.

**The sinking of an empire**

In the first two chapters of his book, Benjamin Rubbers deals with the historical implications of the World-Bank reform of the mining sector in Katanga promoted by the World Bank. He examines the reasons for the decline of Gecamines then describes in depth the careers of the different players who played a role in the privatization and liberalization of the mining sector.

"In Katanga, the privatization of the mining sector did not occur following the decline of Gecamines. The two processes were directly linked. Certainly, the imposition of neoliberal measures by the World Bank opened up the mining sector in Katanga to foreign companies. Nonetheless, the responsibility of Congolese politicians and high-level public servants in the affair cannot be ignored. In order to benefit from this company, they were able to count on the complicity of local economic players who were involved in stripping the company of its resources and then attracting investors within the framework of public/private partnerships that were often opaque", explains the researcher.

The transition of the mining sector in Katanga to a “new form of capitalism" was characterized as much by the appearance of new mining companies as by the growth in the trade of minerals extracted by thousands or even tens of thousands of freelance prospectors. "Although very different in nature, these two processes, one industrial and the other artisanal were nonetheless directly linked“, points out Professor Rubbers. When the opportunity presented itself, holders of capital (companies, local businessmen etc.) were able to use machines or diggers, to process the minerals or to export them in their raw state, and to sell the product to large companies or to small intermediaries. He goes on to add: "even though Gecamines still employs some 12,000 people today, its debt remains colossal and its management is totally under the control of the office of the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo. No one knows where its profits are going!

In the light of the political upheaval that has punctuated the history of the country and the mobility of mining capital within the world mining sector, who can predict the industrial future of Katanga.

"The influx of foreign investors was of especial benefit to Kabila's government, which has an uncertain future", continues Benjamin Rubbers, "but has been of very little benefit to the population of Katanga. Mining activity
is growing rapidly, but this has not resulted in the creation of employment locally, inequality is increasing and a lot of people have been left behind". Foremost among those left behind are the 10,000 Gecamines workers who have been made redundant.

This observation puts things into perspective in a very enlightening way and helps us to better understand the consternation of the Congolese people in the face of collapse of the industrial empire that once was Gecamines and which they believed would last forever. From this point of view, the VRS of 2003-2004 was not only a social tragedy for the redundant workers, but it also symbolized the end of an era, the era of industrial paternalism inherited from the colonial era.
The Gecamines workers constituted a kind of workers’ aristocracy who were envied by the rest of the population. After the VRS, only a small minority of them were able to reestablish themselves professionally. The rest have found it very hard to fend for themselves. With the help of two Congolese trade unions, they have formed a "collective of ex-Gecamines employees" in order to denounce their abandonment by the Congolese state and to demand the full amount of wage arrears to which they are entitled, a request which has, up to now, been in vain. With their incessant appeals to the World Bank, the "old-guard" of the Gecamines compare their plight to a "mass suicide that was imposed and planned" (Collective, 19 February 2009). The poverty they have been afflicted with has resulted in malnutrition, divorce, removal of children from school, delinquency among boys, and prostitution among girls, an increase in levels of morbidity and mortality… "It is difficult to assess the relevance of the figures that have been advanced given the absence of statistics before and after the VRS in question. Regardless of this fact, in the interviews I conducted with the former employees of the company, they often reiterate the difficulty they have in feeding themselves, caring for and educating their children, and consequently, securing the respect of their children. Everything they considered to be the very reason for their existence when they were working for the Union Minière and then Gecamines was taken away from them", notes Professor Rubbers. In the following chapters, Benjamin Rubbers examines the activity of this Collective and the difficulty its members are experiencing in their attempts to be reinstated. He takes an interest in the development of their social connections and intra-familial relations, but also in the upheaval they have had to endure in their daily lives.

**Industrial Paternalism**

For the experts of the World Bank, the majority of the "old-guard" of the Gecamines have succeeded in finding a "survival activity". If they are discontented, the World Bank claims that it is their advanced age that is at fault.
or the poor management exercised by the Congolese government in the past and the paternalistic policy of the company!

"With its neoliberal agenda, the World Bank and the multinationals it was instrumental in attracting to the Congo, are highly critical of the paternalism of the Gecamines company which they adjudge to be costly, counter-productive and responsible for the unrealistic expectations of the population", points out Professor Rubbers. The very notion of "industrial paternalism" - and its subjectification by the workers of the great mining and metallurgical company is the central theme of the present work.

This managerial policy, which appeared at the end of the 19th century in the coal-mining and steel-manufacturing areas of Wallonia, the North of France or the Ruhr valley, was also applied on a grand scale in the colonial context OR by the colonial capital. It was applied to the Union Minière of Haut Katanga, from 1926 onwards, to stabilize and control labor in the workplace, by taking charge of various aspects of the daily lives of the workers and their families: from the construction of houses, schools, sports facilities... to the funding of company welfare services, including the establishment of healthcare services. It also involved educating the workers in the values of the company (work, hierarchy, etc.), to "moralize" them and in this way prevent any interruption to the work. The company held the worker's hand to the extent that the interests of each party seemed to be intertwined.

Benjamin Rubbers uses an analytical framework conceived by Michel Foucault in order to explore the way this "totalitarian control regime" contributed to naturalizing paternalism as a regime of power that was taken for granted. "In a more direct way, it involved monitoring workers in the tiniest details of their daily lives, including family life, the status of the wife and the education of the children, in such a way that they succeed in reproducing in their own houses the authority upon which the power of the mining Union as an employer was based".

In the context of his ethnographic research, Benjamin Rubbers has been able to analyse the extent to which the Industrial paternalism of the Union Minière - then the Gecamines, left its mark upon, or even "formatted" the worker population of Katanga. Independently of its stated objectives (stabilization of the labor force and legitimization of the values of the company), he explains, the paternalistic policy of the Union Minière profoundly reshaped the body of its recruits (their corpulence, their appearance, their health etc.) and the way they used their body (washing, sleeping, having sexual relations, etc.) Beyond this, disciplinary practices contributed not only to the subjugation of the workers, but also to identifying them as subjects. In other words, to organize a certain form of subjectivity, a relationship between the self and the self and the self to others.
"The sensation I have each time I visit the premises of the Gecamines, which have been abandoned for more than 30 years, is that of discovering the ruins of a dead industrial civilization. Nothing seems to have been maintained in the housing complexes for managers and the workers' camps: the roads are full of potholes, the houses are crumbling, and vegetation once again covers the communal areas", recalls Professor Rubbers.

But how do the inhabitants of Panda perceive their day to day living space? Do they have feelings of nostalgia for the "good old days"? In his work, Benjamin Rubbers addresses these questions while deeply examining the career of the "old-guard" of the Gecamines: their married lives, their relationships with their parents and their children, but also their social relations within the community of "children of the Union Minière", as they define themselves.

The researcher continues, "In a general way, their nostalgia stems from the social and material order established by the company at the start of their careers which was the basis of their material security and their pride as workers". Before things went wrong, the organisation of the Gecamines represented a well-constructed and well-oiled machine in terms of the production line, the management of personnel and the care services for their families and social lives outside working hours. Their wages were paid, food rations were allocated to them, access to schools, hospitals and sports facilities were free. All of this disappeared at the beginning of the 1990s. The meritocratic system, inherited from the colonial days, broke down to give way to disorder (fujo). Factories, workshops and offices began to slow down for want of work or material, before being plundered or abandoned.

"The feeling that there is no longer any sense of the meaning of work or the discipline of former times is widely shared. All that remains, is the sentiment of belonging to the same community which had been fostered by the company", explains Professor Rubbers. This is clearly visible in the opinions of former employees of the
Gecamines, who are calling for political intervention in order to help them to return to a "real life": having three meals a day, sending the children to school, having a television, being recognized as a whole person, etc. The paternalistic tradition inherited from colonialism has therefore remained very strong in the collective memory of Katanga. This is the basis for the criticism of the new economic order imposed by the World Bank in Katanga and elsewhere for the last ten years. Such is the paradox which is at the heart of this brilliant work by Professor Benjamin Rubbers: Industrial paternalism as a means of control (by the employer) of the workforce became transformed into a defense weapon for the social rights of the proletariat during the 20th century.


* Paternalism examined. The former workers of the Gecamines in the aftermath of the liberalization of the mining sector in Katanga (DR of Congo)