



How King Leopold II used Émile de Laveleye's intellectual network for the benefit of his African project

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The "Belle Époque" saw the revival of the colonial idea in new forms. A second European colonization wave washed over Africa. King Leopold II unfolded his activities in Congo from 1876 onwards. There, his efforts to develop a so-called "philanthropic" enterprise soon evolved in a process of state formation, overshadowed by intrigues and tensions that were a consequence of colonial competition between the western powers. Only a decade later, at the Berlin Conference of 1885, a definite arrangement was adopted.

Everywhere in Europe, a disputed transition was made from liberal to more conservative ways of government. Of course this tension field also dominated intellectual life. There was an intense debate between partisans of colonialism and supporters of worldwide free trade. For the development of his colonial doctrine Leopold II had been inspired by intellectuals that supported economic expansionism. Most of them were active in the field of economic geography. But the King also searched for support in other academic circles and mobilized one of Europe's brightest minds to join him in his quest for the most adequate economic, social and political model of a future state in the heart of Africa.

In his books, articles and pamphlets, the liberal minded political economist Émile de Laveleye (1822-1892) – an opinion maker of European renown – showed himself an unshakable opponent of colonization and imperialism. However, in the period 1875-1885 – a decade so crucial for Congo – a surprising intellectual rapprochement between de Laveleye and Leopold II was established. For a certain time, this competent man of science advised the King, for example at the International Geographical Conference in Brussels, putting into royal service an intellectual network of European range.



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This paper investigates how, in the complex and constantly evolving public discussion about Congo, two apparently opposing minds attracted each other. Analyzing de Laveleye's publications and correspondence we focus on his important pleas for a "neutral and international formula" that would place Leopold II in a conflicting situation with Portugal and France, countries that claimed Congo's estuary for their own benefit. De Laveleye believed that Leopold was sincere about his civilizing mission and crusade against slavery.

This study shows how, in the years preceding the Berlin Conference, de Laveleye got actively involved in a carefully orchestrated European media campaign in support of Leopold's initiative. It was there that his intellectual circle became extremely useful and was fully implicated. His contacts in the world of law, especially among experts of international law, contributed to the important discussions about Congo's juridical status. De Laveleye's colleague Sir Travers Twiss, one of the most reputed jurists of that time, as well as the influential Institut de Droit international, of which de Laveleye had been one of the founders, entered the debate zone and took positions that were favorable for Leopold's project. With this new approach, our paper also aims to give insight in the way Leopold II transformed his own reasoning into a more authoritative set of practical standards that were shared by an intellectual elite.