

Paul Rohrbach on German Colonialism in Africa (1943)

Abstract

Dr. Paul Rohrbach (1869-1956) was a Baltic German writer and intellectual who travelled throughout Asia and Africa. He described himself as interested in matters of “world politics.” His writings were respected well before the Nazi rise to power, and his books on German imperial politics were translated into English. Most popularized and criticized, however, were his writings on Africa. The excerpt below is from his book, *Afrika*, published in 1943. Rohrbach’s writing is littered with classic chauvinist and racist discourses on the need for the “white man” to “civilize” the African people. This type of language was not novel and appeared in writings across Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. What makes his texts perhaps slightly different is his emphasis that Germany should be the state that colonizes the African continent.

Source

Introduction

[...]

As the continent of the black race, left to it alone without white leadership, Africa has no higher future: neither a cultural, nor a political, nor an economic one. Therein lies the decisive justification for Africa’s purpose as a colonial supplementary area of the European economy. We stress “colonial” here because this explains that the task of autonomously appropriating the social, political and economic forms of life of the white peoples with their far-reaching spiritual content goes beyond the mental capacity of the Negro. That, in addition to this and indeed because of this, racial segregation must also be a matter of course for all German colonial work in Africa, need not be emphasized.

The education of the black race to a way of life corresponding to their talents, yet higher and more valuable in comparison with their present condition, is unquestionably a duty of the white man, but it belongs less to the economic than to the civilizing goals of African colonial policy. It goes without saying that the fruits of such educational work will also have an economic effect. The thirty years of German colonial policy since 1884 have shown that there is no better educator of the Negro than the German. This is due not least to the German soldierly manner, which corresponds to the Negro’s need for leadership and care. No European nation, therefore, is more entitled to an authoritative position in colonial Africa than the German. Moreover, Africa, as soon as it is understood as the given economic supplementary space for Europe, is especially necessary for a country of the natural economic constitution of Germany.

The principle of the complementary space, materially and ideologically underpinned, must not be understood, however, as if a colonial Africa did not belong in the world economy in a broader sense. Nor should a future German colonial empire be thought of as limited solely to complementary trade with Germany. Some African colonies already supply more of certain products than their European motherland absorbs. This is true, for example, of peanut exports from the French Senegal region, cocoa exports from the English Gold Coast, copper and oil palm products from the Belgian Congo, and sisal exports from Tanganyika-East Africa.

Crucial to our understanding of African colonial issues is the concept of potential. Without it, not a single colonial value judgment can be made. If one were to take the population and the surface area of Africa – blood and soil – in their present condition as permanently given quantities, one would very quickly reach

the limit of all economic expectations. Therefore, we distinguish between the economic present and the economic potential of Africa and understand by the latter that state of the African economy which can be reached in the foreseeable future by a planned increase in the performance of the African soil and by a healthy multiplication of the people. Even if we calculate only with quite rational periods, methods and means, present-day Africa and potential Africa are two very different quantities.

[...]

Source of original German text: Paul Rohrbach, *Afrika. Beiträge zu einer praktischen Kolonialkunde*. Berlin 1943, pp. 10-11.

Translation: Insa Kummer

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