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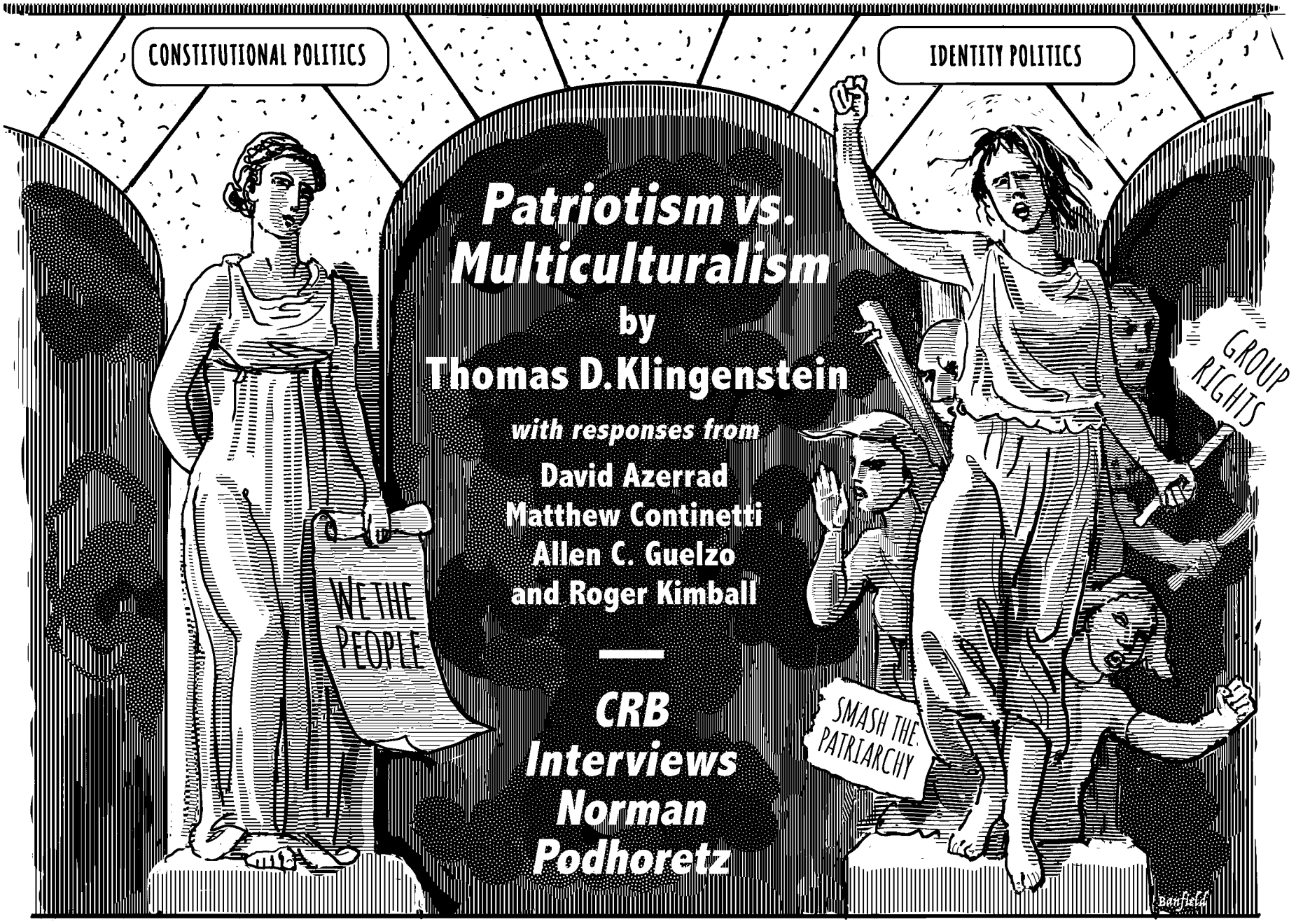

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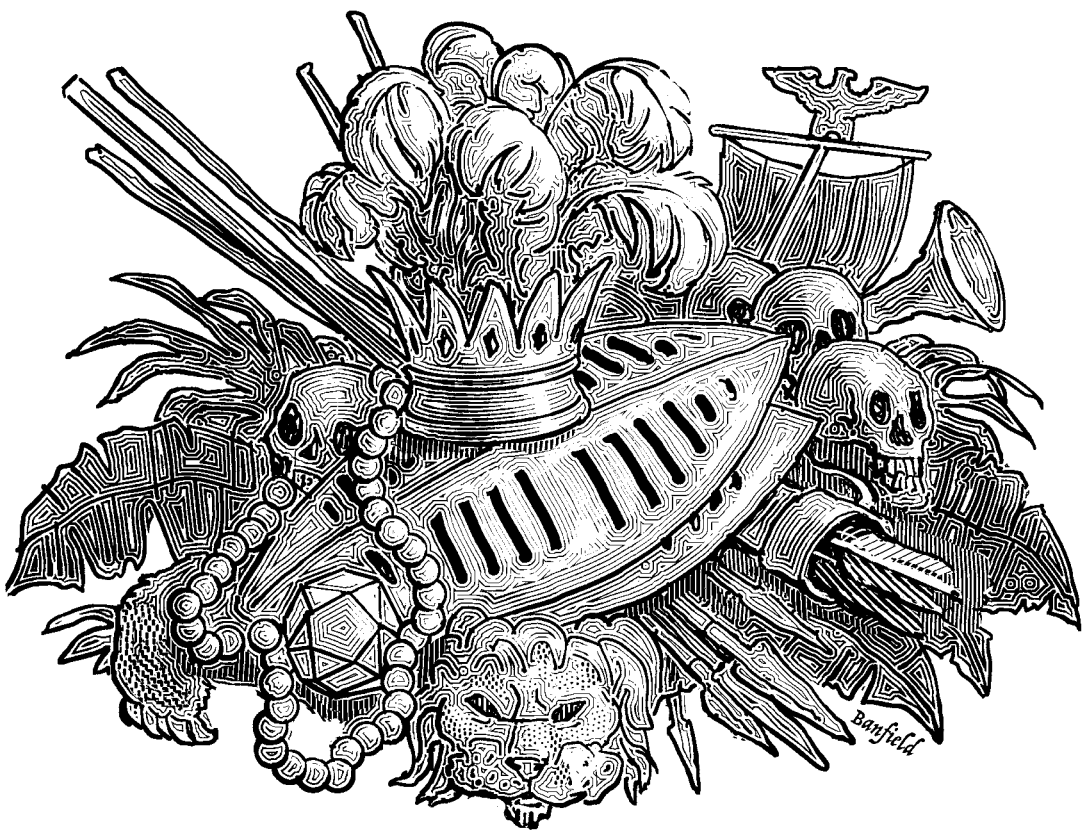
Book Review by Theodore Dalrymple

Heart of Darkness

Dictatorland: The Men Who Stole Africa, by Paul Kenyon.
Head of Zeus, 480 pages, $16.95



The only man I've ever known who was executed by hanging was Ken Saro-Wiwa. I used to visit him in Port Harcourt in south-eastern Nigeria, or whenever he came to London. Once when I was driving with him to his office on the Aggrey Road in Port Harcourt we passed the naked corpse of a man, bloating with decomposition, by the side of the road. An announcer over the car radio was making a plea at the time for the owner of the body to come and collect it. "Only in Nigeria," said Saro-Wiwa.

Saro-Wiwa was the author of a great anti-war novel, *Sozaboy* (1985), and the creator of a television series wildly popular in Nigeria called *Basi and Company* (1986-90), whose hero was an idler who dreamed of becoming a millionaire by petty chicanery and whose dictum was "To be a millionaire, think like a millionaire." Saro-Wiwa used to regard the foibles of his countrymen with a laugh so deep that it seemed to shake his whole being. It was the only effective defence against Nigerian reality.

But Nigeria wasn't really funny. I remember when Saro-Wiwa told me that he was entering politics by starting a movement to obtain compensation for his people, a small ethnic group called the Ogoni, for the devastation of their rural homeland caused by careless oil extraction by the Shell Oil company in collusion with the Nigerian state. Though many billions of dollars' worth of oil had been extracted from Ogoniland, the Ogoni had not benefited in the slightest, not even to the extent of having schools or clinics built for them. On the contrary, their plantations and fishing grounds had been comprehensively ruined by pollution and even their sleep at nights had been disturbed for decades by the perpetual flares of the oil and gas fields.

Saro-Wiwa said that he risked death—"the rascals'll kill me," he'd say—rascals being his rather forgiving word for the totally corrupt soldiers and politicians who ran Nigeria. I thought he was overestimating the personal danger but nevertheless I didn't want him to enter politics because I thought his movement would end in violence (though not in his execution) and do little good. Nigeria, I said, needed writers more than it needed politicians. But I was wrong about the danger he faced personally, for he had touched on the two subjects of vital importance in Nigerian politics: ethnicity and control of the country's oil revenues. With 300 different ethnic groups in the country, anyone claiming special treatment for one of them was potentially igniting the blue touch-paper, as it were, to ethnic violence. And because whoever was in political control of the oil became vastly wealthy overnight, competition for it was correspondingly fierce, not to say vicious. Ken Saro-Wiwa was tried by a military tribunal on trumped-up murder charges, and hanged in November 1995.

Saro-Wiwa looms large in the chapter devoted to Nigeria in Paul Kenyon's *Dictatorland*, a highly readable but not very analytical book about Afri-

can dictators and dictatorship. A former correspondent in Africa for the BBC, Kenyon has travelled widely on the continent, including to very remote places. He doesn't, however, tell us how or why he chose to describe the seven dictatorial regimes (out of the lamentably many he could have chosen) he includes in his book and, I think rather disappointingly, he ventures no general theory to explain Africa's inability to install minimally democratic regimes. He offers us not a typology but merely a menagerie of dictators, albeit one whose inhabitants are never less than hypnotically fascinating.

He does, it's true, make brief reference to one of the frequent explanations for the chaos that followed decolonization in Africa: "The nations [the leaders] inherited were coarsely mapped European constructs, with borders that took little account of age-old tribal rivalries." The arbitrariness of the frontiers meant that those living within them felt no loyalty or devotion to the new countries, which therefore became the object of personal, familial, and tribal looting by whoever was in power.

This sounds plausible enough, until you realise that *no* boundaries could have taken account of age-old tribal rivalries: the African mosaic makes Balkan divisions seem positively straightforward and unequivocal. Moreover, those countries in Africa whose boundaries were not purely arbitrary—Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, and Lesotho, for example—have hardly been models of political wisdom or restraint.

A further theory, implicit rather than explicit in this book, is that, in conditions of general poverty, the struggle for the control of predominant natural resources such as oil or minerals leads to, and maintains, dictatorship because such resources are the country's only wealth—oil in Nigeria, Libya, and Equatorial Guinea, and minerals in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) sustained dictatorships such as those of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha in Nigeria, Muammer Gaddhafi in Libya, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo in Equatorial Guinea, and Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire.

But this theory, too, is far from the whole truth, even if there is an element of truth in it. I visited Equatorial Guinea in the period between the overthrow in 1979 of the country's first (democratically-elected) president after independence from Spain, Francisco Macías Nguema—who killed or drove into exile a third of the country's population and so hated intellectuals that it was extremely dangerous for anyone to be seen with a pair of glasses—and the subsequent discovery of oil in the country's territorial waters. Equatorial Guinea's president for 40 years, Teodoro Obiang, was Macías's nephew, accomplice, and henchman, and was dictator well before the discovery of oil—indeed there was hardly any economic activity at all other than the recycling of aid from governments and NGOs. The terror was palpable; the electricity in the capital was turned off as soon as the president left it; and I was told in confidence by an expatriate that if the government got wind of the fact that I was a writer I would be disappeared and thrown to the sharks. In a way I was flattered: I have never been so important, before or since. But what was quite clear is that it required no oil, or any other commodity (other than aid, perhaps), for Equatorial Guinea to be a dictatorship.

Kenyon hints at, but does not develop, an important theme, namely the humiliation visited upon Africans by colonialism. The reaction of many Africans to the colonial regime was a mixture of hatred and admiration and hence a desire both to be rid of it and to reproduce it with themselves in charge. Perhaps the clearest example of the ambivalence was Zaire's Mobuto. He demanded that the population Africanize its names and forbade neckties in the name of authenticity, but dressed himself up in Ruritanian-Colonial uniforms and (like practically all African dictators) bought an extensive portfolio of property in Europe, seeking to impress thereby those who had previously humiliated him. The bribes he extracted from anyone who wanted a contract in his country were not only convenient financially but soothing psy-

chologically: the former masters were now the supplicants, dishonest ones at that. Mobutu is said once to have remarked that it takes two to be corrupt; the universal practice of bribery equalized the races by visiting humiliation on the formerly dominant race. But Mobutu was no fool: he knew that behind the façade of respect he was accorded by those who wanted something from him lay deep contempt, which in turn led to ever-greater extravagance on his part to try to obtain *real* respect. This, of course, set up a vicious circle than could end only with overthrow and death. A similar syndrome affected Milton Obote (Uganda), Hastings Banda (Malawi), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Daniel arap Moi (Kenya), the Emperor Bokassa (Central African Republic), Omar Bongo (Gabon), Félix Houphouët-Boigny (Ivory Coast) and many others.

Apart from this humiliation, often but not always intentionally inflicted, the worst legacy of colonialism, especially in its last phase, was the model of governance it left behind. The colonial governments were—or at any rate presented themselves as being—composed of all-wise, all-seeing, all-knowing philosopher-kings. They went in for economic planning on a large scale: in short, they pretended that they knew what was best for everyone. Spectacular failure—such as that of the Tanganyikan groundnut scheme, when the British government invested heavily in trying to produce peanuts in a soil and climate totally unsuited to them—gave planners no pause. A later ruler of Tanganyika, the ruthlessly sanctimonious Julius Nyerere, came to realize that power lay in the shortage produced by centralization and incompetent planning, for in conditions of universal shortage powers of patronage increased dramatically. In the countryside, you could tell members of Nyerere's party, the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (the Party of the Revolution), by their girth. Thus there were no better tools for aspiring African dictators than the institutions and habits of mind bequeathed to them by the departing colonial regimes.

Kenyon makes no attempt to rank the dictatorships in order of viciousness or effect on the population, thereby implying that one dictatorship is much the same as another, but it is nevertheless a fact that they were, and are, equally bad. Sani Abacha was by far the worst of the Nigerian military dictators, for example, but even though he committed the atrocious crime of having Saro-Wiwa and others hanged, he could not be compared to, say, Macías Nguema of Equatorial Guinea or Sékou Touré of Guinea. Perhaps he was spared from being as bad as they only by the sheer size, complexity, and anarchy of Nigeria, so unsuited to the imposition of the extremer forms of dictatorship, rather than by any personal moral scruples, of which he had none.

There is a tendency—but only a tendency, not an invariant law—for those dictatorships to be worst whose dictators claim to have large and important ideas or theories—usually socialist—that they then impose on the whole population. Only the attempted implementation of such ideas and theories (other than the insensate brutality of Idi Amin in Uganda, say) are capable of subduing a population's irrepressible gaiety or *joie de vivre*, for such ideas require minute universal surveillance for their implementation. Most standard kleptocrats need only eliminate potential competitors for power; they can leave the rest of the population to its own devices.

But paranoia is an occupational hazard or disease of dictators of whatever kind, and takes the strangest forms when the dictators emerge from a social world in which superstition and belief in magic is endemic. I was once giving some Tanzanian soldiers a lift in a Land Rover when I saw a chameleon crossing the dirt road. Fascinated by this creature, I stopped to capture it. When I returned to the Land Rover, the soldiers, including their commanding officer, had fled into the bush and could be coaxed back only with difficulty. They believed that chameleons were extremely dangerous, both physically and spiritually.

Paul Kenyon's *Dictatorland* is entertaining, informative, and superficial. He attempts no explanation as to why what started with promise ended in disaster, but his book is nonetheless a useful introduction to modern Africa.

Theodore Dalrymple is a contributing editor to City Journal.