

Fracking the future: How Congolese oil extraction has shaped its history and its fate

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In 1969, the recently independent Republic of Congo discovered an enormous oil field off its coast. The find represented both a rare opportunity for the burgeoning nation, and a potential threat—the

revenue generated by oil extraction could either pave the way for a stable socialist society, or doom the country to exploitation much like that it had endured under French colonialism.

A new [paper](#) in *Critical Historical Studies*, titled "Enclosed Futures: Oil Extraction in the Republic of Congo," demonstrates how efforts to draw on the Congolese oil field for profit also necessitated drawing on the very future of the nation.

The article, written anonymously, its author citing concerns that the paper's claims might jeopardize their future research in Congo, narrates the history of the nation under "colonial territorialism," "postcolonial capitalism," and the "(un)certain futures" it faced after independence. The French colonial period saw the first efforts to "modernize" the Congolese through resource exploitation, forced labor, and conversion to Christianity. With the advent of the twentieth century, external interest in monetizing the region grew even more systematic, with researchers "collecting, recording, and mapping" the land in order to better package it for export.

The postwar period determined the great value of oil to the [global economy](#) at the same time that Congo was achieving its independence. The first leaders of the new Republic, like French-backed Fulbert Youlou, continued to allow Western access to Congolese oil despite growing poverty in the country. Mass demonstrations within Congo and the nationalist turn of the OPEC states inspired subsequent Congolese presidents to wrench back some control over the oil field.

The last of these, Marien Ngouabi, was assassinated in 1977. His successor, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, transformed the Republic into a military dictatorship and facilitated relations with French oil conglomerate Elf-ERAP, reversing the efforts of the past decades to give Congo greater ownership over its valuable resource. The future of

the country, once unsettled and open, was again tied to its ability to sell oil to the West.

"With the prospect of a decline in oil production now seeming irreversible," the author concludes, the fate of the African nation is once again in jeopardy. "Whether this inexorable decline of offshore infrastructures will put an end to the authoritarian forms of politics that they brought about remains to be seen."

More information: Anonymous, Enclosed Futures: Oil Extraction in the Republic of Congo, *Critical Historical Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/726776](https://doi.org/10.1086/726776)

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