



## ‘For King, for Freedom and for Justice’? Comments regarding Belgium’s Congo Commission<sup>1</sup>

**In the wake of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, outrage in Belgium also flares up about the country’s role in its former colonies. It would indeed be good if Belgium could come to terms with its colonial past and face up to its own blind spots of discrimination. Hence the question mark in the reference to our national anthem in the title... In this slipstream of world-wide indignation, the African diaspora is also denouncing discrimination in our society today. In order to bridge the gap between word and deed, following the expressions of regret by King Philippe, the Belgian Parliament has now also taken the initiative and set up a Congo committee to investigate how this can be done . Are expressions of regret from the Belgian government, or from the King about the role of his ancestor, enough? Who should they be addressed to? To the authorities of today’s Congo, that are not working convincingly on the present? To the population, then? But is this not too vague and non-committal? How is reparation for injustice done even possible? Is there, then, a need for reparations? Has only damage been done, and how do you account for this? If so, how much and who should be compensated?**

In the wake of the world-wide protests following the death of George Floyd and the continuing discrimination

against Afro-Americans in the United States, in Belgium outrage also flares up about the country’s role in its former colonies. It would indeed be good if Belgium could come to terms with its colonial past and face up to its own blind spots of discrimination. Hence the question mark in the reference to our national anthem in the title ... In the wake of world-wide indignation, the African diaspora is also denouncing discrimination in our society today. In order to bridge the gap between word and deed, following the expressions of regret by King Philippe, the Belgian Parliament has now also taken the initiative and set up a Congo committee to investigate how this can be done . Are expressions of regret from the Belgian government, or from the King about the role of his ancestor, enough? Who should they be addressed to? To the authorities of today’s Congo, that are not working convincingly on the present? To the population, then? But is this not too vague and non-committal? How is reparation for injustice done even possible? Is there, then, a need for reparations? Has only damage been done, and how do you account for this? If so, how much and who should be compensated?

With much opposition and discussion about who is now entitled to talk about these questions and act as an expert, the committee has started, but for sure the Belgian Parliament is where the discussion belongs<sup>2</sup>.

In the heat of the rediscovered indignation, however,

some nuance and context are lost. A second reason for comments in the margin of that committee is, if we want it to be more than a mere symbolic gesture, how we come to terms with that past and with different identities and discrimination in our society, and above all, how we can meet the needs of Congo today. After all, the country is suffering a new cycle of overexploitation of natural resources. A narrow political elite is reaping the benefits and the population is being left out. I wish there were as much indignation about this.

## **A very violent conquest**

A country changing from an agrarian circular economy to a capitalist one always goes through a painful process of destruction and creation. Western countries were able to spread that process of social disruption over more than three centuries, but most developing countries had only a few decades to adapt. The process took the form of colonialism, which in many cases led to the destruction of local cultures and the decimation of populations in Latin and North America, Asia, Australia and Africa.

In Congo, too, this annexation in the new world system was violent, especially in the first part of the colonial era, that of Leopold II (1885-1908). Prime Minister August Beernaert summarised this period well in 1908, when he wondered what had been achieved: 'En Afrique, rien. En Belgique, des travaux exclusivement somptuaires'. ('In Africa, nothing. In Belgium, only exorbitant works.') Historian Guy Vanthemsche rightly remarked that in the context of inter-imperialist competition, the death toll has been vastly exaggerated without any firm statistical base (De Standaard, 23 February). He stated that in that period hundreds of thousands of people had died as a result of war, forced labour and imported diseases, rather than 10 million or 13 million. But whether we are talking about half a million deaths or 10 million, the brutality, untold suffering and humiliation remain.

## **Apartheid**

The same exaggerations circulate about the enrichment of Belgium, which is said to have been built on the exploitation of Congo. The estimate of the net flow of financial resources during the period of Congo Free State was about 32 million gold francs or about 192 million euro today<sup>3</sup>. That does not represent 0.1% of the national income in 1908. By way of comparison, Belgian shareholders' losses on Russian investments in 1919 amounted to 3.5 billion gold francs, one hundred times more. Although per capita income in Belgium doubled during the 75 years of colonisation, it tripled in the forty

years after Congo's independence (1960-2000). It is therefore necessary to make a nuance about Belgium's wealth. Our economy is not only built on Congo.

Nevertheless, Belgian enterprises reaped the economic rents created by colonisation. During almost the entire formal colonisation period 1908-1960, the annual return of Belgian companies in Congo was systematically higher (7.18%) than that of all other equity on the Belgian Stock Exchange (2.87%)<sup>4</sup>. However, this does not fully reflect the costs and benefits of colonisation. The development of industry, the labours of the native labour force, but also the commitment of Belgians in education and health care and other public investments in Congo, did make the colony the second most prosperous country in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the wealth was very unevenly distributed. Foreigners, 1% of the population, held 99% of all capital, and the infrastructure was geared more to the needs of the metropolis than to those of the indigenous population. Above all, however, the indigenous population experienced apartheid and powerlessness as particularly humiliating.

## **The first international African War**

The young nation was ill-prepared for independence in 1960, but the winds of change made it unavoidable. Inherited institutions and imported democracy flourished poorly in the constructed national identity. In the context of the Cold War and the brutal attempt to safeguard Western economic interests, the Mobutu regime was given free rein. The regime not only wanted to establish its political sovereignty and national identity, but understandably also wanted to control the levers of the economy. The two pillars underpinning this were first and foremost investment in large-scale projects financed by international loans - the longest high-voltage line in the world, the development of heavy industry, the purchase of 30 Boeing jumbo jets... As in the Leopold II period, the regime had a bias for prestige projects, termed white elephants because they were unable to repay debts and fuel real growth and prosperity. The second pillar was a radical nationalization of all foreign economic assets (the Zaïrianisation) which mainly affected Belgian interests.

In both cases, all these new state enterprises were headed by political barons of the regime, who depended for their (political) existence on the goodwill of the leader, but not on their entrepreneurial performance. The result was an implosion of national prosperity and the explosion of foreign debt.

These external and internal factors resulted in a dramatic fall in per capita income for more than three decades. The slow collapse of existing infrastructure and production also emptied the state coffers and shrunk public services (1960-1996). This implosion of the economy and the state culminated in the first international African wars (1997-2003). The result? Hundreds of thousands dead and many more internal refugees. After the Sun City peace agreement in 2003, the difficult reconstruction of the resource-rich but weak state was reintegrated within the global world order. This 'order' was characterised by the weakening of the old dominant states and interests in Congo (the US, France, Belgium) and the rise of China in particular. To a large extent, the reconstruction goes hand in hand with the revival of the mining sector. Congo (but in fact mainly Chinese and Swiss companies) is once again the largest producer of copper in Africa and number one exporter in the world of strategic cobalt.

But too little has changed for the population. Two thirds of the population remain below the absolute poverty line. Social mobility and enrichment mainly depend on access to political influence and power. This access is now mainly via networks of political clientelism. At the same time, the population is longing for real representation and democratisation. The hybrid solution - Kabila and his presidential candidate were punished in the elections, but concluded an agreement with Félix Tshisekedi, who had finished second after Martin Fayulu - can be seen as a mockery of democratic values, or as a hesitant step in the growth towards democracy.

## **Atonement and Reparation (payments): A thorny issue**

The context I have outlined in rough outlines for this purpose provides some starting points for thinking about that particular historical 'guilt and penalty'.

First and foremost, it is the period of Leopold II and his personal 'État Indépendant du Congo' (EIC) (1885-1908) that represented a period of looting and violence without any significant quid pro quo for Congo. Leopold II's dream, of which H.M. Stanley said that 'his dream was too big for his purse', was soaked in blood. For that black page in our history, regrets are the least one can expect, and yet Congo has had to wait more than a century for them. For that period, it would also be appropriate to make more than a symbolic act of regret or apology. According to some lawyers, apologies from the Belgian government are a stronger signal than the king's expression of regret, because they could result in some form of reparation (payments). But this is by no means an easy exercise. A

distinction between the responsibility towards individual victims and the collective responsibility of one country towards another must be made.

In the first case, the compensation for the violence and injustice committed against the many thousands of Congolese during that period immediately raises a number of questions. The further in history the violence took place, the more difficult and improbable the reparation will be. It is difficult to ask Spain, for example, for reparation for the suffering caused by the 'Spanish fury' in the Southern Netherlands in the 16th century. The reason is simple: there are no survivors of the heirs who can prove the damage. Nor are there any survivors of the period of looting and violence under Leopold II; only descendants of victims would be able to claim damage and reparation if they could prove the kinship and the damage suffered. Recognition of the suffering on an official occasion, together with possible reparations to those descendants, may be appropriate here. However, since the latter is an unrealistic and difficult legal course of action, recognition of collective responsibility and reparation seems to be a possible way out.

Here, too, however, we have little solid ground for determining a material recovery in addition to the necessary excuses. The net flow of money raised by the EIC of Leopold II to finance the prestige projects in Belgium is the only solid indication. As stated above, this amounted to 32 million francs of gold or approximately €192 million in current value. On the other hand, Belgium spends about 100 million euros a year on development cooperation with the DRC (103.89 million euros in 2018). So the redistribution of reparations is not evident there either - one could only argue that the participation in the use of these development efforts should be more of a joint effort of Congolese and Belgians on an equal basis. It is true that this is now being done on the basis of a 'joint committee' between the governments of the two countries. The objections to this remain the position of donor (Belgium) and recipient 'Congo' and the fact that the recipient - the Congolese state - is under discussion, as a result of which the very concept of development cooperation lingers in a patronising relationship.

The following period, that of actual colonisation (1908-1960), is characterised by what has been called 'paternalistic capitalism'. The 'triumvirate' on which the colonial state was built consisted of the capital of the Belgian companies, a colonial administration and the Catholic Church which, in addition to christianisation, developed education and health care. Because of their monopoly position, Belgian companies made above-

average profits, but developed modern infrastructure, agriculture and industry into the second most prosperous economy in Sub-Saharan Africa. The indigenous population, however, was not given any responsibility in building this race-based economy. At most, they played a subordinate role in its implementation. As a result, the development of this tropical capitalism was seen as a Fremdkörper and was never really internalised. This may be one of the reasons for its complete neglect after independence.

Paternalism was also ingrained in the other two pillars of that colonial state. First of all, the administration of the territory, such as the maintenance of roads, justice and so on, was based on racial discrimination and repression. This may have been efficient, but it was perceived as illegitimate and humiliating. Lumumba, in his speech on Independence Day, expressed the essence of colonial injustice, which most Congolese recognised: “We have known mockery, insults, beatings that we had to endure morning, afternoon and evening because we were ‘Negroes’.”

Finally, there was the presence of the (Catholic and Protestant) churches with missionaries, schools, dispensaries and hospitals. The importance of the churches for health care and education reaching to the furthest corners of the immense country has proved to be one of the most enduring achievements of the colonial era, forming the backbone of essential public services to this day. However, the paternalism of the conversion zeal has often been the subject of fierce comments and criticism. From the point of view of the secularised West, and from contemporary values, it is perceived as very alienating. It is very paradoxical, however, that what has been seen as the most alienating part of colonisation is precisely the institution which today is most trusted by the population and followed as the moral authority to enforce democratic values and respect for human rights. This paradox can be explained by the fact that we have strongly underestimated the inculturation and internalisation of ideas, rites and values in Congo.

Is there, then, for this period of actual colonisation (1908-1960), any ground for reparation (payments)? As has been seen, the injustice inflicted on Congo and the Congolese consisted of the humiliations of colonisation and the disproportionate benefits that the colony, through the monopoly interests of its companies, brought to the motherland. In Frantz Fanon’s influential book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, the author writes that it is essential for the oppressed if they are to exist fully as subjects, that injustice be fought and justice enforced by force

(if necessary). In other words, reparation is something that must be fought for and not received as a gift. The process of decolonisation and the indictment and rupture that Lumumba embodied, remains therefore central to this restoration of human dignity for all Congolese and colonized. He has redressed humiliation by delivering his speech in public and in the presence of the symbol of oppression, the Belgian King.

As regards the disproportionate advantages acquired by Belgium as a result of the monopoly position of Belgian companies, the context we have outlined contains sufficient answer. Through the proximity and non-remunerated nationalisation of Belgian companies in Congo during the period of Zaïrianisation, Congo has collectively resisted and has thus created the opportunity to control the levers of wealth itself. The fact that this possibility has resulted in the destruction of this potential and capital is rather the responsibility of the independent state and its political class.

## **The charges and claims of Afro-Americans in the US and Europeans of African descent**

Finally let’s address the charges by the black population in the USA, but also in the former colonial powers, that discrimination on the basis of race, as the main characteristic of former colonisation, still persists. I have made a deliberate distinction between these two groups in the subtitle. Afro-Americans are mainly heirs of the black population who were transported to America as slaves against their will. The African community in Europe is mainly made up of migrants who have usually sought shelter there of their own free will for family-related, political or economic reasons. The ‘historical guilt’ towards Afro-Americans is therefore greater and the demands for justice and non-discrimination, more pressing. As a group, they have less access to good education and health care due to the nature of a weak welfare state. As a result, they die, on average, 15 years earlier than the white population and live more than the white population<sup>5</sup> in generational poverty.

The situation of the approximately 250,000 Afro descendants in Belgium is objectively different from that of Afro-Americans, although they subjectively share the same feeling of discrimination. Objectively, because Afro descendants are a recent phenomenon and the result of an individual or family choice. The latter contrasts with the Turkish and Moroccan migration that started in the 1960s on the basis of bilateral agreements between Belgium

and the emigration countries. The Afro-descendants are more highly educated than the other non-European migrants, yet unemployment and declassification, i.e. a job below the level of education, are significantly higher among them.<sup>6</sup> Eighty per cent of Afro-descendants indicate that they have to deal with, or at least feel they have to deal with, discrimination in the labour market and racial discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Objectively, however, the Afro-descendants, due to their migration status, and unlike the Afro-Americans, improve their material situation considerably. This is what Milanovic calls the citizenship dividend. This dividend consists of the difference in income between the country of origin and the country of emigration and access to public services (education, health care, unemployment...). On average, they are materially better off, but they experience discrimination here that they did not know in their home country. They share this experience of racial humiliation with 'their brothers' in the United States and this subjective bond is apparently stronger than the objective differences in opportunities and improvement of their material environment.

## Finally

The 'Black Lives Matter' movement that has flared up in the US as a result of structural (police) violence has had worldwide resonance and imitation and has put the problem of racial discrimination back on the social agenda. In Europe, it took different forms, from the iconoclasm of the symbols of colonisation, to the demands for reparation of injustice. Immediately, in the same vein, contemporary discrimination against Afro-descendants in our society has been denounced. The link between historical indignation and contemporary discrimination is that, over and above the enormous differences between situations in time and space, the experience of racial humiliation is universal. I have wanted to give an account of how injustice can be remedied, which varies according to the context. Apologies for the brutality and violence during Leopold II's reign, moments of remembrance and compulsory knowledge about the colonisation in history teaching, are certainly appropriate and relatively easy to realise. Tackling discrimination against Afro-descendants in the labour market is more important and more difficult.

What has remained outside the discussion and indignation, however, is the current situation in Congo. Two thirds of the population live below the absolute poverty line, 90% of active Congolese do not have access to wage labour and social security, and their calls for less corruption and more democracy have been thwarted. This exclusion is happening despite the fact that Congo

has been 'rediscovered' by foreign mining interests and production is increasing. History never repeats itself in the same way, but the same structural error seems to be repeated here. The actors are different, Belgian, French, and American interests have been replaced mainly by Chinese and Swiss multinationals, and the state is now in the hands of Congolese, but the pattern is the same. A production geared to foreign needs and demand for cobalt, copper, tantalum, etc., which mainly serves foreign mining interests and enriches a small domestic elite. Admittedly, changing this pattern is something that far exceeds the power and resources of a Congolese Commission and Belgium.

## References

1. <https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1462/55K1462001.pdf>
2. It is incomprehensible that Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem is missing from that committee. Not only is he the author of the most important historical work on Congo written by a Congolese, *Histoire générale du Congo* (1997), 955 p., but he lives and works in Congo and is the driving force behind a movement for more democracy.
3. Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *ibid.*, p. 336.
4. F. Buelens and S. Marysse, 'Returns on investments during the colonial era: the case of the Belgian Congo', in: *The Economic History Review*, volume 62, pp. 135-166, (2009).
5. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, OUP, 2001, p. 22.
6. See S. Demart et alii, *Burgers met Afrikaanse wortels: een portret van Congolese, Rwandese en Burundese Belgen*, Koning Boudewijn Stichting, 2017. Half of all respondents to that extensive study revealed that they held a job that did not correspond to the level of their diploma.
7. *Ibid.*: "Of all respondents, 41% had a job as their main activity during the month before the survey, just over a quarter were students, 19% were unemployed and 15% stayed at home, were disabled or retired" (Figure 8, Table 17).

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### Stefaan Marysse

Institute of Development Policy,  
University of Antwerp

[Stefaan.marysse@uantwerpen.be](mailto:Stefaan.marysse@uantwerpen.be)

Institute of Development Policy  
University of Antwerp  
[iob@uantwerpen.be](mailto:iob@uantwerpen.be)  
+32 3 265 57 70

[uantwerp.be/iob](http://uantwerp.be/iob)