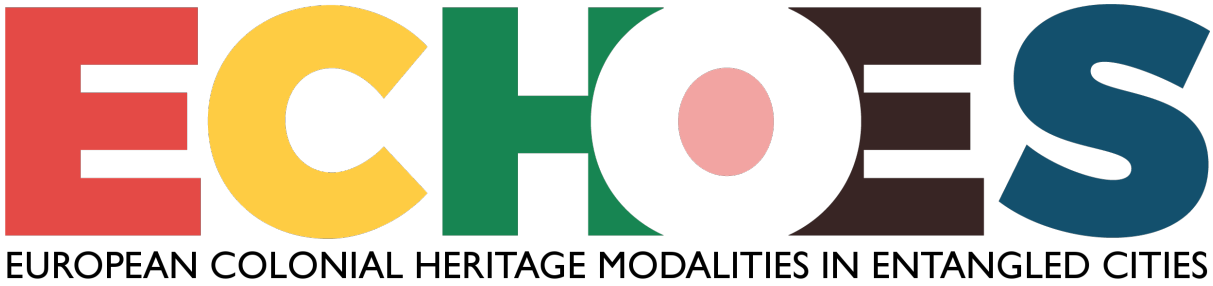

A Renewed Impetus for Reflection on our Colonial Legacies in 2020

Policy Brief

October 2020



A bit more than halfway in, 2020 has turned into a year like no other in our recent history. The challenges faced on a global level have heavily impacted on all aspects of life, from the economy and politics to social and personal concerns. The health crisis experienced worldwide has not only brought challenges for EU institutions at all levels but also has exposed the fragility of processes of collaboration, such as those advocated in external relations activities. This policy brief reflects on a series of lessons learned during the tumultuous events of 2020 in the context of our project. We take this opportunity to reflect on some of the major events witnessed across Europe during 2020 and the lessons to be considered by policy makers and other agents of European diplomacy in light of these events. Some of the issues we discuss here have a direct connection with our colonial past, while others inadvertently highlight the negative legacies of colonialism within European institutions and in power relations amongst different citizen groups in European cities.

The Health Crisis and Inequality

Early on in the development of the COVID – 19 pandemic, the strains within international collaborations were exposed. Countries decided to close down borders, in an effort to contain the toll of rising illness, and lockdowns were enforced at a national level in different countries across Europe. Economic inequalities were quickly exposed and discussed at a global level, especially in relation to the world's poor, for whom such lockdown measures were a luxury beyond reach.[1] Workers in lower-paid positions in different sectors (e.g. public services) or those that depended on casual contracts saw their income security threatened, in the face of rising unemployment. Access to technology was another area of inequality,[2] as well as inequality in access to healthcare across Europe.[3] Moreover, commentators highlighted the gendered impacts of the lockdown, pointing to the disproportionately large number of primary carers who are women, particularly but not exclusively in poorer communities.

[1] Anonymous 2020
[2] Myers (2020)
[3] Burström and Tao (2020)

At first sight, the health crisis also offered a prime opportunity for international collaboration, which has seen laboratories and scientists across the EU come together to find a vaccine in record time. While salutary and seemingly offering an impetus for science diplomacy at an international level, worldwide events have also exposed some of older ways of thinking,[4] including Eurocentrism and neocolonial tendencies. This was clearly exposed by an incident in the French media, when two scientists suggested Africa should be used as a testing ground for the efficacy of a vaccine against Coronavirus.[5] While this was an isolated incident in an increasingly heated debate, research and thinking in the area has exposed global inequalities and Eurocentric models of generating science. Recent publications, often led by Western researchers, have sparked discussions at international level of repeating old patterns, whereby the Global South is all but absent in science collaboration, or its presence is limited to being a subject rather than a creator of science. This tendency entrenches older patterns of colonial relationships, a fact not missed by recent commentators.[6] In response to such observations, Twitter has seen a new hashtag circulating: #DecolonizeGlobalHealth. These international calls to decolonize health research and practices reflect our own concerns in the ECHOES project regarding the recognition and legitimacy of knowledge production, as well as our concern for re-centring marginalised voices and the need for recognition of our moral responsibility for the effects of entanglements created by former colonial relations.

The current health crisis has augmented and amplified the calls for recognition and action in these areas at a global level. The events discussed here cannot be ignored by policy makers, as we continue the work of healing and reparation in Europe.

Black Lives Matter and the Issue of Representation

During these highly charged times, when regular life has been upended, another major event happened that brought a further dimension of the decolonial debate into public life. The killing of a Black US citizen, George Floyd, by a white police officer on 20 May 2020 sparked an

[4] Nordling 2015
[5] Clopot and Oldfield 2020
[6] See Ahmed 2020 for a pertinent critique of these tendencies and a call for African states to employ a decolonial approach as a form of resistance.

international reaction, with protests held across the world in the middle of a global pandemic.[7] This event quickly spiralled and several countries across Europe saw massive discussions and protests centred on anti-racism and social justice messages, most of them embracing the rhetoric and slogans of the earlier grassroots campaign #BlackLivesMatter. The ongoing discussions promoted by movements such as Black Lives Matter have only increased in intensity, turning this into a new time of reckoning and reflection on structural racism in different European societies.

Heritage in its different forms, especially monumentality, became a matter of public debate like never before. Latent debates, such as those around the presence of offensive or 'racist' monuments and their symbolic presence in public spaces, were resurrected, led by grassroots efforts for mobilization. Perhaps the most widely publicized of these protests, certainly in the UK, was the successful effort to remove the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, UK, a prominent British businessman and slave owner.[8] This intervention, albeit deemed illicit and treated by the authorities as an act of vandalism, was considered by some an act of activism, which aimed to highlight the ongoing effects of institutional racism. The counter-reactions to such movements were also documented, with acts such as the desecration of a black gravestone in St. Mary's Churchyard, Bristol, to leading to public discussion of ongoing 'culture wars'.[9]

Similar protests were seen across Europe, with statues and monuments in Belgium, The Netherlands and other countries placed under scrutiny.[10] In Milan, Italian activists daubed the statue of the journalist Indro Montanelli with red paint and demanded its removal from public view. They referenced the 20th century journalist's questionable activities in Ethiopia, which led to accusations of racism and rape.[11] Here again, the protest also led to a counter-reaction from supporters of the status quo. One significant point that is raised by this particular case, as noted by our ECHOES colleague, is the lack of diversity of voices represented in the media and implicated in these debates.

A similar debate appeared in Belgium around the controversial statue of King Leopold,[12] in light of his actions in Congo. Replicating the debates of the other countries, the public

[7] Zabunyan 2020
[8] Schütz and Zabunyan 2018
[9] Casalicchio 2020
[10] Gianolla and Ameida 2020
[11] Pozzi 2020
[12] Lusalusa 2020

discussion was fuelled not only by the presence of monuments of a colonial nature in public spaces but also by the marginalisation and structural racism encountered by African immigrants living in today's Belgian cities.

In reaction to such powerful, widespread grassroots movements, institutions of different types, from businesses to museums, and even states in the West (mainly) rushed to offer apologies, reparations,[13] or simply reinstate Black Lives Matter within their remits.[14] Artists,[15] activists, writers [16] and politicians have publicly weighed into these debates. Issues of remembrance and commemoration have brought to the fore the complex sensitivities involved in heritage matters across Europe, including the tensions caused by disregarded or mismanaged heritages resulting from colonial entanglements. The lessons of these events should not be ignored by European policymakers going forward. As the various movements across the world have demonstrated, groups and communities that have for a long time been disempowered or silenced in different ways have been empowered to demand change when faced with discriminatory practices, putting pressure on local and municipal authorities to act. In these circumstances, pre-established patterns of behaviour are not enough. Something more is needed, akin to affirmative action.

If we are to create better European societies where the respect of diversity continues to be the touchstone of policy and political action, policymakers and representatives of different European bodies need to carefully consider the structures they operate in and carefully scrutinise these for veiled racisms and unequal representation of marginalised groups.

Knowledge and Knowledge Creation

As a corollary to the events discussed above, one of the key topics raised by these public events and movements is that of knowledge creation and whose knowledge matters at different levels

[13] See for instance these UK businesses' commitment to pay reparations for their role in the slave trade: Rawlinson 2020
[14] Gompertz 2020
[15] Zabunyan 2020
[16] See ECHOES 2020a for a collated collection of reactions from academics, artists and activists to BLM events.

of society. In our previous outputs and policy briefs,[17] we have emphasised the need to seriously consider alternative forms of knowledge in the policies and programmes of the EU.

Recent events have emphasised the importance of taking seriously what researchers within ECHOES consider as 'community knowledge'. This is not only a good practice, but a moral imperative, as we look to redress the wrongdoings of the past when European ways of thinking dominated colonial relations. By proposing the term community knowledge, we mean to highlight the diverse, multi-, pluri- forms of knowledge that ordinarily do not fall within the remit of what in Europe is known as scientific knowledge. We include under this umbrella, for instance, the previously discussed ideas of indigenous knowledge,[18] but aim to expand this beyond the narrow notion of what indigeneity might refer to in international policy. Thus, by using the term community knowledge instead, we aim to incorporate different forms of knowledge that include, but are not limited to, memories passed from generation to generation, oral traditions and rituals and other forms of cultural representation. This wider remit thus links knowledge with notions of heritage and identity, whereby preserving and transmitting these minutiae fosters a sense of identity and shared heritage. It is our understanding, considering also the patterns of marginalisation mentioned above, that such forms of knowledge are vulnerable and can easily get discarded and replaced with 'conventional' forms of Western knowledge (e.g. scientific knowledge as included in heritage research projects). We also note the richness of the contribution of actors collaborating and exchanging such knowledge, from the activists mentioned above to the artists that mix elements of different traditions and communities, or ad-hoc communication acts such as graffiti. Such forms of mixed knowledge are often disregarded as marginal or irrelevant, yet they represent core ways of keeping community knowledge alive.

We think it is thus imperative for the different actors involved both in policy work and projects and activities on the ground in different location, to reflect on their role in the formation and transformation of knowledge, accept their subaltern position in relation to such local knowledge, while at the same time making it a priority to listen to the views of the groups and communities involved in these processes.

[17] ECHOES 2020b
[18] Ibidem

Smaller agents such as museum curators, for instance, have begun to reflect and take serious action across Europe, through restitution or other forms of collaboration and interaction with diverse publics, mindful of their duty towards their communities. As we have seen in the ECHOES project, citizen groups and artists[19] across Europe and beyond are also part of the complex set of actors that have carefully reflected on the knowledge they produce or promote through their work, taking active measures to bring marginalised voices to the centre of public debates and public action. As we have argued previously, we believe such non-state actors have a fundamental role to play in advancing our efforts for building more equitable systems of collaboration and representation based on intercultural principles.

Heritage Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations

The ongoing transformations of life across Europe, especially in relation to cultural agents, often underpaid and vulnerable (maybe even more so now), have also emphasised calls for cultural cooperation in official discourses of different institutions. In this setting, for instance, EUNIC has recently released a statement outlining the need for advancing work on international cultural relations[20] at a global level to promote peace and encourage resilience and economic recovery. Official top-level meetings such as the September 2020 meeting of senior officials from the foreign and culture ministries of the EU countries to discuss this topic emphasise the renewed significance of ICR at the European level. As a recent ECHOES webinar outlined, ICR principles dictate that rather than following narrow national interests, states and other actors should set up international collaborations to focus on finding solutions for global problems, such as the global health crisis mentioned above, climate change and environmental issues.[21]

Although the 2016 Joint Communication '*Towards an EU strategy for international cultural relations*' (JOIN/2016/029 final) created a favourable policy framework, however, there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure its implementation. There is still plenty of confusion around the influential notion of soft power,[22] for instance, which is often more attractive for top level

[19] See for instance, Schütz and Joffe 2020
[20] EUNIC 2020
[21] ECHOES 2020c
[22] Nye 2008

institutions to embrace than the more difficult-to-measure ICR. The clear alignment of other forms of diplomacy with the foreign policy goals of the EU and its member states, as well as with measurable soft power objectives, makes ICR a difficult choice at different levels of engagement. COVID-19 has brought with it significant challenges, particularly in relation to mobility, which is key for the implementation of ICR. On the other hand, digitisation offers new opportunities, not least when it comes to including different technologies in the day-to-day activities of different institutions.

There is, as we mention above, a renewed impetus for ICR, even (or rather due to) the extraordinary crisis we are experiencing. However, to ensure further progress in the implementation of ICR, some leaps are necessary not only by incorporating technologies in activities. Rather, actions such as the investment in training for relevant EU officials (e.g. members of EEAS, DEVCO, EU delegations) are key to fostering an appreciation of ICR but also to understanding the sensitivity needed to enter into genuine intercultural dialogue with project partners. This cannot happen if there is no in-depth and maybe uncomfortable reflection on our moral obligations for the colonial past that sometimes continues to be presented positively by some institutions and states, not least through the language of imperial conquest or 'discoveries' of new territories. The importance of bottom-up initiatives, like those investigated by ECHOES, has been outlined again in recent months in these discussions. As the Composing Trust report outlines,[23] there are significant challenges faced by independent cultural professionals or civil society groups in accessing funds or getting involved in projects. There are also significant opportunities for fostering ICR by promoting on-the-ground movements and projects, including addressing the colonial past. There is thus more work needed to ensure a favourable climate of cooperation, so that top-down initiatives and frameworks of participation do not continue to dominate, and that the independent views and perspectives of a range of different cultural actors are respected.

One recommendation is thus to ensure that meetings for ICR projects bring together different types of actors, whose voices are listened to and that meeting mediation ensures neutrality, rather than imposing the views and values of EU institutions representatives.

[23] Helly 2020

A suitable framework for such an approach was already discussed at European level in the 2019 'Draft Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations and a framework for action' (7749/19). The document mentions, for instance, the need for 'cooperation with local stakeholders and civil society at all levels (planning, design, implementation) and on an equal footing, aiming at bottom-up and people-to-people approach, local empowerment, participation and co-creation' (CoEU 2019: 4). The next step is then to ensure wider application of these principles in practice.

While the considerations above can be interpreted as recommendations for ICR more generally, they are equally relevant for the topic that is key for us, that of colonial legacies. A precondition of any potential ICR project is opening a dialogue between members around objectives and values. In the cases where a former colonial relation is known, this history needs to brought into the discussion, so that the effects of this legacy in the present do not hinder the success of the project.

However, we argue that something more is needed and that it is essential to reflect on our colonial past more thoroughly at all levels, including an honest recognition of the enduring legacies of past wrongdoings, not only the easily achievable grassroots level. Institutions at all levels need to carefully tailor their activities and processes to mitigate for unequal power relations, to respond and bring change in reaction to marginalised voices. This time of reckoning has brought to the fore the need for revising existing policies, teasing out inconsistencies in the treatment of heritage across different EU structures. Should the ethos of ICR and its ideals of dialogue and listening be fulfilled, superficial engagement with such important issues will no longer suffice.

Deep engagement, based on recognition of different actors and the different forms of knowledge they bring from their groups and communities, needs to be central in any ICR or diplomatic effort. Moreover, dedicating specific funds for ICR activities, rather than the ad-hoc inclusion of limited projects under other financial instruments (e.g. Creative Europe), with easier mechanisms of participations for different types of actors, would be a welcome step towards ensuring better opportunities for different actors.

Marginalised and disregarded groups at European levels have found new impetus to issue claims to representation in heritage narratives, and become genuine participants in heritage-

work. Their limited involvement in remembrance processes through monumental heritage across the world has also been contested. With such complex discussions at play across Europe, this is an exciting moment to build more equitable ways of living and working together that are grounded on more sensitive understandings of our shared history within Europe.

Concluding Recommendations

Throughout the duration of the ECHOES project (2018-2021) we have analysed different projects addressing colonial heritage at city level in different countries (UK, The Netherlands, Denmark, Portugal, China, Brazil, South America). Our research into different decolonial projects and initiatives across Europe and beyond, presented in different outputs,[24] has highlighted the importance of decolonial heritage projects. Interpreting such projects as manifestations of heritage diplomacy and international cultural relations has enabled us to bring some general reflections on the shortcomings of current policy and practice in addressing Europe's colonial past. Here we bring together some of the key recommendations for policy makers to take away that we think would address these shortcomings.

- There is an urgent need for EU policymakers at all level to confront the legacies of colonialism.
- While there are significant barriers to the creation of a shared European narrative on our colonial past, some of them political or related to different interpretations of the colonial past across member states, we need to arrive at a more equitable representation of colonial legacies in different narratives of shared heritages across Europe.
- While top-down approaches have their merits, grassroots movements and independent cultural actors (including museum curators and artists) are vitally important in advancing our understanding of colonial legacies and in addressing these legacies sensitively.
- Such independent cultural actors bring with them a wealth of local knowledge, sometimes indigenous knowledge, that needs to be incorporated into heritage

[24] ECHOES (n.d.)

diplomacy efforts on equal grounds with other forms of knowledge (e.g. scientific knowledge).

- Listening and the ability to foster genuine intercultural dialogue are skills that policymakers and EU professionals at all levels need to exercise routinely. This includes an openness towards integrating a wider range of actors in diplomatic activities and involving them in policy development processes.
- European institutions, representatives and policymakers should go further in advocating the acceptance of a multicultural Europe as a precondition for thinking in terms of intercultural relations. This includes addressing inconsistencies in the treatment of heritage across different areas of policy interventions (e.g. integration, development, etc).
- Whether labelled as heritage diplomacy or ICR, international collaboration projects and initiatives that address the colonial past need to be based on a foundation of trust and mitigate against unequal power relations between partners. This should include actions or any reparations needed to account for the past.
- Rather than being ignored, or addressed solely by grassroots efforts, colonial heritage needs to be mainstreamed at European level and should be included as a fundamental topic in existing heritage and arts and cultures initiatives.

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