



The Return of the Colonial question in Europe

Report to the European Parliament



Centre for Social Studies
University of Coimbra



AARHUS
UNIVERSITY



MUSEU HISTÓRICO
NACIONAL,
RIO DE JANEIRO



Introduction

The Horizon 2020 research project ECHOES (European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities), Grant agreement ID: 770248, responded to the call on strengthening Europe's position in the global contexts: science diplomacy and intercultural relations in the 2016-2017 work programme.¹

The main aim of the project was to understand how European practices and policies around European colonial heritage impact on contemporary and future reflections on Europe's relations with the regions and countries formerly colonized by European powers. Colonial heritage is a very direct and manifest trace of the many determinants from the colonial era still present in European societies as well as in societies formerly colonized by European powers. A further aim was to reflect on how new perceptions of the colonial past can lead to new forms of intercultural relations between different European actors and actors in the formerly colonized world.

ECHOES departs from the well-known claim that European history has to be understood as entangled. Entanglement is, in fact, both a dynamic factor and a result of history.² Global entanglements are an integral part of European history. For centuries, maritime powers in Western Europe and land-based empires in Eastern Europe dominated people both within and outside Europe through a system of colonies and imperial mechanisms. ECHOES directly addresses the question of how colonial and imperial systems have influenced European values and European societies, as well as how this past still determines perceptions of Europe in the Global South and the Global East. Despite decolonization and the breakdown of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, "technologies of imperialism and colonial matrices of power continue to exist in the minds, lives, languages, dreams, imaginations and epistemologies of modern subjects" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, p. 11). The cultural diversity of many European societies is to a high degree determined by former colonial entanglements. By the same token, European influence is easily detectable in formerly colonized countries.

Colonialism and European Integration

Post- and decolonial theories have for long pointed to the role of colonialism in the formation of modern Europe. The wave of independence following WWII did not eradicate the long-term effects of this entanglement. In many ways, it makes sense to talk of a postcolonial Europe after 1945 (Bhambha 2009). Several scholars have pointed to the role of colonial imaginaries with their visions

¹ <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/770248>

² The theoretical and methodological tools within the ECHOES project

of a Eurafica dominated by the not even quite former European, colonial powers in the early history of European integration (Buettner, Pasture, Hansen & Jönsson). The geopolitical shifts caused by the unfolding of the Cold War turned such expansionist imaginaries into vain fantasies that had to be replaced by ideas more suitable to what the British historian and polyglot Arnold Toynbee termed the dwarfing of Europe. European integration would be condensed around economic cooperation and custom union among European states. Memories of five centuries of colonialism would be replaced by willful amnesia (Stoler 2011, Pasture 2018) and myths of peaceful collaboration in a postwar of post-nationalism.

Driven by a functionalist ideology, the integrationist dynamics would unfold step by step from the 60s to include a range of new topics and policy areas. In the 70s – beginning with the famous Copenhagen declaration from 1973 – European identity was to become the banner of a new European vitalism, which included such elements as values, culture and civilization (Ifversen 2002). European identity politics expanded over the next decades to include the lessons learned from the totalitarian nightmare and particularly from the Holocaust that was made into the absolute European point zero and a negative foundation myth for a new Europe risen as a Phoenix from the ashes or recreated through a virgin birth (Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013). With European integration taking the form of a Union, new elements such as citizenship, constitution-making (which eventually failed), and foreign policy were added to the political inventory.

From the late 90s, driven by series of enlargement, identity, culture and values fed into new ambitious plans of becoming a global player. EU scholars pointed to the EU as an international actor which gained influence through the particular normative power it gained from transferring European values to a universal level (Manners 2002). Some scholars saw it as a new cosmopolitan era for the transnational experiment that EU was (Beck and Grande 2007). Others pointed to similarities between former imperialist ideologies of a civilizing mission and the discourse of Europe as a benefactor of universal values among neighbours and in the wider world (Kølvraa 2012a; Kalypto Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe and Gabrielle Maas 2014).

The re-emergence of the colonial question

Whatever the reasons for the bolstering of European identity politics, it is clear that there was no room for the colonial past in the founding and running of the negative mythomoteur. Already as early as 1950, Aimé Césaire's outcry that "(w)hether one likes it or not, at the end of the blind alley that is Europe, I mean the Europe of Adenauer, Schuman, Bidault, and a few others, there is Hitler"

(Césaire 1972, 37) was met with silence among white Europeans. The advanced critiques of colonialism and racism formulated by leading intellectuals such as Fanon, Césaire, Nkrumah, Cabral, DuBois and others reached only a small audience in Europe. In the official master narrative of European history, postwar decolonization would signal the final chapter of Europe's colonial past. The obvious existence of a postcolonial Europe would be left unnoticed and repressed or only resurface within the European nation states that succeeded the colonial empires in times of conflict (such as involvement in colonial wars). With the breakthrough of post- and decolonial studies within European and North American academia since the late 1970s, the question of the forgotten, colonial past was raised by an ever-growing chorus of scholars (David Theo Goldberg, Gurinder Bhambra, Michael Rothberg).

Other memory and heritage institutions followed suit. From the second decade of the 21st century, the colonial past seriously started to become an issue in public debates, but still without really turning into a *European* matter. As Elizabeth Buettner writes, “the inadequate Europeanization to date [of debates on colonial heritage within EU member states], however, is matched by the ongoing neglect—which might arguably qualify as active or unthinking repression—of empire as an EU history with lingering consequences” (keyword). This neglect is certainly very visible on the political scene of the EU. While condemnations of colonialism, racism and slavery were expressed by the EU institutions since the 2000s, they remained disconnected from Europe's colonial past (Sierp 2020). Pressure to open debates on colonial heritage primarily came from members of the European Parliament. In 2015, Markus Prutsch conducted a study for the EP on the challenges relating to European historical memory, where he timidly proposed that “if we think of common memories shared across the continent, would not the memories of Colonialism and Imperialism – in a wide sense of the meaning – be no less 'European' than the Holocaust?” (Prutsch 2015, p.25).

While never on a par with Holocaust, the crucial focal point of EU memory and identity politics, and with communism, the newcomer in the chamber of horrors of European memory, colonialism at times slipped into memory initiatives such as the ongoing series of Europe for Citizens programmes. Still when it came to more important matters beyond memory initiatives such as the so-called migration crisis, European colonialism could easily be sent back to a past long gone, as the EU Commissioner for migration and home affairs Dimitris Avramopoulos made clear in a speech delivered in 2019: “I want to briefly zoom in on our cooperation with Africa. The essence of our approach has been frank and trust-building partnerships. I want to be clear on that: The very first

signal I sent to these countries is that the colonial era is over. So a trustful relationship has been established” (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_7030).

Groups of MEPs have made several tries to establish a European ‘day’ in recognition of the victims of European colonization and colonial slavery, but without success. So far, the closest we have got is an online event that took place in the European Parliament on November 2020 commemorating the European Day for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The most robust result of this initiative is the resolution on fundamental rights of people of African descent in Europe adopted by the EP the 26th of March 2019 in which it is stated that the EU institutions and the Member States should be encouraged “to officially acknowledge and mark the histories of people of African descent in Europe, including of past and ongoing injustices and crimes against humanity, such as slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, or those committed under European colonialism” (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0239_EN.html).

The massive public reaction following in the wake of the murder of George Floyd also affected the EP. In a debate on the protests, a member of the Greens/EFA group directly linked racism in Europe to the colonial past: “pour ma part en tant que femme noire en Europe, je n’ai pas seulement pris conscience de la réalité raciste chez nous, j’ai vécu la réalité raciste de l’Europe pendant les 40 dernières années. Ce qui se passe dans le monde aujourd’hui est le résultat de structures colonialistes d’oppression qui sont en place depuis des centaines d’années. Il ne s’agit pas d’individus, il s’agit d’un racisme systémique et institutionnalisé qui vise les Noirs et toutes les minorités ethniques” (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-06-17-ITM-019_EN.html).

Practices around European, Colonial Heritage

ECHOES follows in the footsteps of the emerging scholarly interventions into the question of colonialism, slavery and genocide as a *European* one. We do, however, shift the focus from the broader perspective on memory that has dominated the scholarly debate to heritage. We understand heritage not so much as a “thing” but rather as a set of social and cultural processes and a way of thinking, writing, and practicing in relation to objects or phenomena. In other words, heritage becomes a form of discourse (Smith, 2006). “Heritage as discourse” is a means of thinking and writing about objects and phenomena in the world that constitutes them as heritage through formal and informal acts of recognition. Defining objects and phenomena as heritage becomes a complex play between the qualities of the thing or phenomenon (age, patina, perceived

authenticity, etc.) and social and historical processes of representation and recognition, as well as forms of power linked to notions of nationhood, community, tradition, religion, and identity.

ECHOES take a systematic look at the different contemporary practices and discourses around European colonial heritage. As part of our methodological toolkit, we chose four different categories – termed modalities – for understanding the different discourses and practices around colonial heritage in European cities as well as in cities in former colonized countries such as South Africa, Brazil and China. During the project period, we experienced a dramatic heating of debates and interventions around European colonial heritage not least unleashed by the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives matter Movement’s anti-racist and social justice messages. The protests led to a series of engagement and direct intervention with colonial heritage such as the successful effort in Bristol to remove the statue of Edward Colston, a prominent eighteenth-century slave trader and businessman. Similar protests erupted in Belgium, this time focusing on the controversial figure of Leopold II and the atrocities carried out in his name in the Congo Free State (1885-1908). Through the input from activists and artists, ECHOES mapped the reflections behind these interventions in an online catalogue termed key interventions, see <https://keywordsechoes.com/interventions>.

ECHOES chose to work with four different modalities of heritage practices: *Repression*, *Removal*, *Reframing* and *Reemergence*. They specify how heritage practices “treat, relate to, produce or reduces the echoes of the colonial past in and through the significations, displays, actions, interventions and social relations mobilized” (Kølvraa, keywords). Repression denotes practices that involve a silencing or denial of the colonial past, which is what has (and still is) happening most of the time across much of Europe. Removal denotes situations where the presence or absence of this heritage in public spaces, archives and discourses is actively or often antagonistically politicized, while reframing points to situations that seek to incorporate this heritage into new consensual—and, at times, commercialized—frames of reference.

Re-emergence, our prime focus, is used for the practices that, at least potentially, open up social space for new voices, affects and bodies forging relations or ‘contact zones’ between actors, which transcend both the antagonistic dichotomies of removal and the domesticating pressures of reframing, thereby opening up the possibility for a heritage practice that presents a lost opportunity from the past that returns to offer itself as a potential future horizon. Re-emergence transgresses linear temporalities as it connects and moves back and forth between the past, the present and the future. The dichotomy between imaginary and real is likewise dissolved to express the imagined decolonial future in the here and now. The modalities has been investigated among a variety of

different actors from citizens, activist and artists to scholars, museum experts and EU officials and professionals around European culture and heritage. In ECHOES, we concentrated on examining European, colonial heritage as it is articulated and practiced within networks and institutions involved in different forms of science diplomacy which circulates around European culture and heritage.

European, Cultural Diplomacy

As part of this endeavor, we set out to re-evaluate the notion of ‘science diplomacy’, which hitherto has been associated with ‘diffusion’; that is, the export of ideas, values, expertise and money. This emphasis is perhaps most common associated with US cultural diplomacy post-WW2. Similar ideas have been embedded (and are still evident) in a lot of thinking about the EU’s exercise of ‘soft power’ – even at a moment when the EU, not least with its ‘Strategy for International Cultural Relations’ (2016), committed itself to International Cultural Relations, which imagines states and other actors working collaboratively, rather than in pursuit of narrow national interests. In a speech from 2018, Federica Mogherini strongly emphasized the role of “culture as an integral part of our European foreign policy” and promoted Europe as “the cultural superpower of the world” (quoted in Alexandra Oancă 2021). The inclusion of culture and heritage into EUs policies of external relations in general and more specifically into science and heritage diplomacy relied on growing collaboration with a network of European and national, cultural institutions of which the oldest was the European Cultural Foundation.

National cultural institutes such as the German Goethe Institute, the British Council, Alliances Françaises and Instituto Cervantes as well as their European organization, EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture), which operates as a strategic partner for the EU in international, cultural relations were central players in EU’s strategic investment in cultural diplomacy. The collaboration led to a series of initiatives such as the 2006 report “the cultural component as an integral part of the EU’s foreign policy”, the establishment of EUNIC in 2007, “More Europe”, the cultural civil initiative set up in 2011, the Cultural Diplomacy Platform established in 2016 following the recommendations of the Preparatory Action “Culture in EU’s external relations” from 2014, and not least the 2016 strategy “to put culture at the heart of EU international relations”.³

ECHOES held a series of workshop in Brussels (an online for the last one) to discuss approaches to cultural and heritage diplomacy with academics involved in other relevant H2020 projects on

³ For a mapping and discussions of these initiatives, see Oancă 2021.

intercultural relations such as El-CSID and Ilucidare, representatives of various European museums and cultural institutions such as House of European History, Europa Nostra, Eurocities, ENCATC, EUNIC, representatives from EU's Education Audiovisual and Cultural Executive Agency (EACEA) and not least representatives from universities and cultural institutions in countries formerly colonized by European powers, including the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool Fudan University, Shanghai, the District Six Museum in Cape Town; the Centre for Community Knowledge, New Delhi, and Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town.

The House of European History

Another important initiative to mention is the establishment of a museum for Europe under the auspices of the EP, the House of European History (HEH) which opened in 2017 after nearly ten years of preparation and consultation. There are several museums in Europe with a transnational perspective. Most of them are ethnographic museums that deal with global relations often based on collections originating from colonial relations. When it comes to museums, which deal explicitly with Europe as more than a geographical space, the list becomes much smaller. The *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* in Berlin presents the variety of daily life from the 18th century to our time, the *Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* in Marseille looks at intercultural and historical relations across physical and political borders. A number of museums are dedicated to founding fathers of European integration.⁴ There is to our knowledge only one museum in Europe, which is dedicated entirely to European history, namely HEH.

It is thus both a professional museum and an EU institution, which makes it an obvious partner and an excellent object for studying political and scholarly processes around Europeanization of heritage. ECHOES Researchers published research on the HEH exhibition within a perspective of Europeanizing European colonial heritage as part of the WP deliverables.⁵ Furthermore, a public online debate around different ways of narrating and exhibiting Europe's colonial heritage was organised between ECHOES scholars, curators from HEH and the audience. In the debate HEH curator Kieran Burns emphasized that one of the purposes of HEH had been to break silences by mentioning how the abusive system of colonialism and slavery were undeniable and inherent elements of European history. The approach chosen in the exhibition entailed reflecting on the specific role that museums themselves played in colonialism and the underlying racism of the system. The core message of the

⁴ For a discussion of these museums see Kølvråa (2012a) and Ifversen (2019).

⁵ Buettner (2018) and Ifversen (2019).

exhibition about European colonialism is that the ideology of superiority and progress in European expansionism covered up a system of oppression based on European, technical and scientific progress.

Kieran Burns also pointed to the ways that the continuous role of colonialism in the 20th century (the global world wars and the Cold War) unfolded, and how the decolonization was quite forcefully presented in the exhibition of this part of European history. ECHOES scholars agree that compared to other EU attempts to deal with European heritage such as the European heritage label campaign (Turunen 2019), and the “New narrative for Europe” that ran from 2013 to 2017⁶, HEH certainly included European colonial heritage as central for the darker sides of European history presented in the exhibition (together with holocaust, communism, war, poverty and gender discrimination). However, as remarked by Elizabeth Buettner, “In its current form, the HEH devotes so little attention to the end of Europe’s overseas empires in its postwar exhibits that visitors might be forgiven if they left thinking either that colonialism had been over long before the EEC began, or that colonialism had never ended at all” (Buettner 2018), p.142). In the same vein Jan Ifversen stated that “even if the exhibition highlights the brutality of colonialism and the racism of imperialism, the others are still viewed as captured, enslaved and mistreated, but not as part of Europe” (Ifversen 2019, p.142).

Intercultural relations and contact zones

Cultural cooperation, like any kind of cooperation, depends on reciprocity and trust. If our research demonstrates anything, it is the way colonialism haunts Europe’s civil and political relations, creating an atmosphere in which heritage debates quickly becomes polarized, particularly when so-called cherished symbols of the past (statues, institutions, rituals, ceremonies) seem to be under attack. It is easy to become distracted by these culture wars but at the heart of the European project going forward must be a reckoning with the legacies of colonialism; not in a superficial or tokenistic way but honestly and openly.

⁶ The New narrative of Europe was a grandiose project proposed in 2012 by Danish MEP, Morten Løkkegaard and launched by the EU Commission in 2013-2014 with conferences, publications and online activities including an impressive number of European intellectuals, artists and EU politicians as well as European citizens participating through social media. This was followed by a second phase in 2017. One of the results, the publication “The Mind and Body of Europe: a New narrative” presented 1 March 2014 consisting of many speeches or small written contributions on central elements in reflection on Europe’s identity and history did only very scarcely mention Europe’s colonial past and hardly touched on the consequences of this past for a European narrative. While critical of the elite approach, scholars dealing with this project did not point to this lack (Kaiser 2017, Garcià 2017).

We also stress the importance of intercultural ‘contact zones’, where actors from different cultural backgrounds and with different resources and power engage with each other on equal terms. This necessarily involves ‘Europe’ opening up to and acknowledging the different modes of transculturation practiced by the marginalized and granting them far more agency. It also involves ‘active listening’, an approach to listening that is based on a genuine interest in the other’s perspective and which considers listening as an outcome in and of itself. Listening, we believe, is the primary characteristic of two-way communication. Who does the talking and who does the listening is key to this approach, as strengths and weaknesses are part of the positionalities in ALL diplomatic relations; not just in global-North and global-south relations but in relations within the global North and global South. This applies as much to broader debates about cultural cooperation, as it does to the restitution of colonial objects or the decolonization of museums and galleries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout the duration of the ECHOES project (2018-2021), ECHOES researchers have analysed perceptions of Europe in light of the colonial entanglement. We have looked at debates within public history and more closely examined the role of the EU in developing an identity politics based on interpretations of Europe’s postwar history and European values. With the New narrative for Europe and the House of European History, the European Parliament is now engaged in public history with a responsibility to reflect on the variety of responses that is being raised when referring to European history. We have shown that the question of postcolonial Europe has become a new field of tension that impacts on the EU’s policies around heritage and culture. We have also examined the challenges related to using culture and heritage in the EU’s cultural diplomacy and the risks of advancing views based on Eurocentric perspectives and on amnesia when it comes to the effects that colonialism still has on the way that former colonised countries understand Europe.

We therefore have the following key recommendations that we propose the European parliament particular through its committees for culture and education, and development considers:

- There is an urgent need for EU policymakers at all levels to confront the legacies of European colonialism.
- While there are significant barriers to the creation of a shared European narrative of 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 (and decolonial) representation of colonial legacies across Europe.

- While top-down approaches have their merits, grassroots movements and independent cultural actors (including museum curators, artists and citizens groups) are vitally important in advancing our understanding of colonial legacies and in helping us to imagine a future that is significantly different.
- Such independent cultural actors bring with them a wealth of knowledge that needs to be incorporated into heritage practices and treated on equal terms 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 into 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 reparations needed to reckon with the colonial past.
- Rather than being ignored, or addressed solely by grassroots efforts, colonial heritage needs be mainstreamed at European level and should be included as a fundamental topic in existing heritage and arts initiatives.

Bibliography

Beck, U. and Grande E. (2007) *Cosmopolitan Europe*. London: Wiley.

Bhambha, G. (2009) Postcolonial Europe: or, understanding Europe in times of the post-colonial. In Rumford, C. (ed.) *The SAGE Handbook of European Studies*. London: SAGE, 69-86.

Buettner, E. (2016) *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society and Culture*, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Buettner, E. (2018) 'What – and who – is 'European' in the Postcolonial EU? Inclusions and Exclusions in the European Parliament's House of European History' *Low Countries Historical Review* 133 (4), 132-148.

Césaire, A. (1972) *Discourse on colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

- Garcia, L.G. (2017) 'The 'New Narrative Project' and the politicisation of the EU', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 25 (3):340-353
- Hansen, P. and Jonsson, S. (2013) *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ifversen, J. (2002) 'Europe and European culture - a conceptual analysis' *European Societies* 4 (1).
- Ifversen, J. (2019) 'A guided tour into the question of Europe' in Lok, M. et al. (eds.) *Eurocentrism in European History and Memory*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 195-222
- Kaiser, W. (2017) 'One narrative or several? Politics, cultural elites, and citizens in constructing a 'New Narrative for Europe'', *National Identities*, 19 (2): 215-230
- Kølvraa, C.L. (2012a) *Imagining Europe as a Global Player: The Ideological Construction of a New European Identity within the EU*. Brussels: Peter Lang.
- Kølvraa, C.L (2012b) 'The Father on Display: The House of Jean Monnet and the Construction of European Identity' *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 4: 747-765
- Kølvraa, C. (2018), 'Modalities of heritage practice' [online] ECHOES: European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities. Available at: <http://keywordsechoes.com/>
- Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative Power Europe: a Contradiction in terms' *JCMS* 40 (2), 235–58.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. (2013) 'Why Decoloniality in the 21 Century?' *The Thinker*, 48, 10-16.
- Nicolaïdis, K., Sèbe, B. and Maas, G. (2014) *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and Colonial Legacies*. London: I.B.Tauris.
- Oancă, A. (2021) 'We'll always have Paris': Colonial Legacies and the Making of EU Cultural Diplomacy' *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*.
- Onar, N.F. and Nicolaïdis, K. (2013) 'The Decentring Agenda: Europe as a post-colonial power' *Cooperation and Conflict* 48 (2), 283–303.
- Pasture, P. (2018) 'The EC/EU between the Art of Forgetting and the Palimpsest of Empire' *European Review*, 26 (3), 545–581
- Prutsch, M. J. (2013) *European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives, a report to the EU's Policy Department*.
- Sierp, A. (2020) 'EU Memory Politics and Europe's Forgotten Colonial Past' *Interventions*, 22 (6), 686-702.
- Smith, L. (2006) *Uses of heritage*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Stoler, A.L (2011) 'Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France' *Public Culture* 23 (1), 121–156.

Turunen, J. (2019) 'A Geography of Coloniality : Re-narrating European Integration' in Lähdesmäki, T., Passerini, L., Kaasik-Krogerus, S. and van Huis, I. (eds.), *Dissonant Heritages and Memories in Contemporary Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 185-214.