

Decolonising the Classroom: Reforming Education for an Anti-Racist Society

Article by Calvin Soiresse Njall

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The brutal and murderous colonial campaign led by King Leopold II and then the Belgian state in the Congo has long been swept under the carpet. Civil society activists, supported by a small number of politicians, have been campaigning for years to break this silence, calling for recognition of the crimes of this chapter of history but also of the ways in which it continues to shape Belgian society and its institutions. One of those leading the efforts to decolonise the country's culture, public space, and mentalities is Calvin Soiresse, a Green member of the Brussels Parliament, who previously worked as a teacher. He explains how this debate has evolved and outlines his vision for a national, universalist, and anti-racist education.

Green European Journal: In late April 2022, a motion for a resolution to reform education on colonial history was unanimously adopted by the Education Committee of the Parliament of the Francophone Community in Belgium. What is its significance?

Calvin Soiresse Njall: First of all, it is only thanks to the struggles on the ground that we got the agreement of the French-speaking and Brussels governments needed to start this process in the first place. The second stage was actually agreeing in parliament on the texts to be voted on. The resolution I brought before the Brussels and Francophone parliaments provides for a transversal, structural, and inclusive plan on the issue of Belgian colonial history and its consequences within education (secondary, higher, and continuing), culture, and research. This text was voted on and associated with clear commitments.

The next step is to deliver on these commitments; this is a governmental responsibility. However, we are very aware that some – particularly in right-wing parties such as the liberal Reformist Movement – are blocking this process.

In Belgium, significant progress has been made in opening up a public debate over colonisation and national memory over the last decade. Is this debate moving in a promising direction despite the resistance it generates from certain quarters?

Because of my past experiences – and bearing in mind where we started – I see the glass half full, not half empty. I have first-hand experience of the time when no one talked about decolonisation; the media were silent on the issue and it was non-existent in politics. At that time I was campaigning with civil society associations, and among the Greens there were people who supported us very strongly and who had the courage to bring this issue to the negotiating table. No other party wanted to talk about it. On the other hand, there were

people – in the other parties, but also in the Greens – who believed it would fade away after a few months. Today there are parliamentary resolutions, working groups, a special committee, etc. Given the depth of the movement that has grown up around this issue, and also because of the political work that has already been done, we can't simply give up. We have to carry on in spite of the polarisation and resistance we are experiencing. I have been campaigning on the ground for years, and I still do – through decolonial city tours, by speaking at conferences, symposia, debates... I sense a deep aspiration, especially among young people, to enter an era in which colonial mentalities can be overcome.

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Polarisation is normal; it exists to some extent on all political issues. If polarisation is more extreme on the issue of decolonisation, it is because historically it is an issue that has not been adequately addressed in either politics or society. People have been educated based on a certain mentality and exposed to propaganda over generations, so there is bound to be a clash. But polarisation fuels debate, and as long as there is debate, we will continue to move forward.

My fear is mainly that the decisions taken won't materialise, and the diversification of public space will fail. Many concrete steps have already been taken, especially at the local level, in relation to public space and education. The ability of movements and associations to mobilise – but also the ability of the parties, elected representatives, and ministers who bring these issues to the political agenda to get results – will be decisive here.

If history is to be reframed to adopt a new national narrative, the whole population must be brought on board. Is resistance mainly due to a lack of understanding of systemic racism and the structural systems of oppression in our societies?

We have been saying that racism is structural for a long time; now our institutions are finally saying the same thing. "Structural" means that there are institutional mechanisms that do not work from an anti-racist point of view. Schools are proof of this: decolonisation should be taught in schools, but this hardly ever happens. There are shortcomings in a whole range of institutions. Today, we must reflect on how the issue of structural racism should be addressed. If we approach it only from an individual standpoint our efforts will fail, because structures influence individuals. In a company, there is a corporate culture. So if we discriminate against people with a certain skin colour and this becomes the norm, it is structural. Schools influence their students, who are the citizens of the future.

With climate change, the focus is often on individual actions rather than the systemic choices that must be made. The same can be said for racism. This is not contradictory; both approaches are useful, but systemic choices can yield far greater results than individual ones. Take an institution like the judiciary: it is clear that addressing issues related to violence against women and racism has not been a priority. The resources are not there because they have not been allocated. We do not train those in the justice system to make

the fight against racism a priority.

What is the role of education in this process?

Certain elements need to be part of the curriculum in higher and secondary education, and I would argue that decolonisation should even start in primary schools. Teachers must be required to teach the history of colonisation in Africa: about what occurred in countries like Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo. It is also very important to teach about what existed before colonisation – about Africa’s great pre-colonial civilisations – in order to begin to deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices.

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Second, we have to teach about the history of racism. At present we don’t explain to children that racism is a system, where it comes from, and how political choices made in the 15th and 16th centuries instituted it in our societies.

Finally, we need to educate teachers. Teachers are not given the tools and training necessary to teach these courses and to make the connections between history and racism. There are teachers who teach the subject very well, but this is because they are passionate and determined.

You are working towards introducing a new form of citizenship education. Why is it so important, and what principles and values should underpin these classes?

We have long been told that universalism and multiculturalism are opposites. I think this is a false dichotomy. I believe that true universalists recognise the equality of diverse philosophies and civilisations, and that they are capable of building egalitarian societies in which the rights of people are respected, regardless of their origins. I think that we really have to take on the question of universalism; not from the current point of view, with its fixation on “cancel culture” and being “woke”, because this is not universalism. In my opinion, this is an expression of Westernism and ethnocentrism that doesn’t necessarily hold true for everyone. It is a universalism that is closed, self-centred, and cannot serve as the basis for a social project that guarantees equal rights.

For me, citizenship education courses must be able to integrate philosophical elements that are based on Enlightenment ideas, but also on philosophies that come from elsewhere to enable us to understand the diversity of society. Arab, African, Chinese, and American Indian philosophies are among those that have influenced Europe. We must equip teachers to search out references within these cultures that correspond to the Enlightenment notions of equality regardless of origin and skin colour, but which also account for the evolution of society. Human rights and universalism are evolving concepts. For example, in the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights there were neither environmental rights nor LGBTIQ+ rights. These were added later. When I hear people who voted against same-sex marriage talk about universalism, it makes me laugh. Thought evolves. I don’t want to hear about a universalism set in stone. We must get students to understand this. This evolution, which impacts different aspects of life, also concerns the issue of colonialism and racism.

This question must also be able to evolve and be tackled from the point of view of universalism.

How is this universalism linked with the environmental project? Is the decolonial approach sufficiently present, or are there still certain blind spots?

Today there is a lot of talk about decolonial ecology. To this, I would add the idea of “decentred ecology”. Put simply, the political ecology of Western Europe is essentially based on denouncing industrial capitalism – which was born from the Industrial Revolution – and its consequences. Industrial capitalism has destroyed the environment, biodiversity, and endangered our survival on this planet. But Western political ecology has not adequately accounted for the damage of colonial industrial capitalism and the ways in which it persists today.

Today the Congo Basin is the world’s primary climate regulator, ahead of the Amazon in terms of its capacity to capture global CO2 emissions. Political ecology must not get caught in the trap of saying that if we can eliminate the emissions in our country, then it’s all right, because everyone is connected. The day the Congo Basin disappears, I shudder to think what the CO2 consequences will be. If Africa is destroyed, it will be Europe’s turn next. The issue of climate justice and solidarity is essential for the future of the planet.

Decolonial ecology does not only concern the countries of the South; it also concerns how states act internally in relation to their disadvantaged populations. How can we ensure that these populations take on greater ownership of environmental justice struggles, and how can we convince them to support the solutions put forward by political ecology? Addressing social issues is fundamental here. Écolo [the French-speaking in Belgium Green Party] are very active on social issues and on inclusion, but there is still more to be done.

You have said that it is normal to be angry, and that sometimes strong words are needed to counter the trivialisation of hate speech. How do you see the place of anger in the struggle for social, racial, and environmental justice?

It is true that there is a lot of intellectualism within the environmental movement. Environmentalists will have to cope the issue of anger, especially in relation to young activists. When Greta Thunberg told leaders, “I want you to panic,” she was angry. I do not see anyone questioning this anger. When there are Extinction Rebellion demonstrations, they express anger. Why is it that when young people from working-class neighbourhoods get angry, we blame them for it? Sometimes we have unconscious reflexes too, and I think we have to be aware of that.

The cultural battle is a battle for equality.

In order to reconcile these young people with political ecology, we have to take into account what they are expressing. We have to make an effort to cope with this anger and turn it into something positive. For me, it is linked to stereotypes, for example the idea that Black, Arab, Moroccan, or Turkish people are emotional rather than rational people: this is exactly what colonial propaganda used to say. We can’t take anger into account differently based on who is speaking. We need to understand it and use it to create bridges with the

communities where we have relatively little presence. I think work on this has begun but it needs to gain momentum; the arrival of new activists from different backgrounds should help us to make progress here.

Inequality is rising. Rather than reducing it, education can often contribute to its deepening. What are the most urgent reforms to implement to combat this trend?

When it comes to reform, many issues come into play: democracy and diversity within schools, students' orientations... One of the great challenges is to reduce educational inequality, and this is where social diversity and the fight against racism come into play. Training teachers to teach on colonisation, and educating them on interculturalism, can also play a huge role. When I say interculturalism, this includes learning the "codes" of disadvantaged groups. There are middle-class and upper-middle class "codes" that are imposed on children who come from working-class neighbourhoods or foreign countries. This sets them up to fail, as they do not understand how the school functions, nor do their parents. To combat this, parents from working-class neighbourhoods are forming coalitions, supported by associations.

What does it mean to put heritage at the service of an anti-racist society? You say that the decolonisation of public space, for example the inauguration of Brussels' Lumumba Square, is not a concession to minorities but rather a citizenship tool.

It is not simply a concession to minorities, as the history of Belgium must include all Belgians. Certain populations and groups will obviously be affected in different ways, however.

We need to ask ourselves why we are experiencing these racism-related problems. Are there mechanisms in our history that encourage the creation of inequalities? That mean that the citizenship of some people is not respected? What solutions can be found? Such a process helps to foster social cohesion and build relationships. In the debate on decolonisation and the process of diversifying public space, we need to bring together people from different backgrounds with different views of history, to sit down together and talk. People whose paths would not usually cross, even though they might live just around the corner from each other. In some towns and neighbourhoods, these conversations around citizenship and the consequences of history on people's lives are already happening.

For me, the cultural battle is a battle for equality, which in turn must be part of the battle for political ecology. There are urgent struggles linked to the future of the planet, but we won't manage to get certain groups to join the fight if we fail to take into account mechanisms of inclusion. If we really want to build a social project based on social cohesion, we need to identify, for disadvantaged communities, the tools that enable them to strengthen their participation as citizens. For people to fit in, so that they feel included in the vision of society that is being built. If they are left on the margins of society, they are vulnerable to being instrumentalised.

There are people who have had to fight against racism and discrimination their whole lives.

What will be decisive in terms of bringing them closer to political ecology is our ability to make the connection between environmental struggles and equal rights. This is where the cultural battle lies for ecologists. We cannot remain fixed solely on the environmentalist perspective; that won't work. The population is becoming more diverse, and we need to take this diversity into account and address these broader issues. Only then will we be able to form a critical mass that allows us to make a difference in policy decisions that are crucial for the environment, biodiversity, and the climate.



Kalvin Soiresse Njall is a Green member of both the Parliament of the Francophone Community in Belgium and the Brussels Parliament, where he works on education, equal opportunities, and decolonisation issues. Previously, he worked as a teacher, and was co-founder and coordinator of the Collectif Mémoire Coloniale, an association working to raise public awareness of Belgium's colonial history and to combat racism and discrimination. He continues to campaign on issues of North-South relations, memory, and interculturality.

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