

8 Early Whistle-blowers on Belgian Colonialism

Driven to dissidence

Why was I looking forward to meeting Jules Marchal and why was I seeking contact with a writer who chose to remain anonymous? Because I wanted to hear from him personally about the regime of wild rubber in the Congo Free State in the time of Leopold II, which was the subject of much discussion in the Anglo-Saxon world around the turn of the twentieth century. I wanted to know more about this period of terror and the silence surrounding it that has been maintained so unyieldingly in the early accounts of Belgium's colonial history. I was curious about what had driven him to expose it and what the response had been to his findings. In 1987, I myself had published a study on the labour system at large-scale agricultural estates on the East Coast of Sumatra in the early twentieth century (Bremen 1987). In the study, I described the reign of terror which the contracted army of coolies had been subjected to on the plantations. Intrinsic to the capitalist character of the late-colonial project was the extremely high degree of exploitation. But the primitive extraction which I found in the plantation belt on the East Coast of Sumatra in the Netherlands Indies early in the twentieth century not only degraded labour, but denied the human species of those who performed it. The absence of any form of compassion with the victims meant that there was no imperative need to heed appeals to shared humanity. At the public presentation of my study in March 1987, I gave a lecture in which I drew attention to the recently published work of Michael Taussig and his discussion of the Putumayo report brought out by Roger Casement in 1905. Casement's impressive chronicle of human rights violations was founded on evidence he had gathered during a stay in the Congo Free State preceding the publication of his report. This source led me to the detailed study by Jules Marchal of the horrendous rubber regime practiced in this and eventually to Marchal himself. My contribution to a workshop in June 1989 at the Centre for Asian Studies (CASA) in Amsterdam discussed the books published by Marchal as of that time. After the meeting, I spent the weekend at his home in Belgium. He had invited me in advance, saying that I should come to stay as we would need several days to exchange ideas on what preoccupied both of us: the colonial enterprise, earlier and later.

Having been awarded a PhD at the Catholic University of Leuven in 1948, Jules Marchal (1924-2003) became a civil servant in the Belgian Congo. That was the start of a colonial career which ended with him being appointed district commissioner. After independence, he continued to work as an adviser to the government of Zaire. His long and outstanding service – ‘I was a proud colonial official’, he told me, laughing – qualified him for a position in the Belgian diplomatic corps. He later represented his country as ambassador in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Liberia. While at his post in West Africa in the mid-1970s, he happened to read an article in a Liberian newspaper about the mass slaughter of the population of the Congo Free State at the end of the nineteenth century. The article mentioned almost in passing how this had cut the population by half, as if this gruesome act was already widely known among the general public. Jules was shocked and offended. Such a blemish on the honour of Belgium could not go unanswered. He sent the newspaper to his superiors at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels, requesting information that would prove the falsity of this disturbing allegation. He received no response, despite urgently repeating his request. Now suspicious, he spent his next home leave investigating the matter for himself in the ministry’s library. He unearthed sufficient documentation to convince him that the silence from above was due to more than customary indifference. From 1975, Jules began to search through the colonial archives himself, requesting records that were not accessible to the public. The librarian in charge told him that he could not acquire them as they were stored in an unstaffed depot far from Brussels. He could gain access to them but not before his leave was over. Despite being sent away empty-handed, Jules finally struck lucky. In the ministry canteen, he usually had coffee with a porter he had befriended. When Jules told him about his fruitless quest, the latter informed him in confidence that he knew what Jules was looking for. He said that he had access to the archives and would send him a copy of the documents he had been refused access to by diplomatic post. Thus Jules was able to expose what was intended to stay hidden.

This was by no means the end of the story. Jules was intrigued by another visitor to the library, not a member of the ministry staff but a young outsider. He had requested the same documents as Jules, with equal lack of success. He knew the young man’s name, Daniel Vangroenweghe, but had avoided contact with him. Both were seeking the same information but had understandably been too cautious to approach each other. Their reluctance was undoubtedly driven partly by mistrust and fear of being accused of digging up abuses from the colonial past which had, according

to prevalent official as well as public opinion, had never taken place. After visiting Jules, I also met Daniel at his home. From 1960 to 1962, he had worked as a teacher in Zaire as an alternative to compulsory military service. After returning to Europe he had studied anthropology in Leuven and Paris. His PhD research was based on fieldwork conducted in Zaire in 1973-74. While gathering information on mourning customs, he found himself taken aback by the panic and fear with which people spoke of the arrival of white rulers. These folk tales encouraged him, after being awarded his doctorate, to investigate this early colonial past in greater detail. His teaching job gave him the opportunity to do so. Daniel told me about the uproar following the publication in 1985 of his book on Leopold II's regime of terror – state officials coming to his home and school and interrogating his neighbours, seeking evidence of subversive behaviour, with the prospect of losing his job as a consequence. He spoke with great anxiety about the slander and harassment he had been subjected to. As a secondary school teacher, Daniel was much more vulnerable than Jules, who had recently retired and no longer needed to protect his anonymity. Jules had taken care to publish his books under his grandmother's name, A.M. Delathuy, and he showed me her gravestone in the garden of his house. When I asked him whether his employer had ever challenged him about his historical research, he told me that was not the case. He did not know whether the fervour with which he pursued his investigations had invoked the displeasure of senior officials at the ministry. It most probably had, but there was no apparent need to shut him up. Firstly because his work had been published in Dutch, which was not the language used at the ministry. Moreover, his publications had attracted little or no public interest. Despite the small number printed, the publishers never sold more than a handful. In desperation, Jules bought the remaining copies himself, to save them from destruction. His books were consequently no longer available from bookshops, but had to be purchased from Jules himself, one copy at a time. He was pleased with every order. Not for the money it brought in, which was much less than he had spent on producing the books. But it showed that he may have been reviled but was not disregarded or forgotten by everyone.

Jules was aware of my book on the 'coolie scandal' in Deli and the media attention it had received in the Netherlands. He said I was fortunate in having at least instigated a public debate. He himself had learned from his professional experience to keep a low profile in public and avoid any confrontation with prevailing opinion. As he told Dutch journalist Syp Wynia in an interview in 1994:

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, they left me alone, because I stayed so quiet and did not act like a firebrand. I did little to attract criticism. Because I used that other name, Delathuy, I never caused the minister any difficulties. And I was not in search of glory.

The old colonial lobby

The old colonial hands in Belgium were well organized. They would come together at branch meetings of their national association to exchange memories and ensure that any reporting on the overseas past was completely free of any blemish. These veterans were led by General Emile Janssens, former commander of the Force Publique, the colonial army of the Congo Free State and later of the Belgian Congo. Janssens was the proud pillar of the lobby's considerable political clout. Dissenters like Jules and Daniel were considered traitors who fouled their own nests and had to be silenced. And for many decades, that is what happened. Jules was clearly bitter about the lack of interest and appreciation for his work. The resistance he encountered did not affect his determination to continue with it. It was not always easy to keep silent. He was filled with vicarious embarrassment when Belgian politicians denounced Mobutu and many other Congolese leaders for violating human rights. Not because the accusations were unjustified, but because of the double standard. It was an indication of the taboo surrounding the abuses committed against the Congolese people by the Belgian colonizers not only right up to independence, but also in the aftermath. After my meeting with Jules, the taboo on his publications persisted for many years. The interview with Syp Wynia was never published. During the interview, Jules did not wish to speak freely and the tape recorder had to be switched off repeatedly. 'I have to be extremely careful,' he said. 'It is a form of hysteria in Belgium. My windows will be smashed, especially if I talk to a foreign newspaper.' He told Wynia about what happened after the publication of his last book on the missionary system in the Congo. The newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg* was present at the presentation of the book and wanted to publish a portrait of him in its weekend supplement, but the association of old colonials caught wind of the plans and exerted pressure on the paper's editors to cancel it.

Public opinion did not start to change until around the beginning of the current century. Newspapers and magazines showed a willingness to review the colonial past and made use of Jules Marchal's books to do so. This was also partly because he had begun to publish in French and under his own name. Responses to his work became more common and more often

favourable rather than pejorative. An article devoted to him in the regional monthly *La Revue Toudi* reported that the mining company Union Minière du Haut-Katanga was financing a chair in African Studies at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve. *Het Belang van Limburg* changed its mind and decided that it would now interview its provincial compatriot, who until then had led a hidden existence. The interview appeared on 23 February 2002, with the title 'Jules Marchal on Forced Labour in the Congo'. On 1 June 2002, *MO* Magazine* published an article that focused on Jules's trilogy on the system of forced labour in the Belgian Congo between 1910 and 1945 (see Custers 2002). Most of these articles did not fail to mention the disregard and disrespect that he had been subjected to by colonial historians until recently. Jules died in 2003, hopefully aware that the end of the dismissal of his last work – a critical review of the still prevailing opinion of the Congo as a model colony – was in sight.

The colonial sequel to the Free State

Jules Marchal's early work on the Congo Free State was actually a rehearsal of previous observations by numerous eyewitnesses from other countries. Edmund Morel and Roger Casement, and even earlier Mark Twain and George Washington Williams, were among those who had reported in detail on the regime of terror. What gave Marchal the advantage over them was that he could shed light in this theatre of horrors from the inside. As a former colonial official he had himself taken part in the administration of reports, memoranda and official correspondence which, after being recorded in the government's annals, would disappear in the archives. Jules knew from the start how to find his way in this enormous labyrinth of files. When Leopold II finally yielded to the pressure of foreign criticism and transferred the Free State he had founded in 1885 to the Belgian government in 1908, this did not mean that Jules could close the door on a past that had occupied him all that time. He continued to sift through the colonial archives until his death. His quest had inspired him to reflect deeply on his own role in the exercise of colonial power. As district commissioner, he had routinely whipped residents of his district with the *chicotte* in front of the assembled villagers for dereliction of their duties.

These men were sentenced for trivial offences, but that was pure hypocrisy. They would be put behind bars for not reaching their cotton quotas or if their huts were not in a perfect state of cleanliness [*parfait état de*

propreté]. Not a blade of grass was to be seen around the huts – complete nonsense. These prisoners had to drop their trousers and were lashed on their buttocks. *In conspectu omnium*, with everyone watching. It was extremely humiliating. When I arrived in the Congo in '48, they would be given eight lashes on the buttocks with the *chicotte*. In 1952, that had been reduced to four – but that was just as bad. After that, we had to go into the bush for twenty days, to perform the same rigmarole. That is the great lie about the Congo: under Leopold II everything was bad and during the Belgian colonization it was all perfect. (*Het Belang van Limburg* 2002)

Jules had obediently followed the instructions of his superiors, including meting out corporal punishment. And no, he had no qualms at all about doing that. Far-reaching exploitation and enslavement of the population were after all normal practice and thus nothing to be offended about. The independence of Congo in 1960 had been a turning point for Jules. He decided to stay on in the country, but in an advisory capacity and with no administrative responsibilities. He was done with wielding the *chicotte*. And apartheid was over. As he said in his interview with Syp Wynia,

[P]eople came to my house and I went to theirs – I found that much more pleasant. That prepared me mentally for what I was later to discover, because I saw black people not only through the eyes of a colonialist but also of a human being.

But it was his research in the archives that unleashed the real shock of repentance. The confrontation with the truth he found in the archived documents taught him to look not only at the past in a different way, but also at himself. Or that reason, he felt that his publications on the colony established by Belgium were of greater significance than those of the atrocities committed by Leopold II. In *Being Colonized* (2010), anthropologist and Africanist Jan Vansina described, on the basis of oral histories, what it meant to be colonized. It is a convincing account of coerced subjugation, mirrored from the inside and from the bottom up. Vansina identifies the time before and after 1908 as a turning point that put a stop to the absence of any form of state supervision of the terror that the concessionaries – private trading companies – exercised in the process of collecting the imposed quota of wild rubber. Yet what followed shows that there was hardly any change of regime at all. The system of forced labour introduced in 1917 meant that colonial officials determined which crops and how much of them each

male villager had to grow and supply to the state. The methodology of plunder and repression by the state now became systematic rather than arbitrary. The policy of coercion was accompanied almost to the end by dehumanization, high mortality and punishment of colonial subjects who failed in their duties: '[B]y the 1950s about one in every ten men spent time in jail each year and most men had done so at one time or another' (Vansina 2010: 215). Jules reported on the Congo as a colonial possession of Belgium in almost the same words and emphasized the continuity of the brutality, coercion, white supremacy and racist denigration. He pointed out that the mercenaries who had been employed by the Free State were taken over by the Belgian government and given formal authority. They continued to commit the same abuses they had been guilty of when employed privately. Lumumba, he said, was still much too kind in his inaugural speech of independence on the day of liberation. In his spontaneous response to the paternalistic, condescending speech of the Belgian king, he should have taken the grandson of Leopold II to task for the racism and terror that his people had suffered under colonial occupation.

In 1998, Adam Hochschild published *King Leopold's Ghost*, in which he again recounted the state of terror in the domain of the Belgian king. Many of the details in the book were sourced from the work of Marchal, who Hochschild had met in 1995. Jan Vansina had impressed on him that it was essential to consult Jules rather than his academic colleagues. The popular history he wrote became a bestseller in no time, was translated into many languages, and was awarded prizes for the accessible style in which it was written. Undoubtedly encouraged by the wide readership, a film of the book is also forthcoming. Reviewers familiar with the horrors of Leopold's Congo and its royal founder were less receptive. Dan Jacobson's review in the *London Review of Books* is a good example. Entitled 'Arch-Appropriator', Jacobson's article began by recognizing that professional histories need to be translated to make the events concerned accessible to a wider public. But that is followed by a thorough hatchet job full of complaints about inaccuracy, incompleteness and unnecessary embellishment.

It should come as no surprise that Hochschild's litany was received by the right wing in Belgium with great displeasure, which boiled over into anger. Karel Arnaut has devoted an interesting essay to this response, based on the contact he had established with old colonials, who had together founded the Africa Museum in Namur. The building exhibiting the collection of artefacts they brought back from Congo also serves as a meeting place for this circle of colonial veterans living in the town or vicinity. Their numbers are sufficient to keep their association, the Cercle royal namurois des anciens d'Afrique

(CRNAA), up and running and to illustrate the gist of their patriotism and strong support for the monarchy. The political views they share, ranging from conservative to reactionary, are accompanied by a severe dislike of opponents of the monarchy and of the glorious colonial past. In the bulletin informing members of the activities of the association, its president refutes the infamous lies repeated by Hochschild after having them whispered in his ear by compatriots 'who call themselves Belgians' (including Marchal and Vangroenweghe). Arnaut rightly emphasizes the belief underlying their rhetoric: while the Belgian colonials had devoted themselves to bringing Western culture to the people of the Congo, anti-colonials had worked to introduce pseudo-democratic institutions in Africa. These proponents of colonialism considered themselves to have been the harbingers and acclaimed in their discourse the past era as the realization of In their discourse, the past era was thus acclaimed as the realization of the imperialist ideology. Arnaut quotes a passage from one argument in the CRNAA bulletin (1999): colonization is 'une des émanations de l'esprit et du génie de l'Europe.... [L]a colonisation fait partie de notre "authenticité" européenne à tous, colonaux ou non.' According to Arnaut, these veterans point to the close ties that existed between the Belgian Congo and the homeland. Breaking that valuable bond could, in their eyes, only have a dismal effect:

The former colonials of Namur perceive themselves, their values and their activities as residual, as remnants of a lost world, in a 'federalised Belgium'. The contemporary world which they imagine and which they stand up for involves a postcolonial relationship 'metropolis/colony'. This is a bi-national zone that consists of 'Belgium' and 'Belgium's Africa' that share the parallel predicament of falling apart – 'Belgium' through regionalization, and 'Belgium's Africa' through violence and mismanagement. Both are subject to moral decay. (Arnaut 2001)

This is exactly what political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville had in mind with his statement that the aim of the colonial mission in the nineteenth century was primarily to consolidate the national unity of European state formation. That through expansion beyond their own borders, they could both obscure and exorcise the gaping differences between the upper and lower classes at home (Breman 2021: 49-69).

In an interview in the *Nieuwsbrief van de Belgische Vereniging van Afrikanisten* in 2001, Jan Vansina explains why he did not want an academic job as an Africanist in his own country but decided to pursue a university career in the United States. He also gave his opinion at length on how the

history of the Congo was written in Belgium. In doing so, he surprisingly criticizes the work of Marchal and Vangroenweghe. In his view, the latter lacked sufficient historical depth and did not devote sufficient attention to the reliability of his sources. That accusation was not aimed at Marchal. He was a historian and had been awarded his doctorate for his thesis on Leopold II's colonial adventure. But he did have reservations about Jules's crusade:

You can ask yourself why Vangroenweghe and Marchal were so irate. Was it because of the injustices suffered by the people of the Congo or was there some other reason? I suspect that, since they were mainly concerned with Leopold II, their anti-national inquisition was primarily aimed at the French-speaking elite in Brussels. (Arnaut and Vanhee 2001: 17)

My meeting with Daniel in 1989 was too short to deny or confirm Vansina's interpretation, though I have my doubts about it. The claim is also flagrantly at odds with the praise for him expressed by Vansina in the foreword to *Leopold II & Kongo*. He describes Daniel's book in glowing terms 'because it reveals a part of our past, a part of what we all are, and because it shows us under what circumstances inhumanity thrives' (Vangroenweghe 1985a: 3). But Jules I knew longer and better. In his case, I consider this judgement both inaccurate and unjustified. Vansina suggests that Jules went no further than Leopold II in his research. In doing so, he fails to appreciate his discussion on the continuation of bondage and repression after the transfer of the colony to the Belgian state – which Vangroenweghe also did, as a matter of fact. I have no complaints at all about how Vansina portrays historian Jean Stengers. He points out that Stengers took the Belgian political elite as the starting point of his study – 'the role played by the house of representatives, the role of the senate, etc.' – and tried to analyse the events in the Congo, in 1960 and afterwards, from a positivist perception. He strongly believed that

historians should refrain from moral judgements. A historian cannot be a judge. Stengers's response to Vangroenweghe was that it is futile to judge what happened seventy years ago, because we do not know the morals of that time. But then along comes Marchal, who differs from Vangroenweghe in showing that the abuses in the Congo Free State were also considered abominable according to conceptions of morality at the time, and that Leopold II was aware of that fact. Stengers continued to insist that such things can no longer be proven. (Arnaut and Vanhee 2001: 17)

Way out of the impasse

The revival of the public debate on the colonial past towards the end of the twentieth century was the starting point for Belgian African historiographers to develop an argument that contributed to the establishment of a new balance. They called for an end to the old contradictions that led only to rigid opposing positions with, on the one side, the self-satisfied glorification of the Belgian Congo as a model colony and a paradise of progress and, on the other side, its vilification as a hell on earth. Hein Vanhee and Geert Castryck condemn the extreme viewpoints on both sides and offer a way to break through this dispute-ridden impasse. In doing so, they note that, although the critical view has gradually become dominant in public opinion, factual evidence of the reign of terror – such as decimation of the original population by half and accounts of hands being chopped off – has yet to be found. They also call the portrayal of African people living in romanticized unity and balance with nature and in simple, small-scale tribal communities a fabrication. These reservations are correct and help avoid a fictitious image of *le bon sauvage* as the antithesis of colonial subjection. It also helps to counter the impression that colonized societies were ruled by rigid, immutable traditions.

Vanhee and Castryck call for a dynamic and holistic approach to the African societies colonized by Belgium and, not least, to the mass disruption of the country and its people after independence. I agree entirely with their recommendation to employ multiple research methods, at least as long as that endeavour preserves the validity of cultural relativism and does not place moral and ethical judgements in advance and outside the historical and scholarly order. I am less favourably inclined to their plea for greater nuance as a criterion for acceptability. They acknowledge the merits of Vangroenweghe and Marchal, but with the reservation that neither excel in applying nuance. Their justified criticism, especially of the work of Jules Marchal, is that colonial history is reduced to an allegory of terror and violence, with the colonizers as torturers and the Congolese people as helpless victims. Despite its unique documentation, the work of Marchal was long ignored by professional historians. Nevertheless, this kind of historiography has had an enormous impact on the public debate, especially through the publication of Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) which, as mentioned above, took much of its informative contents from Jules Marchal (Vanhee and Castryck 2002: 313).

The balance they offer gives the impression that they are seeking a middle way. But the truth is not always automatically found by adopting an 'on the one hand and on the other hand' approach. The authors are right in

arguing that colonial subservience does not always signify an absence of agency, but sometimes it does. Extreme repression can debilitate resistance and deny the space required for resistance to be overtly expressed. In my opinion, this was systematically the case, in the era of the Congo Free State and also in the Belgian Congo. The work of both Daniel and Jules provides abundant evidence for this conclusion. I wholeheartedly agree with Vanhee and Castryck that African agency and the continuity of African political cultures and economic systems must have a central place in the study of Africa's past. But the resources they employ for this multidimensional study – which, besides classical sources, include oral histories, sources in African languages, material and photographic sources – are insufficient if that does not occur in consultation with former Congolese subjects. No matter how excellently equipped the Belgian side is to better examine its colonial past and its continued impact in the postcolonial present, this laudable intention is doomed to failure if it is limited to a one-sided effort. Without the inclusion in this agenda of fellow academicians and human rights activists from the former colony itself, little will come of their nuanced and moderate approach as a goal for professional historians.

I am also afraid that not all colonial historians are prepared to cooperate on this strategy of reconciliation. Jean-Luc Vellut responded with irritation to the interview with Vansina and the direction taken by the discussion. He rejected the alleged brutalization of the Congo as an iconic metaphor for the forced incorporation of the country in modern history. Such a portrayal of the past was the consequence of the interference of semi-professional historians in Belgium's colonial expansion. This was a reference to Jules Marchal, a disqualification that Vellut exacerbated by describing Jules's work contemptuously as *Greuelgeschichte*, a horror story. Vellut admitted that Vansina had a point, in condemning the silence surrounding the absence of any recorded history immediately after the colony was incorporated in the Belgian state system. However, in his view, this accusation should not be aimed at fellow historians, but at state archivists who denied them access to these files:

It is significant that J. Marchal, though [a] member in disgrace of the Foreign Affairs department, nevertheless gained years-long access to sources which had been kept off limits to less well introduced scholars. It is also fascinating to read that Vansina advised the talented interpreter of Marchal's rather pedestrian production, Adam Hochschild, to concentrate on Marchal's work and to keep clear of historians such as Stengers and Vellut. (Vellut 2002)

In his aggrieved response, Vellut bemoans Vansina's criticism of the History Section of the Africa Museum in Tervuren. He predicts that this institution, founded as a Palace of the Colonies by Leopold II for the 1897 Brussels International Exposition, would become a platform for clashing opinions on Belgium's colonial past. He identifies a number of antagonists in the coming confrontation and leaves no doubt as to which camp he himself belongs: against the anti-colonialists, which is a nest of radicals, and for the nuance, which does justice to the complexity of the issue 'in the tradition of enlightened scholarship'. I feel that this is a different kind of nuance than that envisaged by Vanhee and Castryck.

A disputed memory

Vellut's prediction indeed came true in the years that followed, with Vellut himself initially as a central protagonist. I limit myself here to a short summary on the basis of press releases relating to Tervuren as a hotbed of unrest. The museum was in urgent need of renewal, and in more respects than the antiquated collection alone. An exhibition in 2005 was intended to mark a renewed perspective on the colonial past. Vellut proved willing to curate the exhibition, which was entitled 'The Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era', and also wrote the introduction in its catalogue. In *De Standaard*, museum director Guido Gryseels informed visitors what they could expect to see. The exhibition did not aim to accuse or condemn, but to understand. He clarified that perspective by referring to the spirit of the time. 'Today, the concept of colonialism is of course completely unacceptable in moral terms. But in that time, every country [in Europe] considered it necessary to support its own economic development' (Gryseels 2005). Those who went to the Congo were by definition rough folk and violence had a different significance then than today. The director of course also mentioned the royal founder of the museum, saying that a lot of nonsense had been written and said about him and his 'so-called crimes'. He referred to books by 'amateur historians' on the early period of the Congo Free State. 'You can condemn the actions of Leopold II,' he wrote, 'but you cannot deny that this man had a certain vision in a certain spirit typical of the times, and that he made a great contribution to the economic development of the Congo' (Gryseels 2005). It was the express intention to look at the past from an African perspective, but Gryseels had to admit that the Congolese contribution to the exhibition was minimal, citing practical reasons as an excuse. Asked for his opinion by *De Morgen*, Daniel Vangroenweghe

prudently dosed his criticism (Vangroenweghe 2005). In his soft-pedalled view it was indeed an exaggeration to describe the actions of the rubber regime as genocide. But they did amount to large-scale violations of human rights and severe disruption of the colonized community through terror, hunger and disease. The *chicotte*, the instrument of torture wielded by the white masters to discipline their black subjects for many decades, was unjustly described as a mere whip. Vangroenweghe also notes the striking absence of Leopold II in the presentation. It would have been impossible to maintain his customary image as a benevolent ruler, but he also makes no appearance in his malign guise. Daniel was more robust on Leopold's total absence in his own museum. The link between the monarch and the barbaric rubber exploitation is not made clear. There is no reference at all to his crown lands, considered as his own personal property. Nor to the fact that he was an absolute monarch with neither a parliament or ministers. I know, he continued, of few colonies where the conquering power immediately set about exploiting the population so extremely. When asked whether the king was aware of the cruelties committed, his response was in no uncertain terms: 'Anyone who denies it is not to be trusted and a negationist. No monarch has ever devoted such hands-on attention to his colony as Leopold II. There is ample documentary evidence to support this claim' (Vangroenweghe 2005). Vangroenweghe is even more accommodating about the late-colonial period. He admitted that the Congo evolved into a model colony, especially in terms of healthcare and literacy. No doubt, Jules Marchal would not have agreed with his assessment. The final work that Jules was engaged in towards the end of his life was devoted to this period of colonial rule. Unfortunately, he was unable to complete it.

The Tervuren exhibition attracted much attention also in the Netherlands. An article in *De Academische Boekengids* (November 2006) discusses the Dutch counterpart of Leopold II. It was after all merchant-king Willem I who inspired Leopold to embark on his colonial adventures. The Dutch king had also made Java his personal fief and introduced the infamous cultivation system that had proved so profitable for him (Bremner 2010). In his discussion of the exhibition, Ieme van der Poel lamented the disappearance of its original character. Its portrayal of the colonial past must not be lost. Tervuren was a time capsule or, in Vellut's words, 'a museum of a colonial museum'. For Van der Poel, the same applied to the Teylers Museum in Haarlem.

No right-thinking person would ever come up with the disastrous idea of giving these museums a facelift because, in terms of design and content, they no longer conform to contemporary notions of what a museum

should be. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has even been restored at great expense to its original state from a century ago. The situation of Tervuren is not essentially different, except that in its current form the museum offers no explanation at all of the exhibition. But it is completely unnecessary to fill that gap by 'modernising', and certainly not 'updating', the unique interior of this historical monument. (Van der Poel 2006)

As was to be expected, Adam Hochschild took advantage of the opportunity to have his biting say about contemporary Belgian historiography, and Stengers and Vellut, in particular. He was severely critical of Tervuren in an extensive article in *The New York Review of Books* (October 2005). The exhibition clearly showed, he argued, that neither the museum nor Belgium as a whole had learned from the horrific colonial past. In his view, in a persistent spirit of denial, the holocaust in the Congo Free State had been promptly and fully swept under the royal carpet.

Tervuren, meeting place and battleground

Five years later, new festivities were planned to celebrate fifty years of Congo's independence. On *Apache*, a Belgian news site for research journalism, sociologist Ludo de Witte wrote an opinion piece on the fifteenth Africa Film Festival in April 2010. While understanding that it was not the right moment to drag up painful memories, De Witte did complain about the absence of reflection. He cited the *Canvas* Congo website as an example:

According to *Canvas*, there was 'strictly speaking no racist colour bar as in British South Africa. To the outside world, the Belgian Congo was a model state.' That the colour bar – a euphemism for apartheid – was worse in the colonial Congo than in South Africa had to be withheld from the readers. The inhabitants of the colony were divided along racial lines determining their rights and obligations, with consequences that left deep scars in their daily lives. In the words of Jef van Bilsen, 'In Congo, racism, segregation and the colour bar were deeply rooted in the mentality of many white people and in the laws and regulations.' (De Witte 2010)

De Witte continues his criticism of the *Canvas* site by noting that, in its review of the exhibition held in 2005 on the first five years of independence, not a word was said about the role of Belgium and the West in destroying the young democracy and helping Mobutu take power. He is equally critical

of the Africa Museum in Tervuren. After the exhibition of 2005, he has no great expectations for 'Indépendance! Congolese Accounts of Fifty Years of Independence'. He notes that the exhibition was to run until eight days before the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of Patrice Lumumba. Was this a deliberate choice to avoid attention to Belgium's close and direct involvement in this crime and to deprive human rights activists of the opportunity to bring it to the public's attention?

Lastly there was the reopening of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in 2018, after it had been closed for five years to undergo radical renovation. After many weeks of uncertainty, King Philippe announced that he would not be attending the reopening ceremony at the end of December. Some sources alleged that his decision was related to the fact that the restyled museum was attempting to look at the past through a different lens. The statue of Leopold, for example, was reportedly now accompanied by a critical text. These rumours of royal displeasure were of course denied. Yet the anger of the spokesman of colonial veterans, who complained that despite the large volume of materials they had supplied, their ideas regarding the renovation had fallen on deaf ears, gives food for thought. As do the testimonies that unanimously praise the colonial era as a magnificent time.

We were carefully and maliciously kept at arm's length. Why? In 2005, there was 'The Memory of the Congo', an updated, well-balanced exhibition, led objectively by UCL [Université Catholique de Louvain] historian Jean-Luc Vellut, a wonderful man, between whom and the museum there is little love lost. There are a few dark forces at play in the museum that place ideology above a scientific approach. (Vileyn 2018)

Guido Bosteels is the president of this association. He is eighty-eight years old and still under contract to the museum. The association's members work as volunteer guides at the museum. At the end of December 2019, I found a report from the same source on an incident at the museum, which led to a guide being suspended. While showing a group of history students from the University of Antwerp around, his explanation was accompanied by racist comments. The museum's head of publicity acknowledged the validity of the complaint and dismissed the incident as an 'error of judgement', ((ADD 2019),

Thus far my account on Tervuren as a place where the public is informed about Belgium's relations with the Congo in the past and in the present. It gives little grounds for optimism. I conclude that the differences of opinion are too great to come to an overall assessment somewhere in the middle. I would like to emphasize that, though this divergence is projected on the

events in the Congo, it cannot be seen separately from the domestic politics and social landscape in Belgium itself. Moreover, with the passing of time, the polarization seems to have become more rather than less marked. That leads me to the following conclusions. First, it is incorrect to leave the writing of colonial history to professional academics, and certainly when they tend to dismiss other practitioners of their craft as pseudo-, semi- or amateur historians. My second observation is that, when examining the past, moral and ethical facets cannot be ignored. Moralism gave meaning to and was the essence of imperialism. The subjugation of far-off, alien peoples was justified as bringing civilization, later known as development, where it did not yet exist. '*La mission civilisatrice*' or 'the white man's burden' often – and not only in the Congo – degenerated into barbarism. Not to describe and analyse this aspect when studying colonial history is, or at least comes close to, falsification of history. Coming to terms with it, on the other hand, undeniably raises the thorny problem of discussing the risk that such historiography might be used as a handmaiden to boosting the national interest. My conclusion is that any attempt to better understand this chapter in Belgium's history and bring it closer to past reality indeed demands a broadening of the context. Much of what is under discussion in Belgium is equally applicable to the colonial enterprise of the Netherlands.

It was not only the profiles of kings of the two countries that displayed striking similarities. Leopold II went in search of colonial possessions in many regions of the world. As Stengers relates, he sought contact with The Hague as early as 1861 to enquire whether he could take over control of what was then Borneo (Kalimantan), in return for payment (Stengers 1989). This is precisely the same imperialist manner of thinking behind Trump's recent offer to buy Greenland from Denmark. The predatory exploitation that took place in the Free State was no exception to the rule. The scandals in the Congo were of the same order as the way in which the Netherlands and others exploited their overseas possessions. Last, the variant of the *Historikerstreit* conducted in Belgium takes place in the same tone in the Netherlands. Expanding on these similarities falls beyond the scope of this essay.

Behind the façade of a model colony

The aversion to and resistance against present-day racism that erupted around the world at large also gave a powerful incentive to calls to review the way we see our colonial past. Now and again, the pioneers of this critical perspective come to the fore to talk about the obstacles they encountered

in their endeavours to bring to light the long and carefully concealed dark side of the colonial enterprise. In an interview with *De Standaard* entitled 'A Truth Commission? The Truth Is Already Known' (Vangroenweghe 2020), Daniel Vangroenweghe makes it clear that he has no intention of taking back a single word of the account which primarily invoked abuse against him three and half decades ago. The pressure to which he was exposed from official quarters affected him deeply and in his retrospective he points without reticence to the royal court as its initiator. Despite the lack of appreciation he experienced from colonial historians, he was spared further affronts thanks to the protection afforded to him by Stengers and Vellut when he came under vile scrutiny. The evidence he presented for the abuses and crimes committed was irrefutable, based on sources that he had inadvertently gained access to. Sensitive documents were marked 'ne pas communiquer aux chercheurs' ('not to be made available to researchers'). The sustained refusal to give him access to the archives broke down when the sitting archivist retired and was replaced by untrained students. The registers that Daniel was now able to consult showed clearly that the collection had been purged of incriminating documents, a clean-up operation that had continued into the 1950s. To counteract calls for statues of 'heroes' from the imperialist past to be removed, ultra-nationalist politicians proposed establishing monuments to commemorate compatriots killed in the line of duty in the colony. A very bad idea, in Vangroenweghe's eyes.

Statues for colonials? That's just adding fuel to the fire. If you want to make the Congolese very angry, that's an excellent way to do it. The colonial regime was not as cruel as that under Leopold II, but it was certainly guilty of exploitation, and violent and humiliating practices. That the healthcare system was so good is overstated. Belgian colonialism too was primarily aimed at earning as much money as possible from the Congo's natural resources. No, if we were to erect new statues, then they should be for Congolese women; they have suffered greatly throughout the country's history. I recently received a document relating how colonials took pleasure in letting the wife of a village chief be raped by a villager in public. That is the perversion of power, pure terror. (Vangroenweghe 2020)

Back to Jules Marchal

Jules Marchal's last book was published in English posthumously (2008). It is a translation of the third part of Jules's quartet on forced labour and starts

with an introduction by Hochschild, in which he expresses his appreciation and gratitude for Marchal. It is not from piety that I draw attention to this work, but to emphasize its significance to take stock of the late-colonial political economy. It addresses the period from 1910 to 1945, the years in which, according to official opinion, Belgium transformed the Congo into a model colony. Jules's extensive documentation shows that this portrayal of the facts is inaccurate. The harvesting of wild rubber was an obsolete form of primitive accumulation, which was replaced by the regulated cultivation of crops and the extraction of mineral resources (gold, copper, tin, oil and uranium) in a large-scale agricultural-cum-mining economy. The raw natural resources were transported from the colony to the metropolis to be fabricated into industrial commodities. In the exemplary case described in the book, this occurred by allocating some 5.5 million hectares (twice the size of Belgium) to an expatriate captain of capitalist industry to be cultivated by palm oil plantations. The huge labour force required was not recruited on a voluntary basis, but requisitioned and set to work under coercion. In his introduction, Hochschild presents the writer and his findings in the following words:

Marchal's 40 years in government service taught him to uncover documents that writers of laudatory biographies and cheerful corporate histories have long ignored. This particular book is an implicit response to such volumes about Lord Leverhulme and the corporate empire he and his brothers founded – books like the biography of Leverhulme by W.P. Jolly, whose upbeat chapter on the Congo is largely based on Leverhulme's diaries of the two trips he made there. Like so many white men engaged in the Congo, Leverhulme considered himself and his work there wise and enlightened. It is quite a different story that Marchal tells in these pages. (2005: xxi)

Shipped in bulk to be industrially processed in England, the palm oil was used to make soap in the factory owned by William Lever – later Lord Leverhulme – and his brother James. The location of the factory on the coast of North Wales was named Port Sunlight, after the soap it produced. In his metropolitan guise, William was a caring employer who built attractive and splendidly designed houses for his workers. The model village also had a hospital, a swimming pool, a theatre and, later, a museum. William housed his art collection in the Lady Lever Gallery, named after the wife of his older brother (Vangroenweghe 2020). William is also known as a teetotaler, Calvinist and freemason. The portrait of this philanthropist, a

man who tried to improve the lot of his workers and was concerned about the weaker members of society at home, would be incomplete without recording that he was an avid proponent of colonialism in Africa and Asia. His labour policy in these far-off lands was founded on exploitation and oppression. It is this regime that Jules described at length. This detailed study leads me to draw two conclusions. Firstly, much Western capital accumulated at a disproportionate rate of profit as a result of locking up the colonial workforce in bondage. After the death of the Lever brothers, who had expanded their activities to include the manufacture of various food products, their companies merged at the end of 1929 with the Dutch Margarine Union. Under its new name Unilever, this multinational company has grown over the decades into a gigantic corporation operating worldwide. This mega-empire prides itself on its eminent care for labour, health and the environment. The early history of Lever Brothers subsidiary Huileries du Congo Belge (HCB) tells a different story, as Jules has shown. His book also documents the conspiracy in the late-colonial era between large-scale capitalist corporations and the colonial state. The ideology of neoliberalism under which the global working population has suffered for the past half a century was preceded a hundred years ago in that part of the world that had over time come under European rule. History clearly shows the intimate relationship between capitalism, colonialism and racism. The political, economic, social, cultural and ecological impact of this regime has remained without repair and bodes dire prospects for the future of humanity.

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