BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND EXPLOITATION. REINTERPRETING COLONIAL ECONOMY IN BELGIAN MEMORY (1970S-1990S)

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In 2020, the Belgian Chamber of representatives ordered a special commission to investigate Belgium's colonial past in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. One of the key priorities identified in the resolution implicitly defined the impact of Belgian colonialism as essentially economic in nature, which was reiterated in the 2021 expert report that defined a colony as "of course, a system of economic exploitation" (1). Such a qualification of colonialism in terms of economic exploitation contrasted sharply with Belgian king Baudouin's description in 1960, when he hailed colonial actors such as Leopold II and his pioneers for having "devoted all their efforts and even their lives to the great ideal, [bringing Congo] peace and [enriching its] moral and material heritage" (2). Over the six decades separating the two accounts, the meaning attributed to colonial economy was thus reinterpreted significantly, from a portrayal as a vehicle of progress and development for both metropole and colony to being increasingly understood as an untenable system of exploitation.

I. Introduction

In 2020, the Belgian Chamber of Representatives ordered a special commission, tasked with investigating Belgium's colonial past in Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. It identified six priorities: 1) providing information on colonial history and its lessons for the future, 2) studying the role of key actors, 3) examining its economic impact, 4) formulating recommendations for dealing with the past, 5) for reconciliation and 6) for academic research.[1] The third point, which implicitly labeled the impact of Belgian colonialism as essentially economic in nature, was reiterated in the 2021 expert report produced by the commission, when it appointed its economic structure as one of the defining characteristics: "Being a colony (or a mandate) was therefore a legal status, as well as a political system of governance and, of course, a system of economic exploitation".[2]

Such a qualification of colonialism as "of course, a system of economic exploitation", thus stating its well-known character, contrasts sharply with Belgian King Baudouin's description in 1960. In his speech at the ceremony of the Congolese independence, Baudouin hailed colonial actors such as Leopold II and his pioneers "who [...] made Congo what it is today", specifying that "it was they who, devoting all their efforts and even their lives to the great ideal, brought you [Congo] peace and enriched your [Congolese] moral and material heritage".[3]

This article is interested specifically in this discursive shift in colonial memories in Belgium, tracing it back to the last decades of twentieth century. Showing how colonial economy has always featured in collective representations of Belgium's colonization of Congo, this study explores how its interpretation gradually shifted from being framed as a vehicle of progress or "development" to being understood as a system of colonial extraction or "exploitation". This way, it will engage with the distinction remarked by psychologists Laurent Licata and Olivier Klein between representations of colonialism as forced labor, exploitation, racial segregation and exploitation on the one hand, and as developments in the domains of education, medicine, infrastructure, economy and religion on the other, probing how the increasing prevalence of the former coincided with new generations of memory actors, changing interpretations of global poverty and inequality and, ultimately, a waning belief in the legitimacy of the colonial system.[4]

Hence, it will build on the findings of scholars of colonial history and memory, who have collectively observed a change in narratives around the turn of the century. Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse for instance saw the emergence in history textbooks of a "hunt for the wrong past" in the 1970s, which introduced a "very critical" and "very condemnatory attitude" towards "dark pages in history", including colonialism.[5] In his work on colonial references in the public sphere, Idesbald Goddeeris then again found that such monuments and street names were "met with increased criticism" at the beginning of the twenty-first century.[6] Yet, while they show admirably how Belgian politics, educational reforms, or post-colonial migra-

1. Résolution de la Chambre des Représentants de Belgique relative à la commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'état indépendant du Congo (1885-1908) et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo (1908-1960), au Rwanda et au Burundi (1919-1962), ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver, 17 July 2020. This quote and all further quotes from French or Dutch have been translated by the author, unless specified otherwise.
2. Rapport des experts de la commission spéciale chargée d'examiner l'état indépendant du Congo (1885-1908) et le passé colonial de la Belgique au Congo (1908-1960), au Rwanda et au Burundi (1919-1962), ses conséquences et les suites qu'il convient d'y réserver, 26 October 2021, p. 35.
3. A French transcription of the speech was published in Le Soir, *Le discours du Roi devant le parlement congolais*, 1 July 1960.
4. Laurent Licata & Olivier Klein, "Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism? Intergenerational Comparisons on Collective Memories and Emotions about Belgium's Colonial Past", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence,* 4/1, 2010, 45-57.
5. Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, "From Triumphalism to Amnesia. Belgian-Congolese (Post)Colonial History in Belgian Secondary History Education Curricula and Textbooks (1945-1989)", in Joanna Wojdon, ed., *Colonialism, Decolonization and Postcolonial Historical Perspectives: Challenges for History Didactics and History Teaching in a Globalizing World,* Schwalbach, 2014, 90.
6. Idesbald Goddeeris, "Colonial Streets and Statues: Postcolonial Belgium in the Public Space", *Postcolonial Studies* 18/4, 2015, 399.

tion had opened the memory field to reinterpretations of colonial discourse, very few delve into the actual content of these changing narratives beyond the mere observation of a more critical tone. This article will address this gap, by mapping the narratives related to colonial economy as a central element in colonial discourse, as well as the effects of such shifting narratives on the perceived legitimacy of (Belgian) colonialism.

Colonial memory in Belgian newspapers and history education

Through its research question, the article engages with the field of collective memory studies. What exactly constitutes the collective nature of collective memory has been a point of contention among researchers for several decades now, with a traditional distinction between individualist – collective memory as an aggregation of individual memories – and collectivist – collective memory as a phenomenon *sui generis* – understandings of the notion. A proponent of the latter, Jeffrey Olick for instance finds that a focus on the sum of individual memories is insufficient to explain the processes involved in a collective form of remembering: "collectivities have memories, just like they have identities, and [...] ideas, styles, genres, and discourses [...] that are more than the aggregation of individual subjectivities".[7] Yet at the same time, this Durkheimian take[8] risks introducing the idea of a "group mind" or a group-level cognition that *has* one collective memory. Even proponents of the collectivist stance therefore warn against the reification of memory, with Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins clarifying that memories "are ongoing processes, not possessions or properties" of a group.[9] When conversing with the individualist-collectivist debate, these nuances are crucial. While this article follows Olick's definition of collective memory as an inherently collective phenomenon, it also considers the importance of individual agency and interaction in the mediation or externalization of these memories, as Olick himself acknowledges that "[mnemonic practices] gain their reality only by being used, interpreted, and reproduced or changed" and are therefore "simultaneously individual and social".[10] Sarah Gensburger similarly argues that "the structuration of the social space and the position that the individual occupies within it explains the expression of memory", thus hinting at the interplay between social and individual aspects of the remembering process.[11]

Throughout this article, collective memories will be studied as historical representations in the form of historical narratives. Empirically, it will explore the representations of colonial memory in history textbooks and newspapers published during the last thirty years of the twentieth century, guided by four discourse analytical questions:

1. How is colonial economy represented in history textbooks and newspapers in Belgium?
2. What role is it awarded in the history of colonialism; or what explanatory force is it ascribed?
3. Is colonial economy assigned a moral judgment and if so, which one?
4. How does this shape representations of colonialism in general, both as a European and a Belgian phenomenon?

As such, it focusses specifically on the aspect of colonial economy, though without losing sight of its position within the broader narrative of colonial history.

7. Jeffrey Olick, "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures", *Sociological Theory,* 17/3, 1999, 342.
8. As explored repeatedly in Jeffrey Olick, "The Two Cultures of Collective Memory Revisited", in Astrid Erll & William Hirst, ed., *Cognition, Culture, and Political Momentum: Breaking down the Silos in Collective Memory Research,* Oxford, 2025, 15-26.
9. Jeffrey Olick & Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices", *Annual Review of Sociology,* 24, 1998, 133-34.
10. Jeffrey Olick, *The Sins of the Fathers: Germany, Memory, Method,* Chicago, 2016, 43.
11. Sarah Gensburger, "Halbwachs' Studies in Collective Memory: A Founding Text for Contemporary 'Memory Studies'?", *Journal of Classical Sociology,* 16/4, 2016, 396-413.

That said, the article aims to go beyond this traditional focus on representations alone, by not only examining what these representations entail but also the processes at its roots – as emphasized by scholars protesting the reification of memory. Psychologists Frederic Bartlett and James Wertsch for instance prefer to speak of *remembering,* rather than *memory,* while Gensburger argues that Halbwachs' foundational texts have always promoted such a relational and interactionist understanding of collective memory that recognizes how the social frameworks of memory take form through interaction between individuals among themselves and with their social space.[12] Gensburger, but also Wulf Kansteiner and more recently Wouter Reggers therefore insist on an interactional approach that goes beyond a mere analysis of representations as the outcome of the remembering process.[13] Asking why collective representations of colonial economy are represented the way they are, the analysis thus recognizes that the historical narratives under study were written by individuals, who occupy a unique position at the crossroad of several subgroups in Belgian history.[14] Hence, the article considers the individual agency of the authors, as well as their interaction with broader sociohistorical developments and discourses in Belgium and beyond.

This article therefore argues that newspapers and history textbooks are not containers of a reified version of memory, nor just reflections of individual positions, but two sites (among many) where socially constructed remembering occurs through interaction. Scholars in media studies and educational sciences have recognized the social function of newspapers and history textbooks in shaping collective views on the past : newspapers are particularly effective in distributing certain interpretations of the past due to their large reach and the position of journalists as excellent storytellers with an authoritative reputation who regularly use the past to fit events into a coherent and recognizable framework.[15] Even if their narratives are often not readily adopted by its readers, newspapers are found to be very effective in guiding public debate towards certain themes.[16] History textbooks are then again educational resources, closely related to the discipline of history. They are a functional medium, aimed at educating according to specific pedagogical or didactic principles.[17] Contrary to newspapers, the past is the main subject of interest to history classes, that therefore offer consciously constructed representations of historical events. While the effectiveness of textbooks as vehicles of collective memory is debated, it is generally accepted that history education enjoys a particularly authoritative position and a modest monop-

12. Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering : A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology,* Cambridge, 1995 ; James Wertsch, "Collective Memory and Narrative Templates", *Social Research : An International Quarterly,* 75/1, 2008, 133-56 ; Gensburger, "Halbwachs' Studies in Collective Memory , 396-413.

13. Ibid. ; Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory : A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies", *History and Theory,* 41/2, 2002, 179-97 ; Wouter Reggers, "A Family Past in a Foreign Country. Interactional Remembering and Relations to the Past in Families of Belgian Former Colonials", PhD thesis, UCLouvain, 2026.

14. Ibid.

15. Jill Edy, "Journalistic Uses of Collective Memory", *Journal of Communication,* 49/2, 1999, 71 ; Ludmila Isurin, "Collective Memory, Journalism, and News Making", in Ludmila Isurin, *Reenacting the Enemy : Collective Memory Construction in Russian and US Media,* Oxford, 2022, 37, 39 ; Barbie Zelizer & Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, *Journalism and Memory,* Berlin, Springer, 2014, 7 ; Janice Hume, "Memory Matters : The Evolution of Scholarship in Collective Memory and Mass Communication", *The Review of Communication,* 10/3, 2010, 188-89 ; Barbie Zelizer, "CNN, the Gulf War, and Journalistic Practice", *Journal of Communication,* 42/1, 1992, 66 ; Eyal Zandberg et al., "Past Continuous : Newsworthiness and the Shaping of Collective Memory", *Critical Studies in Media Communication,* 29/1, 2012, 66.

16. Maxwell E. McCombs & Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media", *The Public Opinion Quarterly,* 36/2, 1972, 176-87 ; Neta Kligler-Vilenchik et al., "Setting the Collective Memory Agenda : Examining Mainstream Media Influence on Individuals' Perceptions of the Past", *Memory Studies,* 7, 2014, 487 ; Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, "Memory-Setting : Applying Agenda-Setting Theory to the Study of Collective Memory", in Motti Neiger et al., eds., *On Media Memory,* London, 2011, 226-37.

17. Maria Grever & Tina Van Der Vlies, "Why National Narratives Are Perpetuated : A Literature Review on New Insights from History Textbook Research", *London Review of Education,* 15/2, 2017, 288.

oly on the education of younger generations, with studies showing how even at a later age, individuals often rely on memories of their education.[18] Classrooms are therefore thought of as sites where narratives about history are reproduced, actively promoted or delegitimized.[19]

At the same time, newspapers and history textbooks are restricted by the context in which they were produced. Standing at the crossroad of several social groups, journalists and textbook authors are social beings who interact with fellow members and with social frameworks that help shape their reality. Moreover, both are confronted with several societal and political expectations, especially as inherently commercial products. In their assessment of what is deemed newsworthy, newspapers must consider the sociohistorical context of their target group and, to a certain degree, concur with the prevailing views of its readers, leading scholars such as Caroll Glynn and Ronald Rodgers to claim that "if we can figure out what people like to read, listen to and watch, we will have a good sense of their attitudes and opinions on public affairs".[20] History textbooks are similarly expected to conform to what is considered common historical knowledge that all children and citizens ought to know and therefore susceptible to social and cultural frameworks in society, prompting Bert Vanhulle to conclude that they "reflect quite truthfully the ideas and values that exist in society".[21]

This interplay between the ways in which newspapers and textbooks shape and are shaped by memory and its sociocultural context was already recognized as history's "disciplinary matrix" by Jörn Rüsen, which explored the relationship between the discipline and the larger cultural context in which it emerges. Incited by people's need to orient themselves and their groups in time and throughout history, historians and other historical work are called to address these questions and are thus inspired by broader sociocultural developments. It is therefore to be expected that their work, in turn, "feed[s] back into the larger culture's understandings and orientation", resulting in a constant reciprocity by the two.[22] Applied by Peter Seixas to the case of history education and memory, the current article extends this principle to textbooks and newspapers, arguing, as shown above, that the representations in both memory vehicles are guided by questions related to identity formation and building in Belgian society, while, ultimately, shaping changing memories and new inquiries themselves.[23]

However, neither the degree to which newspapers and textbooks conform to prevailing views, nor their influence on these views should be exaggerated. Questions of reception remain difficult to address in studies such as the one presented here. It is not possible to assess how the narratives in newspapers were engaged with in broader society, how textbooks were actually used in classrooms by teachers or how students reacted to these courses. Both newspapers and history textbooks are moreover closely related to power in society and the narratives in both sources are the narratives of those in the position to take the floor.

18. Eckhardt Fuchs & Marcus Otto, "Educational Media, Textbooks, and Postcolonial Relocations of Memory Politics in Europe", *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society,* 5/1, 2013, 3 ; Grever & Van Der Vlies, "Why National Narratives Are Perpetuated", 288 ; Kligler-Vilenchik, "Memory-Setting", 230-32.
19. Johanna Ahlrichs et al., "Memory Practices in the Classroom", *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society,* 7/2, 2015, 89-100.
20. Jeffrey Olick, "Reflections on the Underdeveloped Relations between Journalism and Memory Studies", in Barbie Zelizer & Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt, eds., *Journalism and Memory,* London, 2014, 25–26 ; Carroll J. Glynn, *Public Opinion,* London, 2019, 81 ; Ronald R. Rodgers, *The Struggle for the Soul of Journalism : The Pulpit versus the Press, 1833-1923,* Missouri, 2018, 84.
21. Stuart Foster, "Dominant Traditions in International Textbook Research and Revision", *Education Inquiry,* 2/1, 2011, 5 ; Bert Vanhulle, "The Path of History : Narrative Analysis of History Textbooks – a Case Study of Belgian History Textbooks (1945-2004)", *History of Education,* 38/2, 2009, 134, 267.
22. Jörn Rüsen, *Historische Vernunft : Grundzüge einer Historik I,* Stuttgart, 1976 ; Allan Megill, „Jorn Rusen's Theory of Historiography between Modernism and Rhethoric of Inquiry", *History and Theory,* 33/1, 1994, 39-60 ; Peter Seixas, "A History/Memory Matrix for History Education", *Public History Weekly,* 4/6, 2016.
23. Seixas, "A History/Memory Matrix for History Education".

They therefore inevitably reflect the exclusions and restrictions in Belgium at the time.[24]

The analysis presented below is based on 358 articles published in 1970 (83 articles), 1985 (121 articles) and 1990 (154 articles) in the newspapers *De Standaard, Vooruit/De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws, La Libre Belgique, Le Peuple* and *Le Soir* and on 47 chapters in French- and Dutch-speaking history textbooks published between 1970 and 2000. The results are part of a broader PhD project, which studied colonial memories in Belgium between 1960 and 2020. For this project, newspapers and history textbooks were selected on the basis of their popularity in Belgian society, representativeness of two main fault lines in the country (ideological and linguistic) and availability for the whole research period. In the case of newspapers, this resulted in six newspapers that were published continuously throughout the research chronology (with the exception of *Le Peuple,* which was discontinued in 1998). Given the abundance of newspapers and the non-digitisation of the majority of their editions, they were analysed through eight key dates that represent moments of heightened debate and through a manual selection of articles mentioning colonial history in any way. No distinction was made in the selection process between types of articles (opinion pieces, editorials, news reports). History textbooks were then again chosen on the basis of their availability in archives. The research opted for textbook series of which several editions were available in the archives, so that each new edition could be compared and changes in curriculum could be observed. Within these textbooks, all chapters discussing colonial history were selected. Sometimes these consisted of chapters dedicated wholly to colonial history. Other textbooks included them in broader chapters, for instance per royal reign. Due to the unsystematic nature of the archival collection, with the most important archive of the KULeuven depending primarily on private donations, French-speaking textbooks are underrepresented in the selection, especially for the earlier period.

Both sources were analyzed through a discourse analysis, with attention to the frequency of (new) terms, co-occurrences of key terms and instances of intertextuality or interdiscursivity.[25] This way, the article is concerned with the associations and meanings evoked through the use of a specific vocabulary. With language being a popular mediator for sharing and understanding collective memory, discourses, narratives and vocabulary are understood as inherently social and thankful entry points into the study of changing representations of the past.[26] After all, Halbwachs famously argued that even the most personal memories are socially conditioned, especially when they share these memories through language.[27] Indeed, language users are not entirely free in their communication but rather constrained by the available linguistic repertoires, that are themselves the result of ongoing exchanges between people. This means that a person's choice for a word is not just an individual action, but interplays with a long historical development leading to its current mean-

24. Maria Repoussi & Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon, "New Trends in History Textbook Research", *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society,* 2/1, 2010, 156-159; Olick, "Reflections on the Underdeveloped Relations between Journalism and Memory Studies", 25-26.

25. For discourse analysis and the discipline of history see Marnix Beyen, *De taal van de geschiedenis : hoe historici lezen en schrijven,* Leuven, 2019. For discourse analysis and the field of memory studies see Jakub Mlynár, "Language and Collective Memory : Insights from Social Theory", *Slovak Journals of Political Sciences,* 14/3, 2014, 217-36; Louise Ballière, "Words of the Past : A Discourse Analysis of Seventy-Six Years of Remembering Collaboration in Post-War Belgium (1944-2020)", in Natalie Braber, Thomas Van de Putte & Sophie Van den Elzen, eds., *Language and Memory : Interactions and Mediations,* London, 2026, 199-216.

26. Mlynár, "Language and Collective Memory : Insights from Social Theory"; Astrid Erll, "The Invention of Cultural Memory", in Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies : An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook,* Berlin, 2008, 85-96.

27. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de La Mémoire,* Paris, 1925.

ing and connotation. Language is therefore a site where historians can observe negotiations about past and current reality in society.[28]

II. A quick retrospective : colonial economy in Belgian colonial propaganda

While traditionally portrayed as "reluctant imperialists" unwillingly dragged into the colonial adventure by an overeager king, recent scholarship has shown the relative success of colonial (state) propaganda in creating a "limited, but significant colonial culture [...], such that by 1960 many people embraced a positive vision of their colonial 'mission' in Africa".[29] Matthew Standard indeed counters the popular idea that most of the population was unbothered by their nation's imperialism, arguing that "the Congo was more than an economic, diplomatic or political concern of an elite" and that "colonies entered into people's everyday lives".[30] This concurs with the field of New Imperial History, which proposes a rethinking of the history of colonialism that focusses on the mutual exchanges between colony and metropole and understands imperialism as a complex system of cultural, societal and knowledge production that has shaped the metropole as much as the colony.[31]

Many of such recent studies on Belgian colonial culture nevertheless center on the *civilizing mission,* which supposedly acted as a "thin veil to disguise [Leopold's] material objectives".[32] Wrapped in the Western development discourse and its inherent hierarchization of societies, this narrative portrayed colonialism as a benevolent work of charity in the interest of an uncivilized or underdeveloped people.[33] A "colonialist triumphalism" lauded both the endeavors by Leopold II in the Congo Free State and the colonial administration in Belgian Congo, with newspapers and history textbooks typically listing positive achievements in the domains of culture, education, medicine, and economy.[34] Developed most famously by governor-general Pierre Ryckmans, the paternalistic interpretation of the *politique indigène* around the 1930s notoriously painted the colonial domination as wholly beneficial to the wellbeing of the Congolese : "To dominate in order to serve [...], that is to say, to civilize. [...] not just to exploit, not just to enrich ; but to make people better, happier, more human".[35]

Yet, through this mostly one-sided focus, scholarship tends to neglect the importance of economic benefits to the metropole in pro-empire discourse. Historians Matthew Stanard and Guy Vanthemsche both assess that economy and profit were integral to Belgian propaganda. Vanthemsche for instance found that Leopoldian communications focused on the potential of the colony to bring the nation "incredible wealth", which was repeated

28. Jan Blommaert, *Discourse : A Critical Introduction,* Cambridge, 2005, 15, 27 ; Jeffrey Olick, *The Politics of Regret : On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility,* London, 2007, 29-30 ; Olick, "The Two Cultures of Collective Memory Revisited", 19.
29. Matthew Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock,* Leuven, 2019, 46.
30. Matthew Stanard, *Selling the Congo : A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism,* Nabraska, 2012, 6.
31. Matthew Stanard, "Post-1945 Colonial Historiography and the New Imperial History", in Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse & Joaquim Pires Valentim, eds., *The Colonial Past in History Textbooks : Historical and Social Psychological Perspectives,* Charlotte, 2018, 20-24 ; Idesbald Goddeeris, "Postcolonial Belgium : The Memory of the Congo", *Interventions,* 17/3, 2015, 445-46 ; Julian Go, "The 'New' Sociology of Empire and Colonialism", *Sociology Compass, 3/5,* 2009, 776-77 ; Idesbald Goddeeris & Sindani E. Kiangu, "Congomania in Academia. Recent Historical Research on the Belgian Colonial Past", *Low Countries Historical Review,* 126/4, 2011, 54-74 ; Stephen Howe, *The New Imperial Histories Reader,* London, 2020, 1.
32. Guy Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980,* Cambridge, 2012, 197.
33. Pierre-Olivier de Broux & Bérengère Piret, "« Le Congo était fondé dans l'intérêt de la civilisation et de la Belgique ». La notion de civilisation dans la Charte coloniale", *Revue interdisciplinaire d'études juridiques,* 83/2, 2019, 52.
34. Van Nieuwenhuyse, "From Triumphalism to Amnesia", 86.
35. Pierre Ryckmans, *Dominer Pour Servir,* Brussel, 1931, 5.

in his increased efforts around 1900 to attract Belgian investors and entrepreneurs.[36] Stanard similarly found that even after the annexation in 1908, much of the propaganda continued to portray overseas colonies as "realms of untold fortunes, and incredible wealth", that "could act as economic saviors to the metropole".[37] Despite current estimates that even during the heydays of Belgian investments, colonial trade comprised no more than 3 % of Belgium's GDP,[38] Stanard claims that popular belief saw in colonialism opportunities for economic growth, especially in times of economic hardships.[39] Tying Belgium's economic future together with the progress of its colony, minister Paul Crokaert for instance asserted the prospects of "the vitality of our Colony, its wealth, all its immediate and future resources and our profound faith in its assured future".[40] As such, Stanard shows how colonial pavilions at interwar world fairs did not only convey the civilizing discourse, however important it remained, but also displayed the industrial, agricultural and mineral potential of the colony by emphasizing the inexhaustible richness of the land, leading him to identify economic potential as one of four central themes typically circulating in interwar pro-empire propaganda in Belgium and Europe at large.[41]

This article therefore argues that the material objectives were not simply disguised by the "thin veil" of the civilizing mission but played a pivotal role in colonial discourse. This discourse depicted colonialism as simultaneously beneficial to the colony and metropole's economy, thus combining the focus on humanitarianism with an eye for investment potential. Discursively, this tied the Belgian and Congolese fate together, as "Belgium's future depended on the Congo", while the latter "was permanently backward and thus always in need of Belgium".[42]

The question remains how much of this colonial discourse survived the Congolese independence, especially as several scholars have defined this period in terms of collective amnesia. A declining number of textbook pages dedicated to colonial history, limited contributions to colonial culture, fading academic attention and significantly fewer newspaper articles on the topic do suggest that Belgian society failed to construct a strong post-1960 colonial memory.[43] This is typically attributed to its relatively short period of colonization and marginal demographic impact.[44] Yet, the result of this little interaction between Congolese and Belgians during and after colonization was that

36. Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885-1980,* 148-49.
37. Matthew Stanard, "Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda", *Journal of Contemporary History,* 44/1, 2009, 40.
38. This is not to say that colonial trade was not crucial for certain Belgian sectors and industries such as mining and agriculture. For a detailed discussion of the share of the colony in Belgium's economy see Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo,* 1885-1980.
39. Stanard, "'Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture", 40-41; Stanard, *Selling the Congo,* 78.
40. Cited by Stanard, *Selling the Congo,* 78, 160.
41. Matthew Stanard, "Selling the Empire between the Wars: Colonial Expositions in Belgium, 1920-1940", *French Colonial History,* 6, 2005, 159–78; Stanard, "Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture".
42. Stanard, *Selling the Congo,* 120.
43. Van Nieuwenhuyse, "From Triumphalism to Amnesia", 87, 95; Antoon De Baets, "Métamorphoses d'une Épopée: Le Congo Dans Les Manuels d'histoire Employés Dans Nos Écoles", in Adrillon François & Jacquemin Jean-Pierre, eds., *Racisme, Continent Obscur: Clichés, Stéréotypes, Phantasmes à Propos Des Noirs Dans Le Royaume de Belgique,* Brussel, 1991 54; Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock,* 95, 137; Guy Vanthemsche, "The Historiography of Belgian Colonialism in the Congo", in Csaba Levai, ed., *Europe and the World in European Historiography,* Pisa, 2006, 100; Louise Ballière, "Remembering the Good or the Bad. Collective Memories Related to Collaboration and Colonisation as Historical Injustices in Belgium (1944/1960-2020)", PhD thesis, UCLouvain, 2024, 223.
44. Georgi Verbeeck, "Legacies of an Imperial Past in a Small Nation. Patterns of Postcolonialism in Belgium", *European Politics and Society,* 21/3, 2020, 295; Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock,* 46-47, 95; Valerie Rosoux, "The Two Faces of Belgium in the Congo: Perpetrator and Rescuer", *European Review of International Studies,* 1/3, 2014, 21; Sarah Demart, "Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives", *African Diaspora,* 6/1, 2013, 1–20; Mathieu Zana Aziza Etambala, "Présences Congolaises En Belgique, 1885-1940: Exhibition, Éducation, Émancipation, Paternalisme", PhD thesis, KULeuven, 1989.

images of Congo and colonialism that circulated in Belgium remained largely fabricated in Europe, often shaped heavily by a state propaganda or self-celebratory stories of colonials.[45] If we then consider the above-mentioned success of colonial propaganda in shaping a colonial culture, it is to be expected that the ideas disseminated vigorously before 1960 did not simply disappear after independence, even if interest was fading. Hence, the limited interaction between former colony and former metropole, and the silence and refusal of self-reflexivity on the part of Belgian authorities, makes it plausible that the images of colonial propaganda left lingering marks in post-colonial views on Congo, disconnected from contemporary realities. Stanard indeed found that memories of colonial economy continued to influence views on colonialism after 1960, as he estimates that immediate post-colonial memories were still largely informed by the abundance of images spread throughout the "golden age of the 1950s" of a blooming colonial economy, thriving infrastructure and investment plans designing a prosperous joint future. Especially in the context of afterwar struggles in Belgium, "memories of prosperous Congo in the 1950s were [thus] especially sweet".[46]

This can be noted in both post-1960 textbooks and newspapers. A 1960 edition of *Cultuurgetijden* for instance included a section entitled "The economic development benefits both Congo and Belgium", which had positioned Congo on "the third place among African countries ranked by economic importance".[47] In 1964, an article in *Het Laatste Nieuws* similarly reminded its readers that "in 1960, Belgium [had] granted independence to Sub-Saharan Africa's most prosperous colony".[48] All in all, while some criticism on the rubber extractions and the independence policy could be noted in both sources immediately after 1960, most narratives continued to promote the idea of a positive end balance for both Congo and Belgium, as had long been suggested by colonial propaganda.

III. Between development and exploitation : a growing tension

This is not to say the economic foundations of (Belgian) colonialism hadn't faced scrutiny before. Since its very beginning, scholars and politicians have warned against the risk of economic exploitation, while others have opted for inherently economic interpretations of colonialism, ascribing primacy to economic forces over the political, military or ideological arguments that prevailed at the time.[49] As Bogumił Jewsiewicki argues, long-term studies of memory hardly ever reveal the absolute replacement of older narratives with new perspectives. Since the mediation of memory can take on different shapes, "discourses [of memory] are multiform", with relationships of negotiation and contradiction but also complementarity existing within the same society.[50] In 2016, historian Pedro Monaville concurred, when describing colonial memories in 1980s and 1990s Belgium as a multitude of voices, showing a mixture of nostalgia and increasing criticism.[51]

45. Matthew Stanard, "Remembering Belgium's Colonial Past in the Congo", in Ihab Saloul & Britt Baillie, eds., *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Cultural Heritage and Conflict,* Cham, 2024, 1.
46. Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock,* 85.
47. J.A. Van Houtte & P. Voeten, *Cultuurgetijden. Geschiedenis van België en Kongo,* Lier, s.d., 283-284.
48. Het Laatste Nieuws, *Ons land en Congo. In beroerde tijden,* 17 December 1964.
49. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government,* London, 1861 as discussed in Margaret Kohn & Kavita Reddy, "Colonialism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* 2023, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/?f[0]=topic:1&countryid=391&f%5B0%5D=region%3A46, consulted on 17 October 2025 ; John Atkinson Hobson, *Imperialism : A Study,* New York, J. Pott, 1902 ; Anthony A. Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism : A Critical Survey,* London, 1995, 73–87.
50. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, "Collective Memory and the Stakes of Power. A Reading of Popular Zairian Historical Discourses", *History in Africa,* 13, 1986, 197.
51. Pedro Monaville, "A Distinctive Ugliness : Colonial Memory in Belgium", in Dietmar Rothermund, ed., *Memories of Post-Imperial Nations,* Cambridge, 2015, 71-72.

Hence, this article does not claim that critical economic-centered interpretations of colonialism were a novelty in the 1980s. What it did observe, however, was a shift in narratives in two sources that are considered crucial vehicles of collective memory and that are associated with privileged positions of powers, suggesting that such interpretations slowly entered mainstream thought in Belgian society. Whereas before, colonial economy had mainly been portrayed in Belgian newspapers and history textbooks as beneficial to both colony and metropole, progressively from the late 1970s onwards, a tension appeared between these two perspectives, which challenged the compatibility of both views.

This is especially evident in the case of history textbooks, that are produced with the intent of explaining historical events in a clear manner to an uneducated audience. In other words, history education requires to-the-point arguments about the lead-up and causes of historical developments. Contrary to newspapers, that are typically dedicated to temporal proximity and newsmaking about the present, history education's main concern is the past, thus providing clear and typically thought-through representations of historical events.[52]

In the case of (European) colonialism, textbook authors increasingly explained colonial expansion through its profit-seeking intentions, while highlighting the repercussions of these profit-based structures and exploring the detrimental short- and long-term implications for the local people. In the first paragraph of his 1995 chapter on the topic, Paul Vandepitte for instance combined economic and imperial motivations to introduce late nineteenth-century European expansion, which implicitly labeled colonialism as a profit-seeking venture and prestige project that had detrimental repercussions for the colonized subject on both economic and humanitarian level :

> "Profit, getting benefit from the overseas adventure always came first. […] *They incorporated the colonies into the Western capitalist system.* In concrete terms, this meant that a global 'division of labour' was established in which the industrialised countries supplied manufactured goods and the colonies became suppliers of tropical crops (plantation farming) and minerals. […] The excessive focus on the production of tropical crops happened at the expense of food production for the local population. In addition, there was *nationalism.* […] Every people wanted to surpass the others. […] Colonies existed solely to serve the wealth, prestige and power of the mother countries." (cursive copied from textbook)[53]

Other textbooks have more explicitly defined colonialism as an endeavor that "usually resulted in exploitation and domination" or introduced the "history of white colonization" as "a history of predatory cultivation in the dominated territories, but also a predatory cultivation of people".[54] By the 1990s, this perspective appeared in almost all studied textbooks, as symbolized in the statement in a 1993 edition of *Memo* that colonialism was "a theft of territory to take possession of a profit colony, gain greater political power, and possibly occupy a strategically important position".[55]

As their existence is centered around current events and temporal proximity, newspapers approach history differently and through the prism of the present. Nevertheless, Barbie Zelizer and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt do emphasize that "journalism regularly looks backward" and frequently incorporates views on the past in their accounts of

52. Grever & Van Der Vlies, "Why National Narratives Are Perpetuated", 288 ; Repoussi & Tutiaux-Guillon, "New Trends in History Textbook Research", 159 ; Mario Carretero, "Imagining the Nation throughout School History Master Narratives", in Marko Demantowsky, ed., *Public History and School : International Perspectives,* Berlin, 2018, 98.
53. P. Vandepitte, *Chrono 5. 18de-19de eeuw. De groei van een moderne samenleving,* Kapellen, 1995, 90.
54. L. Teetaert, o.l.v. M. Vermander, *Chrono 6. Het eigen tijdsgebeuren,* Kapellen, 1982, 82 ; P. Vandepitte, *Tijdspiegel 6. Twintigste Eeuw : De problematiek van vrede, welvaart en welzijn in een mundiale samenleving,* Antwerpen, 1975, 205.
55. P. Morren, *Memo 5. De 20ste eeuw,* Oostmalle, 1993, 192.

current developments.[56] In this sense, while articles on colonial history itself were slowly diminishing, colonialism was regularly cited in news articles about the situation in Zaire/Congo and its contemporary relations in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the context of the declining interest of the Belgian government in investing foreign aid in the region. In June 1990, economy-expert Paul Goossens for instance wrote in *De Morgen* that

> "It would be very naïve to interpret this turnaround [in the Belgian attitude towards president Mobutu] as the belated victory of moral consciousness in the Belgian foreign policy. […] On the contrary, the marginal importance of Zairian raw materials for Belgian companies and holdings is all the more significant. The days when the largest industries […] needed cheap ores from the former colonies to maintain their dividends are over".[57]

Goossens was not alone in labelling a historical interest in raw materials as the main incentive for investments in the region, today and in the past. In a later edition of *De Morgen,* professor Jean-Claude Willame similarly explained how the changing nature of the relations between Zaire and Belgium were due to a combination of diplomatic strains and the fact that "the Belgian industrial interests in Zaire have been greatly reduced since the Zairinisation of 1973".[58] *De Standaard* editor-in-chief Manu Ruys then again ascribed the current abandonment of Africa by Europe to the fact that "Europe no longer needs Black Africa" since "many countries have been stripped bare".[59]

Le Soir journalist and Zaire/Congo-expert Colette Braeckman was even more explicit when reviewing potential solutions to remedy the debt crisis of Central Africa. When briefly reflecting on previous unsuccessful attempts of Belgium at altering the region's economy, she noted

> "For God knows how many remedies Africa has known. First, there was colonisation, which sought to place African countries within global economic circuits. For the benefit of the metropoles, primarily, but also, it was believed, for the local populations who were thus opened to the world, and to 'progress'. Was it not 'for their own good' that farmers of Chad were forced to grow cotton, those of Rwanda to plant coffee and those of Tanzania and Kenya to produce tea ? The aim was, willingly or by force, to integrate African countries into the global economy. To enable people to earn some money so that they could pay taxes and buy what we wanted to sell them".[60]

Obelizing traditional colonial discourse that portrayed colonial rule and economy as beneficial to the local population, Braeckman sarcastically questioned the true motives behind the policy. Forcing a particular economy on a people, she claimed, primarily benefitted the metropoles, while leaving colonized Africa with very little freedom.

Such interpretations fit within a contemporary scholarly tendency to shift the focus from the colonizer's perspective, such as colonial administrators, functionaries or missionaries, towards the experience of the colonized. The field was propelled and heavily marked by Belgian historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina, who actively resisted the tradition to have African history start with the arrival of Europeans. Interested in early and pre-colonial African history through oral history methods, Vansina's work concerned the experiences of African individuals and societies directly.[61] Such a scholarly incentive of acknowl-

56. Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, *Journalism and Memory,* 1 ; Isurin, "Collective Memory, Journalism, and News Making", 40.
57. De Morgen, *Zaïre en Afrika : wachten op de rechtsorde van de jungle,* 2 June 1990.
58. De Morgen, *'Het verschil met vorige keer is dat Brussel goed voorbereid krisis ingaat',* 23 June 1990.
59. Ibid.
60. Le Soir, *Les décennies perdues de l'Afrique,* 15 June 1990.
61. Jan Vansina, *Being Colonized : The Kuba Experience in Rural Congo, 1880–1960,* Wisconsin, 2010.

edging the reality lived by colonized people furthered the discrepancy between the benefits of colonial economy for the metropole on the one hand and the supposed benefits of colonialism for the colony. This was especially the case for history textbooks, many of which were written by professional historians or academics and were closely related to the discipline of history - even if articles such as the ones quoted above showed similar tendencies. In 1993, Paul Morren for instance contemplated in *Memo* that "while there are also a few positive facts that fit into this overall picture", "however commendable they may be, [they] must also be nuanced by the observation that it was found almost exclusively in areas of economic interest to white people".[62] As such, he reversed the early triumphalist narrative that systematically put forward positive achievements while sometimes acknowledging the 1900 scrutiny by now placing these achievements second to the domination and exploitation that had characterized the colonial system – or, as a 1982 edition of *Chrono* noted, to the fact that "[c]olonies existed solely to serve the wealth, prestige and power of the mother countries".[63]

This shift in narratives also overlaps partly with the distinction observed by psychologists Laurent Licata and Olivier Klein. When asking French-speaking Belgians about their views on Belgian rule in the Congo Free State, two diverging representations of colonialism emerged, summarized by the authors in the contradicting concepts of "development" and "exploitation". The first notion comprised efforts in the domains of education, medicine, infrastructure, economy and religion – all labelled by Licata and Klein as "positive traits". The notion of "exploitation" then again included references to forced labor, racial segregation, abuses and the exploitation for profit, or "negative traits". In interpreting the connotations of both representations, the authors found that an understanding of colonialism in terms of exploitation acted as a significant predictor of feelings of collective guilt and moral condemnation, while respondents adhering to a view of colonialism as a vehicle of development typically rejected claims of exploitation. This way, Klein and Licata showed how both perspectives coexisted in Belgian society, thus corroborating Jewsiewicki's argument that collective memory is mediated on different levels and Monaville's observation that the 1980s memories in Belgium showed traces of nostalgia, as well as increasing scrutiny.[64]

Continuity and change : a shift in generations

It is true that despite the shift observed above, many instances of continuities were found as well. For instance, while the Belgian history education went through a reform in 1970, which changed the goals of history from the initial patriotic and nation-building function towards a heavy focus on transnational identity and values, the break it may be expected to cause in the content of history textbooks cannot be exaggerated.[65] Many of the textbooks studied in this article show a strong continuity between their editions before and after 1970 and were not adapted to the reform : the text on the colonial past in the series *Cultuurgetijden. Geschiedenis van België (en Kongo)* and *Histoire et Humanité* did not change over their four editions between respectively 1960 and 1974 and 1961 and 1970. *Historia. Nieuwste Tijd* similarly retained the same account for its eight editions between 1960 and 1977, while its *Historia. Geschiedenis van België* showed only slight rephrasings between 1961 and 1980. Between 1966 and 1988, the series *Levend Verleden. Van 1815 tot heden* then again had only one sen-

62. P. Morren, *Memo 5. De 20ste eeuw,* 193.
63. P. Vandepitte, *Chrono 5. 18de-19de eeuw. De groei van een moderne samenleving,* Kapellen, 1995, 90.
64. Licata & Klein, "Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?.
65. Van Nieuwenhuyse & Marjolein Wilke, "History Education in Belgium/Flanders since 1945 between a National and a Global Scope : Whose Past, What for and for Whom?", *Bulletin Du CREAS,* 7, 2020, 67–69 ; Van Nieuwenhuyse, "From Triumphalism to Amnesia", 90-91.

tence altered over the course of its eight editions. Any impression of significant change must thus be tempered in light of the heavy continuity between textbook authors and content, as new editions often relied thoroughly on previous versions.

Similarly, several journalists had been writing for Belgian newspapers since before Congolese independence, thus showing some continuity in their reports. Manu Ruys (*De Standaard,* born in 1927) had been systematically covering stories related to Belgian Congo, the (Democratic) Republic of the Congo and Zaire since his first of many trips to the country in 1958. He also had close personal connections to the country through family members who had resided and worked in Belgian Congo.[66] As a journalist for *La Libre Belgique,* Jean Kestergat (pen name of Jean-Marie Thierry Alphones Ghislain van der Dussen de Kestergat, born in 1922) would similarly continue writing on the African continent, and the Congo-Zaire in particular, following his first foreign mission for the newspaper in 1958.[67] For *Le Soir,* Etienne Ugeux (born in 1923) then again started his journalistic career at the radio station of Belgian Congo, after which he became the director of information of the colonial government until 1960 and chief of cabinet for the new Katangese secretary of state for information, Lucas Samalenge, before leaving Katanga in 1961.[68] While this continuity cannot be generalized (with Manu Ruys as a striking exception), writings by journalists such as Jean Kestergat did show echoes of the colonial discourse (most notably, in the excerpts of his 1985 book "Quand le Zaïre s'appelait Congo", published regularly in *La Libre Belgique*).[69]

So how can we explain the discursive shift that increasingly portrayed colonial economy as a system of exploitation? One aspect that Licata and Klein found crucial in explaining the coexistence of different views was generational belonging, with young respondents indicating higher levels of collective guilt.[70] Such results evoke Vincent Houben's statement in the context of Belgian colonial memories that "there seems to be a 20- to 30- years cycle involved in looking back upon critical events".[71] Such theories propose that age cohorts gather certain traits based on the sociohistorical context of their youth. As collective memories are constantly reinterpreted and re-narrated according to individual and collective experiences, it is to be expected that these generational characteristics influence social processes at least to a certain degree. While this does not annihilate other variables such as gender, class, or political convictions, the category of age has at the hypothetical ability to cut across these social categories:[72] "each generation grows up in a particular social and historical context, which profoundly influences its representations, attitudes and shared values".[73] This is even more true when we consider Karl Mannheim's widely accepted claim that public events during adolescence and early adulthood are particularly important in the formation of world views.[74]

66. Mark Deweerdt, "Ruys, Manu", *Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging,* 2023, https://devb.be/id/per-010602, consulted on 17 October 2025.
67. Paul Raeymaekers, "VAN DER DRUSSEN DE KESTERGAT (Jean Marie Thierry Alphonse Ghislain", in Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, *Biographie belge d'outre mer,* Brussel, 2005, 389-391.
68. Le Soir, *Etienne Ugeux, témoin d'Afrique pour « Le Soir »,* 19 February 1998.
69. Jan Kestergat, *Quand le Zaïre s'appelait Congo,* Brussels, 1985.
70. Licata & Klein, "Holocaust or Benevolent Paternalism?"
71. Vincent Houben, "The Unmastered Past: Decolonization and Dutch Collective Memory", *European Review,* 8/1, 2000, 77-78.
72. Monika Palmberger, *How Generations Remember: Conflicting Histories and Shared Memories in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina,* Berlin, 2016; Valérie Rosoux, "Federalization of the Belgian National Past", in Didier Caluwaerts & Min Reuchamps, eds., *Belgian Exceptionalism,* London, 2021, 173; Olick, "Collective Memory," 8.
73. Pierre Bouchat et al., "A Social Psychological Perspective on World War II Collaboration in the 21st Century: A Belgian Case", *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 50/7, 2020, 1411.
74. Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations", in Paul Kecskemeti, ed., *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge,* London, 1952; Harald Wydra, "Generations of Memory: Elements of a Conceptual Framework", *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 60/1, 2018, 7.

The coming-of-age of and a co-narration of memories by a generation that did not actively experience the colonial period and were not exposed as intensely to its pro-empire propaganda might therefore have partly contributed to the discursive shift central to this article. Ruys, Kestergat and Ugeux were indeed joined by colleagues who had not experienced the colonial past as consciously or not at all. Notable in this regard are Axel Buyse (*De Standaard,* born in 1955), Dirk Achten (*De Standaard,* born in 1956), Colette Braeckman (*Le Soir,* born in 1946) and Marie-France Cros (*La Libre Belgique,* born in 1956).[75] Their systematic reporting was moreover increasingly joined by articles or op-eds by Congolese, Belgian-Congolese or Congolese-descendent politicians or scholars, such as historian Mathieu Zana Etambala (born in 1955), though this remained limited still.

Such biographical information is remarkably harder to find for textbook authors, especially since 1980s and 1990s news editions were almost exclusively written by teachers themselves (eg. Paul Morren, Jos Henckens (born in 1962), Louis E.M. Laitem (born in 1939), Omer Wautelet and Georges Huget). What could be noted, however, was that new textbook series or completely revised editions that were published from the late 1970s to 1990s focussed remarkably less on colonial achievements and more on the concept of exploitations than those who relied heavily on previous textbooks : the new and very critical textbook series *Levend Verleden. Van 1870 tot heden* was first published in 1971 ; the entire *Tijdspiegel*-series ran from 1975 to 1985 ; and the long-standing series *Notre Histoire* heavily revised its initial 1945 chapters on the colonial past in 1978.

Licata and Klein's results were indeed replicated by other scholars, though several warn for the pitfalls of blindly gathering individuals on the basis of their date of birth.[76] Only when shared experiences actually unite these individuals can we speak of "communities of perceptions", who partake in similar interpretative and discursive practices.[77] The question then remains what developments in the lifetime of these younger authors might have influenced their views of a colonial past they had not experienced.

Historical economy and current crises : new perspectives

What has remained largely underexplored in studies of colonial memory in Belgium is the broader national and transnational context that shaped changing interpretations of colonial economy. The following section examines how a discursive focus on poverty and (under)development in Latin America evolved into a global concern, providing a new interpretative frame through which Belgium's colonial past was reassessed in a time of shifting generations. It argues that these emerging development discourses shaped memory cultures in both Zaire/Congo and Belgium, while also informing their bilateral relations. By tracing the interplay between the global, national and bilateral levels of remembrance, the section explores the sociohistorical context in which new generations reinterpreted colonial economy over time.

While articles on the topic of colonialism itself quickly diminished after Congolese independence, discussions on contemporary Zaire/Congo did not disappear from public debate. Instead, newspapers showed extensive concern with the economic and social situation of the African continent in general, leading them to disseminate an image of the region as dramatically declined :

> "Hunger, poverty, drought, debt, civil wars… You name it. Africa is spared no disaster. You already knew that. And you also knew that the situation seems hopeless. Anyone who takes a moment to consider the future of this con-

75. Guy Poppe, *De boom waarnaar ze stenen gooien,* Amsterdam, 2009.
76. Eg. Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock,* 181, 224-25.
77. Olick, "Collective Memory," 339.

> tinent cannot help but wake up to a 'nightmare'. Even the football achievements of the 'lions of Africa' cannot remedy that."[78]

Articles such as this one in *De Morgen* were testament of the pessimistic outlook that had dominated Belgian public debate on the subject of Africa and the balance of payment crisis that had resulted from the external debt obligations entered by many African states after their independence.[79] The foreign aid initiated by European nations and institutions only deepened the dependency on foreign support, as these initiatives left very little autonomy for national governments to respond to these crises. From 1986 onwards, the European Commission for instance made the priority financial aid to African countries increasingly conditioned, with recipient states being compelled to adopt and comply with proposed structural adjustment programs, including imposed economic reform.[80] These outcomes revealed the limitations and contradictions of neoliberal reform programs and prompted a reconsideration of existing policies, leading to several initiatives aimed at debts restructuring and debt relief, such as the 1999 "Heavily Indebted Poor Countries II" initiative of the IMF and the World Bank.[81]

In a similar vein, the question of Zairian debts to Belgium had been a central theme in the countries' bilateral relations throughout the 1980s, as the Belgian government failed to formulate a clear stance. When on a state visit to the former colony in November 1988, Belgian prime minister Wilfried Martens and minister of foreign affairs Leo Tindemans were officially requested by president Mobutu to provide the country with extensive relief of the country's colonial and post-colonial debts. Once more, Martens responded conservatively, refusing the far-reaching measures sought by the Zairian government. This prompted the latter to revise its bilateral relations with Belgium, which culminated in the termination of the "Traité d'amitié, d'assistance et de coopération technique" and the "Convention générale de coopération technique et scientifique".[82]

In Belgium and elsewhere, such debates translated into a discursive focus on poverty and underdevelopment, as well as its historical roots.[83] In 1970s Latin America, scholars notably responded to the outdated modernization theory and rejected the idea that all societies progress through similar stages. Dependency Theory and Immanuel Wallerstein's subsequent World Systems Theory instead foregrounded the economic logic of colonialism, arguing that the current economic position of Latin American nations resulted not from an incomplete developmental phase, but from a historical flow of resources from a "periphery" of exploited states to a "core" of wealthy nations, thereby placing the former into a perpetual state of dependency.[84] These perspectives spread beyond Latin America, with Walter Rodney famously

78. De Morgen, *Afrika : Van krisis naar krisis,* 3 July 1990.
79. Jeremiah Shola Omotola & Hassan Saliu, "Foreign Aid, Debt Relief and Africa's Development : Problems and Prospects", *South African Journal of International Affairs,* 16/1, 2009, 87–91.
80. Anne-Sophie Gijs & Guia Migani, "Development Cooperation Policy", in European Commission, *The European Commission 1986-2000 : History and Memories of an Institution,* Brussel, 2019, 567 ; Francis Owusu, "Discourses on Development from Dependency to Neoliberalism", in Malinda Smith, ed., *Beyond the "African Tragedy" : Discourses on Development and the Global Economy,* Farnham, 2006, 28 ; Omotola & Saliu, "Foreign Aid, Debt Relief and Africa's Development", 90.
81. Omotola & Saliu, "Foreign Aid, Debt Relief and Africa's Development", 88, 92–93 ; "The History of Foreign Aid," ABC Listen, December 17, 2013, https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/rearvision/the-history-of-foreign-aid/5162100.
82. Rik Coolsaet, *België En Zijn Buitenlandse Politiek : 1830-1990,* Leuven, 1998, 1998, 447 ; Vanthemsche, *Belgium and the Congo, 1885–1980,* 222.
83. Owusu, "Discourses on Development from Dependency to Neoliberalism", 27 ; Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock,* 24.
84. Ravi Arvind Palat, "Dependency Theory and World-Systems Analysis," in Prasenjit Duara et al., eds. *A Companion to Global Historical Thought,* New York, 2014 ; Raúl Prebisch, *The Economic Development of Latin America and Its Principal Problems,* New York, 1950 ; Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America. Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil,* New York, 1967 ; Samir Amin, *L'accumulation a l'echelle Mondiale,* Paris, 1970.

connecting European development and African underdevelopment in a dialectical relation based on the former's history of exploitation in Africa.[85]

In line with the increasing number of memory scholars who, over the last decade, have explored the transnational character of collective memory, showing how "memory is literally on the move" and subject to ongoing transformations through time and space, colonial memory in Belgium too must be understood in broader terms than just the national ones.[86] Questions about poverty and its historical roots emerged and developed in this period through transnational exchanges over borders, with many African and European nations, along with international institutions, for instance regularly gathering throughout the 1990s to discuss the issue (eg. Maastricht Conference on African Development (2-4 July 1990)).

Besides these broader transnational negotiations, the discursive focus on the role of the colonial past in the economic history of formerly colonised nations also dominated bilateral relations between Zaire and Belgium during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Historian Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem observed similar interpretations of the past in Zaïre around the end of the century, when analogies between the historical European interest in rubber on the one hand and the current foreign obsession with red coltan moved colonial memories away from a type of nostalgia that had framed them over the last decades: "They discover, with a mixture of anger, defiance and resignation, that today, just as in the past, natural resources have always been the source of their misfortunes".[87] Feeling as though Leopold II had set in motion a violent and seemingly perpetual sale of Congolese land, Ndaywel è Nziem found colonial memories in the country increasingly reflecting on the region's historical and current place in the global market: "Just as in Leopold's time, the allure of these minerals and the trade war they generate are carried out with utter disregard for the population".[88]

That these reflections impacted Belgian-Zairian relations became clear in December 1988, during a television debate between a Zairian delegation and Belgian journalists. After meeting with Belgian politicians to resolve the dispute over Zairian debts, Gérard Kamanda wa Kamanda, Mpinga Kasenda and Nimy Maydika Ngimbi sat down across from Colette Braeckman, Paul Goossens, Frans Verleyen and Paul Gruselin to demand clarifications on the claims allegedly made by Belgian press and politicians that president Mobutu had obscured the majority of Belgium's foreign aid. The Zairian delegation and Belgian journalists quickly agreed that foreign aid had historically benefitted Belgium more than it did Zaire: "This money stays in Belgium, it remains in your banks in Belgium and it helps to promote your business in Belgium". Other questions were nevertheless hardly addressed, as participants on both sides talked in circles. When Paul Goossens steered the debate into the direction of the freedom of speech to critique foreign regimes, Kamanda launched into accusations of neo-colonialism, while directly referencing the colonial origins of the post-1960 struggles of his country:

> "We are not a developed nation. We are a developing nation that has faced many problems. You yourselves have created these problems for us. [Belgian journalist: "Absolutely"]. Well, even before independence, we suffered aggression at the hands of Belgium. You disrupted [Belgian journalist: "We have a moral debt to Zaire"] – you disrupted our territory administratively, economically and militarily. […] And we cannot allow the man who

85. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,* London, 1972.
86. Thomas Van de Putte, *Contemporary Auschwitz/Oswięcim : An Interactional, Synchronic Approach to Collective Memory,* London, 2022, 3 ; Astrid Erll, "Travelling Memory," *Parallax,* 17/4, 2011, 11.
87. Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, "Le Passé Colonial Dans Le Rétroviseur Congolais: Du Caoutchouc Rouge Au Coltan Rouge" in Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro & Guy Vanthemsche, eds. *Le Congo Colonial. Une Histoire En Questions,* Waterloo, 2020, 424.
88. Ibid., 425.

> stepped in to deal with these situations and enabled a nation to exist to be the target of baseless accusations from the Belgian press".[89]

Throughout the debate, the Zairian delegation advanced such an argument on multiple occasions, centred on both causality and continuity. Not only did they link the post-colonial administrative, political and economic structures of Zaire to the colonial period directly, they also accused Belgium of perpetuating these interests today: "The crux of the matter is that Belgium has never really come to terms with the idea that its former colony has become an independent sovereign state".[90]

While many voices in Europe and Belgium maintained that the situation in Africa was in essence a purely domestic affair, newspapers and history textbooks seem to suggest that several of these ideas did gain some foothold in Belgian public debate, prompted no doubt by bilateral relations with African states, postcolonial and decolonial theories and a growing Zairian diaspora in Belgium.[91] Due to their characteristic present-centred nature, this is especially clear in newspapers, where journalists from all editorial lines did make a connection between past and present governance in the region to explain current economical developments. In June 1985, *Le Soir* for instance published an opinion piece by government functionary Roland Binet, who wrote that

> "We must have the courage to admit it. Africa is a child of Europe. We watched it grow with pride. We watched it separate from us, with rage, with sadness. But the diseases from which Africa suffers, it is us, Europeans, who inoculated them. This delusion of grandeur, this corruption, these senseless wars, these glaring inequalities, this unpreparedness for the socio-psychological phenomena of excessive modernism, these are facts of Europe, these are examples of our own spiritual failure".[92]

Five years later, professor and development expert Didier Goyvaert adopted a more analytical tone in his essay published in *De Standaard*, explicitly naming the colonial past as a direct cause of the current economic state of many formerly colonized nations: "The disastrous situation of Africa is due to four factors: (1) the morally reprehensible colonisation; (2) the catastrophic decolonisation (neo-colonisation?); (3) the ludicrous ethnic manipulations of the past hundred years and (4) the cultural inability to a absorb foreign, i.e. Western, political and economic structures". In the next paragraph, he reiterated the responsibility of foreign players in this history, thus countering the popular idea that these crises are an inherently African affair: "it should be noted, however, that not one of these parameters are inherent to Africa itself. They have all manifested themselves through actions of foreign players".[93]

Yet, even in textbooks these connections were made explicit. Despite the popular belief that history textbooks are focused primarily on representations of the past, Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse and colleagues have repeatedly shown how the traditional understanding of history education as a vehicle of Belgian patriotism and national identity-construction slowly succumbed to the pressure of universal values. Throughout the 1970s, secondary education in general harbored increasingly global ambitions of supporting a transnational citizenship by raising students into good global citizens who could and would participate in contemporary democracy. Within this context, the importance of secondary education was no longer (only) fostering a national identity but

89. "Archives SONUMA-RTBF", Archive relative aux relations belgo-congolaise, Faire le point. Belgique-Zaïre, Isabelle Christiaens, 11 December 1988.
90. Ibid.
91. For Belgian diplomatic relations see Coolsaet, *België En Zijn Buitenlandse Politiek : 1830-1990 ;* For African migration to Belgium see Demart, "Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives".
92. Le Soir, *Sommes-nous des nazis ?,* 22 June 1985.
93. De Standaard, *Afrika : een laatste kans ?,* 28 July 1990.

contributing to the understanding of contemporary society and its challenges.[94] This is especially evident in history textbook series produced after this shift, with the introduction to a 1993 edition of *Chrono for instance* explaining students that insights into the twentieth century are not only required to understand the past, "but also to face the future, with all its challenges, well-prepared and intellectually-equipped".[95]

Within this framework, several textbook chapters directly link present concerns with the colonial past, to such a degree that sections on decolonization are frequently combined with later post-colonial developments: the 1982 edition of *Chrono* contained a chapter entitled "Decolonization and development cooperation", in which the subsection "Decolonization" was followed by "The Tragedy of the Third World".[96] In 1977, the critical *Levend Verleden* similarly offered a chapter called "Decolonization and development aid determine the relationship between rich and poor countries", whereas other editions of this series and of *Tijdsspiegel* complemented their chapters on decolonization with one on "A world of prosperity and poverty" or "The problem of underdevelopment".[97] Several textbook authors thus correlate poverty in the Central-African region to the nature of colonial economy. In 1996, *Memo* for instance noted that "it soon became clear that political independence does not mean the same thing as economic independence" and described a colonial legacy, which former colonies "have so far been unable to shake off" as "all manner of malpractices and problems are often a direct consequence of their colonial past".[98] In 1982, the authors of *Chrono* then again wrote that "in recent years, the industrialized world has become aware of the dire poverty in the Third World and the responsibility that rich countries bare in this regard", while adding that development aid was in essence "oriented towards political, military and economic self-interest".[99]

IV. Concluding remarks: a system under duress everywhere?

Such reinterpretations of colonial economy coincided with an increasingly controversial nature of the system of colonialism, as referenced directly by textbook authors and journalists: in 1975, *Tijdspiegel* titled its chapter on the matter "The colonial system called into question", while a 1993 edition of *Memo* included a section called "An indefensible and untenable system".[100] In 1985, Manu Ruys then again noted that the history known by Zairians was "different than what was taught in our schools at the time".[101] Still, a discrepancy between colonialism as a European system and the Belgian colonization of Congo remains apparent in many of the examples cited above.[102] Early post-colonial textbooks on Belgian history were typically more triumphant in their description of Belgian colonialism than textbooks on world history's accounts of European imperial expansion. After the reform of 1970, new or revised editions focused on European cases of colonialism even more, culminating

94. Van Nieuwenhuyse & Wilke, "History Education in Belgium/Flanders since 1945 between a National and a Global Scope".
95. P. Morren, *Memo 5. De 20ste eeuw,* Oostmalle, 1993, 3.
96. L. Teetaert, o.l.v. M. Vermander, *Chrono 6. Het eigen tijdsgebeuren,* Kapellen, 1982.
97. L. Teetaert, o.l.v. M. Vermander, *Levend Verleden. De Laatste Honderd Jaar,* Antwerpen, 1977; D. Van den Houdt, *Levend Verleden III. Nieuwste Tijd. Van 1815 tot heden,* Antwerpen, 1966, 96; P. Vandepitte, *Tijdspiegel 6. Twintigste eeuw,* Antwerpen, 1975, 232.
98. R. Lenaerts & J. Henckens, *Memo 5-TSO. De 20ste eeuw,* Oostmalle, 1996, 69-70.
99. Louis Teetaert, o.l.v. M. Vermander, *Chrono 6. Het eigen tijdsgebeuren,* Kapellen, 1982, 88.
100. Paul Vandepitte, *Tijdspiegel 6. Twintigste Eeuw: De problematiek van vrede, welvaart en welzijn in een mundiale samenleving,* Antwerpen, 1975, 206; P. Morren, *Memo 5. De 20ste eeuw,* Oostmalle, 1993, 192.
101. De Standaard, *Zondag 30 juni 1960. De Dag dat de koloniale voorhang scheurde,* 28 June 1985.
102. In the case of textbooks, this was also noted by Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, "Towards a Postcolonial Mindset in a Post-Colonial World? Evolving Representations of Modern Imperialism in Belgian History Textbooks (1945-2017)", in Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse & Joaquim Pires Valentim, eds., *The Colonial Past in History Textbooks: Historical and Social Psychological Perspectives,* Charlotte, 2018, 166.

in a complete absence in 1990s textbooks of any mention of positive achievements and a marginal place for Belgian colonial history.

This is not to say that the debate never extended to Belgian history. Newspapers regularly referred back to the colonial past in articles about Belgian-Zairian relations and in the 1990s the Belgian case resumed a central place in history textbooks. Yet, here too, a distinction must be made in the ways in which the discursive shift central to this article manifested itself : many articles and chapters restricted the increasingly critical interpretations of colonial economy to the period of the Congo Free State and the motivations of its rule, this way echoing the arguments previously raised by the Congo Reform Association around 1900 and exhumed by influential publications of the time by Daniel Vangroenweghe, Jules Marchal and Adam Hochschild.[103] In line with these iconoclastic accounts, journalists described Leopold II as a "national bloodhound", who "sucked his Congo Free State dry until the wild rubber tree was as rare as the dodo", while others portrayed his rule as a "reign of terror […] that enlisted black people in a merciless system of exploitation" or "the largest forced labor camp of modern times".[104] After a period of intense focus on the global history of colonialism, several textbooks in the 1990s similarly zoomed in again on Belgian colonial history : a 1984 edition of *Chrono* admitted that "the yield from natural rubber was the most important thing for the king", while *Memo* took on a harsher tone in 1994 when it explained how "inlanders were forced to work as a cheap and unprotected labor force and were subjected to an inhumane regime".[105]

As such, the Congo Free State and the figure of the king became the epitome of the increasingly economic and exploitative nature of colonialism, with the increasing circulation of these representations inferred in statements such as the one by the newly appointed director of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, who felt compelled to clarify that he was not "anti-Leopoldist", even though "it is [nowadays] somewhat a fashion to be so".[106] The increasingly critical account of colonial economy was then again rarely extended to the period of Belgian Congo, which, despite its chronologically larger share in Belgium's colonial history, received notably less attention and was scrutinized less iconoclastically for its poor independence policy. Still, most textbook authors and many journalists had moved away from the idea that colonial economy benefitted the colony and metropole equally, even if this acknowledgement was typically applied to colonialism as a European or global system or, to a lesser degree, the rule of Leopold II.

However, as has been stressed repeatedly throughout this article, it remains difficult to assess the extent to which the representations identified above have permeated broader public opinion. A 2020 study conducted by Ghent University, for instance, found that 43 % of Belgian respondents reported that they "rather agreed" with the statement that colonialism did more good than harm.[107] While it is possible to analyze media as key sites of memory negotiation, reconstructing their reception and impact within wider society remains methodologically challenging for historians, particularly on a larger scale.

103. Daniel Vangroenweghe, *Rood rubber : Leopold II en zijn Kongo,* Brussel, Elsevier, 1985 ; A. M. Delathuy, *E.D. Morel Tegen Leopold II En de Kongostaat,* Antwerpen, 1985 ; Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost : A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa,* Boston, 1998.
104. De Standaard, *Leopold II tussen Brussel en Congo. Bloedhond met visie,* 30 May 2002 ; De Morgen, *Voor een paar negers meer,* 30 January 2002 ; De Standaard, *Zondag 30 juni 1960 : de dag dat de koloniale voorhang scheurde,* 28 June 1985 ; Le Peuple, *Du Congo au Zaïre : 30 ans d'indépendance. Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu wa za Banga,* 1 June 1990.
105. P. Vandepitte, *Chrono 5. Achttiende en negentiende eeuw,* Antwerpen, 1984, 150 ; P. Morren, *Memo 6B : De geschiedenis van België,* Oostmalle, 1994, 84.
106. De Morgen, *"Tervuren" : Afrika met een "kreemke",* 27 April 1985.
107. Rowan Brouwers et al., "De Steun Voor Dekolonisering in België in Kaart Gebracht : Tussen Politieke Gevoeligheden En Maatschappelijke Aanvaarding", *Tijdschrift Sociologie,* 3, 2022, 141.

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