

Campaign #DecolonizeBozar

Decolonizing arts and culture: removing Étienne Davignon from his position as Chairman of the Board of Directors of BOZAR. A campaign initiated by the Intal movement.

1. Why this campaign?

We want a culture that is decolonial. An institution like “Bozar” must embody a space for a collective expression that is open to the colonial past and present. Other stories must be told to question the dominant culture. These stories challenge our codes and help decolonize our present. Thus, we question the colonial present of the Bozar, whose president is Étienne Davignon, a defender of colonization, which is a system of criminal exploitation that has caused the death of millions of people.

In 2015, Étienne Davignon banned the image of Lumumba at the Afropolitan Festival of Bozar. It is not an insignificant fact that the figure of the Prime Minister of the newly independent Congo is censored. Etienne Davignon's presidency embodies the imposition of a Eurocentric and colonial cultural orientation.

Removing Etienne Davignon from his position as president of the Bozar is part of the process of decolonization of arts and culture. Although, according to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sophie Wilmès, E. Davignon is 88 years old and will not seek a future mandate (1), the date of the end of his mandate is not clear. Even if Etienne Davignon does not stand for re-election, explanations and apologies must be presented by the Minister for Davignon's appointment as head of the Bozar. Furthermore, his mandate must end now without waiting for the end of his term.

The cultural institutions must be allowed to put in place the conditions for the creativity of the artist, for the development of popular culture, and to allow the artist to tell the story of the people and not of the dominant actors. A solidary and humane culture allows artists to use their art to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the world, of ourselves and thus also of colonization. It is the artists who make the richness of cultural institutions, not men linked to the business world.

2. Who is Étienne Davignon?

A pure product of the Belgian elite

Étienne Davignon is from a line of notables. His grandfather, Julien Davignon, had been a close ally of Leopold II and was a Minister of Foreign Affairs. His father, Jacques Davignon was an ambassador to Budapest, Warsaw and Berlin during the 1930s and one of Leopold III's trusted men during the Second World War. His mother, Jacqueline de Liedekerke, was lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth. The Davignon family controlled several companies and had formed matrimonial alliances with certain industrial dynasties.

Davignon at war with Congolese nationalists fighting for independence

In 1960, he was sent to take part in the Conference of the Round Table for the Independence of the Congo by its supervisory minister Pierre Wigny (PSC-CVP). There he met members of the Congolese delegations (such as Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Kasavubu and Justin Bomboko) and their Belgian advisors. He then became one of those responsible for preparing the international sovereignty of the Congo. During the celebration of independence on June 30, 1960, he was present in Leopoldville. On 4 July, a revolt broke out in the Public Force ("Force Publique") following the displeasure caused by the maintenance of a corps of white officers and by the methods of the commander-in-chief, General Janssens. The Eyskens government wanted to exploit the climate generated by this revolt to send the army to the Congo and thus empty independence of its substance. Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba opposes this attempt and breaks off diplomatic relations with Brussels. Despite this break, Davignon remains in Leopoldville. At the request of Kasavubu (2).

As Ludo De Witte states, "from independence, he was sent to the Congo in particular to organize the opposition against Lumumba. Working in the entourage of President Kasavubu and Congolese Foreign Minister Justin Bomboko, he convinced them to organize a coup d'état and overthrow Lumumba's government" (3). Justin Bomboko is a central figure. He is one of the first academics in the Congo, but also the first to betray the nationalist leader. In September 1960, he introduced Joseph Désiré Mobutu, then Chief of Staff of the Congolese National Army (ANC), to Leopoldville CIA leader Lawrence Devlin (4). Following these contacts, the CIA begins to distribute money to the Congolese military hierarchy to turn it against Lumumba. From Davignon to Devlin, via Bomboko, a chain of connivance unfolds. It constitutes one of the bases of the enormous network that the viscount will have throughout his career.

Political eviction of Lumumba, a telegram co-signed by Davignon

On the 5th of September 1960, the Kasavubu Head of State announced that he was dismissing Lumumba from his post as Prime Minister. In an interview, Davignon asserts that this decision was taken by Kasavubu alone (5). However, in his Memoirs, Belgian Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens himself states that on August 18, he had met Jef Van Bilsen, legal adviser to the Congolese leader. "I made him understand that Kasavubu had to kick Lumumba out," he wrote (6). In a telegram dated to the 3rd of September, it appears that Minister Wigny's staff contacted another Kasavubu adviser, Georges Denis. The stated objective of these contacts is "the overthrow of the government" Lumumba. The telegram in question is co-signed by a certain ... Etienne Davignon (7).

To push aside a union of Congolese leaders, the will expressed by Davignon

After the dismissal of the Lumumba government, the problems are far from being solved for the Belgian elite. Lumumba still has supporters, notably in the ANC (Congolese national army). And on the 13th of September, the united chambers granted full powers to his government, thus rejecting Kasavubu's coup d'état. On the 14th, he dismissed the parliament. In the evening, Mobutu committed his first coup d'état. On September 16, Davignon was in Brazzaville. He sends a telegram to Minister Wigny in which he states that Lumumba is not yet out of power. He adds that the main problem is to remove him and to have a union of Congolese leaders against him (8). It must be said that as early as 11 and 12 September, Colonel Marlière, Mobutu's technical advisor, drew up the preparations for Operation Barracuda, aimed at eliminating Lumumba in one way or another. In a telegram, Brussels states that the Minister of African Affairs, Harold d'Aspremont-Lynden, will decide whether or not to launch this operation and that in the event of a trigger, the assassination would be covered up. On October 6, d'Aspremont-Lynden demands the definitive elimination of Lumumba. Four days later, the Congolese leader was arrested at his home. Following this, Operation Barracuda is cancelled. On November 27, Lumumba fled Leopoldville to join his supporters in Stanleyville. On 2 December, he is caught by ANC soldiers and locked up in the Thysville camp. For Brussels and Washington, the affair seems to be in the bag.

The Assassination of Lumumba

The beginning of 1961 is synonymous with the appearance of new clouds. Indeed, Lumumba's partisans who had taken refuge in Stanleyville and led by Antoine Gizenga launched the offensive and liberated Bukavu (25 December 1960). Mobutu's ANC's attempt to recapture Bukavu turns into a fiasco on 1 January. On 7 January, Gizenga's troops overthrow Manono (North Katanga). On 4 January, Brussels sends a telegram to insist that the liberation of Lumumba would have 'disastrous consequences'. Precisely on 12 January, a revolt breaks out in the Thysville camp, where Lumumba is still imprisoned. On 15 January, at the Ministry of African Affairs, Aspremont-Lynden had a telegram drawn up ordering the transfer of Lumumba to Elisabethville. The telegram will be sent on the 16th (9). This contradicts Davignon's assertion that it was only Congolese leaders who ordered Lumumba to be sent to Katanga (10). On January 17, the Congolese leader is transferred by plane with two of his companions, Maurice Mpolo and Joseph Okito. A day of ordeal for the three men, who will be savagely mistreated during and after their arrival. An ordeal that will only end with their execution, in which Belgian policemen and officers took part. Ludo De Witte cites various witnesses, including a certain Major Noël Dedeken, who "acknowledged having received orders from the commander-in-chief of the Belgian army, Baron de Cumont, to kidnap Lumumba, no doubt with a view to his subsequent elimination" (11).

In 2011, the Lumumba family filed a complaint with the Belgian justice system. In a 30-page report, the Federal Prosecutor's Office ruled in his favor and considered the physical elimination of the Congolese pro-independence activist, after torture and inhuman and degrading treatment, to be an imprescriptible war crime. Ten Belgian personalities are targeted. Among them, Etienne Davignon. Here he is caught up by a past that has become somewhat embarrassing. But the complaint has been dragging on for more than nine years now. Eight of the protagonists are dead and the viscount of Verviers, very old, was knighted as count by the king in 2017.

Davignon's rise from the Belgian foreign office to the business world

In November 1963, the last revolutionary momentum led by Pierre Mulele was shattered from Brussels by "Operation Ommegang". For Davignon, it adds one more additional element to his CV that will allow him to remain under the next minister, Pierre Harmel.

From 1974 to 1977, he became the first president of the International Atomic Energy Agency. He then held a position at the European Commission, in the Industry and Research Department. There he supervised the restructuring of the steel industry. In 1985, he went into business. He was respectively president of the ERT (European Round Table, one of the most powerful employers' pressure groups on the Old Continent), of the Société Générale de Belgique and of the Union Minière. In addition, he will later become vice-chairman of Accor, Arbed, Tractebel and Fortis Belgium, as well as director or member of the supervisory board of Anglo-American Mining, Gilead, ICL, Pechiney, Foamex, Fiat, Suez, BASF, Solvay, Sofina, Recticel, CMB (Compagnie Maritime Belge) and Kissinger Associates (12). In short, board member of both European and American companies. It must be said that it is not only one of the embodiments of the link between politics and business, but also between European and North American establishments. In the early 2000s, he chaired the Bilderberg Group, one of the main cenacles where these establishments meet. Just as he went through another of these cenacles: the Trilateral Commission (13).

Davignon, an unequivocal defender of colonialism (14)

Davignon affirms it: Leopold II put an end to slavery in the Congo ("one of his merits" he says). This implies a silence on the policy of forced labor. He adds that Belgium took over the Congo in 1908 only in retrospect. He passes over in silence the fact that the three groups spearheading the exploitation of Congolese wealth (Union Minière du Haut Katanga, Forminière and Compagnie des Chemins de Fer du Bas-Congo au Katanga) were created in 1906, at the same time as Leopold II announced the surrender of the Congo, which shows that certain Belgian circles were not so reticent and worried. He also overlooks the dual character of the colonial economy, with a dominant industrial sector focused on the extraction and export of raw materials and an impoverished and stunted agricultural sector limited to the provision of labour and food. This dual colonial policy is at the root of many of the current problems in the Congo.

Moreover, he says he regrets only one thing: the way in which independence was negotiated ("in haste"). He does not say that the strategy of the colonial circles was to grant quick independence in order to cut the grass under the feet of genuine nationalists like Lumumba. Nor does he mention the fact that the Belgians sought to channel the demands for national independence towards ethnicist and regionalist formations, with the aim of weakening the new state by "balkanizing" Congolese territory.

Finally, he speaks of the colonial enterprise as an "unfinished work". He glorifies the fact that the Congo had a literacy rate higher than that of Greece in 1960. This means that he obscures the fact that colonialism educated many Congolese by directing them towards technical branches, with the goal of having good hands to exploit wealth and labor. Finally, the "sadness" that he shows when he speaks of the present Congo are "crocodile tears". First, because Belgium and the West

paved the road to power for Mobutu and supported him until the early 1990s. And secondly, because the development of underdevelopment in the countries of the South by the Western powers was - and remains - an indispensable condition for maintaining their domination, especially through access to raw materials.

3. Colonization, a criminal enterprise for the benefit of Belgian and foreign companies

Colonization was a conquest by violence for the raw materials of the Congo

The colonization of Congo by Belgium involved the conquest of territory, and it was done by violence and military means (15) with the objective of monopolizing raw materials and having new markets.

Currently, there are still myths about the Belgian colonization of the Congo such as it being "a civilizing mission", "an unfinished work", or about "Leopold II, the builder king". However, if we go back to the origins of colonization, it had progressively appeared at the end of the 19th century when European countries, in full industrial expansion, needed raw materials and new markets. The colonies thus find their origins in the interest of the European countries to the raw materials of the colonized countries and not to an alleged civilizing will, even if some believed in it at the time. This is how, at the Berlin conference in 1885, the European powers divided Africa among themselves. The Germans received part of it, as well as the British, the French and Leopold II obtained the Congo.

Leopold II supported by the Belgian state

At the time of Leopold II, the Belgian state was also involved in the colonization of the Congo. Leopold II, who needed the authorization of the Chambers to be the sovereign of the Congo, obtained this authorization unanimously by the Chamber and the Senate. Soldiers of the Belgian army were sent to watch over the intense rubber production, and if this production was deemed insufficient, the hands of the Congolese workers were cut off. The Belgian state also financially supported the independent state of Congo by granting loans supplemented by investments or loans from private companies (16). The objective was to bring Belgium into the colonial conquests.

Decolonization is a common struggle of the Belgian and Congolese people

Colonization was aimed at the exploitation of raw materials in order to seek maximum profit for Belgian and foreign companies. It was the will of Leopold II and the successive Belgian governments of the time that set up and maintained a system in the Congo which oppressed and exploited the Congolese population for the benefit of companies. In Belgium, Leopold II was also shooting Belgian workers, while the government of the day allowed companies to exploit the vast majority of workers in Belgium. The Congolese economy in the 1950s was controlled by a few large Belgian financial groups. The Union Minière obtained the basis of its wealth during colonization with

the copper mines of Katanga. Even after independence, they were able to maintain their stranglehold on these mines. Today, this company is called Umicore which, here in Belgium, makes children sick in the popular district of Moretusburg, next to their factory in Hoboken (Antwerp). The struggle for decolonization is therefore not a struggle against the Belgian population, on the contrary, it is a common struggle with the majority of Belgians who are, admittedly at another level, subjected to decisions of political leaders taken in the interest of large corporations, as was the case during colonization.

Colonization constructed stereotypical thoughts that still lead to today's racism.

The United Nations panel of experts on Afro-descendants, in its 2019 visit report, estimated that "the current root causes of human rights violations lie in the non-recognition of the real extent of the violence and injustice of colonization. There is clear evidence that racial discrimination is endemic in the country's institutions. As a result, people of African descent face racial discrimination, xenophobia, Afrophobia leading to systemic exclusion in education, employment" (17).

Racism is not limited to a moral issue, it is a systemic problem, as the historian Amzat Boukari explains: "Racism implies a set of inequalities or deficiencies constructed to justify a relationship of domination over others. Domination means the appropriation of the other (slavery) and the exploitation of the resources of one's territory (colonization). Consequently, the history of slavery and colonialism is inseparable from the construction of racism. Racism was constructed to justify colonization and the neo-colonialism that followed. This neo-colonialism established new mechanisms of dependence that do not require the military occupation of countries, the politics and economy of the country are directed from outside, the theoretically independent state has the appearance of sovereignty.

4. Decolonization, a worldwide movement with many victories

In recent years, decolonial movements have won victories in many countries, as in 2015, in South Africa, the statue of the colonialist Cecil Rhodes fell in the wake of the campaign "Rhodes must fall (18)". In 2020, in the United States, statues of Christopher Columbus were unblocked by the mayor of the City of Chicago, etc..

Decolonial movements have gained momentum around the world and more intensely in recent months in Belgium, with the establishment of the Special Commission on the Belgian colonial past in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi (19) just after the great "Black Lives Matters" demonstrations that brought together more than 10. 000 people in Brussels, demonstrations triggered by the murder of Georges Floyd, a black American citizen killed by police officers in the United States because of the color of his skin. Decolonization is therefore a much broader process than the official independence of colonized countries. The colonialist, racist ideology unfortunately did not disappear at the time of independence. This ideology is structural, permanent, organized and rooted, including in Belgium. It is reflected in different ways: by statues and names of streets and cities, in museums,

by the monopolization of cultural goods and human remains being looted during colonization, in education, by racism expressed towards Afro-descendants (20) which is particularly reflected in racial profiling by the police, discrimination in employment, housing, the media and in culture and the arts.

We cannot understand or combat systemic racism in Belgium without decolonizing our imaginations and culture, which are largely the result of the racist regime that was the Belgian colonial regime. This regime infused society for 80 years with its colonial propaganda and racist culture - including in representations.

5. The different aspects of decolonization

The decolonization of our collective imagination covers several aspects.

- The decolonization of the public space (21) :

It aims to stop glorifying figures of colonization, whether by statues or by names of streets and squares, and consequently to put an end to the colonial propaganda machine that has erected these figures of colonization as heroes in order to legitimize the exploitation and plundering of the Congo by giving them the image of a "civilizing mission". The glorification of the colonial enterprise structurally shaped racism in Belgium.

Today in Belgium, streets and squares are named after Patrice Lumumba. It is a step in the elaboration of another vision of colonial and neo-colonial history. The Lumumba square represents a tribute to the struggle of the Congolese leader, of the Congolese people, an anti-imperialist struggle, against the capitalist system whose colonialism was a stage in its history.

- The decolonization of education :

It consists of modifying school curricula, of creating teachings that explain colonization, not as a civilizing mission with positive and negative aspects, but for what it really was: murders, cruel violence, rapes, deportations, exploitation, looting, ...

- The decolonization of cultural goods looted during the colonial period and their restitution :

In Belgium, the question of the restitution of cultural property currently arises from the presence of Congolese skulls in the collections of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences and the AfricaMuseum.

Recently, on October 15, 2020, the Université libre de Bruxelles finally committed itself to the restitution of human remains from the colonial period to the University of Lubumbashi in Congo. Congolese bodies and body parts were extorted by physical violence during the war of colonial conquest. Scientists from the ULB did not hesitate to carry out analyses and comparisons. The aim of this racial research was to justify the massacres and exploitation of the Belgian colonial system in the Congo and to make public opinion adhere to this system.

These institutions must come to terms with their colonial past by acknowledging the violence used to possess its human remains and they must admit the racist objective of its studies.

- Without the anti-imperialist struggle, decolonization will not be complete:

Colonization and capitalism are inseparable. Colonization was a stage in the evolution of the capitalist system which needed, at some point in its history, to look for raw materials elsewhere and to access new markets. After colonization, neo-colonialism took its place and is still present. Beginning in the 1980s, international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank conditioned their loans to the countries of the South on a series of economic reforms consisting essentially of liberalizing the economies of these countries in order to benefit Western multinationals. Fighting for decolonization is also an anti-imperialist struggle, a struggle for a different world, a world without exploitation, for the equality and development of all and not for the profit of a minority at the expense of the majority.

Through this campaign, we want to contribute to the decolonization of arts and culture. This decolonization implies allowing artists to use their art to deepen our knowledge and understanding of colonization and therefore of the world, of ourselves, and contribute to building a more solidary and humane society. For this to happen, the great cultural institutions must not have people like Bozar's Etienne Davignon at their head, like. The cultural institutions must be allowed to create and to put in place the conditions for the creativity of the artist, to promote popular culture, street arts, to allow the artist to tell the history of the people and not of the dominant actors.

Etienne Davignon must therefore now be dismissed from his position as President of the Board of Directors of the Bozar. Furthermore, if, as announced by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sophie Wilmès, E. Davignon, being 88 years old, does not seek a future mandate (whose end date is unclear (22)), explanations and apologies must be presented by the Minister for the appointment of Davignon as head of the Bozar.

First signatories : intal, le Collectif Mémoire Colonial et Lutte contre les Discriminations, Lucas Catherine (author), Ludo De Witte (author), Bakushinta, Fédération des Congolais de Bruxelles, Pitcho (artist), Raphaëlle Bruneau (artist), Ligue de Défense Noire Africaine, CADTM, Hart Boven Hard Bruxelles, Bruxelles Panthère, Olivier Mukuna (independent journalist), Change, Binabi ULB, Raf Custers (writer, freelance journalist), Mansuela Nguizani (co-founder Ujima), Hugues Lausberg Masikini (Secretary General LDC-Europe), Sous l'Arbre à Palabre (pan-African campus radio program), Leslie Lukamba (decolonial and intersectional activist), Marcelle Kom (communicator and association leader).

Sign the petition [here](#).

Sources :

1

<https://www.lecho.be/culture/general/etienne-davignon-n-est-pas-candidat-a-sa-succession-a-la-presidence-de-bozar/10269182.html>

2 According to an interview given at Le Soir in 1996: https://www.lesoir.be/art/docteur-stevie-et-mister-etienne-les-bonnes-relations_t-19960105-Z0AHN4.html

3 Interview granted to Solidaire, January 12, 2011.

4 L. DE WITTE, L'Ascension de Mobutu..., p. 34.

5 Interview available at the following address: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRnEx4hao34>.

6 Quoted in L. DE WITTE, The Assassination of Lumumba, p. 59.

7 Ibid.

8 Quoted in L. DE WITTE, L'assassinat... p. 69.

9 See L. DE WITTE, L'assassinat..., pp. 215-220.

10 See interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRnEx4hao34>

11 Interview granted to Solidaire, January 12, 2011.

12 See G. GEUENS, Tous pouvoirs confondus, p. 27.

13 Ibid. at 30-37. Commission co-founded in the 1970s by Zbigniew Brzezinski and David Rockefeller.

14 As when it appeared at the Royal Academy of Belgium. See videos: <https://youtu.be/J2i1LHGxap8> and https://youtu.be/L_lgJei-Zn0

15 How the colonization of the Congo enriched the big Belgian bosses - PTB, at https://www.ptb.be/comment_la_colonisation_du_congo_a_enrichi_les_grands_patrons_belges.

16 https://www.kaowarsom.be/documents/bbom/Tome_I/Beernaert.Auguste.pdf

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20 Citizens with African roots: a portrait of Belgo-Congolese, Belgo-Rwandan and Belgo-Burundian citizens | DIAL.pr - BOREAL (uclouvain.be), at the link <https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal:189843>

21 <https://www.intal.be/decolonisation-de-lespace-public/>

22 This was already scheduled to end on January 1, 2020, see above, page 1.