

Response to Kwame Anthony Appiah's keynote lecture at KNHG-najaarscongres 2021,
Wereldburgerschap in beweging: in geschiedenis, erfgoed en onderwijs

Susan Legêne, 12-11-2021

Thank you very much for this inspiring talk, which comes to us via satellite at the end of our day-long discussion about historical approaches to contemporary wereldburgerschap, Weltbürgerschaft, Cosmopolitanism.

Metaphor

Framed as global (or universal) citizenship, you approach the conception of cosmopolitanism as a *metaphor*. Global citizenship, you argue, does not intend the establishment of any kind of world government, it is not a program for the integration of humanity into *one* superstate handing out passports to 6 billion subjects. On the contrary, in your talk and publications you explain why it is important that people live in -- are the citizens of -- *different* states, and move *between* states if needed or wanted. If I understand you accurately, you caution us not to match states as political entities, to nations as communities. Yes, we do have the United *Nations* and its universal declaration of Human rights, and extended UN family of supranational institutions for food, labour, health, culture, security, education, law, the oceans, water and climate and much more issues of global concern. But basically this United Nations is a supranational *political* institution, where individual states meet. In the post-world war 2 period it also played an historic role with its decolonization committee.

Your lecture discusses global or universal citizenship as a metaphor that helps us to think about responsibilities and morality with respect to one another within and outside of the borders of the *state*. It is this responsibility – a responsibility to ‘governing a common life together’ in a globalized world full of borders, walls, pushbacks and passport controls – that forms the major challenge for the concept of global citizenship. We all are acutely aware of the millions of migrants who move around the world often in the search of a better life, and who, in Hannah Arendt's famous phrase have a “right to have rights” which so often remains connected to problems of citizenship entitlements. In our times with our lives affecting and affected by actions and cross border developments all around the globe, you argue, we really need the cosmopolitan impulse; that is to say: an impulse that draws on our common humanity and that challenges existing power imbalances. I agree with that.

Philosophy and History

But let me also respond with an open Question, about which, I hope prof. Appiah, you can briefly share your insights with us. We are together here as historians, both teachers and academics, and so

the question comes from History and asks about History's relationship to Philosophy, and the role of historians. In the history of (western) thought one is aware of the ways in which natural history and natural philosophy emerged and then separated. We are also aware of the work of historical imagination in the debates surrounding the philosophy of history and the re-enactment of the past shaped by our concerns and questions about the present. For a few years I have been teaching "history" to PPE students, students who are well versed in philosophy, politics and economics (hence PPE). But somehow they lacked a deeper and in my view crucial understanding of history. Their intellectual compass was sharp, they knew how to reason about the ideal and nonideal world and they dared to address difficult moral issues. But each year it took some effort to make them understand how history relates to that philosophical 'nonideal world'; that actually this 'nonideal world' *is* history.

In your talk, as well as in your other work on cosmopolitanism, ethics, identity formation and intellectual political movements, you convincingly explain the workings in society of all kinds of inclusive and exclusive identity politics, including origin myths, shared memories and family stories about the past, and how these identity markers create circles of insiders and outsiders. One of your examples is the twentieth century notion of Pan-Africanism. Another example would be discussions here about what makes the European *demos*.

Your recent book *The Lies that Bind*, which has been translated into Dutch as well, convincingly shows that such identifications never just have one dimension. Different identification processes intersect in multiple ways, related to gender, age, class, religion, cultural backgrounds, family histories and more. And if I read you well, then it is "History" that in the end brings you to your nuanced views concerning those notions of shared identities. This happens, in my view, when for instance you first unpack the concept of Pan-Africanism and then explain why Pan-Africanism nevertheless did make sense in the context of the time. Or when you argue, that art and ethnographic objects in their essence do not belong to a certain place or people, but that sometimes we should make a case for restitution, because through restitution these objects can contribute to the strengthening of a certain community or to healing, providing consolation with respect to the wrongdoings from the past.

Cosmopolitanism and the colonial past

These are examples of how History works in binding processes in local, national or also diasporic global communities of memory, in which the past is important to arrive at a shared projection of a future. Such identifications with each other -- at times through objects -- help, and provide the roots as well for a multidirectional cosmopolitanism, a global citizenship. Because what binds us is elastic,

it is always moving through time and space, is always multidirectional and never limited to one single point of reference. Even a passport for someone who never left her hometown, will have changed several times during her lifetime. Citizenship is not a status, it is a process.

So, if global citizenship is about multidirectional historical awareness and imagination, then my question is: what is the meaning and impact of the colonial past in our current approaches to global citizenship as a metaphor? And more precisely, what is the role and responsibility of historians and philosophers in addressing this past in the context of the need for a cosmopolitan impulse?

Binding / Dividing

The same lies that bind, also divide. Historians, our own history writing is part of making a present which both binds and divides. I would like to briefly mention an actual example for us now: the intensifying discussion among communities of memory, historians and politicians in City Councils and Parliament, about the year 2023. 2023 will be the year to commemorate 150 or 160 years of abolition of Transatlantic slavery,¹ as well as 150 years of immigration of Hindustani indentured laborers in the Caribbean plantation colonies. Politicians are asking historians for historical narratives as an input to political arguments why and how Dutch Government might decide to express apologies for this slavery history and its legacies, as well as whether and how to include the 1860 abolition of slavery in the South-East Asian parts of the Dutch colonial empire, as well as the system of indenture.² From a historiographic point of view historians in the Netherlands, in Indonesia, in Suriname and the Caribbean just recently began to work on this understudied aspect of the colonial past, partly inspired by the historical and societal debates in South Africa about East India slave histories in the Cape, partly by discussions about indenture as human trafficking. Because of 2023, their work is more and more put in Dutch political commemorative spotlights. At times I sincerely worry about how historiography and memory politics get entangled in complex ways, and what role we historians have here.

But if then we zoom out a bit, we can easily relate this to the main topic of today. We are looking here at a Dutch and European history of immense forced migration histories related to the violent and unfree labour regimes of colonialism that affected communities all around the globe. These histories provide very strong roots for multidirectional and intersectional notions of a global

¹ Consensus is growing that indeed we better stick to 150 years of 'real' abolition, in order to acknowledge that after 1863 the now nominally free black plantation laborers in principle had to stay on plantation for another ten years.

² There hardly is an active diasporic community of memory about this South East Asian slavery past. No consensus exists either about whether we should understand indentured labour as human trafficking, and whether 2023 will have one, or two commemorations of what happened 150 years ago with respect to slavery and indenture.

citizenship today which potentially decentres as well as redefines Europe. Is, at the national level, global citizenship maybe a common denominator that can bring all the voices, perspectives, continents, together, indeed? Or is the metaphor of global citizenship basically an ideal outcome of societal tension in a polarized nonideal world?

Race

Art, the creative work of the mind and hands of many, substantiates the validity and power of the concept of cosmopolitanism. And here again, I would argue, it is history that colours our appreciation of those expressions of our common humanity. Professor Appiah, you convincingly argues that the variety of cultural artifacts all around the world and the kind of connections that their makers, performers, audiences, have with such works – be it literature, art, music, architecture, crafts, etc. – are not national expressions, and together do not form what the Romanticists called a national spirit. Nevertheless, these can be framed and often are perceived as such; and this is where history and politics enter again. For instance, **(slide)** in a compelling comparison, you describe in *The lies that bind* “race” as the lost wax of the nineteenth century. Lost wax, *à cire perdue*, refers to the technical process of sculpting, moulding and casting fine gold, bronze or other metal sculptures and jewellery. This connection between race and lost wax is a powerful evocation of type casting, of the making of a racist order that was sculpted as from the 18th century and lives on after its 19th century scientific basis disappeared. As such it is presented here, in between art and science, in the current Musée de l’Homme in Paris.

Your lost wax association is the Ashanti gold weights, **(slide)** mine, when I read your text, was the famous Benin Bronzes that for a long time have been and still are subject to an international restitution debate. They embody a universal artistic value and a history of conquest that resonates in the major museums around the world that have these work of art in their collections.

Art and History

These Benin Bronzes are just one, but a telling, example of the many layers of meaning in art. And I am grateful that this thought about race as lost wax has added another interpretative layer, for me at least.

I would like to end with another Dutch example of how nation, state, and universal value keep co-constructing each other in different specific historical moments. It is about a painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; one of the great museum to which the lecture referred.

During a stopover in New York in 1944, the then well-known KLM aviator and poet Viruly, who had become an airman, visited the Met and was blown away by an unanticipated encounter with this

(slide) 1646 Jan van Goyen painting 'View of Haarlem and the Haarlemmermeer;' a famous seventeenth century oil painting dating from the final years of the Dutch revolt. In his poem about his feelings when he recognized all the details, of the farmers, the water engineering, the horizon, of van Goyens Dutch landscape, he concludes

... Driehonderd jaren later
Zag ik zijn Holland aan;
Drieduizend mijlen water
Ver was ik er vandaan.

Maar nooit was ik ons wezen
Van stilte en strijd nabij,
Of verder weg van vrezen
Dan voor dit schilderij.

This was Jan van Goyens Holland, 300 centuries ago, and 3000 miles across waters away. But (my free translation) never, than in front of this painting / Felt our essential self so near / of quiet and of fighting / And far away the fear.

The painting, three hundred years after it was made, thus led to an evocation of the emotions of an airman involved in the fight against Nazism and fascism, because it took him by surprise and made him feel his deep bonds with his country and countrymen. The airman/poet identifies himself, through this artistic masterpiece, with his nation. The painting to him at that moment expressed, so to say, the spirit of his national community. It did so in those specific historical circumstances of 1944, at a specific place, for someone who knew his roots and was inspired by that history; travelling all over the globe while putting his life at risk in an ongoing war. Today the painting has remained the same, but it lives in another time, and will not easily evoke such a strong call to action, responsibility and care in order to contribute to a better world to a contemporary Dutch visitor in New York. Or – autonomous as it is – would it again? For instance in the context of climate change?

Thank you professor Appiah, for etc

(slides on next page)

'When I think about why the racial fixation has proved so durable, I sometimes recall the lost-wax method by which the gold weights in Ghana were cast. (...) The 19th century race concept is the lost wax: the substance may have melted away, but we've intently filled the space it created.' (Appiah, *The lies that bind*, 2018, p. 132).



Part of the permanent exhibition in Musee de l'Homme, Paris (October 2021)

**Cambridge college to be first in UK to return looted Benin bronze
Jesus College will give sculpture of a cockerel back to Nigeria, which
could spark a wave of repatriations (The Guardian, 15 -10-2021)**



The Okukor was taken from the kingdom of Benin in 1897 when thousands of bronzes were looted by British forces. Photograph: Chris Loades

Jan van Goyen, View of Haarlem and the Haarlemmermeer (1646) (Metropolitan Museum col. Nr. 71.62)



Uit: *Vrij Nederland*.
Opgenomen in: *De muze zweeft door Nederland. Een bloemlezing van gedichten uit hare ontmoetingen met provincies, steden en stadjes bijegebracht door Ed. Hoornik. Uitgegeven door de Vereeniging ter Bevordering van de Belangen des Boekhandels ter gelegenheid van de Boekenweek 1956.*

Metropolitan Museum New York

A. Viruly, 1944

Ik kwam van ver gevlogen
Over een oceaan,
Toen zag ik hooi op hopen
Aan een stil water staan.

Ik zag een scheepje varen,
Drie ruitertjes daarin,
Lang heb ik er staan staren
Naar Haarlem aan de kin.

Twee houten molens rustten.
Mijn land lag stil en wijd
Achter zijn lage kusten
Voor alle eenwigheid.

Ze waren laat aan 't hooien.
Geschilderd was dat gras
Door onze Jan van Goyen
Tervijl het oorlog was.

Driehonderd jaren later
Zag ik zijn Holland aan;
Drieduizend mijlen water
Ver was ik er vandaan.

Maar nooit was ik ons wezen
Van stille en strijd nabij,
Of verder weg van vrezzen
Dan voor dit schilderij