

# **NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

## **Rethinking Citizenship Education in European Migration Societies**

### **Political Strategies - Social Changes - Educational Concepts**

# **Conference Paper**

**Contribution to Workshop 1, Session 1:  
Remembrance, Responsibility and Future:  
Citizenship Education and European Public Memory**

**Bringing History Home: Europe's Postcolonial Migrants and  
the Rethinking of Colonialism.**

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Every generation writes its own version of history. Moreover, different social classes and cultural groups continuously develop competing and often contrasting interpretations of national history. Departing from these truisms, it comes as no surprise that the massive postwar migration from the former colonies has added new, often fiercely critical perspectives on Europe's colonial past as well as strong claims to include these in the canonical versions of Europe's national historiographies.

There is no uniformity in the alternative narratives of colonialism promoted by representatives of postcolonial migrant communities. Between various colonial empires and within specific national empires, different communities do not share identical historical trajectories. Moreover, 'representatives' need not necessarily speak for all of communities they claim to speak for. So there is no uniformity in the claims made from the millions of postcolonial migrants who brought history literally home to the former metropolitan centres of colonialism.

Neither do the former European colonial powers provide uniform political opportunity structures for those claiming a voice in the new narrative of the postcolonial nation. Receptivity depends on the numbers of postcolonial migrants and hence their political clout as well as on domestic tradition: not all European nations attach the same value to concepts such as 'national identity' and particularly to the significance of history for the articulation of 'the nation'.

In this short presentation, I will discuss the recent debates in the Netherlands on the issue of colonialism and national history and make an attempt to insert these in a wider European debate. I suggest that the political opportunity structure in the Netherlands has been relatively susceptible to claims from among the postcolonial migrant communities; that this has resulted in significant revisions in the canonical version of national history; and that both the nature and impact of these revisions warrant critical analysis rather than oblique self-congratulation.

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Why has the political opportunity structure in the Netherlands been relatively susceptible to claims from among the postcolonial migrant communities? Numbers provide an evident part of the answer. One million out of just over sixteen million Dutch have roots in the former colonies, hence their presence and the history they embody cannot possibly be overlooked. But this is not all. Postwar, nationalism and national identity were long perceived of as outdated concepts, and the idea of a canonical version of history only became popular in the last years, in response to European integration and particularly to the growing proportion of immigrants among the population.

Postcolonial claims to insert new perspectives on colonialism therefore did not arise in opposition to a strongly cemented national canon, but rather in a context where openness to new perspectives was encouraged. In this particular context, spokespeople from postcolonial migrant communities had strong lobbying power not only because of good historical arguments and because of the numbers they claim to represent, but also because they generally share cultural capital with the elites of the host society. There is a strong contrast here with the Dutch Islamic communities and their leadership – if any – in the Netherlands.

Postcolonial claims and metropolitan receptivity have resulted in significant revisions in the canonical version of national history. I will discuss some major illustrations for this. The first instances were a number of commemorative institutions financed by the Dutch government to appease claims of specific postcolonial migrant communities. The second illustration is the recent next step towards an inclusion of the various colonial subnarratives in the wider canonical version of Dutch history.

I think the widening of the narrative of Dutch history to include the colonial dimension is timely – for a better understanding of the Dutch nation through the centuries, as a gesture of inclusion to postcolonial migrant communities, and to help to the non-immigrant Dutch understand that these migrants indeed bring Dutch national history home.

However, I also feel that we should not overestimate the impact this has so far. This has to do with disinterest among a wider public not particularly interested in history in the first place. Then there is the inescapable fact that the more heterogeneous a population becomes, the greater the number of competing claims for insertion of particularist narratives in the national one will be; hence the risk of – as one French historian recently put it – a ‘balkanisation’ of history.

This risk of ‘balkanisation’, finally, has serious consequences for the issues of citizenship we are discussing here. This is an issue we should not underestimate. Where every particular group promotes its own subnarrative of national history, where ‘anything goes’, there is no shared version of history that may stimulate the articulation of a shared national citizenship. Hence, the pre-postmodern ideal of a canonical national history is as unattainable as it is crucial in contemporary multicultural Europe. This is our paradoxical challenge.

My point of departure is that any introduction to the national history of a country such as the Netherlands – whether specifically intended for immigrants or not – should include an analysis of the development towards a liberal democracy, including the past and present failures to meet its high standards as well as a discussion of past and present risks to this ideal. At the same time, history writing and education should first and foremost be about serious facts and analyses, and should not be used in an instrumental way to attain specific political objectives

All this is perhaps overly abstract. In my presentation, I will therefore briefly discuss two specific illustrations of the difficulty of ‘getting it right’. The first will deal with the highly inconsistent way the Dutch think of their colonial past in Asia vs. the Atlantic. The second illustration is about the way the commemoration of the Second World War and the Nazi occupation is adapted in the hope of including immigrants in this trope of national history.