

The Colonization of the Future

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David Van Reybrouck

Esteemed guests,

Dear friends,

By the end of this talk, an estimated 3 to 4 species will be extinct. A tropical salamander, a shiny beetle, an inconspicuous lichen or fungus – it could be anything. Having existed for thousands [or even millions] of years, they won't survive the next 30 minutes and will irrevocably disappear from the face of the earth. At midnight, it could be as many as 35. By this time tomorrow we'll have lost about 150 species, and when the Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin is held next year, we could be looking at a total of 55,000 extinct species. And it won't stop there. The number will keep rising relentlessly, because we're in the middle of the sixth major extinction wave our planet has known. The first, though, that's been caused by human activity. [The previous wave took place 65 million years ago, when a meteorite wiped out the dinosaurs.]

Up to 55,000 species a year: this figure is not an apocalyptic vision of a few ecological radicals but an estimate from the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, a multilateral treaty between 196 countries. IPBES, the UN platform on biodiversity, has calculated that, of the eight million species currently alive, one million are at risk of extinction within one [or just a few] generations. And that's a conservative estimate.

At the Mauna Loa Observatory, a scientific research station in Hawaii situated 3,400 metres above sea level, an average carbon dioxide concentration of 421 parts per million, or ppm, was measured in the months of May and June this year. This figure doesn't mean much to most people, but it is probably the most important news of the year. Imagine our atmosphere as a swimming pool filled with a million dark- and light-blue balls – these are oxygen and nitrogen molecules. You can also see a few bright-red balls floating around in this blue mass. There aren't many of them, just a few hundred, but they're very hot and they stay hot for a very long time, thus heating up the rest of the pool. These are CO₂ molecules. Now, 421 red

balls to a million blue ones is an alarmingly high ratio. Mauna Loa is an inhospitable volcano, a sloping, rocky moonscape overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It's also the place where, since March 1958, daily observations of the atmosphere have been made: the longest series on record. Sixty-four years ago, when observations began, CO₂ levels were only 315 parts per million. Things have moved incredibly fast. From 315 to 421 red balls in less than a lifetime: that's a huge increase if you realise that, for the last 800,000 years, with all those harsh ice ages and warmer periods in between, the number fluctuated between 170 and no more than 300 ppm. 421 ppm: we have entered a danger zone not seen for millions of years. And the Summer of 2022 has made that abundantly clear.

Dear friends,

Less than a month ago in a village in southern France, I saw a large cat in a garden after midnight. Upon closer inspection, it turned out not to be a big cat, but a small, young fox. The poor thing was skinny, bony and emaciated. Weeks and weeks of drought had turned its territory into a dead desert of dry branches and hungry nights – the Provence looked like Arizona – and the young fox must have been so desperate about finding some food that it forgot its usual fear. I opened the door, it didn't run away. I threw some leftovers, it didn't run away. I got closer and squatted on the grass – it didn't run away. It swallowed the food rapidly and eventually even came to eat from my hand, licking my fingers to see if there was more. As a hiker, I have seen dozens of foxes in the wild, but never before did one of them lick my hand. It was moving and deeply unsettling. The landscape was empty, the fridge was full and the hungry came towards the guilty.

The Summer of 2022 was the Summer of Truth. I saw forests reduced to ashes, I smelt kilometres and kilometres of charcoal, I saw frogs and toads on dusty hiking paths, dead, with wide open mouths. I heard stories about wild boars entering villages, begging for food, and yes I still feel that young fox' tongue on my finger. The hungry came towards the guilty and the guilty had nothing to say. Until now, perhaps.

Dear friends,

For almost fifteen years I have been studying colonialism through oral history. I interviewed hundreds of people in Congo to try to understand the country's tragical past. I listened to hundreds of witnesses in Indonesia, the fourth most populous country in the world after

China, India and America, to understand how it had set in motion the global decolonisation movement, by becoming the very first colony to proclaim its independence after World War II. I sat down with villagers, fishermen, and rice-farmers. I traveled by motorbike and dug-out canoe, I slept on boat decks and beaches, I scrolled and swiped through cyberspace and used Tinder to find witnesses [‘sorry, I am more interested in your grandfather than you.’] An elderly woman on a remote island who thought she had nothing to say, turned out to be an extraordinary witness about the 1930s. A remarkable veteran in a home for the elderly in Jakarta spoke Dutch, wrote Japanese characters and sang in Indonesian. An elderly man in the forest cried like a boy when he spoke about a Dutch massacre he saw as a child.

What I learnt from this was that colonial history is so much more than national history. It is global history, too. Today, however, in the 21st century, we still look at the colonialism of the 20th century through the national lens of the 19th century. Germany zooms in on Namibia, Britain on India, France on Algeria, Belgium on Congo, and the Netherlands on Indonesia. Everything europeanises, apart from colonial memory. Of course, it is a good thing that former colonisers come to terms with their imperial past, yet the obsession with the key national project prevents a deeper understanding of the European dimension and the global dynamics. Colonial history is global history.

There was a second lesson to be gleaned. Colonialism, I learnt, is not just something historical. Looking over our shoulders is not enough. Because even when we’ve fully come to terms with the colonialism of the past, we still haven’t done anything about the dramatic way in which we are now colonising the future. Humans appropriate this century with the same ruthlessness, greed, and short-sightedness that characterised the way in which continents were once seized. Colonialism is no longer a territorial but a temporal thing – the worst may not be behind us, but yet to come. We’re behaving like the colonisers of future generations. We’re depriving them of their freedom, their health, possibly even their lives – just like the colonisers of the past did. We burden future generations with our own selves, and we do so with astounding brutality and indifference. We act as if they won’t be there, as if their land is ours, as if their world is empty, as if we’re free to dip into its resources – potable water, fertile soil, healthy air – forgetting that they might need them too. We plunder our grandchildren, we rob our children, we poison our offspring.

But now it’s happening so fast that we’re beginning to feel the consequences ourselves. Forest fires, floods and water shortages have become our salvation, apparently. It’s too cynical for

words. It's only now that we're waking up. It's only now that we're taking action. It's only now that we're realising that things can't go on like this.

We say *we* and *us* as if it were the whole of humanity, because that sounds friendly and inclusive – we, humanity, are collectively responsible for global warming and we're all in the same boat. But this conceals a much deeper truth, one we don't want to see. Because we're *not* in the same boat. And we're *not* equally responsible. Greta Thunberg has rightly said: 'We are all in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat.' Global warming has been and still is mainly caused by the richest nations in the temperate regions of the planet, and is mainly felt by the poorest countries in the tropics. This change from subject to direct object occurs somewhere around the Tropic of Cancer. Once you've crossed it, you've entered the accusative. From there on, you *undergo* the behaviour of the other. It's like passive smoking: you didn't ask for it, but you suffer the consequences.

Shall we talk about colonialism beyond colonialism? Alright, the countries of the South are the passive smokers from the temperate zones of the North, inhaling the latter's smoke and pollution. No, it's worse, because they suffer more than the smokers themselves! Those countries that emit the lowest amounts of greenhouse gases are the most vulnerable to their harmful effects. We're not only colonising the future, we're fully colonising the South again. The carbon footprint of a fifteen-year-old shepherd boy from Chad is zilch, but he'll see his country turn into an even bigger desert as a result of the lifestyles of his peers in Washington, Tokyo, or Amsterdam, who have the air conditioning set at sixteen degrees Celsius while watching influencers on TikTok promoting fast fashion stitched by children in the sweatshops of the South-Asia. And once his goats have died of hunger and thirst, and he decides to move to more moderate regions where the heat is tolerable for most months of the year, a long ordeal of migration, discrimination, and disintegration awaits him. Whatever he does, it'll be misery.

Decolonising the mind? Absolutely. But, more importantly, we should be decolonising *the heat*. Western countries devote remarkable amounts of energy to endless discussions over street names and statues – a suitable way of dealing with the colonial past is in the news almost every week – but the discussion about this much more widespread, much more contemporary type of colonialism has hardly begun.

Yet, we *have* to talk about the hurricanes that hit Mozambique in 2019, a country that hardly emits any greenhouse gases at all, yet more than three million of its inhabitants lost their

homes or became victims in other ways. We have to talk about the famine that ravaged Madagascar in 2021 and 2022, affecting more than one million people and forcing adults and children to feed on mud. We have to talk about the slums of Jakarta that are flooded, about the wheat fields of India that are dead, about the valleys in Pakistan that are being destroyed by a monster monsoon as we speak.

Climate change is all too often presented as something that threatens nature in the far North – we keep seeing images of crumbling glaciers or lonely polar bears on tiny ice floes – but climate change also concerns people in the tropics. Like the old fishermen in Kilibati, Samoa, and Vanuatu, who see their islands disappear. Or the young mothers in Bangladesh whose coastal village has been washed away. It's estimated that, in Bangladesh alone, 18 million people will have to flee due to rising sea levels in the next thirty years. That's the entire population of North Rhine-Westphalia.

If we really want to develop a post-colonial world, we'll have to go beyond campaigning against local symbols of the past and fighting global structures of the present. If we really want to make progress, we'll need to reinvent global solidarity. *But we can only start tackling the challenges of future in the present if the past is no longer an open wound.* Very many people have suffered under colonialism, and their children and grandchildren still feel the pain. Many others haven't sufficiently been aware of that wound, let alone recognise it. Healing from past trauma will require humility, dialogue, and empathy. Maya Angelou once wrote:

History, despite its wrenching pain,
cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage,
need not to be lived again.

Yes, courage is what we need. We need the courage to say: Western countries have been polluting for much longer and have historical emissions rates that are much higher than the rest of the world. We need the courage to say: when it comes to climate change and biodiversity loss, we have a crushing responsibility. We need the courage to say: poor countries may be financially indebted to us, but rich countries are environmentally indebted to them. We need the courage to say: the carbon budget of the West is quite simply spent. We have had more than a fair share of the global allowance. We need the courage to say:

getting to net zero by 2050 is simply not enough for us. We have to get there much sooner, so that the world may get there in 2050.

Western countries like Britain, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and France have been polluting since the nineteenth century. That's why they need to reduce their emissions much faster than the rest. All of them have had colonies, too, and owe part of their prosperity to them. That's why they should contribute generously to the international climate funds for the global South, and do it now.

For years, the UN has been striving for a large emergency fund to assist the most vulnerable countries to climate change. During the Paris Summit in 2015, it was agreed that the fund would be worth 100 billion dollars but, six years later, it appears that the rich countries haven't kept their promise. This is unacceptable. The former colonisers should be the first to put substantial amounts of money in the pot. They owe it both to themselves and to the world. Younger generations cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of their forefathers, yet they should be deeply aware of the historical benefits they still enjoy today. Colonial culpability is not hereditary, but colonial privilege *is*. Realising this is key to rebuilding the world. *We, the younger generations, didn't choose this past, but we can choose another future.* We can show that we've learned from the mistakes of the past. We can restore the broken world of the previous century by working together to create a fairer, more equitable and more sustainable world – a world in which a hungry fox needs not to lick a strange man's hand.

Before we say goodbye, dear friends, let's think for a few seconds about the species we've lost in the last half an hour.

[Long silence.]

Thank you very much.