



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 20 June 2020



Red Skins, in "Senses of Image" | 2019 | Rui Almeida Pereira (courtesy of the artist)



WINDRUSHES (3)

Paulo de Medeiros

If you come as softly
As the wind within the trees
You may hear what I hear
See what sorrow sees.

Audre Lorde (1)

Suddenly, everyone seems to be talking about statues. Some even go as far as mentioning a ‘war of statues’. But nothing could be further from the truth. Statues, for all their symbolic charge, are not really the aim of the protests, just as the defences so quickly mounted to ‘protect’ statues and History are not about either the statues or History, but about preserving centuries of privilege and maintaining the very core of inhumanity upon which our societies have been built. Without capitalism developing racism, massive slavery would not have been possible; without slavery, the expansion of capitalism would not have been possible; without capitalism the West would never have been able to assume global hegemony and oppress most people around the world for its immediate and long-term profit. Toppling statues of known slavers, as happened recently in Bristol on 7 June, should be read along the lines proposed by Michael Taussig, that defacement of statues, among other key objects – ‘a human body, a nation’s flag, money’ – always involves the revelation of what he terms a ‘public secret’: ‘what if the truth is not so much a secret, as is the case with most important social knowledge, *knowing what not to know*’? (2)

Agreeing on what to forget is as important as deciding on what to remember for any society and in particular to those emerging from totalitarian regimes. In relation to the knowledge of the violence of imperialism, colonialism, and the racism that remains as one of our societies’ most persistent and insidious structural features, we can say that indeed, this knowledge is shared by all, and what varies is only the degree of detail each of us decides, or was forced, to learn, as well as how one positions oneself, or is forced into a position, in relation to that knowledge. As such, it never really is a question of forgetting, but of selective remembering. In the case of Bristol, it is clear that the image of the slaver as a philanthropist was the one the city notables had decided to remember and preserve. Had

they forgotten that the fortune that allowed for such charity came from slavery? Of course not. The agreement on what to remember that had lasted into the more recent period had already started being questioned as for a number of year petitions had been made to have the statue removed. If anything can be said to be surprising, it is that the statue had not disappeared earlier.

Toppling or defacing a statue or other monument is also never a form of forgetting, much less an attempt at erasure. One could even say that it is precisely in the act of defacement that memory resides more strongly, though in a negative sense, as Taussig also reminds us. The game of memory being played around statues is a deadly one. Whether in the United States around the confederate figures, or in Belgium with those of Leopold II; and even in Lisbon, with the one of [Father António Vieira](#) – the prominent 17th century Jesuit – the enslavement and killing of millions of people is what provides the historical background to those statues. Defacing or toppling them is then at once a symptom of the profound crisis of memory we face as part and parcel of strategies of mass domination and containment that have eroded the very foundations of western democracy, and a revelation that nothing was really forgotten. How could it ever be?

Even though those defacements are usually labelled by government authorities as violent, they are actually self-contained, controlled, and peaceful. What violence there is in those actions operates largely on a symbolic level. In any case, bearing in mind the incommensurable violence inherent in imperialism and colonialism, which can still be felt in many aspects of daily life, does it make any sense at all to paint those actions as violent, criminal, acts that cannot be tolerated? When the extreme violence of slavery is what is behind those statues? Populists and populist governments will always do so, in part as an attempt to control the narrative, to position themselves as the decent, moral, civilized good guys. They will shamelessly lie and lie about their distress at the defacements and at the ‘threats’ to democracy, while fanning the flames of division, when not actively inciting towards further violence so they can posture as the defenders of law, order, and even moral citizenship. How many times has the UK Prime Minister expressed his condemnation of the protesters against racism as ‘thugs’ and ‘terrorists’, leaving aside his own racist references made in the past? (3) If the defacements in themselves are clear symptoms of the profound inequalities and deep-seated racism still structuring our societies, the attempt to draw some kind of moral superiority from their condemnation by populists – including at present various governments, among which are those of the USA and UK – is pure distraction from the current crisis, from systemic inequality and racism, and the repeated failure of those populists to

effectively address any of them. To be clear: condemning the toppling of statues replaces having to account for not doing anything to tackle systemic racism. Such a strategy, however, can only work by assuming that the majority of the population feels equally threatened in its privileges as those currently in power; but can that still be taken for granted?

That is the bet various national leaders appear to have taken, whether in the UK, Belgium or France. While voicing some kind of timid acknowledgment of the suffering inflicted by racism, Mr. Johnson swiftly and defiantly boasts of the great strides his country has made in going against racism – something which was also immediately denounced and derided by many, as the political cartoon by Steve Bell in *The Guardian* on 10 June made very clear (4). In Belgium, Prince Laurent declared to the press that he could not see how Leopold II would have harmed people in the Congo since he had never gone there. Confronted with such scandalous, if completely predictable, statements by King Phillippe's brother, the Palace merely expressed the view that it is necessary to wait for 'the proper historical conjecture and a good opportunity' to engage in a discussion over the actions of Leopold II in the Congo (5). And that is actually much more scandalous. But it was French President Emmanuel Macron, who on his televised address to the nation on 14 June made it unmistakably clear how the establishment would like to control the narrative surrounding the protests when he sternly declared that 'the Republic will not erase any trace nor any name from its History' (6). Macron's statements are as clear as they are paradoxical. For in stating that it is necessary to consider the whole of History in order to construct the future in a process driven by a desire for truth, he also affirms that there cannot be 'any reconsideration or negation of who we are'. Macron's appeal to republicanism and his facile, unqualified 'we' might be meant to sound dignified and reassuring, the very expression of the full State's authority, but they cannot help but appear hollow and smacking of authoritarianism.

The summer of 2020 promises to be a hot one. The Covid-19 crisis is far from having run its course; current trends of the virus being ostensibly under control in Europe could easily be reversed by a new outbreak that most think unavoidable. Six months into the disease, we are all still in the dark about many of its aspects, in spite of all the advances that have been made. 2020 would be a remarkable year even in terms of the immediate impact of the new virus, given the horrific number of deaths and the imposition of lock down measures throughout the world. At the same time, Covid-19 has also served to reveal the immensely obscene inequalities our societies are based upon. The protests against police brutality directed especially at black people that erupted after the murder of George Floyd on 25 May

2020 (7) are separate, but intrinsically related. Were one to believe the various populists currently at the helm of many European countries, to say nothing about the USA or Brazil, the protests against the systemic racism inherent in our societies would be a threat to 'law and order', even to democracy itself, to say nothing of the hallowed principles of the various nations.

Could there be a more blatant, even transparent, distraction from the serious crises in our hands? David Lammy, currently the opposition's Shadow Secretary of State for Justice and Shadow Lord Chancellor, has not hesitated in calling Mr. Johnson's bluff on the BBC Radio 4's *Today* (15 June), by stating that no one is talking about statues in any of the political parties, except for the Conservatives, the very same party that has never done anything about racism in spite of various official reports making concrete recommendations. [As he makes clear](#), 'They [The Conservative party] want a culture war because they want to distract from the central issue; implement the reviews. Do something. Change it. You're in power. You've been in power for a decade.' This and other calls for the government to take responsibility must never be weakened, nor forgotten. And it must go in hand with a renewed hope that this time around there might be substantial change. All those young people risking their lives to protest the murder of George Floyd and demand justice are not re-enacting some kind of Marxist nostalgia as some of the dimmer parrots of the right have been cowardly squealing even in some of the more established dailies. This new generation can draw indeed from the past, and the struggle for a better world is immemorial; but its problems, as well as the solutions it must seek for them, are new, and one of this generation's distinguishing features is its very diversity. They may be young but they have seen the sorrow and if they come, peacefully, as 'soft as the wind', they may yet prevail. Interviewed by Lanre Bakara for *The Guardian*, Angela Davis stressed this hope: 'We've never witnessed sustained demonstrations of this size that are so diverse. So I think that is what is giving people a great deal of hope. Many people previously, in response to the slogan Black Lives Matter, asked: "But shouldn't we really be saying all lives matter?" They're now finally getting it. That as long as black people continue to be treated in this way, as long as the violence of racism remains what it is, then no one is safe' (8). Let us hold on to that hope and strive for a better future right now.

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- (1) Audre Lorde. [1968] 2000. 'If You Come as Softly. *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 21.
 - (2) Michael Taussig. 1999. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1-2.
 - (3) 'Black Lives Matter: Boris Johnson must apologise for 'racist' comments before he can be taken seriously, warns Bonnie Greer'. [The Independent](#).
 - (4) See [Steve Bell's cartoon](#) depicting Mr. Johnson as a statue of a letter-box eating a slice of watermelon, in reference to the Prime Minister's widely documented slurs on Muslim women and black people.
 - (5) Wim Winckelmans. 'Excuses aan Congo zijn voor later'. [De Standaard](#). 12 June 2020.
 - (6) Emmanuel Macron. '[Adresse aux Français](#), Élysée. 14 June 2020: 'Je vous le dis très clairement ce soir mes chers compatriotes, la République n'effacera aucune trace ni aucun nom de son Histoire. La République ne déboulonnera pas de statue. Nous devons plutôt lucidement regarder ensemble toute notre Histoire, toutes nos mémoires, notre rapport à l'Afrique en particulier, pour bâtir un présent et un avenir possible, d'une rive l'autre de la Méditerranée avec une volonté de vérité et en aucun cas de revisiter ou de nier ce que nous sommes'.
 - (7) See Manny Fernandez and Audra D. S. Burch. 'George Floyd, From 'I Want to Touch the World' to 'I Can't Breathe'. 11 June 2020. [New York Times](#).
 - (8) Angela Davis [in interview with Lanre Bakara](#). 'We knew that the role of the police was to protect white supremacy'. 15 June 2020.
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