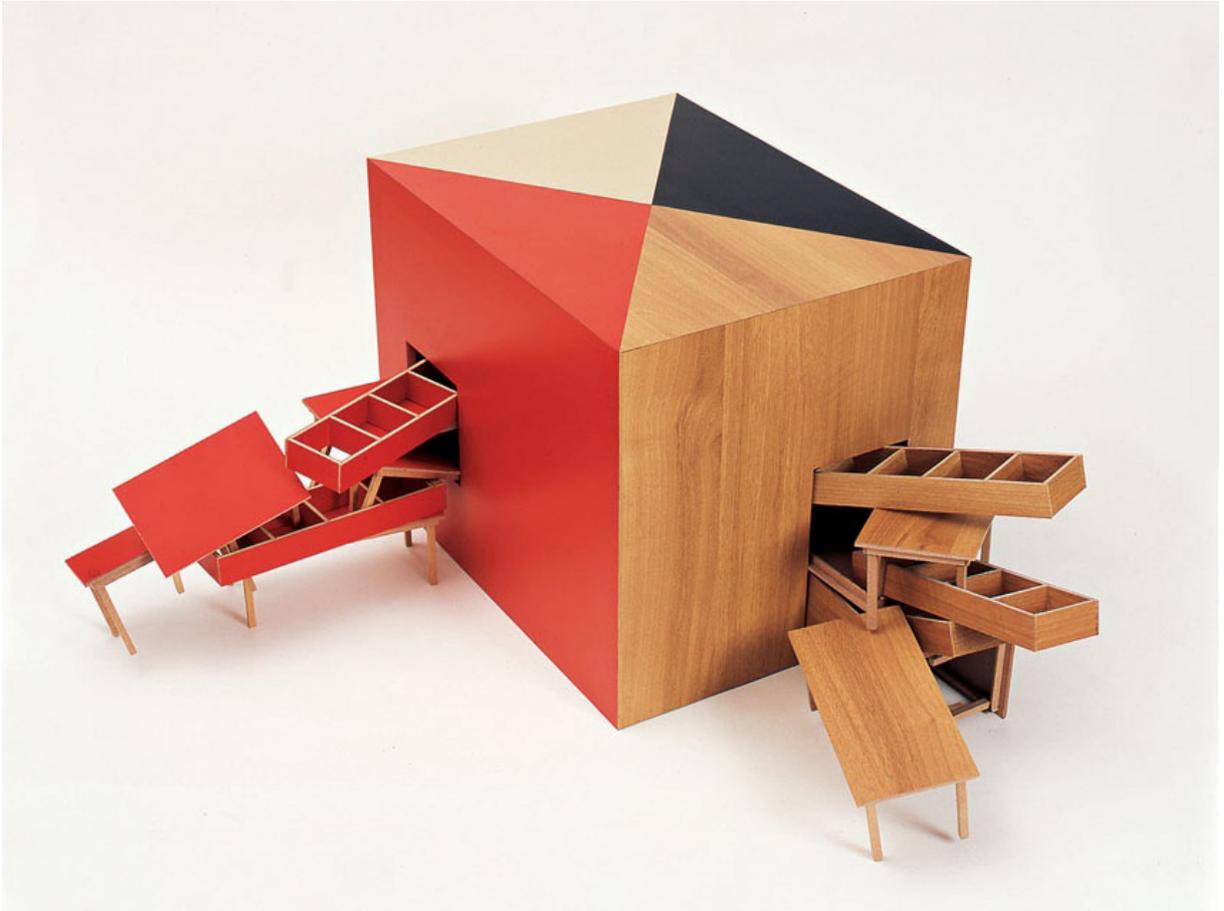




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 16 March 2019



Fantástica (from *Open House* series) | 2006 | José Bechara (courtesy of the artist)

ASSASSINS

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At one point in Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Beloved* (1987), Sethe, the main protagonist, says: "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place--the picture of it--stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head" (43). In a recent article Nadine El-Enany, a Senior Lecturer at Birkbeck's School of Law, referred back to this novel about slavery and its consequences to remind us not only about the dangers of forgetting the past but also of the fact that for some, forgetting will never be an option (1).

El-Enany then goes on to cite Catherine Hall, in 'Histories, Empires and the Post-Colonial Moment', who already in 2002, drew precisely on *Beloved* to sound a warning about the dire consequences for Europe of 'forgetting' its imperial and colonial past: "Toni Morrison's *Beloved* powerfully evokes a past which African-Americans as well as white Americans have found too painful to remember but which needs to be recovered through what she calls 're-memory' if that society is to reorient itself in such a way that it can come to terms with its own raced history. If such memories are not 'remembered' then they will haunt the social imagination and disrupt the present" (66). One could say that Europe's present is more than disrupted precisely by the willful forgetting of such memories to the point that Europe's very future, at least its future as a democratic community of free states and a successful peace project, is seriously endangered.

We have now reached the point at which not even a month stands between now and a possibly messy and highly damaging separation of the United Kingdom from the European Union on 29 March 2019. One should keep in mind that Europe has many other preoccupations besides that one, be it in the form of the spread and growing influence of xenophobic ultra-nationalist forces spreading like fire all across the continent, be it in the form of the large influx of migrants that has, in part, helped fuel precisely those flames. But even if Brexit might appear as a less important issue, depending on which side of the Channel one happens to live, it must be seen as inextricably linked to those other two.

In many ways, one could say, Brexit is but an acute form of the profound malaise that has come to afflict the continent. Seen that way, a closer look at the situation initiated by the United Kingdom, can help us better understand the dangers Hall warned about. In other words, forgetting about the UK's and Europe's imperial and colonial past is haunting our social imagination to the point we risk losing a sense not just of History but of our place in the world in the present moment. [Recently, it has been announced that the cost to the UK since the referendum is roughly 40 billion pounds a year, or 800 million every week.](#) One way of understanding how, in spite of what has become unavoidable, and clear to understand, evidence pointing out to such immense economic harm already suffered, is to reflect on how it is being driven by postimperial nostalgia. This is a point made, among others, by Nadine El-Enany: "The terms on which the EU referendum debate took place are symptomatic of a Britain struggling to conceive of its place in the world post-Empire. Present in the discourse of some of those arguing for a Leave vote was a tendency to romanticise the days of the British Empire, a time when Britannia ruled the waves and was defined by her racial and cultural superiority. Brexit is not only an expression of nostalgia for empire, it is also the fruit of empire".

The direct connection between past forms of racism linked to the enslavement of Africans to fuel imperial capitalist ventures and present, expanded, forms of racism in Europe is made clear, again, by Catherine Hall: “My work as a historian has convinced me that ways of thinking about race are the most destructive legacy of Britain’s imperial past. In the wake of the Brexit vote we have witnessed a deeply disturbing increase in the number of hate crimes committed against Poles, Muslims and racial minorities. Globalisation, with all the losses it has brought for so many, has clearly acted as a trigger for this upsurge of rage and resentment, the wish to ‘take back control’ and ‘secure our borders’ (2). The sharp rise in racism and xenophobia coupled with a nostalgia for an imperial past in which Europe was at the centre of the world, are not a UK only phenomenon: clearly, they have spread all over Europe. And at their base, anywhere in Europe, is a specific and extremely dangerous delusion made possible by the willful forgetting, and negating, of Europe’s imperial past and its responsibility.

If anything, the current political situation in the UK – a profound crisis of which Brexit is but a part, but which nonetheless exposes how raw the issues are and how divided the country is – serves as a flare to signal to the rest of Europe how close we have come to denying our own painstakingly won ideals, rights, and freedoms since the Enlightenment. The desire to ‘regain control’ and the obsession with ‘securing the borders’ – a tragic and desperate illusion made perhaps more easily spun because of England’s insularity – has many sides. Beyond restricting who can come in, the move towards setting up a society based on exclusion also depends on forced deportations. In a study just published, Nisha Kapoor leaves no room for doubt concerning the importance that forced deportations have come to assume in the last few years: ““Deportation figures, too, have risen sharply from the low thousands in the early 1990s. Between 2010 and 2015, approximately 40,000–45,000 people were deported annually” (3). Such numbers should raise alarms, specifically concerning the question of Human Rights and due process in a state of law. That number also includes about ten percent of citizens from the EU, which has prompted Adrienne Yong, a lecturer at the City Law School of the University of London to state: “Laws exist to protect EU citizens from being deported. Yet, the Home Office seems to want to downplay the obligations that it is bound to ensure under EU law, but also under the ECHR [European Convention on Human Rights]. Attempting to shirk its responsibilities even before Brexit has occurred does not set a positive precedent for the protection of EU citizens’ rights going forward” (4).

One of the most infamous cases surrounding the ‘Hostile Environment’ adopted by the Home office when Theresa May was its head, was the *Windrush* scandal that played in March and April of 2018,

spurred on by investigative work done by reporters from the *Guardian*. As it came out, the Home Office had targeted an unknown number of people, mostly belonging to the so-called *Windrush* generation of migrants from the Caribbean who had travelled in the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, and who were, to a great extent, British citizens after the British Nationality Act of that year. In the end, besides numerous people (up to eight thousand) who suffered from being detained, threatened with deportation and excluded from vital social services including health provisions – especially grievous given that many had been among the first to work in the National Health Service also inaugurated in 1948 – about 63 people were actually deported. [David Lammy, a Labour MP who confronted the problem directly, wrote:](#) “In 2018, on the 70th anniversary of the arrival [of] the *Empire Windrush*, the 50th anniversary of Enoch Powell’s abhorrent ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, and the 25th anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, the tragic but incontestable reality is that Britain still has huge progress to make with race relations and migration. The *Windrush* scandal was more than a unique mistake caused by officials – it was a disgraceful and as yet unresolved display of a toxic and racist undercurrent driven by public alarm over immigration”.

This wilful ‘forgetting’ of the rights of citizens who are perceived as racially other led to the dismissal of Amber Rudd, who was caught enforcing the policies set up by her predecessor. Yet, one could argue that any changes made, including the appointment of a new Home Secretary, were merely cosmetic at best. Not only is Amber Rudd back in the Cabinet, she can even be seen as one of the Rising stars on the side of the Conservatives. As for the new Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, son of Pakistani immigrants, several of his interventions show the extent to which ‘Hostile Environment’ remains very much alive. Whether one considers his announcement of having asked for the deployment of a Navy ship to patrol the Channel and chase off would be migrants, or his announcement of a decision – soon after shown to be highly problematic – to strip a young woman of her British citizenship for having joined Isis in Syria one can also see a further desire to openly pander to more extremist members of the public. And, even more pertinently, although the promised compensation scheme for victims of the Home Office’s questionable actions against members of the *Windrush* generation is still to materialise, is the Home Office’s decision to resume special deportation flights. [As the *Guardian* editorial of 5 February 2019 put it:](#) “The government’s decision to resume deportations to the Caribbean before the independent inquiry into the *Windrush* scandal has delivered its findings, and before any of those affected have received compensation, is an affront to decency and a calculated snub to critics of the hostile environment policy created by Theresa May when she was home secretary. The message is that the Home Office’s aggressive approach, after a pause, is back on”.

Equally troubling is that even when pressed, the Home Office does not seem capable of providing the number of people directly affected by its policies and actions. At least eleven of those people have died – and the question of responsibility looms large. But exact numbers cannot be produced as admitted by the Home Secretary who has “said British officials had also been unable to contact many of those thought to have been caught up in the scandal, suggesting the true death toll could be higher still” (5). As Toni Morrison aptly put it, “Some things you forget. Other things you never do”. On Boxing Day – the 2nd day of Christmas when traditionally servants would receive a gift, or Christmas box, from their master – [the BBC aired the first of three episodes of a new adaptation of Agatha Christie's *The ABC Murders*, directed by Sarah Phelps](#). Starring John Malkovich as a kind of *noir* Hercule Poirot – a decision that led to much criticism by some spectators oblivious to his greatness and deeply concerned by his being American – this version of Christie’s 1936 fiction was set back slightly in 1933, while it also in an indirect but no less powerful way, asked viewers to reflect on the parallels with today’s Europe.

Asked about her decision to choose 1933, [Phelps explained, in a way, again, that invites reflection on the present](#): “chose 1933 really specifically because we are in a period in Britain where the [British Union of Fascists](#) (BUF) had started to gain a lot of traction, especially within other mainstream political parties who sensed this groundswell and began to adopt some of the language for themselves. 1930s Britain was also a period of savage recession and a lot of people were looking for someone to blame”. Phelps changed a number of key items from Christie’s novel. One of these concerns Poirot’s elusive past in Belgium before migrating to England. In this version – which repeatedly shows how hostile the atmosphere was for any deemed foreign – Poirot is shown to have a priest, not an inspector with the Belgian police. As a priest he tries to save some of his parishioners who had rushed into the small rural church seeking sanctuary from the approaching German troops at the start of the Great War in 1914. In a dramatic scene, Poirot is shown mutely imploring the young soldier pointing a rifle at him not to shoot; this, while the voice of a German commanding officer orders him to shoot. Until a shot is heard, and we realize the officer has decided to execute the soldier who had been incapable of murdering the priest. Knocked to the ground by the butt of the officer’s gun, when Poirot comes to himself, his church is completely engulfed in flames. As he rises from the ground he shouts in French: “Assassins”. The rising xenophobia of that historical period, long thought, if not completely banished, at least reduced to insignificance, has again risen and occupies centre stage in European politics. Whether fuelled by the ever deepening economic problems, a sense of complacency on the part of a cultural elite convinced that peace in Europe, after so much destruction, was more or less a given, or even just because of basic

human cruelty, it can no longer be ignored: the time of the assassins is back to haunt us all, and at its root one finds a renewed postimperial nostalgia driven by a wilful, shameful and shameless, denial of Europe's imperial past.

(1) "[Things Fall Apart: From Empire to Brexit Britain](#)". 2 May 2017.

(2) Catherine Hall. 'The racist ideas of slave owners are still with us today: The surge in hate crime since the Brexit vote is one legacy of an overlooked period of British history'. [The Guardian, 26 September 2016](#).

(3) Nisha Kapoor. *Deport Deprive Extradite: 21st Century State Extremism*. London: Verso, 2019.

(4) Adrienne Yong. 'When Britain can deport EU citizens – according to the law'. [The Conversation, 23 November 2017](#).

(5) "Windrush: 11 people wrongly deported from UK have died – Javid.

Officials unable to contact many of those affected, suggesting death toll could be higher". [The Guardian, 12 November 2018](#).

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