



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

Saturday, 21 December 2019



still of the movie *My father has a gun* | 2019 | [Ana Mendes](#) (courtesy of the artist)

WINDRUSHES (2)

Paulo de Medeiros

*Oh, the wind, the wind is blowing
Through the graves the wind is blowing*
Leonard Cohen

In sinister times sudden flashes of resistance become brighter. Amidst the cover of ashen greyness that has come to encircle us, these fleeting moments can cut through the darkness of the heart. As Walter Benjamin well knew, '[t]he true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again' (1). All over Europe we can see an attempt to revert emancipatory gains of the past hundred years, with claims for regaining control pretending to address social ills while touting rabid forms of nationalism. These

invariably are predicated on xenophobia and racism, whether thinly disguised or virulently open and direct. Everything appears to happen either a bit too fast, and a bit everywhere, or other very slowly and seemingly in isolated circumstances. All smoke and mirrors of course. But one could almost be 'forgiven' for not paying attention, for cancelling the future while forgetting, or denying the past so as to better sell the present.

The facile and disingenuous appropriations of popular discontent – with the 'elites', that most malleable of portmanteau terms which by now has come to be emptied out of any meaning – usually go hand in hand with outrageous reversals of concepts. Just as 'truth' became a husk bandied about until one could embrace a supposed 'post-truth' age, so with many other crucial terms for any understanding of how power operates. 'Democracy' by now has to be the most abused term as anti-democratic forces blatantly accuse their opponents of being anti-democratic. And the same with 'free speech' and 'racism'. One of the false paradoxes of our times is the notion of the 'post-racial'. Just as racist attitudes and attacks increase exponentially in number and deadly violence throughout Europe, the United States, and certainly now in Brazil as well, the myth of a post-racial society parades itself with the belief in post-truth. As David Theo Goldberg puts it in the 'Conclusion' to *Are We All Post-Racial Yet?*: 'Postraciality (...) rather than expressing the end of racism, conceals within its conceptual erasure of race the driving mode of contemporary racist articulation. Racisms dis-appear behind the formal deletion of racial classification, state regulation, and legal refusal of racial definition. They express themselves anew in the name of racial disappearance, disavowal, and denial. Racisms proliferate in the wake of the supposed death of race' (2).

As Benjamin further warned us, "'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'" ([Otto] Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'. Were the two white mounted police officers in Texas blind to such a moment of danger when they decided to lead a mentally ill black man, Donald Neely' through the streets of Galveston, Texas on Saturday 3 August 2019, on a rope, with his hands tied behind his back? It would seem so, because as one of them mentioned even while doing so, they were aware of how '[t]his is gonna look so bad' (3). But that would have been all too easy. The problem is that it did not just 'look bad'; it *was* bad, and it channelled centuries of evil. Yet, the two police officers still went ahead with it; and, perhaps to no one's surprise these days, even though there was a public outcry once their actions became widely known, there were little consequences to them.

Now, that might have been an especially iconic moment and as such will remain, at least for a little longer, on everyone's consciousness. But we should not let ourselves be blinded by it. Only the ensuing outrage can be said to have been a show of resistance. The action itself though, outside of all circumstantial considerations as have been invoked in an attempt at 'explaining' it, was nothing more than a repetition of countless other moments, a re-enactment, of dehumanization in general, and racial oppression in particular. For a fleeting moment 'the true picture of the past' flashed by. If there were any doubts about how racism, rather than representing some aberration, is both systemic and endemic of our societies, one only has to look at the statistics for the killing of black people by law enforcement agents. A recent study, conducted by social scientists Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito makes for an especially compelling and lucid indictment:

We use data on police-involved deaths to estimate how the risk of being killed by police use of force in the United States varies across social groups. We estimate the lifetime and age-specific risks of being killed by police by race and sex. (...) Risk is highest for black men, who (at current levels of risk) face about a 1 in 1,000 chance of being killed by police over the life course. The average lifetime odds of being killed by police are about 1 in 2,000 for men and about 1 in 33,000 for women. Risk peaks between the ages of 20 y and 35 y for all groups. For young men of color, police use of force is among the leading causes of death (4).

It is not just when black people are led away by a rope as if they were cattle, or when they get killed, mostly with impunity, by law agents, that one can get those glimpses of the past flashing by. They also come to us as a result of unguarded moments, such as when the BBC reporter, referring to the two women novelists who have been awarded the Booker Prize in 2019, mentioned one, Margaret Atwood, by name, and then left out Bernardine Evaristo, whom he mentioned merely as 'another author'. Less iconic perhaps than leading a black man on a rope through the streets of a town in Texas, and less lethal than a bullet shot at close range but this casual erasure of Evaristo's identity is equally important as showing how the system truly operates.

The instance of resistance that represents that seizing of a memory in a moment of danger Benjamin alluded to can best be seen in Evaristo's own comment on the situation on Twitter. Rather than expressing her, in any case justified, outrage at how she had been made invisible, Evaristo, rightly, placed the event in historical context as yet another iteration of an enduring racism: 'The [@BBC](#) described me yesterday as 'another author' apropos [@TheBookerPrizes](#) 2019. How quickly & casually they have removed my name from history - the first black woman to win it. This is what we've always

been up against, folks' (5). Indeed, what such moments show us is how, in our society, more often than not, black people are still primarily perceived as suspects rather than as citizens as Eugene Robinson recently noted (6), or, at best, rendered invisible. If we want to change this present condition of ours, if we want to lay the foundations for a more hopeful future, then one of our tasks certainly must be to seize hold of those flashes of memory.

(1) Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken Books, 2007 [1968], 255.

(2) David Theo Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015, 152.

(3) 'Texas police officer who led black man by rope said "This is gonna look so bad"' AP in Galveston, [The Guardian](#), 3 October 2019.

(4) Frank Edwards, Hedwig Lee, and Michael Esposito, 'Risk of being killed by police use of force in the United States by age, race-ethnicity, and sex', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* | August 20, 2019 vol. 116 no. 34.

(5) [Bernardine Evaristo](#), 14 October, 2019.

(6) Eugene Robinson, 'What can a black person do to keep from getting killed by police in this country?', [Washington Post](#), 14 October, 2019.

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