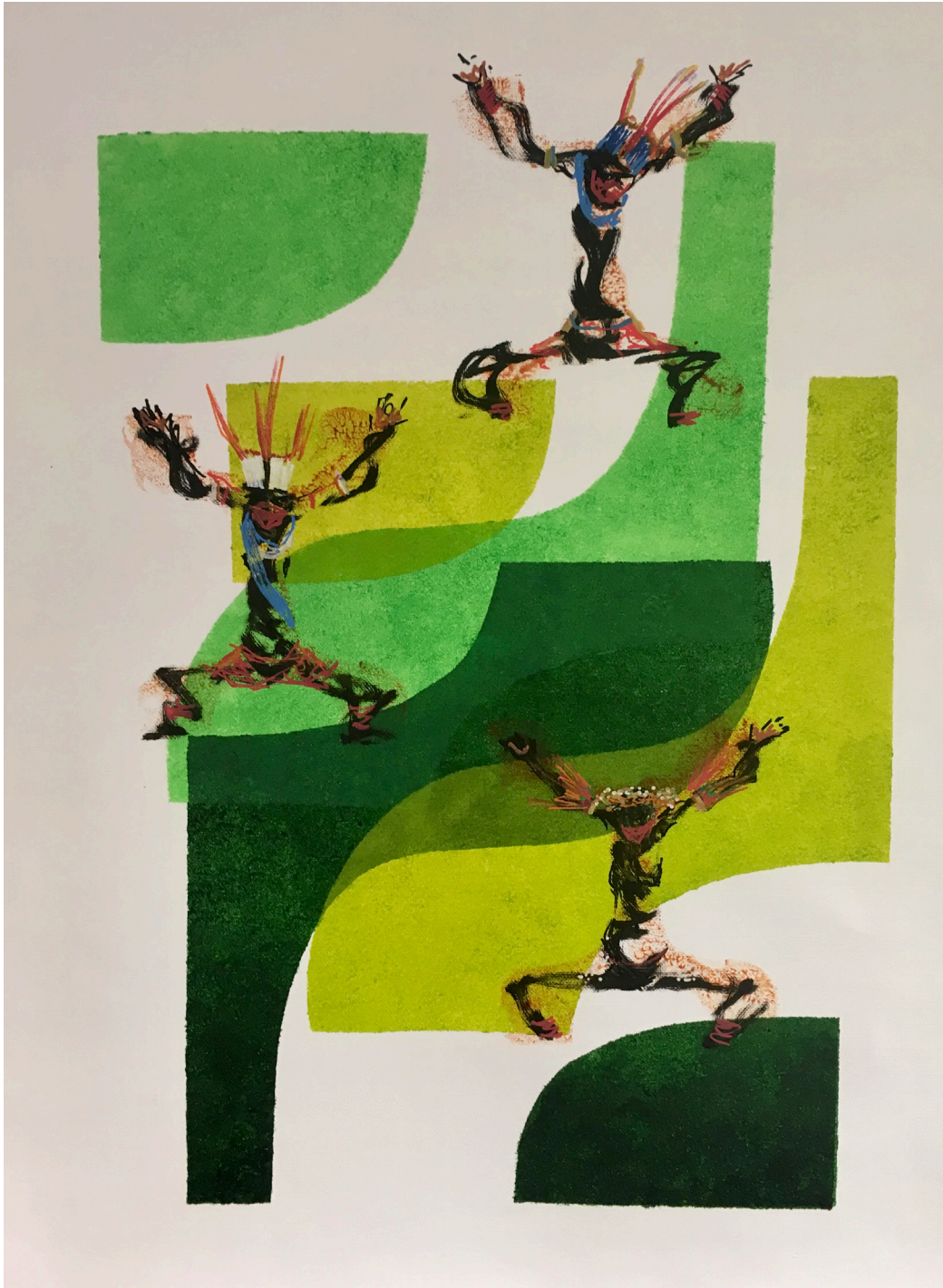




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 21 March 2020



*Todos do Mato* | 2017 | Mica Barbot (courtesy of the artist)



# HOW TO CHANGE MINDS IN A NEW CENTURY: A RADIOGRAPHY OF EUROPE

Fernanda Vilar

When I met the Portuguese writer Gonçalo M Tavares, we spoke about how the media determines the scope of our discourse. No dictatorship could hope to be as effective in directing what we talk about. We are profoundly manipulated, above all by those who sell to us. Human tragedies accrue a volatile economic value, they raise our compassion in a fluctuating and uneven manner: we are thrown into great commotion by an act of terrorism, and ignore the plight of refugees and the climate emergency. Over recent years the number of immigrants has risen in Europe. Public discourse and the media continue to put forward partial or misrepresentative opinions, generally painting immigrants as a scapegoat for all the ills of the society in which they arrive. This approach is toxic in how it constructs public opinion. Not least because immigration is intimately connected to the constitution of the Nation State we have to think through the legislation which will allow us to welcome migrants.

The public perception of immigration has long been [studied](#), but integration requires further research. The real or perceived challenges of integration raised by a growing number of immigrants often reflect the uncertainties of a society worried about its present and future. It throws into relief the capacity of governments to respond to the social and economic demands of their population.

According to a study by the European Commission ([Eurobarometer](#) 2017) on the public perception of the integration of immigrants in Europe, 60% of those interviewed think that not enough is known about the impacts of immigration on their countries. Twenty-eight thousand people participated, with a thousand interviews undertaken in each of the 28 member states of the European Union. Though opinions of immigration diverge a great deal within each society, it is important to note that there are many people who are undecided, in particular among a middle class that seeks economic and social stability – just what migrants themselves crave.



The research shows that the majority of those interviewed over-estimate by a factor of two the number of immigrants coming from outside Europe. They also wrongly think that more than half of these immigrants come to Europe illegally, when this proportion is in fact much lower. Conspiracy theories like the “great substitution” coined by Renaud Camus in his book *Le grand remplacement* (2011), [The Great Replacement] have come to dominate nationalist discourses in Europe. This dangerous discourse carries with it the idea that Europe is in the throws of its own disappearance under a great flux of immigrants who are going to replace Europeans. This idea results from deliberate disinformation linked to racist theories and a simplistic discourse that confirms many of the population’s fears. Faced with rising emotion, facts have little value: even if the numbers contradict the feelings evoked in Camus’ book, the author uses this contradiction as an argument in his own favour. He writes that governments like about the number of immigrants in order to hide the processes of the ‘Islamification’ and ‘Africanization’ of Europe.

The research by Eurobarometer demonstrates that the public perceive positive integration to depend firstly on immigrants speaking the local language, followed by paying taxes to maintain social welfare, and accepting the values and norms of the host society. However, being part of groups or associations, having friends, or running for local office come at the bottom of the list. The research reveals, too, that people who engage with immigrants on a daily basis perceive integration more positively. When it comes to discussing the barriers to integration that an immigrant might encounter, people see immigrants as not making an effort. Yet they immediately then refer to the difficulties in finding work, and the discrimination that many suffer. This gestures towards a cognitive dissonance between cause and consequence, because if there is discrimination and it is difficult to access the labour market, clearly immigrants will find it more difficult to integrate in a society that should welcome them, not reject them.

The integration of second-generation immigrants – whether born here or who came as children – is one of the core criteria for establishing the success of integration. When children went to school in the country, the hope is that they would not have the same barriers or difficulties that the adults encountered in arriving in a foreign country. However, according to the data gathered by the [OECD](#) (1), Europe does not follow this pattern.



The indicators for integration show that, in Europe, 40% of children from immigrant families live in relative poverty, compared to 20% of children from non-immigrant families (2019: 176). Even if the children of second and third generations have access to education (81% in France and Belgium, 90% in Portugal), 29% of children speak of having been treated differently by teachers or colleagues (2019: 188). As the rate of school drop-out is the same between immigrant and non-immigrant children (9%), the differences are more noticeable when it comes to looking for work.

The rate of rejection by employers of the children of immigrants is shocking. Religion is a major factor of exclusion in France, according to the researchers [Marie Anne Valfort and Stéphane Carcillo](#) (2018) (2). Muslims represent 7.5% of the French population (3) and they consistently experience both irrational “aesthetic discrimination” and “statistical discrimination” because employers think they are less productive. These logical fallacies clearly influence discriminatory behaviour and contribute to discrimination against women and (ethnic, religious, sexual and other) minorities in the labour market. According to the researchers, this creates a vicious circle. The victims of discrimination do not find a way to escape the stigmas attributed to them by the part of society that isolates them by group. It is precisely this post-colonial wound that flourishes in media discussions in France: groups are accused of “communitarianism” through “the scant effort that the (children of) immigrants make to integrate”, when in fact there are many reasons why such integration is difficult. And there is no discussion of that most dangerous of communitarianisms; white communitarianism, which is taken as normal.

Research on access to the labour market is very important if we are to account for the fact that in the European Union 25% of children of parents who were born outside the EU are over-qualified for the work they do. In Belgium, according to one study (4) - *Des citoyens aux racines africaines: un portrait des Belgo-Congolais, Belgo-Rwandais et Belgo-Burundais* [On citizens with African roots: a portrait of Belgo-Congolese, Belgo-Rwandans and Belgo-Burundians] - young Belgians of Congolese origin, like their parents (but unlike the average in OECD countries) are better educated than the average Belgian. Yet they experience a higher rate of unemployment and underemployment than non-immigrant Belgians (5): they are four times less likely to have a job (2017: 205). Unfortunately, competence is not as strong a criterion as ethnic origin, skin colour or religion. Another painful figure is that, in Belgium and France, the rate of relatively poorly educated young immigrants (15-34 years old) who are unemployed or not in education is double that of their non-immigrant peers (2019:190).



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One of the conclusions of the [report](#) by the European Union (6) in 2020 shows how perceived knowledge (interviewees who believe that they are informed about education) and real knowledge (interviewees who correctly estimate the number of immigrants in a country) is related to the way in which people interact with immigrants, as well as how the media deal with these questions. So that we can overcome these challenges, the OECD recommends focussing on the “[concerned middle classes](#)” (7), and adopting a more balanced and fact-based public discourse. However, spreading new modalities and interpretations of social integration is not straightforward. The MEMOIRS project is therefore significant in its analysis of the role of different arts in promoting European citizenship. We must try to be clear if we are to interrupt the flow of information that drenches us. We must seek out what the children of empires have not brought to light, and what they have silenced. In this way we will be able to contribute to overthrowing some of the prejudiced notions about migration in Europe in our still new century.

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- (1) OECD/European Union (2019), [Trouver ses marques 2018: Les indicateurs de l'intégration des immigrés](#), OECD Publishing, Paris/European Union, Brussels. OCDE (2019), [Perspectives des migrations internationales 2019](#), Éditions OCDE, Paris.
- (2) Marie Anne Valfort and Stéphane Carcillo (2018), *Les discriminations au travail, Femmes, ethnicité, religion, âge, apparence, LGBT*, Sciences Po les presses, Paris.
- (3) The report points out that France is the country with the second highest number of young people of immigrant origin (3.4 million, alongside Germany, and far behind the 17.1 million in the United States).
- (4) Demart S. et al. (2017) *Des citoyens aux racines africaines : un portrait des Belgo-Congolais, Belgo-Rwandais et Belgo-Burundais*, Fondation Roi Baudoin, Bruxelles.
- (5) In the report they make a distinction between Belgians with European origins, called “Belgo-Belgians”, and Belgians of African origin, “Belgo-Congolese”.
- (6) Dražanová, L., Liebig, T., Migali, S., Scipioni, M. and Spielvogel, G., What are Europeans’ views on integration of immigrants? An in-depth analysis of 2017 Special Eurobarometer “Integration of immigrants in the European Union”, European Commission, 2020, JRC119315.
- (7) Recommendations put forward in the OECD report «*Sous pression : la classe moyenne en perte de vitesse*».

Translated by Archie Davies

Fernanda Vilar is a researcher on the project MEMOIRS – *Children of Empire and European Post-memories* (ERC n. 648624) at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra.

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