



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

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Mínimos detalhes de paisagem | 2015 | Cristina Ataíde (courtesy of the artist)

WINDRUSHES [1]

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It is late and the Angel of Benjamin, his “Angel of Progress” and no longer Paul Klee’s Angel, lies itself in ruins amid the rubble of centuries. His distorted face and broken wings smeared with red blood, as it failed utterly not so much to stop the wind rushing from Paradise, but another kind of wind, more seemingly out of Hell, or what passes for Hell in our present, the all-too-human perversion of the powerful, intent in reducing everyone to the condition of slaves or animals. It is late, but this seemingly exaggerated allegory and (mis)-appropriation of the famous image of Walter Benjamin, is but a simple reflection of the way in which all over Europe the winds of xenophobic nationalism, of fascism and racism, threaten the possibility of a future that, even if no one any longer believes in a naïve version of progress, would nonetheless be better, less marked by inequality and injustice, than the past.

One of the most illustrative examples of this – though by no means unique – is the Windrush scandal that broke out last year in the United Kingdom after the investigative reports by journalists from the *Guardian*. [The first one, published by Amelia Gentleman on 9 April 2018](#), was preceded by several months of research. Yet, it was but the beginning, and in spite of mounting and damning evidence, including a governmental report published on 27 February 2019, there is no conclusion in sight. As David Olusoga starkly put it on 16 June 2019: “[The Windrush scandal is raw, shocking and ongoing](#)”. The [report published by the House of Commons](#) leaves no doubts about the seriousness of the matter and the government’s responsibility: “The Windrush scandal demonstrates a combination of a lack of concern about the real- world impact of the Home Office’s (the Department) immigration policies compounded by a systemic failure to keep accurate records, meaning many people who are British Citizens or have leave to remain in the UK do not have the paperwork to prove it. The Home Office was aware of this through case enquiries from citizens and their MPs. Yet, the department failed in its duty to protect the rights of people to live, work and access services and benefits in the UK when designing and implementing its immigration policies”.

There are, unfortunately, many other examples and it seems as if every day brings further proof of how our societies not only have fallen prey to, but even seem to revel in, the utter ethical failure that is racism. [Roberto Vecchi has noted](#) that “decadence is not only the proper form of an aspect of modernity. It is also a mode of glancing retrospectively towards a loaded and conditioning past.” (1) To this I would add, as I find it crucial, that modernity as we usually understand it, cannot be disassociated on the one hand from the egalitarian spirit of the Enlightenment, and on the other hand, from the rise of capitalism; a capitalism that not only imposed itself from the very beginning but also always dissimulated the extent to which it perverted and denied those same ideals that allowed it to spread.

Susan Buck-Morss has forcefully shown this paradox in her essay on “Hegel and Haiti”: “By the eighteenth century, slavery had become the root metaphor of Western political philosophy, connoting everything that was evil about power relations. Freedom, its conceptual antithesis, was considered by Enlightenment thinkers as the highest and universal political value. Yet this political metaphor began to take root at precisely the time that the economic practice of slavery – the systematic, highly sophisticated capitalist enslavement of non-Europeans as a labor force in the colonies – was increasing quantitatively and intensifying qualitatively to the point that by the mid-eighteenth century it came to underwrite the entire economic system of the West...” (2).

And today? Today, that paradox no longer even is assumed as such, as we have more or less unconsciously slid more and more deeply into a form of spectral, financial, capitalism. One can, one should, approach this, only seemingly odd, condition, from a theoretical perspective as Jacques Derrida, Joseph Vogl, and others have done (3). But one should also never lose sight of those whose lives are directly affected by the ever more elaborate processes of exclusion that still, as always, fall back on class, gender, and racial factors. In that regard, and staying only within the range of immediate past events in England, we must understand the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017 that killed at least 72 people and injured as many, as connected, though different, to the Windrush scandal.

In both cases we can see similar patterns of exclusion and inequality in which ethnicity and class are closely linked. Another striking, though not at all unexpected, connection between the two, is the fact that even though in both a whole nation was moved by the horror and extent of the tragedies, no one has yet been brought to accountability and even the promised measures to help the victims to a great extent have failed to materialize and scores of other high-rise buildings remain covered in the same type of dangerous materials. As Daniel Renwick, a community member, has said on the second anniversary of the blaze, "[The wounds that opened two years ago have only deepened. Hundreds of thousands remain at risk of death](#)". In a similar fashion, even after the Windrush scandal had blown all over the pages of the newspapers and the television screens, the Home Office, responsible for the forced deportation of at least 83, mostly British citizens, planned to resume special deportation flights in February 2019, before the compensation scheme for the initial victims had even been set in motion (4).

Although no one really doubts that England, and the whole of Europe, have long entered a postimperial age in chronological terms, when it comes to political action and consequences, and to the various national imaginaries, after a few gains and some attempts at different, more inclusive, notions of citizenship, we are rapidly regressing in time as if prisoners of some evil Tardis fuelled by unbridled greed and called imperial nostalgia. The process put in motion through Brexit might appear to exacerbate it all, as it consumes most energy and serves to keep everyone in Europe, but especially in the United Kingdom, under severe psychological and emotional strain. Brexit, however, is not the cause, merely a symptom of the profound malaise currently blowing over Europe.

And what the successive failures, to remedy the lot of those most affected by the tragedies of either Grenfell Tower or the Windrush Scandal, to determine responsibility, or to put measures in place

to avoid repeating the same crimes signify, is not so much some temporary lapse due to individual turpitude, moral failing or some other aberration, but rather a systemic and foundational aspect of modern European societies, built on the cruellest forms of human expropriation and dehumanization. It is not that those responsible for the lack of prevention of further catastrophic fires, or those ready to return stealthily to forced deportations, deviate somehow from the norm, but rather that they embody it. This can also be amply seen across the Atlantic. When the current man in the Oval Office recently, openly, expressed racist views on four Congresswomen (5) he was not being impulsive, misguided, or having some sort of breakdown. Besides consciously, and successfully, courting the vote of neo-Nazis and other white supremacists directly, what 'individual number one' – to fall back on his assigned name in Special Counsel's Robert Mueller's report – did was simply to voice the thoughts and feelings of a large number, if not the majority, of all white conservative 'citizens'.

The vote on the resolution passed by the House of Representatives to condemn the President for his "racist comments that have legitimized fear and hatred of new Americans and people of color", was easily predictable (6). Just as the image portrayed, and message sent, by having only 4 out of 191 Republicans agree to the motion. In the words of the *Washington Post* reporters: "The imagery of the 240-to-187 vote was stark: A diverse Democratic caucus cast the president's words as an affront to millions of Americans and descendants of immigrants while Republican lawmakers – the vast majority of them white men – stood with Trump ..." (7). Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, it seems as though the current Prime Minister was the only leader in office to openly criticize those racist messages. But of course, the whole policy called "Hostile Environment" that led to the forced deportations had been set in place by the same individual when she had been in charge of the Home Office.

It is late, so so late. But not all is lost yet. Even in the darkest of these moments, when one may feel like despairing over the human condition, the mounting volume of resistance to the endemic racism of our modern capitalist societies, offers hope. From the various initiatives that have arisen out of the Windrush Scandal, for instance, the collection of essays and testimonies gathered by Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff in *Mother Country: Real Stories of the Windrush Children* (London, 2019) is notable. As she notes in the Introduction: "Black slavery is the wider context of any book which lingers over the history of the Windrush generation ... But while so many of our ancestors will remain voiceless, faceless and forever unremembered in the history books written by the same type of men who 'owned' them, I feel lucky now, as one of their descendants, to be able to help tell the future of their story". It is stories such as

those that give one hope that other winds too may soon be blowing and sweeping those remnants of Empire definitely to the dustbin of History where they belong or the pile of rubble Benjamin pictured for us. Those then, might more properly be seen as blowing from Paradise.

(1) Originally: "Decay is not just one shade of a certain stripe of modernity. It is also a way of looking, with hindsight, at a charged and potent past ". However, the Portuguese text differs slightly, and I prefer to follow it here in my translation.

(2) Susan Buck-Morss. "Hegel and Haiti". *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 821.

(3) See for instance Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* ([1993], 1994) and Joseph Vogl's *The Specter of Capital* ([2010], 2015).

(4) As reported by the *Observer* in "[New Jamaica Deportation Flights attacked as 'insult to Windrush victims'](#)", 3 February 2019.

(5) See Mallory Simon and Sara Sidner, "[Trump said 'many people agree' with his racist tweets. These white supremacists certainly do](#)". *CNN*, 16 July 2019.

(6) See John Wagner, Mike DeBonis, and Colby Itkowitz, "[A divided House votes for resolution condemning Trump's racist remarks](#)", *Washington Post*, 16 July 2019.

(7) Mike DeBonis, John Wagner, and Rachael Bade, "[A divided House votes for resolution condemning Trump's racist remarks](#)", *Washington Post*, 17 July 2019.

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