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## **Time, History, Politics: Anticolonial Constellations**

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## **Time, History, Politics: Anticolonial Constellations**

One of the most significant elements of the international relations of the twentieth century was the transformation from a colonial to a postcolonial world order. That transformation, contested, lengthy and uneven, was the fruit of struggles by colonised peoples for independence. The postcolonial experience has proved very different from that hoped for by the anticolonial generation. From the perspective of our own times, how can we learn from the thought and practice of those earlier struggles? In this article I first discuss the work of David Scott who has posed this question in compelling terms, arguing that our postcolonial present requires a tragic apprehension of anticolonialism. Finding his questions urgent but his conclusions too restrictive, I turn to Walter Benjamin, and show how his method offers alternative possibilities for exploring the questions that Scott poses. Drawing on archives of African anticolonialism I consider how we can engage with these struggles for our own times, through three elements of Benjamin's approach: the question of time and temporality; the method of montage and quotation; and the device of the dialectical image. In doing so this article sketches possibilities of an anticolonial method suitable for our own neoliberal but still imperial times.

*Keywords: anticolonialism; postcolonialism; method; montage; temporality*

In 1958, Fanon wrote:

The twentieth century, when the future looks back on it will not only be remembered as the era of atomic discoveries and interplanetary explorations. The second upheaval of this period, unquestionably, is the conquest by the peoples of the lands that belong to them. (Fanon [1958] 1967a, 130)

We now inhabit the future that Fanon referred to. How do we look back on that century? How can our looking back on that international upheaval be made relevant today, given the disappointments of the postcolonial condition? David Scott (2005) has addressed this very question anticipated by Fanon's compelling image of the future (our present) looking back on the past (his present). Arguing that postcolonial scholarship tends to narrate anticolonialism in a romantic mode consistent with the heroic revolutionary terms of its own enunciation, Scott urges that we rethink anticolonialism in a manner attentive to the politics of our own times. Eschewing the pitfalls of romantic political nostalgia, Scott concludes that anticolonialism can best be reconstructed through the narrative form of tragedy.

Scott's argument seems particularly pertinent to the tragedies of post-colonial Africa. In admitting the contradictions of the postcolonial national project, however, we should beware conflating this with the exhaustion of anticolonial critique. To pose tragedy as the only alternative to romance would seem to be constrained by a dualism

similar to that of the external gaze of Afro-pessimism/optimism (Jules-Rosette 2002). Scott poses profound questions but his resolution remains within the terrain of alternative modes of historical narrative. In this article, I turn to the work of Walter Benjamin as an alternative source of inspiration. Benjamin shared Scott's concern with remembering struggles of earlier eras, but his critique of historicism led him to reject the question of historical narrative as such, and to propose an entirely different method for engagement with the historical past. Benjamin was concerned with politics in Europe and he failed to consider the broader colonial conditions of such politics. It is because of his concerns with the philosophy of history, method and critique, rather than his credentials as a critic of colonialism, that I turn to Benjamin. Notwithstanding Benjamin's failure to confront the colonial, I demonstrate that his arguments about history and method might provide rich ground for us to do so.

### **The romance and tragedy of anti-colonialism**

How, from the position of our postcolonial times, should we engage with anticolonial struggles of the past? David Scott (2005) urges that we consider the problem-space of the present, the historically specific configuration of ideas, understandings and social conditions within which critical analysis takes place. It is the character of the problem-space which defines the *stakes* of critical enquiry. Scott provokes us to reconsider not the continued relevance of certain histories as such but, rather, the way in which these histories are narrated in the present. Historical accounts vary not simply according to their content but according to their literary form, and the 'mode of emplotment' configures the type of story which the telling of a particular history produces (Scott 2005, 45-51). The choice of narrative form is therefore a strategic move which is made according to the prevailing context.

The material for Scott's argument is CLR James' account of the Haitian revolution in *The Black Jacobins* (James [1938] 1963). When it was first written in the 1930s, Scott (2005, 23-29, 64-87) demonstrates, James told the history of the slave rebellion in Haiti in a specific way. Consciously reflecting on the possibilities of anticolonial struggle in the problem-space of his times – that of Victorian colonial racism, the Spanish civil war, Stalin's purges and the emergence of a radical anti-Stalinist current

of Marxism – James strategically chose a specific literary form. In a time charged with revolutionary possibility, James chose the mode of romance, enabling a vindicationist account of black political agency centring on the heroic revolutionary figure of Toussaint L'Ouverture. This choice to write 'a revolutionary study of a revolution' (Scott 2005, 88) was informed by James' understanding of what he was fighting against. Scott foregrounds that for James, as for others, colonialism was understood as a dehumanizing structure of oppression and denial. This shaped the response: the dehumanizing character of colonialism required what Bernard Yack (1986) summarises as a 'total overcoming' (Scott 2005, 88-95). Scott (2005, 133-168; 2014) shows, however, that in the second edition of *The Black Jacobins*, published in the very different times of the 1960s, James chose to narrate the aftermath of the revolution in the mode of tragedy, a genre which tells a story not of heroic overcoming, but of the impossibilities and ambiguities of moral and political action in times of colliding historical forces; the tragic figure is the embodiment of irreconcilable contradictions.

The burden of Scott's analysis is precisely its implications for our own practices of critical inquiry:

If our sense is ... that our present constitutes something of a new conjuncture, and that consequently the old story about the past's relation to the present and to possible futures is no longer adequate, no longer provides or sustains critical leverage, how do we go about altering that story? (Scott 2005, 42)

Scott characterises our problem-space as the dead-end time of neoliberalism, which presents a very different horizon of possibilities. Today the imagined futures of anticolonialism exist only as ruins, exhausted and collapsed: the futures the anticolonialists anticipated 'we live today as the bleak ruins of our postcolonial present' (Scott 2005, 45). There are no revolutionary horizons today, only the faded disappointments of the collapse of socialism and internationalism, the exhausted visions of the Bandung era, the persistent crises of nationalism. This seems to be Achille Mbembe's (2002, 254-257) conclusion in his rejection of all forms of 'Afro-radicalism', which he looks back on as an 'empty dream', an 'exhausted mode of thought.' Instead, Scott argues (2005, 168), 'the mode of employment of tragedy comports better with a time of postcolonial crisis in which old horizons have collapsed or evaporated and new ones have not yet taken shape'. Scott asks, of the

inter-war period during which James first wrote *The Black Jacobins*, ‘who today can hear around them, except as a fading and altogether nostalgic echo, the sounds that reverberated militantly through those interwar years?’ (Scott 2005, 29). Much the same can be asked of the global context of anti-imperial militancy and revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Surely the sounds of those times can only be heard today as a fading and nostalgic echo? Scott’s argument seems unavoidably pertinent to the study of African anticolonialism, especially the liberation movements of Portugal’s African colonies. Many of the leading figures met the ultimate fate of colonial modernity – Eduardo Mondlane, Amílcar Cabral and Samora Machel were all assassinated. Agostinho Neto lived to lead his country to independence and socialist construction, but that quest of leadership and postcolonial revolutionary construction resulted in authoritarianism, prolonged war and widespread destruction. It is hard to disagree that the mode of tragedy articulates the profound contradictions and difficulties of anticolonial political struggle and postcolonial construction. It seems too soon, however, to accept this as the only suitable mode of engagement.

In Scott’s (2005, 6) argument it is because our problem-space is different from that of earlier times that anticolonialism needs to be narrated in different ways, so as to resonate in the present. The problem-space is ‘a fundamentally temporal concept. Problem-spaces alter historically because problems are not timeless and do not have everlasting shapes.’ If it is the temporal underpinnings of Scott’s argument which lead to the alternative of romance or tragedy, then a different understanding of temporality might open up other modes of critical response. This is what Walter Benjamin offers us. Benjamin shared Scott’s concerns with the politics of historical narrative and the relationships between past, present and future, and he formulated his concerns in strikingly similar terms. For Scott, the anticipated futures of anticolonialism exist today as exhausted ruins. Benjamin too was concerned with ‘the specific way the present generation inherited the ‘failed material’ of the past’ as ruins: ‘The *ruin* ... is the form in which the wish images of the past century appear, as rubble, in the present’ (Buck-Morss 1991, 281, 212). Benjamin did not devote attention to the question of colonialism nor anticolonial struggle. Nor did Marx, yet his thought proved fertile for generations of anticolonial intellectuals. Fanon’s (1967b, 31) response was to point out that when confronted with the colonial problem, ‘Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched.’ In the spirit of anticolonial thought,

which drew widely on all available intellectual resources, I propose that, with a bit of stretching, Benjamin's work might assist anticolonial critique for our times.

### **Constellations of past and present**

James's *The Black Jacobins* was published in 1938. Benjamin's *Theses on the Concept of History* were composed a few years later in 1940 (1968 [1940]). This work is not a historical narrative of struggle, but a series of reflections on historical method, the relationship between past and present, and the importance of remembering earlier moments of struggle. Benjamin set out an understanding of history radically different from that of both conservative historians and orthodox Marxists. The defining feature of most understandings of history, which Benjamin termed historicism, was a linear directionality, a moving forward; and a notion of progress, advance and improvement (Thesis XIII). It was Benjamin's 'long-standing (if intensifying) concern' to annihilate the ideology of historical progress; in these short theses and in his much larger Arcades project his aim was 'to drive out any trace of "development" from the image of history' (Buck-Morss 1991, 79). Benjamin rejected conformist history writing which told the history of the victorious as a succession of events plotting a path of progress (Thesis VII). Orthodox Marxism might claim to stand against the rulers but similarly succumbed to progressivist assumptions (Theses XI, XII, XIII). Both approaches, conservative and Marxist, are oriented towards the future.

Benjamin rejected this progressivist outlook through a reversal from 'a vindication of the forward course of history to a radical critique of history when viewed with a backward gaze' (Buck-Morss 1991, 93). History does not move forward along a linear path, leaving the past behind. Rather, the processes of history accumulate, expand, intensify, pile up, congeal. Ian Baucom (2005, 21) captures Benjamin's philosophy of history powerfully: 'as time passes the past does not wane but intensifies.' In order to understand and act in the present we should look back and learn from the past:

A construction of history that looks backwards, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it has *already taken place*, provides

dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened). (Buck-Morss 1991, 95)

In doing so we are confronted by an accumulation of catastrophe and ruin; rather than ‘a chain of events’, history appears as ‘one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage’, a ‘pile of debris’ which ‘grows skyward’ (Benjamin 1968, Thesis IX, 257-258).

Though this seems a pessimistic and tragic notion of history, it is not fatalistic. Benjamin considers history to be inherently open and unpredictable; a repetitive and catastrophic process which nevertheless might be, and occasionally *has* been, interrupted. This is why it is important to learn from earlier moments of revolutionary struggle, even if unsuccessful, short-lived or defeated (Theses II, V, VI, XII, XIV; Löwy 2006). Benjamin urges us to remember previous attempts at liberation as brief interruptions in the otherwise continuous historical dynamic of accumulating oppression. The role of the historian is not to narrate the victories of the ruling classes but to heed the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ (Theses VIII, XII). The remembrance of earlier struggles and defeats might charge the present and offer a source of moral and critical energy. Benjamin’s method of historical inquiry therefore could not be one of narrative which would plot the chain of processes and events linking the past to the present, revealing the causal path of history. The methodological challenge was to grasp the constellation between past and present (Thesis A). A central element of Benjamin’s historical method was to identify ‘dialectical images’ – items, objects or forms from the past which have continued to expand and intensify, and so, as ‘historical clues’, shed critical light on the present (Buck-Morss 1991, 66). These images were ‘the concrete, “small, particular moments” in which ... the origins of the present could be found’: ‘Nineteenth-century objects were to be made visible as the origin of the present, at the same time that every assumption of progress was to be scrupulously rejected’ (Buck-Morss 1991, 71, 218).

In order for the image of the past to be made to work in the present – not simply by casting a sharper light onto the contours of the present but by provoking a ‘shock of recognition’, an ‘awakening’ (Benjamin 1968, Theses V, VI) – Benjamin employed the method of montage. Montage operates by juxtaposition and quotation across past



and present. Pulling elements from their original context and inserting them into the present can provoke new insights. The technique of montage has ‘special, perhaps even total rights’ as a progressive form because it ‘interrupts the context into which it is inserted’ and thus ‘counteracts illusion’ (Buck-Morss 1991, 67; Benjamin 1972, Vol II, 697-98). Rather than narrating a sequence of events, the method is to be constructive, like that of an engineer, wrenching elements from the historical continuum of the past to forge dialectical images in the present (Benjamin, Theses XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, A), thus ‘telescoping the past through the present’ (Benjamin 1972, Vol. V, 588; Buck-Morss 1991, 291). The relationship between past and present in the dialectical image is captured in Benjamin’s idea of the constellation: ‘It is not that the past throws its light on the present, or the present its light on the past, but [the dialectical] image is that wherein the past comes together with the present in a constellation (Benjamin 1972, Vol. V, 576, cited in Buck-Morss 1991, 291). Buck-Morss explains:

[d]ialectical images as “critical constellations” of past and present are at the center of materialist pedagogy. Short-circuiting the bourgeois historical-literary apparatus, they pass down a tradition of *discontinuity*. If all historical continuity is “that of the oppressors”, this tradition is composed of “those rough and jagged places” at which the continuity of tradition breaks down, and the objects reveal “cracks” providing “a hold for anyone wishing to get beyond these points”. (Buck-Morss 1991, 290) (.

Benjamin’s philosophy of history was alert to continuities, concentrations and intensifications, ‘hellish repetitions’, as elements from one historical era reappear in concentrated forms under new guises in the ‘ideological problem-space’ of later eras (Buck-Morss 1991, 212). Part of what is at stake in remembering African anticolonialism today is a refusal of the continuous and repeating narrative of international progress. The crimes of colonialism were legitimised as beneficial to peoples who were ‘not sufficiently mature’ to govern themselves. Later while European powers took every measure to delay and co-opt political independence so as to permanently secure economic, military and strategic interests, the narrative adapted to present the ‘granting’ of independence in a manner consistent with colonial discourse. The concept of development secured the forgetting of the colonial past. Thus, the changing ‘fashion’ of the international narrative ‘rearranges the given,

merely symbolizing historical change, rather than ushering it in' (Buck-Morss 1991, 100). In a repetition of colonial discourse, Africa's condition of economic crisis and deprivation is presented today as *Africa's failure*. As one scholar observes, '[b]y and large, the states of sub-Saharan Africa are failures' (Englebert 2009, 1). Mainstream scholarship would concur, it seems, with Scott: 'Africa's economic history since 1960 fits the classical definition of tragedy' (Easterly and Levine 1997, 1203).

Benjamin's critique of the myth of progress was not, however, specifically concerned with colonial ideology. His preoccupations were the class struggle and the rise of Fascism in Europe. He focused on the form of the commodity as the dialectical image which connected 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial capitalism with the intensified contradictions and catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More precisely, Benjamin focused on the commodity-on-display, which expressed in myth form the wishes of the 'dreaming collective' (Buck-Morss 1991, 80-82; 253-286). Benjamin explored the sites of the Parisian Arcade and the World Exposition for the 'dazzling visual experience' of the commodity, the dreams and fantasies of the European consumer, as show-cases of all that was modern – technology, art, fashion and business (Benjamin 1999 [1935]). But Benjamin failed to examine the imperial conditions of possibility and implications of the commodity and the World Exposition. In fact, John Kraniauskas tells us, Adorno suggested to his friend that he should explore this dimension, urging that 'the commodity category could be greatly concretized by the specifically modern categories of *world trade* and *imperialism*' (Adorno 1980, 118, cited in Kraniauskas 1994, 143). Unfortunately, Kraniauskas observes, 'Adorno never took full note of this idea in his own work. ... Benjamin did not follow up this criticism either, refusing to involve himself ... in the international dimension of capitalism (imperialism/colonialism) signalled by the above critique' (ibid.).

Benjamin saw in the glittering form of the commodity-on-display the endlessly unsatisfied dreams of the worker, the intensifying contradictions of the exploitation of the European working class. But he failed to register within this very form the violent racial oppression of the colonised. This was, however, visible and obvious to WEB Du Bois, writing just a few years later in 1946:

The dependence of civilized life upon products from the ends of the world tied the everyday citizen more and more firmly to the exploitation of each colonial area: tea and coffee, diamonds and gold, ivory and copper, vegetable oils, nuts and dates, pepper and spices, olives and cocoa, rubber, hemp, silk, fibres of all sorts, rare metals, valuable lumber, fruit, sugar. All these things and a hundred others became necessary to modern life, and modern life thus was built around colonial ownership and exploitation (Du Bois 1966 [1946], 35).

Du Bois' concerns echoed those of Benjamin, but went beyond: the 'moral plight of present European culture and what capitalistic investment *and imperialism* have done to it' (1946 41, emphasis added). Du Bois conjures as a dialectical image not the commodity-on-display in the European market, but the consumer-at-leisure in the European home:

Here for instance is a lovely British home, with green lawns, appropriate furnishings and a retinue of well-trained servants. Within is a young woman, well trained and well dressed, intelligent and high-minded. She is fingering the ivory keys of a grand piano and pondering the problem of her summer vacation (ibid.).

Having conjured this vivid image he goes on to ask: 'How far is such a person responsible for the crimes of colonialism?'

It will in all probability not occur to her that she has any responsibility whatsoever, and that may well be true. Equally, it may be true that her income is the result of starvation, theft, and murder; that it involves ignorance, disease, and crime on the part of thousands; that the system which sustains the security, leisure, and comfort she enjoys is based on the suppression, exploitation, and slavery of the majority of mankind. ...

The frightful paradox that is the indictment of modern civilization and the cause of its moral collapse is that a blameless, cultured, beautiful young woman in a London suburb may be the foundation on which is built the poverty and degradation of the world (Du Bois 1946, 42).

Benjamin failed to see what was so apparent to Du Bois at the time, despite Adorno's prompt. Nevertheless, his alternative philosophy of history and methodological proposals might offer rich ground for us to engage from our present with earlier anticolonial struggles.

## **Anticolonial illuminations**

### *Anticolonial time*

As Walter Benjamin (1968, Thesis XIII, 261) underlined, there was always an inherent relationship between the idea of progress and an understanding of history in terms of temporal progression: 'The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.' The notion of temporal movement through stages towards a better future was integral to Enlightenment thought, as were ideas about civilisation as the realisation of progress. Europe presented the myth of progress to the colonised through the simultaneous configuration of its opposite – lack of movement, lack of civilisation. It was always (white) Europe which defined the most advanced, civilised, refined; it was always (black) Africa which was furthest behind, uncivilised, primitive (Eze 1997; Valls 2005). The temporality of historicism, which so excised Benjamin, also took on a specific form when encountered by the colonised: it was not just linear but racialised (Mills 2014; Hanchard 1999). It was a temporality of waiting. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, 7, 8) has emphasised, historicism was a "first in Europe, then elsewhere" structure of global historical time'. For the colonized, European historicism came 'as somebody's way of saying "not yet" to somebody else.'

What, then, might be the temporality of anticolonialism? Scott characterises the temporality of anticolonialism as one of longing. James's account of the Haitian revolution, first emplotted through the structure of romance, constituted 'an allegory of emancipationist redemption that embodies in a compelling way the great longing for black and anticolonial revolution' (Scott 2005, 57). Scott argues (2005, 87-97) that anticolonialism was configured as romantic longing for total overcoming because of its emergence within a specific structure of thought and temporality – that of the

Enlightenment. Since the eighteenth century, European radical critiques and revolutionary traditions had been informed by a romantic sense of alienation and dehumanization, and by the Enlightenment temporality of progress. These are the traditions of thought, Scott argues, which colonial subjects inherited and through which their own thinking was necessarily formed, from Toussaint L'Ouverture to CLR James to Frantz Fanon and beyond. The story of anticolonial liberation necessarily 'presupposed a direction, a teleology, an end toward which we were inevitably moving' (2005, 96). Mbembe similarly considers African anticolonialism trapped within the inherited myths and temporalities of historicism:

African thinkers ... invented a narrative of liberation built around the dual temporality of a glorious—albeit fallen—past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism). ... in the post-World War II period, African nationalisms came to replace the concept of “civilization” with that of “progress.” But they did so the better to endorse the characteristic teleologies of the times (Mbembe 2002, 249-250).

Was it this great teleological longing for anticolonial revolution which animated the liberation struggles of the Portuguese colonies in Africa? Perhaps. From the beginning the anticolonial movements of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, Cape Verde and São Tomé formed collaborative organisations which articulated their position to the world. This important and perhaps unique feature of their political practice was manifest first in the *Movimento Anti-Colonialista*, (MAC), founded in 1957. MAC was replaced in 1960 by the *Frente Revolucionária Africana para a Independência Nacional das Colónias Portuguesas* (FRAIN), then the following year by the *Conferência das Organizações Nacionalistas das Colónias Portuguesas* (CONCP). At their first meeting in Casablanca in April 1961 CONCP (1961) pronounced:

[We] proclaim the unity of action of the nationalist organisations in the struggle by all means with a view to the immediate liquidation of Portuguese colonialism and liberation from all forms of oppression.

Is this an expression of longing which remains within a framework of teleological movement? Or should it be understood, rather, as a refusal of that very teleology? If we examine anticolonial discourse we might find a critique of the myth of progress informed not by a romantic framework of alienation inherited from Enlightenment

Europe, but by the experiences of dispossession, forced labour, hunger and racial violence long endured in Europe's colonies. Patrice Lumumba explained:

I had a thorough education in the Christian doctrine. I was always a person with feelings. My mother and father told me to be kind to people, and never hit back when someone hits you. But I never understood why in my country when at school, we were taught to be good, to be charitable, to love one's fellow man. How can one reconcile what the Europeans taught us at school, the principles of civilisation and morals, with what they did to the black population? And whilst making this observation on a day to day basis, comparing the things they taught us, [with] the acts that our teachers did, I came up every time with a contradiction (Lumumba, interview, in Peck 1990).

The anticolonial critique of progress and civilisation was at times articulated through a bitter sense of humour. In a document entitled *O Colonialismo Português é Julgado pela Primeira Vez* (Portuguese colonialism is judged for the first time) FRAIN (1960, p. 1) provided a sharp and condensed commentary on the temporality of European progress: 'After five centuries in Africa, Portuguese colonialism ... condemns Africans to a condition of abject misery, and this *in the name of Christian civilisation*.' Deliberately employing Europe's own terms of discourse Amílcar Cabral considered Portugal to be an 'underdeveloped country' with only '40% literacy ... its standard of living is the lowest in Europe.' And so, he commented, 'If it could manage to have a 'civilizing influence' over any people it would be a form of miracle' (Cabral 1976a, 59). They affirmed a sober rejection of any desire for European civilisation. Just as Aimé Césaire (2000, 32) had in 1955 refused any identification between *colonisation* and *civilization*, had refused 'to be the dupe in good faith of a collective hypocrisy that cleverly misrepresents problems, the better to legitimize the hateful solutions provided for them', so too the Manifesto of the *Movimento Anti-Colonialista* declared:

Our peoples cannot accept a historical identity with Portugal, especially because they do not assume responsibility for the historical monstrosities of this country, such as three centuries of the Portuguese inquisition, thirty years of fascism and, above all, the crimes committed against African peoples themselves – slavery, the traffic of black people, colonial wars and the most violent colonial exploitation (MAC 1957, 16).

The experience of colonialism allowed little space for illusions of progress and its temporality of waiting. Eduardo Mondlane (1962, 27) explained to the United Nations in 1962: ‘We have waited too long for the application of the often vaunted Judeo-Christian principles of justice, by the same people who are exploiting us. We are tired of preachments about freedom and democracy by the same people who are denying these to us.’ Even after the fascist regime had finally been overthrown by the Armed Forces Movement there was still an expectation for the colonised to wait. The provisional Portuguese government, led by Foreign Minister Mário Soares, sought to negotiate independence with the liberation movements. The first meeting with FRELIMO in Lusaka in June 1974 failed because of Portugal’s insistence on a ceasefire followed by a referendum on independence: ‘Statements by President Spínola, and the Portuguese position at Lusaka, let it be known that independence would only be desirable over a period of five years or so, and only within the framework of a Luso-African federation’ (José and Vieira 1992, 20). FRELIMO responded that negotiations could only begin after Portugal recognized the right of the people of Mozambique to immediate and full independence (Telegram to the American Committee on Africa from Marcelino dos Santos, Vice President, FRELIMO, 3 June 1974, cited in Leonard 1974, 43). As Sérgio Vieira recounted:

The government claimed that a cease-fire was indispensable to consolidate democracy, and restore the economy to health. Only after this could there be decolonisation. Samora Machel replied that it was not up to the slave-owner to ask his slaves if they would like to be free – particularly when they had already picked up guns to free themselves (Vieira 1988, 9).

This anticolonial refusal of the temporality of waiting resounded widely. Michael Hanchard recalls Kwame Nkrumah’s refusal to accept glaring racial inequalities produced by the rhythms of ‘progress’ under British rule. Nkrumah recounts his response to the extremely limited efforts in the realm of education made by the British colonial civilizers in the Gold Coast:

When we confronted the colonial administration with this appalling situation on taking office at the beginning of 1951, they told us that the budget was limited and time was needed. Time, they said, was required to train the army

of teachers needed for the education of all the children. They did not look very happy when we pointed out that they seemed to have had time enough to allow traders and shippers and mining companies to amass huge fortunes (Nkrumah 1963, 47, cited in Hanchard 1999, 262-3).

And again, in the Belgian Congo. As Nzongola-Ntalaja recounts, one of the punctual sparks for the articulation of Congolese anticolonialism was the publication in 1956 of a pamphlet by a Belgian professor at the Colonial University in Antwerp entitled *Un Plan de Trente Ans pour l'Emancipation Politique de l'Afrique Belge* – A thirty-year plan for the political independence of Belgian Africa (Bilsen 1956). The counter-proposal of Joseph Kasa-Vubu, leader of the Alliance des Bakongo, radically rejected this temporality, and his slogan '*indépendance immédiate*' was rapidly adopted by elite and popular elements of the independence struggle all over the colony (Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002, 81-82).

These and other instances indicate not a sentiment of longing trapped *within* the temporality of the Enlightenment, but an adamant refusal of a racialised temporality which expected the colonised endlessly to wait according to a rhythm of time determined by the west. Anticolonial thought embodied an autonomy and singularity which engaged with but went beyond Enlightenment traditions (Edwards 2001; Bogues 2005; Pease 2010). Bogues (2003, 6, emphasis added) has highlighted this 'dialogical engagement', arguing that '[t]o see the black radical intellectual tradition as operating wholly inside the Western canon, and then to judge its many contributors solely from that angle, is both to miss the tradition's complexity and to negate the tremendous knowledge that this tradition has postulated *about the nature of the West*.' This is why, amid the ruins of the postcolonial project, the discourse of anticolonialism continues to offer a resource of critique for the present. The task of historical narration, important in itself, need not exhaust the methods of engagement with the past in the present. Benjamin's method of montage and quotation, and his notion of the dialectical image, might offer possibilities for bringing the past into a new confrontation with the present.

### ***Anticolonial quotation***



Anticolonial discourse was often addressed as much to the west as to an audience of fellow colonised. In this endeavour, anticolonial discourse made productive use of montage and quotation, wrenching the acts and utterances of Europe from the chronological past back into the present and thereby compelling recognition of the decadence, the savage, brutal and stricken quality of European civilisation. In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire (2000, 40) proceeded to quote systematically from European words and deeds, wrenching Europe's past into the present. He did so even though when he had previously 'cited at length a few incidents culled from the history of colonial expeditions', his method 'did not find favour with everyone. It seems that I was pulling old skeletons out of the closet. Indeed!' Césaire (2000, 41) insisted on recalling details of hideous colonial butcheries because, he warned, the dead 'are not to be so easily disposed of.' In a striking echo of Benjamin's Thesis IX,<sup>1</sup> Césaire (2000, 42, 45) turns his face towards the past: 'I hear the storm. They talk to me about progress, about 'achievements', diseases cured, improved standards of living. ... [but] Europe is responsible before the human community for the highest heap of corpses in history.'

The liberation movements of Portugal's colonies explicitly addressed a western audience, especially in the institutional setting of the United Nations. Here too Amílcar Cabral employed the method of quotation, this time quoting not the words and deeds of colonial Europeans but his own earlier words. At the beginning of a lengthy speech addressing the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly in October 1972, Cabral (1977, 190-194) proceeded to repeat four pages of his previous speech given to the same committee in 1962. He did not refer back to or briefly summarise his earlier speech; rather, he compelled his audience to listen again, paragraph by paragraph, to what he had said previously. Repeating his words of 1962, he reminded his audience in 1972: "'We are not only conscious", we said [then], "of the legality of our struggle: we are today conscious that, struggling by all means for the liberation of our country, we are struggling in defence of international legality, and for peace, at the service of the progress of humanity"' (1977, 192). In this measured and deliberate intervention, he underlined the continued international relations of Portugal's colonial wars – 'the political support and the material, military, economic and financial assistance' provided by Portugal's NATO allies which was 'the primordial factor in the continuation of the Portuguese colonial war against

Africa'. After repeating his words of ten years earlier he went on to observe: 'It was not ten years ago but in these recent years that the Portuguese government received from its allies the most important quantities of war material, jet aircraft, helicopters, gunboats, launches, etc. It was not in 1962, but this very year that the Government of Portugal received financial support of some 500 million dollars from one of its principal allies' (1977, 194). This constituted a profound rejection of the West's claim to international moral authority. Cabral's critique was neither articulated in the mode of vindication nor trapped within the confines of inherited discourses. The anticolonial movements deliberately employed contemporary international legal and moral terminology to defend their struggles for freedom. In claiming this discourse as their own while exposing the continued crimes of Western powers they consciously wrested from the West the moral authority to act on behalf of humanity.

This method of quotation has been employed powerfully in works by Jean-Marie Teno and Raoul Peck, which look back to distinct moments of anticolonialism for the present. Both insert elements of the past, archive footage, not just into our present in the sense of the present construction of their films, but alongside scenes of the everyday of our own times. Teno's film *Afrique, Je Te Plumerai* (1992) provides a meditation on Cameroon's postcolonial condition. Teno explores scenes of the postcolonial present: widespread urban poverty, political violence and censorship, western cultural domination. In order to make sense of this condition, Teno does not narrate a sequence of events. His method is one of construction, bringing the colonial past into a tension-filled constellation with the present, pulling the words and deeds of Europe (France, Germany, Britain) – pronouncements of the civilising mission, scenes of forced labour, police batons striking African bodies, assassinations – from the historical continuum of the forgotten past to reappear as the precursors of the present. Teno returns to Cameroon's defeated anticolonial struggle: strikes and campaigns for workers' rights, the formation of the UPC, France's banning of and war against the party, the assassinations of Ruben Um Nyobé, Ernest Ouandié and Félix-Roland Moumié, the installation of France's puppet Ahidjo. This is neither romantic nor tragic narration of the anticolonial past, but a refusal of decades of silence and censorship in both Cameroon and Europe, a heeding of Benjamin's (1968, Thesis XIII, 255) warning that '*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.'

Teno returns to the archive not to assemble a faithful account of what actually happened but to insert these elements into the present, to interrupt the complacency and cynicism of the West which views Africa as a site of aid and assistance still waiting for development and democracy. We can quote here Teno's concentrated critique:

When they talk of Third World debt, I realize that cynicism abounds in some quarters. How many Africans were deported to work in the Americas? How many Africans in their own homeland perished over the centuries under a thinly disguised form of slavery called colonization? And then too, how many were obliged to don uniforms and fight in distant wars? In an attempt to justify their atrocities, can the colonists long take refuge behind blacks who assimilated? Does a crime against humanity only exist when the victims are of the white race? (Teno 1992)

Teno addresses Cameroon's experience not as a unique case study, an anomaly, but as an instance of Africa's general experience (Grovoqui 2001, 445). The preference for eliminating parties and leaders demanding real independence and installing puppets in their place was intrinsic to the practice of colonial powers, and so Teno necessarily references the assassination of Patrice Lumumba on 14 February, 1961. This is the defining moment that Raoul Peck returns to in his film *Lumumba: La Mort du Prophète* (Peck 1990). From the gloom of a Belgian winter in Brussels – magnificent buildings, snow-covered lamp-lit squares, empty cobbled streets at dusk – Peck acknowledges that the future died with this anticolonial prophet, 'His message has vanished, but his name remains.' Evening shoppers pass by head-down through the sleet and snow of December streets; a 'blameless, cultured, beautiful young woman' (Du Bois 1946, 42) sits reading a book on a tram. Amid these scenes of the European present Peck ponders 'Should the prophet be brought back to life again? Should he be given the floor, one last time? Or should the final traces of his memory disappear with the snow?' With these juxtapositions Peck gently but forcefully invites us to acknowledge what Du Bois (ibid.) named 'the frightful paradox that is the indictment of modern civilization.'

The power of Lumumba's improvised speech at the independence celebrations speaks all the more strongly to us today when we hear it again in its own relational context, as a rebuttal of the colonial myth of progress. In retrieving these quotations from the past, Peck first presents to us Badouin, King of Belgium, as he solemnly declares:

The independence of the Congo is the result of the task conceived by the genius of King Leopold II, a task undertaken by him with courage and tenacity, and furthered by Belgium's own perseverance. This marks a decisive hour in the destiny, not only of the Congo itself, but, I can confirm categorically, for the whole of Africa.

Here is Europe, at the moment of African independence, containing that rupture within the continuum of the temporality of progress. And then we hear Lumumba's measured response at this formal international moment. Reflecting that perhaps Lumumba spoke 'things best left unsaid', Peck nevertheless constructs a re-telling for our own time:

Today we have won our struggle for independence.  
I salute you in the name of the Congolese government.  
To you all, my friends, who have fought without respite at our sides,  
I ask you to make of today, this 30th June 1960,  
an illustrious day that will be etched forever in your hearts.  
A date, whose significance you will pass on with pride to your children,  
who, in their turn,  
will pass on to their sons and grandsons,  
the glorious story of the struggle for our liberty.  
We have known ironies, insults,  
we have had to submit to beatings, morning, noon and night...  
because we were negroes.  
A black was always addressed in the familiar form,  
certainly not as a friend,  
but because the respectful form of address was reserved for the whites.  
We, whose bodies have suffered under the colonial oppression,  
we say to you: it is all over now.

Raoul Peck quotes this anticolonial interruption, these things perhaps best left unsaid, despite all that followed. Short-circuiting the historical continuity of the oppressors he passes down to us this rough and jagged moment of *discontinuity*. His mournful remembrance of Lumumba's murder is constructed above all as a critique of European civilisation, past and present. With echoes of both Benjamin and Césaire, he draws together moments and images of the past, from Belgium's Universal Exposition of 1897 – Peck's concern is not the commodities, but the Africans on display – to the holocaust a few decades later. The whole catastrophe of Auschwitz and Birkenau is figured simply through an image of train tracks stretching ahead, a journey through vast, snow-bound forests. 'Why do these images keep coming back to me? What do these have to do with Lumumba?' he asks, posing a question, the answer to which was set out by Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism*. In his examination of the death of Lumumba, Peck moves back and forth between past and present, Africa and Europe, assembling a much broader scope of colonialism in order to make sense of this defining event for our own times. His forays into the colonial and anticolonial past are interspersed with or layered over scenes of the mundane, everyday, familiar European present: airport corridors, rain-soaked pavements, shoppers and commuters, traffic jams, Christmas trees. His closing reflection, 'I know, my story is not a nice story. But it's Patrice's story', is spoken over the endless flow of traffic on a Belgian motorway at night. Lumumba's story, not a nice story, is also Europe's story.

### ***Anticolonial constellations***

Bringing the past and the present into a critical constellation can provoke awareness of 'hellish repetitions' as earlier modes of domination or oppression are intensified and reproduced in the present under new guises. It can also provoke an appreciation of earlier struggles, values and practices. This is very powerfully the effect in Mia Couto's recalling of the anticolonial past in response to xenophobic attacks against African migrants living and working in South Africa. In January and April 2015, many Africans living in South Africa originating from Zimbabwe, Malawi, Nigeria, Somalia, Mozambique and elsewhere suffered violent attacks, their shops and businesses looted and burnt. Concentrated terribly in the killing of a Mozambican man, Emmanuel Sithole, in Johannesburg, April 18<sup>th</sup> 2015 (Tromp and Oatway 2015; Tromp 2015), these episodes of xenophobic violence resulting in deaths, destroyed

homes and shops, widespread fear, and hundreds moving to refugee camps or returning to their countries follow a longer trajectory, with recurrences in 2010, 2008 and previously (Vale 2002; Neocosmos 2010).

Couto's response is particularly powerful because of the way he painfully brings this postcolonial present into a constellation with the anticolonial past. In an open letter written on 18 April 2015 to then South African president Jacob Zuma, Couto wrote:

Your Excellency President Jacob Zuma,

We remember you in Maputo, in the eighties, during that time that you spent as a political refugee in Mozambique. Many times we met in Avenue Julius Nyerere and greeted each other with the casual friendship of neighbours. I imagined many times the fears that you must have felt, in your condition of persecution by the apartheid regime. I imagined the nightmares that trespassed your nights thinking of the ambushes plotted against you and against your fellow comrades in the struggle. I do not remember, however, having seen you with a bodyguard. In truth, it was us, Mozambicans, who served as your bodyguard. For years we gave you more than a place of refuge. We offered you a home and we gave you safety at the cost of our own safety. (Couto 2015)

The value of solidarity was integral to the thought and practice of the liberation movements fighting against Portuguese colonialism and a condition of possibility for the end of colonial rule and apartheid. At the second All-African Peoples Conference in Tunis, January 1960, the *Movimento Anti-Colonialista* proclaimed:

it is with profound conviction that we do not cease to affirm: as long as there is even one oppressed people in our continent, the freedom of the independent African states will not be truly secured (MAC 1960, 12).

This was never confined to the realm of abstract values. These movements relied upon the solidarity of neighbouring and other African countries and governments, in particular Tanzania, Guinea, Algeria and Morocco (Cabral 1976b). FRELIMO's commitment to solidarity continued after independence. Mozambique provided vital

support to the Zimbabwean independence movements and to the ANC, at enormous cost (Machel 1980; Vieira 1988). Determination to prevent such support was the principle reason for Rhodesia and Apartheid South Africa's formation and direction of RENAMO, which fuelled the terrible brutalising of Mozambican society and economy during the 1980s (Nhabinde 1999; Mamdani 2004, 87-95).

This is the tradition that Mia Couto turns back to in the face of the current crisis, urging Zuma and the rest of South Africa to remember their shared past:

It is impossible that you could have forgotten this generosity.

We have not forgotten it. Perhaps more than any other neighbour, Mozambique paid dearly for this support that we gave to the liberation of South Africa. The fragile economy of Mozambique was wrecked. Our territory was invaded and bombed. Mozambicans died in defence of their brothers on the other side of the frontier. It is because for us, Mr President, there was no frontier, there was no nationality. We were, on either side, brothers in the same cause and when Apartheid fell our celebration was the same, on either side of the frontier.

Over centuries emigrants from Mozambique, miners and peasants, worked in neighbouring South Africa in conditions hardly distinguishable from slavery. These workers helped to construct the South African economy. There is no wealth in your country which does not have the contribution of those who today are made martyrs.

For these reasons it is not possible to imagine what is happening in your country. It is not possible to imagine that these same South African brothers have chosen us as an object of hatred and persecution. It is not possible that Mozambicans could be persecuted in the streets of South Africa with the same cruelty that the apartheid police persecuted those fighting for freedom, within and beyond Mozambique. (Couto 2015)

In bringing this memory of the anticolonial past back to clash with the present Couto recalls not simply the imagined futures of anticolonial struggles, but their actual practice. He does not accept the current situation as tragic; he insists on the current political resonance of the values and visions which animated the anticolonial practice of the past.

The postcolonial tragedy of xenophobia is, of course, not South Africa's alone. And so, one final 'dialectical image': the UK Labour Party's immigration mug of 2015. Aimé Césaire (2000, 31, 33) warned that 'a civilisation that withdraws into itself atrophies'; that a civilization that 'proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization'; that a civilization that 'chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.' Adapting his words, Césaire continues to speak to us directly:

The fact is that so-called European civilization – 'Western' civilization – as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the [neo-]colonial problem. (Césaire 2000, 31)

In April 2015, more than 1200 people, many of whom were African, drowned in the Mediterranean as they crossed the sea to seek refuge in Europe, fleeing from war, persecution and poverty. In this one month the number of casualties reached nearly a third of the total number of deaths in the Mediterranean in the whole of the previous year (BBC News 2015). This terrible logic is rooted in part in the EU's chilling repetition of the complaint rejected by Nkrumah in 1951: 'the budget was limited'. In October 2014, the Italian government's search and rescue programme Mare Nostrum came to an end, having, over the previous twelve months, rescued more than 150,000 migrants. When Italy appealed to the rest of Europe to share the costs of this service, other European countries refused. The UK government led the way, arguing that the search and rescue service constituted a 'pull factor' encouraging migrants. And so, Mare Nostrum was replaced by the much more limited EU border agency's Operation Triton which had no mandate to search and rescue, merely to 'patrol' the waters close to Italy's shores (Travis 2014a, 2014b).



These terrible events occurred during the weeks leading up to the UK national elections, one of the symbols of which was the Labour Party's bright red campaign mug with the words 'Controls on immigration. I'm voting Labour'. Observing the 'element of tragic irony this week as the growing drumbeat of anti-immigration election rhetoric has been punctuated by the mass drowning of migrants', Frankie Boyle takes this image as a focal point to effect the telescoping of Britain's colonial past into our present moment. Ridiculing 'the logic of a receptacle for hot beverages provided by slavery and colonisation being anti-immigrant,' Boyle places this mug inside the home of the British consumer/voter. Refusing the possibility of colonial innocence that has gone so long unquestioned since Du Bois's first critique, he asks:

Could you hand Labour's "controls on immigration" mug to a guest? ... Let's not forget where coffee and tea come from: this mug is bitterly opposed to its own contents. Unless you drink hot Tizer from a coffee cup, the drink inside that mug will be an immigrant (Boyle 2015).

The problem, he concludes, is that Britain, Europe, and the West more generally, neither understands nor acknowledges its colonial history: 'We have streets named after slave owners. We profited from a vile crime and feel no shame. We fear the arrival of immigrants that we have drawn here with the wealth we stole from them. For much of the rest of the world we must be the focus of bitter amusement, characters in a satire we don't understand.'

## **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly the hopes for national independence and international transformation have not been realised in the manner fought for by the anticolonial generation. The contradictions and crises of the postcolonial state today stand in sharp contrast to the hopes for continued economic and social decolonisation and transformation after political independence. As Grovogui (2005, 112) has observed, 'decolonization failed to stop the completion of the colonial project. It left in place the structures of violence and repression that protected subjective privileges. It left in its wake subjects with no real power domestically or internationally and therefore no hope of recognition or justice through legislation, negotiation or otherwise.' It is therefore not enough today, as Scott urges, to recount the histories of anticolonial struggle in a heroic vein. Our

engagement with these histories must speak to our own present. A tragic structure is compelling when considering the disappointments and defeats suffered by anticolonial visions, but there are also other ways in which these histories can resonate with our times.

The postcolonial present is a time when Europe spends its budget strengthening its borders and Britain deports its Windrush generation of British citizens, when the US continues its drone wars, prepares to build a wall between the US and Mexico, bans Muslims from entering the country and Guantanamo Bay remains open, when international wars are conducted on the basis of lies, when the wreckage of western progress continues to pile up. In such times, we need a different engagement with history, including the history of colonialism and anticolonialism. We need an engagement with history which refuses and interrupts the usual containment of colonialism in the linear past, to be safely forgotten – or worse, remembered only as a step towards progress. We need an engagement with the past which is not restricted to linear or causal narratives, which is capable of addressing the accumulations and intensifications of colonial international relations, in both structure and style, in our present.

Anticolonial struggles fought for more than just a national project. In many cases they clearly and consciously understood their struggles to be situated within and for a global project. But Grovogui (2005, 111, emphasis added) underlines, ‘it is not evident that the process of decolonization freed these spaces *and the international system itself* of colonial traditions and morality, even in the absence of colonial laws.’ It is because of the continuities of colonial traditions and moralities within the international system today that anticolonial critique still resonates. If James wrote a ‘revolutionary account of a revolution’, then today we need anti-colonial accounts of anticolonialism which can bring the past, colonial and anticolonial, into critical constellation with the present.

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<sup>1</sup> 'A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This is the storm that we call progress.' (1968, 257-58).