



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

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*Tchandisila (Heritage): Melgaço* | 2019-10 | Yara Monteiro (courtesy of the artist)  
[digital collage of original photographs from family archives (1960s)]

## THE GUILT OF HISTORY

Roberto Vecchi

On the 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020, on the 60th anniversary of Congo's independence, in a letter to the Congolese president, Félix Tshisekedi, King Philip of Belgium for the first time officially apologized (expressing "les plus profonds regrets") for the "colonial wounds" that Belgium inflicted on its former African colony. The king's gesture is part of a (complex, tumultuous, and more reactive than reflective) revisionist

movement in relation to historic injustices. The movement has manifested through acts of iconoclasm against the monuments that today symbolize and consecrate historical violations of rights.

The monarch's attitude is not unprecedented: in 2000, Pope John Paul II undertook a "purification of memory" with a special liturgy, "Confession of guilt and request for pardon". He said a number of prayers, some of which were for crimes that have tainted the Church in the past (crimes against peace, cultures, other religions, the rights of peoples, the dignity of women, and against Israel). After the act of penitence over the past, the Pope clearly articulated, "never again".

Gestures like these exhibit a rupture with the past. They have a simultaneously spectacular, symbolic and political air. However, the two cases mentioned, in particular the most recent one, which is most relevant to colonialism, pose some extremely complex ethical and legal questions. They refer to communal acts perceived today as historical mistakes from the more or less distant past, and they open critical space in relation to the inheritances of historical violence which weigh down the contemporary world.

I have highlighted, above, the verbs used in the circumstances in question, because we find imbued in these words the problems that arise whenever there is a "use" of the past (either a repetition of the identical or a translation of diversity). I gather together, in this piece, some considerations that could never exhaust a problem of this magnitude, but that seek to contribute to a broad and open reflection that is tied not so much to our past, but to our future.

One might find a public "request for pardon" (*pedido de perdão*: not simply 'sorry', but something much more specific and relational) sufficient in relation to the past: it might even be seen as a radical revision, displaying an active, critical spirit. However, around the term pardon (and its apparent religious aura) there is a set of associations and reference points which contemporary philosophy has opened up in relation to non-coincident words-concepts, with some contingencies. And each of these associations raises many problems and offers very few solutions.

In the 20th century, the historical and political scope of some crucial words/concepts was most clearly defined: pardon, forgetting, amnesty, imprescriptibility, removal and, as possible logical expansions, restitution, compensation, repair, restoration, etc. In the wake of an ever more involved reflection by philosophers such as Vladimir Jankélévitch, Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida (all interrogating the silence over the Holocaust), pardon was inscribed in the field of the unforgivable and the inexplicable.

In this sense, and without paradox, being able to pardon is related to impossibility. More recently, in the field of etymology, Ettore Finazzi-Agrò (2018) has shown that the verb ‘to pardon’ is absent from classical Latin and Greek: this means that it does not belong, as one might initially assume, to the sphere of Christian ethics, where we find, unlike in the vulgate, the verb *dimittere*. The request for pardon therefore suggests conceptual and legal *a priori* of some complexity; one of the verbs used to express an action akin to pardon - to condone (*condoar*), in Old Portuguese - which has left some traces in contemporary Portuguese, is a word wrapped in mystery: the Portuguese for a magic wand is *uma varinha de condão*, which shows the term’s exceptionalist and a-historical qualities.

Going beyond the viability or otherwise of pardon, however, a prior problem emerges: in whose name is blame for past, ostensibly unjust, actions taken? Only a pretentiously homogeneous, naïve, disingenuous, and nationalist narrative (without fractures, hiatuses or voids) could suggest that there is an uninterrupted continuity into contemporary life from those who practiced slavery, the inquisition, colonialism, exploitation, and other structural forms of injustice. This is the place of communitarian narratives, but we recognize that such continuities are substantially mythological and deliberately falsified.

On the theological level, vicarious assumptions of guilt evoke the ancient doctrine of traducianism (2nd century AD). According to this doctrine the father’s soul is reproduced in the child. Thus, the sins of the father are transmitted to the children. This explained, as St. Augustine observed, the historical transmission of original sin. With the arrival of modernity, the opposite interpretation, creationism, has been fully endorsed. It asserts the uniqueness of the soul given to us by God, and thus the impossibility of passing on blame from one generation to the next. This interpretation is inscribed in the modern development of the notion of individual responsibility.

From a critical point of view, to ask for forgiveness on behalf of ancestors is a complicated move. It attempts to keep the so-called “innocent guilt” active. A guilt that takes us directly to the tragic crux of classic tragedy. Here, the heroes (and *Os Lusíadas*, in terms of the epic, are also a good example of this inheritance of classicism) are innocent because the Gods are responsible for what they do. Innocent guilt therefore arises when an act of violence is committed at the imposition of someone else. This is the paradigm of guilt that is frequently invoked, for example, during wars, when crimes are committed based on orders given by superiors. But after the 20th century, the structure of guilt changed profoundly: Auschwitz’s abyss without return, the horror created by an enlightened rationality

like modern colonialism, prevents the reproduction of tragic guilt and changes the power relations of contemporary ethics through the ultimate conflict between subjective innocence and objective guilt. Taking on guilt for the acts of others in the past, as we have seen here, seems to reactive this innocent guilt. It makes it difficult to apply a contemporary ethics that values individual responsibility, and to apply the new paradigm of guilt that has been shaped in the 20th century.

In addition to its public face and its symbolism, what could an assumption of guilt mean in relation to the crimes of the past? What marks do such acts make in our present consciousness? We cannot respond immediately, and the answer always reveals a boundary that cannot be crossed. At the same time, the question demands that we look diligently for a response. In a recent essay, *Faire justice de l'irréparable. Esclavage colonial et responsabilités contemporaines* (2019), political philosopher Magali Bessone offers a complex map of the aporias we encounter when we try to assume responsibility for historical acts. The philosopher goes so far as to define a critically active attitude towards the sins of history that goes beyond the constrained sphere of forgiveness. It is an attitude disconnected from a generic request for pardon but linked to a clear, reflective exercise. It is impossible to consider reparations only in terms of the individualistic and retrospective logic of corrective justice. It is necessary to think about structural historical injustice not based on a naive attempt to repair past crimes, which are by definition irreparable, but based on a history that is necessarily beyond forgiveness. However, in the present, a reparative intervention of some kind can nevertheless be articulated within still enduring structures of rights violations.

Slavery has been legally and historically abolished, yet its deforming effects continue to cast their shadows in the present: racism, social discrimination, the holding back and underdevelopment of the “souths” and the peripheries. Responsibility persists, and it is ours, individually ours, here and now, even in the face of the irreparability of the crimes of the past. And it is in the present that an active, living, political memory of injustices must emerge. It must be active in the sense that it cannot be limited to a pseudo-restorative rhetoric. It requires us, now and in the future, to think through the unforgivable mistakes of the past and the inexhaustible guilt of a history that is also, and always, ours.

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