

BRITAIN AND THE AFTERMATH OF EMPIRE

GRÃ-BRETANHA E AS CONSEQUÊNCIAS DO IMPÉRIO

GRAN BRETAÑA Y LAS SECUELAS DEL IMPERIO

Kojo Koram (2022). *Britain and the Aftermath of Empire. Uncommon Wealth*. United Kingdom.

Kojo Koram, author of *Britain and the Aftermath of Empire*, presents an excellent analysis of the consequences of the British Empire that continue to resonate today not only in the United Kingdom (UK), but also around the world. The echo of the British Empire is still evident in the structure of the machine of capitalism, in the production of millions of poor worldwide, in the global supremacy of the commercial corporations, in the emergence of movements of extreme right claiming the supremacy of the “white race” and in the nostalgia for the “Empire rule”, in the social and class divisions, in the appetite of the multinationals for the natural resources of the underdeveloped countries, in the tax system, secrecy of jurisdictions, environmental regulations, the marginalisation and racism towards black and brown people, and in the construction of the British and global institutions that rule the public policies around the world.

Kojo Koram, who is a lecturer at the School of Law at Birkbeck College, University of London, suggests that the British elites have created a mirage to impose an exaggerated historical distance between our lives today and the period of imperial rule. This historical amnesia is created on purpose to avoid explaining the historical privileges of a few over the deprivation of millions, presenting the concept of “Empire” as something about plantation slavery and indigenous communities being chased from their lands by men in red coats with smoking muskets, without explaining the method used to chase indigenous people or enslave black and brown people.

Koram, explains that it is not a coincidence that in school the subject of “British Empire” is avoided by teachers. In fact, Kemi Badenoch, Secretary of State for Business and Trade, insisted that “the government considers the teaching of topics of race and empire in schools in an unbalanced manner to be breaking the law”. Following a statement like this from a minister, any teacher would be best to avoid the topics of empire and decolonisation all together. But the problem for teachers is how to teach business, history, sociology and other key subjects, without teaching commercial corporation history, exploitation and creation of wealth.

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Children can't understand the country where they live without understanding centuries of Empire that brought it into existence and shape their history. The omission of Empire and decolonisation from British education is the product of a world view that has been myopic.

Members of parliament have called for the government to instruct a team of ministers to wage war on academics pushing the decolonial agenda. Institutions once beloved by the establishment like BBC or the National Trust are now castigated and threatened by high-profile public figures for making the smallest attempt to reckon with Britain's colonial legacy.

England was the centre of the largest empire the world has ever seen, the British Empire, was expanded across the globe with unprecedented wealth and population within it, covering around a quarter of the planet and ruling over 458 million people. The Royal Navy was the world's most feared military force and the British pound was the global reserve currency. A few centuries later, this grandeur was expired, but the sequels are with us: from Africa to Caribe, from Latin America to China, from India to Middle East, from Australia to Europe.

For most adults in Britain today, the main period of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s occurred while their parents were alive. This event has global importance, but the decolonisation of the British Empire is not seen as a significant moment in the nation's history.

Koram, who is also the editor of *The War on Drugs* and the *Global Color Line*, indicates that the entire debate around decolonisation in twenty-first-century Britain operates as if the legacy of Empire is almost entirely carried within the symbolic and cultural register. Decolonisation becomes about whether streets are called "Diversity Gove" or "Kitchener Road". Certainly, the street names and status obviously carry a certain importance, but the legacy of Empire goes beyond of this. It reaches from the unemployed worker in Jamaica to the single mother stuck on a zero-hours contract in the UK.

According to Koram, who has also worked in social welfare law, youth work and teaching, the current crisis is not something that has arisen over the past few years, but rather for the past century. In this sense Empire carries an economic legacy not just a cultural or racial one. Britain's vast wealth inequalities are amplified when we look at the racial breakdown of the data: households measured as having more debts than assets being twice as likely to be "Black African" or other "Asian's families" than white British ones.

For Koram, the racism was an important ideological justification that helps to impose and consolidate the colonisation, since the colonisers needed to make appear natural the racial hierarchies to reduce risk of uprisings.

Koram indicates that the British government continues insisting on the idea that racism is a personal prejudice rather than a system maintained by institutions of law and economics. Racism did not spread because of an inherent fear and hatred of people of different appearance, but because the empire needed to gain more resources, wealth and justify the robbery and exploitation of natural and human resources based on "the white supremacy". This system required making others disposable, particularly those who inconveniently lived on the lands, where those resources were located.

The sequels of the British Empire, according to Koram, are also present in the emergence of extreme right movements. After the financial crises in 2008, the support to the extreme right movements reflects some resentments of the lost empire and the nostalgia of "white supremacy". The myth of supremacy based on the race origin is no longer a narrative accepted by the world, and statistics point out this change, particular among younger Brits, with only 18 per cent of eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds now seeing Empire as something to be proud of, compared to 43 per cent of those older than sixty-five. This shift in attitude has generated a great deal of anger among British elites towards "ungrateful" or "unpatriotic millennials". The elites accused of "brainwashed" by teachers, media, pop stars, footballers, who were considered "public enemies".

The rejection of "Historical British figures", who contributed to the enrichment of the British Empire, is another symptom of the social division existing among social classes and age generations. For example, in January 2022, protesters of the social movement "Black Lives Matter" pulled down the state of Edward Colston, 17th Century figure who played an active role in the enslavement of 84, 000 black people.

For Koram, the Brexiteers –supporters of the Brexit, exit of the UK from the European Union- were suffering the hangover of the British Empire, they saw the Brexit as a moment of independence for Britain, taking back the control to UK government, and recovery of sovereignty outside Europe. However, Brexit has just accelerated the deep problems of the UK: The level of inequality in Britain today.

The aftermath of Empire is not just about race, identity and memory or “dead” history, it is also about economic and material conditions that structure our lives. In 2018, Philip Alston, UN special envoy on extreme poverty reported that a fifth of Britain’s population now live in poverty, with child poverty potentially to increase to as high as 40% by 2022, and also noting this information was released before Covid-19. In Alston’s words, “almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty first century Britain”. This is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and economic disaster.

Koram writes that the aftermath of British Empire is also present in the legal and economic structures put in place to facilitate the transfer of imperial wealth that drive our world today. The heritage of English laws of property, commercial corporations, investment and funds, collection of taxes, and money management set up during the English Empire continues being used today worldwide, such as the banks and the “offshore”, as a location outside of one’s national boundaries to place money (The Cayman Islands and Bermuda have played a crucial role in shielding capitalist interests).

For Koram, when talking about the triumph of capitalist globalisation, following the end of Empire, we often centre the role of the USA with its military and economic power and its newly independent government during the final decades of the twentieth century. However, the machine behind this new chapter of success of American capitalism, is the British Empire.

Koram explores the aftermath of the British Empire over the last century, not only through the experiences of the UK, but in connection to the history of Ghana, India, Singapore and Jamaica, among other territories that nourished to the British Empire.

The text presented by Koran analysed the global tax system that moves across the Caribbean to the Cayman Islands in order to trace how British overseas territories have driven the global proliferation of the offshore economy since the end of Empire.

Koram also unveiled the hypocrisy of British politicians, when referring to corruption in the “third-world”. For example, in 2016, Prime Minister David Cameron was recorded describing Nigeria and Afghanistan as “fantastically corrupt” countries, while in a conversation with the Queen. Later on, in the same year, (2016) David Cameron admitted that his father had an investment fund in Blairmore, which featured in Panama Papers for £31,500, documents leaked from the offshore agent Mossack Fonseca, to avoid paying tax in Britain. By 2021, he was also facing his own accusations of corruption. The revelation of Cameron’s efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic to lobby his former colleagues in government for a loan on behalf of Greensill (a company for which he was paid adviser and shareholder) caused a national scandal.

Koram indicates that the struggles at the end of Empire set the tone for the world that we all live in, it is time for us to think about the aftermath of Empire not only in terms of identity, but also in terms of wealth forces that are driving inequality and insecurity in the world today both in Britain and abroad. To pretend that Empire is all about identity politics is to protect its economic legacy of a few winners and far more losers

According to Koram, conversations about British Empire should involve law, economics, and systems that produce wealth inequality and financial insecurity in the real world both in the UK and worldwide. Koram underlines that politics has become a process of negotiating between the global multinational corporations and the local labour and material resources.

The trend towards privatisation, deregulation and corporatisation in the West, known as neoliberalism, began in the post colonies after the end of Empire. After independence, decolonised governments had the ability to interrupt the flow of global capital, but if they dare to do it, they were quickly removed, accused of corruption or whatever allegation, since the purpose of state office was limited to serving the appetite of the market.

Nationalist authoritarianism that spread across the African, Asian and Latin American continents during the post-Empire is not due to some innate cultural or racial failure within the populations, rather

a political model that became the most effective method for managing wealth, since the market set the rules to the governments and not in the opposite way.

According to Koram, democracy during the aftermath of the Empire has been reduced to civil rights, but rarely if ever, it is offered the chance to citizens to restrain the power of corporations, financial speculation or reduce the commercialisation of all aspects of social life both in decolonised countries and in the old Empires of the West. Speaking about culture and symbolism are powerful ways to describe how people experience the hangover of Empire in contemporary Britain, but there must also be a reckoning with the primary reason why empire was created in the first place: to materially enrich some people at the expense of others.

REFERENCE

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