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A Post-imperial Stress Syndrome or a New Beginning?

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Within written history, Europe is rich in post-imperial situations. In the twentieth century the dwindling empires of this century, born during European colonial expansion after Columbus, gave rise to new post-imperial conditions with a global impact. Europe is no exception. On other continents, empires have also emerged and faded away: Latin-America with the Mayas and the Aztecs, and, notably, Asia where the Chinese Empire has disappeared and re-emerged at different historical junctures. On their way down, European empires have produced what could be labelled a post-imperial stress syndrome, very much like a PTSD, producing certain defensive ideological configurations of parochialism, xenophobia and nostalgic illusions, binding them to a past they have left, but are still chained to, mentally and ideologically. The fall or fading away of an empire is not just an event with a precise date, but a process, which, inevitably, shows cracks before it actually happens. Such frictions anticipating a future reality can only be caught by imagination. This article will concentrate on two such imaginative post-imperial prefigurations before the fact is generally recognized, both concerning the dissolution of the British Empire. It can be argued that, with Brexit, Britain is still trying to come to terms with its post-imperial reality. One such prefiguration will be seen through the eyes of the centre, J.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), the other from the periphery, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

Introduction

Most of us do not realize, in our everyday lives, that all of us live in countries that are, have been or shall be part of an empire. Take myself as an example. I am a Danish citizen, born and raised in what should be called Southern Denmark – yet normally is just called Denmark – within the United Kingdom of Denmark. This includes Greenland and The Faroe Islands, who are not members of the European Union, although this fact does not threaten the unitedness of this particular kingdom.

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(To call a country just *The* United Kingdom is a misnomer, there are more of 'united kingdoms'.) This geographical area is but the leftovers of the Danish Empire. With changing borders circumscribing North European colonies and territories plus a limited number of small colonies in India, Africa and the Caribbean, this now forgotten empire lasted for about 800 years. It finally collapsed during the Napoleonic wars when its dissolution became formally confirmed with the territorial losses decided by the Vienna conference in 1815. Two pointless wars with Prussia in the mid-nineteenth century destroyed the last hopes of an imperial comeback, and the remaining crumbs on the table, the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, were sold to the USA in 1916. Together with Iceland, only Greenland and The Faroe Islands remained within this new united kingdom – a slowly emerging parliamentary democracy after 1849. Yet, even this situation was short-lived. A small Northern German territory was first lost, then partly regained after 1920, and Iceland issued a declaration of independence in 1944. However, the growing importance of the Arctic region may bring back something of the former imperial glory – or vanity as the case may be. Looking at the attempt to think along those lines in empires now grinding to a halt, most Danes would not welcome this backward-looking perspective. Small and happy appears to be good combination. Quite a few European nations can tell a similar story. Nevertheless, this perspective opens two sets of questions.

(1) Would it be relevant to distinguish between different kinds of empires and, if so, will they belong to different historical locations and periods? Denmark stopped being a geographical empire and, yet, could it have been, or has it, turned into an empire of a different type in the Arctic?
(2) If empires may be different in kind, will this conclusion also imply that the understanding of what it means to be post-imperial differs as well? Moreover, could this differentiation be connected with symmetrical considerations of what pre-imperial could mean, and maybe even open for a mutual interdependence between these two otherwise contrasting positions? Did Denmark's post-imperial position actually make a new, even a pre-imperial beginning if not attractive at least possible?

An Empire is an Empire is an Empire . . .

Most history books conceive of empires as *geographical* empires. They first give an account of a series of land acquisitions and maybe loss of land as the defining feature of the history of empires. Subsequently, historical overviews discuss the more or less doubtful legal background for the foundational conquests and the more or less defendable ethical principles and practices of the exercise of power and extraction of valuable raw materials in the colonies. Of course, the battle of borders between other empires with similar ambitions in the same geographical area, or with major local powers, indicates the ups and downs of the empire, supplemented with accounts of missionary and other alleged civilizing interventions and of ethnological details.

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The Egyptian Empire, the Roman Empire, the Spanish Empire, the Portuguese Empire, the French Empire, the British Empire and even the Danish Empire have all been mapped in this way.

However, there are other types of empires than the geographical that, since the early twentieth century, better match the realities. The surging empire of the twentieth century, The United States of America, is of another kind. It is an *economic* empire, which has made very few direct land claims in its history, beyond the regions close to the United States itself. Instead, it has exercised its global power through economic means supported by military power, in particular after the Second World War with, among other things, the creation of the United Nations and the Marshall Program. The intervention in other regions across the world by political and military instruments did not aim at geographical control beyond economic interests.

At the same time, the United States also became a *technological* empire. If a date can be set for the beginning of this imperial status in a long and complicated process, 1893 would be a good choice, the year of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago (Appelbaum 1980). With the newly reconstructed Chicago as the frame of the site of the exposition's so-called White City on the border of Lake Michigan, the World Fair was a demonstration of technological innovation galore. Beyond the World Fair site itself, Chicago displayed how new construction methods made possible skyscrapers and urban planning, after the city's devastating fire of 1880. On the World Fair site itself, the potential of George Westinghouse's alternating-current electrical power for machines, electrical light, and other new technological wonders left the world nonplussed. It did so even more when, shortly after, it gave rise to the assembly line in the Ford car factories.

The United States became the new economic and technological empire without having to extract raw materials from a geographical empire, as had been the case for the British Empire when it peaked in the nineteenth century as the first large-scale industrial and technological empire. Here, for the British Empire, the dependence on the geographical empire eventually became too costly, and, inevitably, the dismantling of the empire began, first with the secession of Australia and South Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century, then India right after the Second World War, and later with Canada and the big colonial territories in Africa. Now, as is the case for France, the only remains of the British geographical empire are a few scattered islands and bits of land around the world, which, apart from being havens of tax evasion, have no importance for a monopoly on raw material or for the economic or technological development that defines today's empires with a global outreach. It is pure geographical nostalgia, yet still worth a war as in the Falklands.

The final relevant type of empire is the *cultural* empire. When the Roman Empire drew its last breath around 400 CE, its geographical, economic and technological dominance disappeared with it. However, its role as a cultural benchmark for the countries, empires and regions later emerging in Europe continued as if nothing had happened. Roman law continued to set a standard for European judiciaries for more than a thousand years, its terminology being still in use, particularly so

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in civil law. Most importantly, Latin remained a shared official language across the European countries in legal, religious, political, scientific and literary domains until the eighteenth century, by which time the vernaculars had gradually conquered these cultural spaces. Nonetheless, Latin persevered in specific contexts until well into the nineteenth century.

Electromagnetism is the foundation of Westinghouse's innovations that were presented to the public at large during the Columbian Exposition and, later, it is the foundation of digital technology. When Hans Christian Ørsted published his findings on electromagnetism in 1820, it was in a small article – written in Latin, not Danish. In contrast, when Charles Darwin in 1859 and Albert Einstein in 1905 brought their results into the public realm as the theory of evolution and the theory of relativity, the languages they used were English and German, respectively.

A short-lived empire, such as the Soviet Union from 1917–1989, did not become a geographical empire outside the local region, large as it was, and did not have the power to be a technological or economic empire, although various financial channels were opened to overseas allies. As a cultural empire, its profile was a political ideology, the Soviet version of Marxism, which did not suffice to support its status as a cultural empire. Strong cultural empires have had an influence on the everyday day life of individuals beyond politics, and also on fundamental values, with an impact on social and cultural domains from factories to households, on fashion and clothing, on aesthetic tastes in music, writing and performances, on city planning, on law, etc. Yet, language is the most important, simply because language has a pervasive influence by being used beyond conscious decision making, while other kinds of cultural impact will be the result of deliberate imitation, if and only if they are judged to be attractive in a broad social and cultural context. The Soviet Union fell short of this broadly scoped cultural impact.

If any lessons can be drawn, there are at least two. (1) For an empire to get a history lasting longer than a few generations it takes more than being only one type of empire. (2) The cultural empires are those with the longest historical impact, but if and only if the culture they develop is perceived as more than just dominant; it has to offer attractive cultural elements which are integrated into the everyday lives of broad social groups. American fast food, casual wear, movies, music and everyday technology, and new materials have the potential for making the United States a long-lasting cultural empire, as was the case for the British Empire for a long time. It also seems safe to predict that English in various interchangeable variants will prevail, as Globish, with the same stability as Latin did in Europe, no matter the future of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America. If Chinese attempts to create a new imperial dynasty after 1949, which could be called the Party Dynasty, are going to succeed, the cultural attraction of particular Chinese values, goods and services will have to grow in tandem with its accelerated economic and technological development. It remains to be seen whether this will happen.

The differentiation between imperial categories also makes it clear that no empire is ever alone in the world. No matter how forcefully an empire insists on the idea of

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its own absolute hegemony as the world's greatest within one or several imperial categories, there will always be several simultaneous empires that coexist, are entangled with each other and maybe compete with each other within the same geographical, economical, technological or cultural domain, or in all of these. In the field of technology, one example of this demonstration of imperial muscle is the early 2019 American attack, supported by several Western countries, on Huawei and its advanced competence in 5G technology. With regard to geography, the conflict in the Pacific between European empires in the eighteenth century and earlier may serve as an example from another historical period. Here, the first movers, Portugal and France, and on a smaller scale Holland and Denmark, were gradually pushed out, or nearly so, by the stronger British colonizing efforts, and all of them together put an end to the less expansive Asian exploitation of East Africa. Currently, the United States' attempts to keep up its dominance in the area are less decisive than a few decades ago. Every empire has anticipation of the post-imperial as part of its DNA, although is rarely able to detect it.

Post-imperial or Pre-imperial?

This brings me to the second of my clusters of questions, which concern the place of empires in history. For the imperial self-understanding as embodied in its political strategies and action, the underlying conception of history is essential. On the deeper level of the so-far peaceful confrontation between today's two imperial rivals in the economic and technological domain, the United States and China, the sub-currents of two different historical ramifications flow into each other like the meeting of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans at the promontory of the Cape of Good Hope. A quotation will show one of the ramifications:

> Domains under heaven, after a long period of divisions, tend to unite; after a long period of union, tend to divide. This has been so since antiquity. When the rule of the Zhou Dynasty weakened, seven contending kingdoms sprang up, warring one with another until the kingdom of Qin prevailed and possessed the empire. But when Qin's destiny had been fulfilled, arose two opposing kingdoms, Chu and Han, to fight for the mastery. And Han was the victor. The rise of the fortunes of Han began when Liu Bang slew the white serpent to raise the banners of uprising, which only ended when the whole empire belonged to Han. [...] Liu Xiu, the latter Han founder, restored the empire, and Han emperors continued their rule for another two hundred years till the days of Emperor Xian, which were doomed to see the beginning of the empire's division into three parts, known to history as The Three Kingdoms. (Luo Guanzhong 2008, 7)

These are the opening lines of one of the five Chinese classical novels, Luo Guanzhong's *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* from the fourteenth century, during the Ming Dynasty. Although labelled a kingdom, the narrative core is the battle to be the ruler of the 'state in the middle' (*zhong* (middle) *guo* (state)). This term is not the only name for China, *zhong-hua* is another, roughly meaning 'the beauty (*hua*) in the middle', similar to the metaphor for the British Raj, called

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'the jewel in the crown'. Although the meaning of these and other names for China changed through history, the sense of being superior by dominating a centre, especially if it is taken to be the centre of the world, is all-important. In the same way, London was the centre of an empire, first epitomized by the world's fair in 1850 before the Columbian Exposition in 1893 exposed the ambition of a new imperial centre. As an economic empire, the centre of the United States is not its capital, but the New York Stock Exchange, and the centre of its technological empire is Silicon Valley, while the Chinese equivalent of both is Shanghai.

The Chinese quotation explains, within a *cyclical* conception of history, the coming and going of any empire with the ambition of being the centre of the world. The fall of one empire is identical with the beginning of another, each empire having to pass through a phase of rise, maturity and fall as a matter of destiny. This does not mean that chronology and linearity are ignored. Everybody measures his or her age in this way, and the duration of the empire will also be counted step by step. Yet, this linearity does not define the underlying universal pattern of the trajectory of history, which runs in a circular repetition of empires, although each has its own particular features. This circular seriality is mirrored in the overall counting of the consecutive order of years as a recurring pattern within the lunar calendar, where each year is named after animal symbols, which return in a regular sequence – dog, rooster, pig, monkey, etc., subdivided in particular dog-years, rooster-years etc. In this perspective, the notion 'post-imperial' has no independent meaning, but could just as well be called pre-imperial as it paves the way for a new beginning of another empire after a period of turbulence.

If we consider Europe, we will immediately observe another basic approach to history. Just take a few symptomatic titles: *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788) by Edward Gibbon; *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (2011 [1991]) by William Shirer; *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (1995) by Lawrence James; *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (2017) by Paul Kennedy; and finally *The End of History and the Last Man* (2012 [1992]) by Francis Fukuyama. By their titles alone they situate themselves within a *linear* conception of history. When an empire falls, it is the end of story once and for all, and can even be regarded as the end of history itself, as Fukuyama did after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each empire is one of a kind, a unique occurrence in human history, leaving traces of course, but their break-down is not a premonition of the necessary ascendance of another. According to this model, the year 1945 never comes back. It was the final destruction of the Third Reich. Yet, in China it does – as yet another year of the rooster with all the standard forebodings for the events in that year.

The western concept of history changed in the eighteenth century by removing God, destiny and teleology from the equation, replacing divinity with rational, imaginative and creative Man fully responsible for the course of history which he – it was inevitably a male in those days – sets in motion (Koselleck 2002; Hartog 2015 [2003]). Teleology could then be replaced by a notion of progress, embracing human freedom, social organization and the reshaping of nature for the common good.

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This reorientation of history fostered, throughout the nineteenth century, a host of secular utopias in tandem, however, with growing doubts about what the content of progress really should be, accompanied as it was by bloodshed, exploitation and oppression in both the imperial centres and peripheries. Nevertheless, the consequences of the linear thinking in the secular take on history as it emerged during the Enlightenment did not lead to another basic model of history. More importantly, the ideas of the eighteenth century did not replace linearity with an alternative non-linear foundation of history, only with reinterpretations of the meaning of linearity.

This model is deeply rooted in European, and later Western, philosophy of history.

It relies on the age-old biblical model of the four consecutive monarchies, an order which, in a final breakdown, opens for the return of God. This macro-historical paradigm is derived from Daniel's dream in *The Book of Daniel* in *The Old Testament*, and since late antiquity and until the Renaissance it was accepted and adapted without discussion, most notably by Philippe Melanchton, before it finally died in the Enlightenment, leaving linearity as its lasting heritage. What remained stable in the historiographical tradition from the pagan period and Judaism, through Christianity to c. 1700, was the account of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome as the four monarchies. Before the first monarchy was the sacred history accounted for by *The Old Testament*. After the Roman monarchy, the European empires until the Enlightenment were seen as products of the split between the Eastern and Western Roman empires and understood as a late and transitory fragmented history of Rome, called 'The Great Interregnum'. In fact, this was not unlike the belligerent in-between periods pointed to in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. At the end, the apocalyptic second coming of Christ would occur, in accordance with a linear view of history, while the cyclical model anticipates a perennial repetition of the series of imperial dynasties.

The current large global imperial reconfiguration involving the United States and China, perhaps including the transnational European Union, not only shows imperial ambitions at a crossroads, but also stages an encounter of different and probably ambiguous views of empires and of the phase they are in – post-imperial (EU?), pre-imperial (China?), imperial (USA?). On top of this, two different conceptions of history frame the way such positions are evaluated and, hence, the strategies chosen to move ahead. On the one hand, a predominantly cyclical sense of historicity places the situation of China in a repetitive historical register, where post-imperial and pre-imperial are two sides of the same coin. This attitude gives priority to a slow diplomacy, because the end goal will eventually occur anyway as long as a stable predictability of the domestic area remains unchallenged. 'We have the time, you have the clock,' as some Asians are supposed to have whispered to their European colonizers.

On the other hand, a linear historical register, as in the thinking of the United States and Europe, will place the post- and pre-imperial as mutually exclusive opposites, and the whole political strategy is to avoid moving into a potential and irreversible post-imperial situation of descent. One example of how to keep up

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the linear push forward is the current crisis in the European Union, where the continental members oppose the attempt to turn the time back to a pre-EU period, as manifested in the British decision to leave the union. The call to make America great – again – is an expression of the same move as in 'Great' Britain, showing that the linear grasp of historicity produces a temptation for a nostalgic longing for an alleged greatness of old, which, if lost, will be irreparably gone. This is an approach to history where the clock is always ticking, not least because of ever returning elections where strategy and results are to be tested. Yet, it is also a historical framework where innovation is a permanent social and political driver for a robust linear development. This necessary dynamic is hard to launch without contradictions within a temporal sensibility of a cyclical Chinese bent, and this in spite of the many political long-term Chinese plans to create an innovative culture as an integral part of a deeply authoritarian culture. In practical terms, post-imperial, pre-imperial or imperial never indicate unambiguous historical positions but a cluster of dilemmas, which make strategic thinking the same as attempts to follow a forked road.

Centre and Periphery

In a geographical empire such as the bygone British Empire, this predicament is reinforced by a clear opposition between the view of the empire from the centre and that from the periphery. The other three imperial categories also have their centres and peripheries – for example with central Wales, Northern Ireland or Cumbria as the peripheries and London as the economic centre of the United Kingdom of financial Britain.

Maybe the most unbridled example of a view from the centre is Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' (1899).

> Take up the White Man's burden —
> [. . .]
> To wait in heavy harness
> On fluttered folk and wild —
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
> Half devil and half child
> Take up the White Man's burden
> [. . .]
> Take up the White Man's burden —
> And reap his old reward:
> The blame of those ye better
> The hate of those ye guard —
> [. . .]
> Comes now, to search your manhood
> Through all the thankless years,
> Cold-edged with dear-bought wisdom,
> The judgment of your peers!

This is not a poem about the geographical, economic or technological centre of the world, but about the centre of superior civilization and culture, here offering advice

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to the imperial beginners of the United States. That is where the 'peers' of civilized people live, and where the burden of the mission of such people is defined – a self-inflicted victimhood of being bound to a higher ethical standard than others and of the duty to transform the latter.

A similar but equally intransigent view from the periphery, just reversing Kipling 180°, is exemplified by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o from the former British colony of Kenya. After a few successful novels in English, he decided thenceforth to do his creative writing only in his native tongue, gikuyu, or in kiswhahili. In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986) he gives his reasons:

> We African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spenser, Milton or Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all other areas of human creative endeavours. (wa Thiong'o 1986, 29)

To make the periphery a new centre, comparable with and on the same footing as the vanishing imperial centre, this is Thiong'o's goal. The periphery *is* civilized already. Here, imperial empathy is in short supply, which forces each party to be able to see the world also from the opposite position, not in order to cave in, but to get a grip of the real complexity of the imperial and post-imperial condition.

In both cases, any dilemma in the hegemony of an empire, be it at the centre or on its margins, has vanished from the screen and been replaced by a good dose of self-assertive pathos. More important, however, is the fact that they both focus on the cultural dimension of the empire as a place where the battle for the future is played out and, hence, requires imagination. They sketch a project, not a reality. Therefore, literature and other creative art forms constitute a basic platform for the project. In such forms, a necessary amendment to self-assertion cannot avoid being developed, namely empathy – in this context meaning the ability to adopt a double view of the situation that comprises both centre and periphery, and to bring forth an awareness of the dilemmas and ambiguities it contains. As far as empires go, literature has the potential to comprehend the imperial complexity beyond its present status and generate a sense of its internal cracks and frictions as a recognition of the post-imperial possibility as an inherent part of empire itself, even at its peak.

E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* (1924) is one case in point, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) another, both reaching across the opposition between centre and periphery but from the opposite rims of the abyss. Forster's novel is set in the jewel in the imperial crown, India. The title is borrowed from Walt Whitman's poem 'Passage to India' (1881), but with an ironical twist. In unhinged jubilation Whitman celebrates the technological triumph of modern transport, which allows for easy access, not only to India but also beyond, as the shaping of a universal technological empire. Forster moves in the opposite direction and focuses on the ambiguity of imperial sensibility. The kind and empathetic Mrs Moore has come over from England to visit her son, Ronny Moore, accompanied by the latter's fiancée, Adela Quested. Ronny Moore is a civil servant in the colonial British

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administration of the Raj, now almost unconsciously enmeshed in a Kiplingesque attitude to all Indians. He is not alone in this regard, but just follows the general arrogant sensibility promoted by the other Brits. The local life revolves around the British club, which Indians cannot join.

Mrs Moore is curious and wants to know more about local people and their culture in order to understand who they are. Here, the Brits are of no help. At a certain point, she loses her way when visiting a mosque. A young Muslim Indian, Dr Aziz, offers to answer her questions and to see her home. We later learn that he has excellent medical skills and is in British service as a surgeon. Being more interested in people than titles and positions, Mrs Moore expresses her gratitude and he responds:

> 'You understand me, you know what I feel. Oh, if others resembled you!' – Rather surprised, she replied: 'I don't think I understand people very well. I only know whether I like or dislike them.' – 'Then you are an Oriental.' (Forster 1979 [1924], 20)

This short passage has a significant subcutaneous complexity. It concerns the possibility and impossibility of mutual empathy, even shifting cultural positions, a flexible openness which both realize is both unique and extraordinary in the colonial setting, and almost pushed aside by the modest Mrs Moore and looked upon as an impossible utopia by Dr Aziz. This situation makes the larger but absent context simultaneously present. Returning home, the context becomes shockingly clear to Mrs Moore through her son, with whom she from now on has a hard time empathizing. Ronny Moore is unable to conceive that his mother has approached an Indian, and misunderstands her account from the mosque, caught as he is in the perspective of an imperial representative for whom unmediated contact with natives on an even footing appears as repulsive:

> 'Oh, good gracious! Not a Mohammedan! Why ever didn't you tell me you'd been talking to a native? I was going all wrong!' – 'A Mohammedan! How perfectly magnificent!' exclaimed Miss Quested. 'Ronny, isn't that like your mother? While we are talking about seeing the real India, she goes and sees it, and then forgets she's seen it.' Ronny was ruffled. From his mother's description he had thought the doctor might be young Muggins from across the Ganges, and had brought out all the comradely emotions. (Forster 1979 [1924], 27)

When Mrs. Moore tells about her young helper without specifying his ethnicity and name, Ronny cannot fathom that his mother had approached an Indian as if he were a reliable person or that his mother would dare to so. *Eo ipso*, it must the British surgeon, Muggins. The British arrogance is further exposed at a bridge party to which local Indian dignitaries with their wives are invited by the British tax collector Mr Turton following a wish from Mrs Moore to meet local people. She is surrounded by the wives of the local British civil servants and military staff and wants to be introduced to the Indian ladies of the local elite, clustered in a corner:

> 'Do kindly tell us who these ladies are,' asked Mrs. Moore. – 'You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India except one or two of the ranis [wives of a rajah], and they're on an equality.' [Said Mrs Turton] (Forster 1979 [1924], 38)

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Mrs Moore remains a slightly disturbing visitor for the local Brits until she returns home half way through the novel and dies on board the ship back to England. Yet her quest for human equality and empathy remains present in the rest of the novel, between the lines, and casts doubt on the self-legitimized superiority of the British representatives. The foundation of the empire has a latent instability, here detected from the centre itself: the longer the colonizers are out in the world, the more blind they become to its reality. In a colonial situation, arrogance may blind the centre, self-defeatingly as it were, to its own post-imperial future.

When, with Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, the perspective moves to the periphery, the same imbalance between blindness and insight is described within the indigenous culture. Once dominated by a colonial power, the latter's values inevitably seep into the local mentality. There is no return to some pure indigenous past beyond the duplicity forced upon the colonial peoples by the empire. Being post-colonial runs parallel yet in opposite directions at the centre as well as at the periphery. The only option is to generate an awareness of the full complexity of being, at the same time, colonized and post-colonial or, alternatively, imperial and post-imperial. For Achebe this implies a strategy of working with the basic tool of imperial culture, the English language, and turning it against the empire. When a post-imperial future is looming on the horizon, 'the empire writes back', as Salman Rushdie aptly phrased it with reference to *Star Wars* (Rushdie 1982). Achebe states:

> Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal that included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. [...] I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Achebe 1965, 27, 30)

The colonizers will get their language back, but under conditions not their own. The same tack is taken in Achebe's title. It is a quote from a poem in English, though not an English but an Irish poem: William Butler Yeats's 'The Second Coming' (1919). Written right after the First World War and in the beginning of the Irish rebellion against England, the quote forms a significant frame of the novel's indigenous perspective from around 1890, when the Brits tightened the screw in Nigeria. Yeats's title refers to the ancient idea of linear history from *The Book of Daniel* with an apocalypse as the end of history. The first verses of the poem present this idea metaphorically applied to the post-war chaos, and later in the poem with the emerging Irish uprising as the new beginning for Ireland as an implicit consequence. Achebe only uses these lines:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot find the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

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For Achebe, the lines from Yeats's poem become a way of saying that imperial dominance, even at its peak, also sows the seeds for its later downfall. For the British Empire this began to become visible after the First World War, when Forster wrote his critical novel, and abundantly clear after the Suez crisis in 1956 and with the decolonization of Nigeria, when Achebe wrote his novel.

Things Fall Apart takes place in an Igbo village where Okonkwo lives as a young and stubborn defender of the classical ideal of honour and collective tribal responsibility in respect of the ancestral spirits. In the beginning, his father receives another villager, Okoye, to discuss urgent business matters. The following short excerpt from the long account of the conversation shows the same complexity as the snippets of Mrs Moore's and Aziz' conversation quoted above:

> Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. [. . .] The night was very quiet. It was always quiet except on moonlight nights. Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. [. . .] As the Igbo say: 'When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.' (Achebe 2010 [1958], 7–9)

This an example of the way Achebe uses English in his own manner to turn it away from a standard British discourse. Fist, the narrator describes in plain terms that the guest sprinkles his speech with proverbs. Then he directs his attention to the international non-Igbo reader and informs about this discursive strategy as a local habit. The Igbos know it already. In the same sentence he now introduces a proverb of his own, and in the same sentence speaking as an Igbo at the end and as an internationally oriented narrator at the beginning. In the last half of my quote, this procedure is repeated. First, a neutral description of the night; then an information on the perception darkness, which is redundant for a local villager, to which is added a psychological insight into the terror of darkness, which appeals to the empathy of at least a European reader akin to Mrs Moore. Finally, we are offered a new proverb, said in unison by the narrator and the average Igbos, local in content, but also, with the 'As the Igbo say', indicated for non-Igbos as part of the shared immaterial Igbo-heritage. The double perspective between centre and periphery is working in every sentence in a permanent back-and-forth.

However, the British dominance is the strongest, slowly destroying the cohesion and mutual solidarity within the local social fabric. Towards the end of the novel, Okonkwo tries to mobilize the other men to stand up to the colonial oppressors, but in vain. The evasive Egonwanne speaks better to the men's fear. Okonkwo's disappointed reaction now becomes entirely at odds with local norms and values. Realizing the dilemma produced by the situation, Okonkwo first thinks for himself a bit and then shouts at his tribesmen:

> If they listen to [Egonwanne] I shall leave them and plan my own revenge [. . .] 'Afraid? I do not care what [Egonwanne] does to *you*. I shall fight alone if I choose.' [. . .] 'If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of our clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them.' (Achebe 2010 [1958], 140–141)

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Here, Okonkwo speaks like a European individualist, a lone wolf or gunslinger, who plans individual action and does so by a deliberate personal choice without consulting ancestral spirits, other members of the tribe or the old people. He kills a black collaborator. However, he knows this is against the values he wants to defend, and, consequently, he commits suicide by hanging himself. This desperate act is unforgivable according to local tradition, and it is taboo to take him down, to bury him and even to mention his name. He has become a non-entity.

From the British side, the commissioner entangled in the whole business without much understanding or empathetic abilities appears on the last page. He could have been Ronny Moore. Shrouded in the narrator's sarcasm we learn, in the mode of free indirect speech, about his plans for a treatise on *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*:

> In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilisation to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from a tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. [...] One could almost write a whole chapter on [Okonkwo]. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. (Achebe 2010 [1958], 145–146)

Although the irony is almost palpable and, apparently, without any remnants of the carefully developed double perspective in Achebe's prose, the sardonic discourse also targets Achebe himself. The story, which from the English perspective is worth a few lines, is actually the novel we have just finished. Its topic is defined by the commissioner, but the way of writing is defined by Achebe as a demonstration of how the empire writes back.

New Empires and Post-empires?

Whitman's 'Passage to India' is an ecstatic vision of a global technological empire with no particular national location on the world map. It is shaped as a global network, powered by human creativity. Such new kinds of empires had been created in the twentieth century, first with multinationals such as oil companies or car companies, legally hosted by certain countries, but still dependent on site-specific raw materials and supply chains across the world. Today, the big tech companies such as Facebook, Google, Amazon and others of the same type follow suit. However, in contrast to older and newer industrial giants they only, to a limited extent, depend on local resources, maybe apart from rare minerals. Like the early multinationals, they are situated within national jurisdictions, yet they can easily move headquarters, capital and other basic conditions for their imperial practice across political borders and tax regimes and create formally independent branches without fixed abode. Such volatile imperial configurations and reconfigurations force us to reconsider the nature of empires, and contemplate how they coexist and blend with still existing earlier empires and present empires of the types addressed in this article.

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Are we living in the pre-imperial or imperial peak phase of such new empires? Or, are we rather trying slowly and without a clear strategy to dismantle them or at least fence them in by transnational regulations? Being modifications of the known specimens of financial, technological and cultural empires, it is clear that their cultural effects will last longer than their technological monopoly or their financial power. In all likelihood, they will shape our cultures and societies and do so on a global scale beyond their country of origin and after they may have ceased to exist. They are primary drivers for the shaping of globalization as a culture phenomenon.

Can we 'take back control' of the borders of classical nations and empires? This is the slogan of one of those old vanished empires, the British, now stuck in the Brexit process, which – when I write this in March 2019 – has no clear outcome besides what looks as self-destructive an act as the last desperate gesture of Okonkwo. It sounds like an echo of the past, like a nostalgic nineteenth-century blend of nationalism and fear of losing a centre that cannot hold, as Yeats said. The centre is already lost to other powers, leaving a post-imperial stress syndrome as an apt diagnosis of the British situation right now. Taking back control here means taking back control of itself in a national and inward-looking movement.

The same phrase has the opposite meaning when transferred to the new empires. If we take the European Union to be an economic and technological empire, its attempts to force taxation and fines on the tech companies to control their transnational slalom between a number of global tax safe havens, show that control of a transnational and not a national nature is necessary to confront such empires on the level where they themselves operate. Will the post-imperial situation for the new empires be defined by a confrontation with or between the three present empires, each in different phases of 'imperiality' – the United States, China, the European Union? Moreover, which of the sides will then succumb into some kind of a post-imperial status? Or, as a battle in the manner of those between the traditional empires, only now between the tech companies themselves, is it Chinese WeChat or QQ against American Facebook, Instagram and Twitter? Chinese Baidu against American Google?

The signs of post-imperial uncertainties within the new empires may have begun to appear with the first traces of limits to the control of their own practices. With the debate following their contribution to distorting elections through hacking and sharing of private data, their dissemination of violent videos with no acknowledgement of responsibility or appropriate measures for prevention, it has become evident that the operations of the core algorithmic structures of their own making also transcend their self-regulative capacity. At the same time, a contradiction between ideology and practice begins to catch the public eye in a critical way. The self-declared utopian democratic idealism behind the development of social media, supposedly open for each and every one in an informal global interaction, is counterpoised by a practice, now deliberate, now flying under the radar, which leads to breach of privacy, tax evasion and catering for anti-democratic forces and regular crimes. The big tech

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empires may be on the way to losing control of their own technology. Yet, more seriously, their public standing shows a descending curve, and in contrast to the classical empires, this is their bread and butter. How will a new sense of the post-imperial unfold, this is the big question for the future. Will we see another post-imperial stress syndrome or a new beginning?

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