EXERCISES IN CLARITY

A Series of Reflections on History, Memory, and Human Nature

"La parole est moitié à celuy qui parle, moitié à celui qui l'éscoute."

Montaigne, Essais, Livre III, Chapitre 13

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Author's Preface

These reflections are not written in anger, nor in grief, nor in self-justification. They are written in the spirit of clarity — and of a certain fidelity to reality, however unwelcome reality may sometimes be.

The essays that follow do not seek to flatter, condemn, or idealize. They seek only to hold a mirror steady: to human nature, to history, to power, to memory.

I have lived among peoples who are now called colonizers and colonized, victors and vanquished. I have seen sympathy where I was taught to expect hatred, and indifference where I was taught to expect loyalty. I have found that the simple categories offered by popular history are too narrow to contain the complexity of human experience.

What follows, then, are exercises, not sermons but mere attempts to say what I think I see, rather than what is wished; to understand, without excusing; to acknowledge, without adoring; to remember, without deforming.

The clarity of things belongs neither to victors nor to victims. It belongs, if it belongs anywhere, to those who have the patience to look at reality steadily, and the humility to know it is larger than their desires.

Jeffrey Feynman

1.

THE SHATTERED CHAINS

A Quiet Note on African and Other Colonial Realities

(*April 2025*)

Part 1. The Welcome of the Oppressed

(On the Complex Reception of the European Arrival)

I. On the Universality of Slavery and Servitude

When the European "*Scramble for Africa*" began in earnest in the late 19th century, the colonial powers brought with them systems that, however flawed, formally prohibited slavery and introduced rudimentary forms of administrative justice. This was not due to sudden enlightenment, but because by then slavery had become politically and morally indefensible within Europe itself.

The new colonial administrations were undoubtedly structured on assumptions of European superiority. These assumptions were neither unique to the colonizers nor to their age; they were the common architecture of thought in all known human societies. Disdain for those outside one's own group was the historical norm, not the exception. European colonialism merely adapted this universality into its own particular form.

Today, the colonial era is often framed as a pure act of violent theft. There

is truth in the charge, yet the reality was more complicated: for millions of Africans who had lived for centuries in hereditary bondage to their African rulers, the colonial administrators — however condescending — offered, for the first time, formal legal protections against being bought, sold, or inherited.

This complexity helps explain why European colonization of Africa proved, in many places, a relatively easy endeavor (except when Europeans were at each other's throat), with small groups of colonists subjugating vast populations with minimal resistance.

This complexity may partly explain a phenomenon I personally observed:

I spent a significant part of my childhood in Western Africa and Algeria, attending local schools and living among the local population. In three years spent in Algeria during the volatile post-independence years, a child commuting alone by public bus to school, I never heard a single derogatory word from those around me.

Later, traveling and residing extensively across Africa and Asia in a professional capacity, I again encountered, far more often than not, a quiet sympathy or simple acceptance toward the descendant of former colonizers — in contrast to the received image of endless rancor.

Could a German family, arriving in Paris in May 1946, speaking only German and traveling freely through France for three years, have expected a similar experience?

The answer is self-evident. History's realities cannot be collapsed into slogans.

II. The Shift Brought by Colonial Administrations

Nor should the process by which former colonies achieved political independence be romanticized too simply. In many cases, especially throughout the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand, colonies of European settlement merely shifted the center of gravity from European capitals to their own new imported political elites — while preserving older structures of dominance. However, when Ian Smith declared Southern Rhodesia independent in 1965 — following essentially the same logic applied earlier by American and Dominion colonists — the newly dominant societies of the West cried scandal. Consistency and honest self-assessment has rarely been history's strong suit.

History, if it teaches anything, tells that chains are often shattered not through collective virtue, but through the collision of flawed systems, accidents of power, and contradictions that become impossible to sustain.

The real embarrassment is not that the oppressed were sometimes imperfect. The real dishonor would have been to abandon them to the permanent certainty of servitude because their virtue could not be neatly certified.

Human dignity deserves protection not because humans are angels, but because suffering, injustice, and tyranny are universal — and because recognizing that truth, without romanticism, is the first step toward serious, sustainable liberty.

Historical precedent suggests that conquest and domination are never simple. Even among the chains and humiliations, bonds of humanity endured.

Sometimes, in the ashes of broken empires, the traces of unexpected affection and gratitude remain — inexplicable to the ideologues of a later age.

III. The Experience of the Colonized: Beyond Simplifications

The following historical paradoxes may also come to mind:

- In 1519, after having sailed in small rudimentary sailboats across 10,000 km of Atlantic Ocean, Spaniard Hernan Cortes, with his retinue of 450 men and 16 horses, quickly obliterated the whole Aztec Empire, a 2,000 km wide quite advanced place with a population of 25 million;
- In 1532, illiterate Spaniard Francisco Pizarro, initially with 80 men and 20 horses, although he later returned with 160 men and 40 horses, left the Isthmus of Panama and rapidly annihilated the whole Inca Empire, a 3,500 km wide, considerably rugged and quite advanced place with a population of 12 million;
- In 1565, Spaniard Miguel Lopez de Legazpi sailed from New Spain (Mexico) across 15,000 km of Pacific Ocean with 250 men in 5 small rudimentary sailboats, swiftly conquered the Philippines, a 1,500 km wide archipelago with a population of 2 million, and made it a possession of New Spain, some 25,000 km from Old Spain;
- By 1930, more than four centuries after the first Europeans had arrived in the Indian subcontinent, about 100,000 Britons were ruling over 300 million natives in a 3,000 km wide piece of land, 20,000 km from home;
- By 1930, more than four centuries after the first Europeans had

arrived in the Indonesian Archipelago, about 200,000 Dutchmen were ruling over 60 million natives in a 6,000 km wide piece of land, 25,000 km from home.

IV. Reflections on Historical Memory and Moral Posturing

One may be tempted to invoke some overwhelming technical superiority on the side of the invaders, but, upon scrutinizing geography and the balance of forces during the conquests of colonial empires, one comes to the conclusion that the explanation may lie elsewhere, when considering that:

- A few foreign iron swords or even muskets cannot be as superior to a myriad domestic slingshots used on their own turf as a nuclear bomb might be to a million swords, and
- A few dozen foreign horses cannot offer as much ascendancy over millions of domestic foot soldiers in their own environment as a supersonic jet fighter would over a thousand horsemen.

Thus, the explanation must be sought not in overwhelming technological advantage, but elsewhere: in the internal fractures of the conquered societies, in the silent resentments of the oppressed against their native rulers, in the readiness of many to welcome — or at least not to resist — the collapse of orders that had long ceased to serve them.

A few hundred invaders could not have conquered empires of millions without the cooperation, or at least the acquiescence, of the many. They did not defeat armies alone; they entered into the fissures of exhausted civilizations.

History, then, is not the tidy duel of strength versus weakness, nor of virtue

versus villainy. It is the slow, complicated unraveling of human structures — when the weight of injustice and the paralysis of imagination render a society unable, or unwilling, to defend itself, even against a handful of strangers.

Thus fall empires. Thus are chains shattered — not always by nobility, but often by fatigue, by longing, and by forgotten hopes.

And in the ruins, amid the smoke of fallen banners, there sometimes flickers the first strange light of another beginning.

The conquest of peoples often rested not on military superiority alone, but on the quiet collapse of old social orders.

Yet conquest was only one expression of an older and broader human reality: the omnipresence of servitude.

One may feel puzzled upon observing that those who are said to curse the conqueror's name still wear today his business suit, study his laws, drink his coffee, and speak his tongue. No mass movement anywhere has rejected Savile Row, Oxford degrees, Bordeaux wines, or English as a lingua franca — while, on the other hand, the swastika, SS uniforms, and yellow stars have been (almost) globally rejected, legally banned in many countries, and socially despised almost everywhere.

Note to the Reader

This reflection is not drawn from books alone. In 2016, in Jakarta, Indonesia, the author shared these ideas with close friends deeply connected to the nation's ruling class and to the statesman who was to become President in 2024. The stir that ensued confirmed what history teaches: that resentment is

often less the cry of the oppressed than the defense of lost privilege. Memory, too, serves masters — and not always the ones history claims.

Part 2. The Universality of Slavery and the Atlantic Trade

(On Human Servitude and Retrospective Illusions)

Slavery, and its close relative, serfdom, were entrenched institutions virtually everywhere in the world — particularly in Europe — until the devastations of the great epidemics. It was only the catastrophic labor shortages caused by the Black Death that began to erode feudal structures. Thus, by the time European colonialism reached Africa's shores, European merchants were sourcing labor externally, not out of unique malice, but out of structural necessity.

In Africa, slavery was an ancient and accepted institution, as it had been elsewhere, including Europe. Tributary systems, conquest warfare, and hereditary servitude had long fed the internal economies of kingdoms across West, Central, and East Africa. The Europeans, landing with malnourished crews through treacherous coastal bars, were never in a position to capture slaves themselves. They bought human beings from African rulers and intermediaries, exchanging rum, cloth, firearms, and other exotic goods — and, perhaps most importantly, gold, which was as precious to African potentates as

it was to European merchants.

If slaves and serfs had still been abundant within Europe, the Atlantic slave trade might never have taken its terrible shape. Indeed, European indentured servitude was still widespread by the 17th and early 18th centuries: it is estimated that by 1776, up to three-quarters of British colonists in North America were descended from indentured servants — and not, contrary to popular myth, from Pilgrims and freeholders.

Direct access to inland Africa was exceedingly difficult. The "bar" — the sand and surf barrier — made landing perilous, and only a few natural harbors, like Gorée Island in Dakar Bay, allowed European ships to anchor securely. Europeans remained coastal traders, dependent on local networks.

Even after the abolition of the Atlantic trade in the early 19th century, slavery persisted robustly within Africa itself. It shifted from transatlantic to trans-Saharan and Red Sea routes, feeding markets as far afield as Arabia and the Ottoman Empire. André Gide's, Albert Londres', and Henry de Montfreid's 20th century writings provide firsthand accounts of this ongoing traffic, a grim reminder that emancipation proclamations did not abolish demand.

The Atlantic Slave Trade and African Intermediaries

Slavery and servitude have existed across the globe for most of human history. From Mesopotamia to Africa, from China to Europe, via ancient Greece and Rome, the ownership of human beings was seen as natural, legitimate, and necessary — even condoned by religious writs.

The Atlantic Slave Trade did not invent this institution. It connected existing systems — African, European, and American — into a single vast, terrible commercial network.

European traders, arriving by sea, rarely ventured inland. They established precarious coastal trading posts and depended almost entirely on African rulers, merchants, and intermediaries to supply captives. Goods such as firearms, textiles, beads, and rum were exchanged for human lives, creating a grim but mutually understood commerce.

Thus, the Atlantic trade was not born solely of European violence; it was the catastrophic intersection of external demand and internal structures.

Later, slavery did not disappear in the Western world because men suddenly discovered it was evil. It disappeared, where it did disappear, because it became economically inconvenient and socially unstable. In Europe and the Americas, the flood of impoverished free laborers from Europe and China — immigrants who demanded low wages but not lifetime purchase and considered slaves as unfair competition — gradually made slavery obsolete. In Africa, where these demographic and economic disruptions did not occur, slavery remained viable for much longer.

Moreover, the collapse of slavery in the West, often celebrated as a moral awakening, occurred far later than retrospective rhetoric suggests.

France abolished it only in 1848 — after reinstating it under Napoleon, no less; Russia abolished serfdom only in 1861; the United States didn't abolish slavery until 1863.

There is little cause for triumph.

History's realities cannot be collapsed into slogans. One must ask who exactly stands qualified to lecture the world on virtue.

7.

REVOLUTION

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say (King Lear)

(July 2018)

In the mid-18th century, North America was settled by subjects of the Kings of Great Britain, France, and Spain, and by innumerable Native Nations, while.Alaska was colonized by subjects of the Czar.

From 1754 until 1763, a Worldwide War pitted George III, King of Great Britain, against Louis XV, King of France. Spain sided with the former, while some of the Native Nations sided with the latter. The commander of the British forces in the opening battle was then 21-year-old Major George Washington.

By 1763, France had been defeated. By the Treaty of Paris, France lost to the United Kingdom all her possessions east of the Mississippi River and ceded Louisiana to Spain.

In the course of the next few years, the following events developed:

1. King George III granted Catholic French Canadians freedom of worship;
2. The King gave guarantees to the Native Nations with respect to their uncontested sovereignty west of the Appalachian Mountains;
3. The United Kingdom, which was by now quite impoverished, proposed that the Colonies contribute some taxes to the Treasury for

their own defense;

4. The Government of the United Kingdom reminded His Majesty's overseas subjects that trading with the enemy in time of war was frowned upon;
5. In 1772, a judge of the English Court of King's Bench ruled in the Somerset v Stewart case (Somerset was a slave and Stewart his master) that the state of slavery was "*so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law*", and slavery had never been authorized by statute within England and Wales. Somerset was set free.

Despite their High Ideals as Philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment, many in the Patrician classes of the British Colonies were dreadfully alarmed by these developments and professed to be incensed by the unbearable duress imposed on them by their King's Government.

However, it is worth considering that many in the Colonies either did not feel directly threatened or did not disagree with the Government.

The Patrician classes were morally scandalized by the perceived threat over their rightful and sacred privileges to:

1. Deny the Papists of the North the right to worship freely;
2. Deny the Native Nations sovereignty over their land;
3. Be exempt of taxation to support their own defense;
4. Trade with the enemy in time of war, and
5. Maintain and develop the Institution of Slavery.

Consequently, they rebelled against their King and fought a War of Independence between 1776 and 1783, albeit not of the Colonized but of the

Colonist, in which they prevailed with the active support of the King of France, now Louis XVI, whose motivation was revenge against his nemesis, George III (little did he know that the troops he sent to America would come back with both good revolutionary education and training and would depose him within six years).

Those who had not supported the victors fled primarily to Canada, where they constituted the original English speaking population, after having left their estates behind. With them came the slaves freed by the British during the war. However, emboldened by their success, the victors endeavored a couple of decades later to finish off their revolutionary undertaking by attempting to annex the rest of British America, in which they failed, but not until their northern neighbors and brethren had burnt to the ground the Presidential Mansion and the Capitol in Washington.

Meanwhile, a Quasi-War had quickly erupted between the victors and the French when the former flatly reneged on their war debt to France, under the noteworthy pretext that France was now a Republic whereas the debt was owed to King Louis. However, they reconciled and only a couple of years later Jefferson purchased Louisiana from a French dictator who had just seized it secretly from Spain.

"C'est ainsi qu'on écrit l'histoire, et la postérité croit être instruite." [1]

[1] Jean le Rond d'Alembert, co-editor with Diderot of the Encyclopédie (1751-1772): "That's how history is written, and posterity believes itself to be informed"

A Note on Emancipation and Irony

The American Revolution is remembered as Emancipation of the Virtuous, although it was the emancipation of the Colonists, not of the Colonized.

1. The independence declared in 1776 was that of British settlers — not of the Native nations they had displaced, whose lands and relative sovereignty remain acknowledged to this day only within the Indian Reservations;
2. The name "United States of America" was the direct transposition of an existing monarchical model — "The United Kingdom of Great Britain" which had been formalized in 1707. The phrasing, far from radical, was a familiar echo;
3. Save for the Stars, the U.S. flag was directly borrowed from the flag of the British East India Company — the commercial arm of Empire. The Stars and Stripes sit atop East Indies colonial lineage;
4. The Revolutionary War was a civil war between brethren. In modern days all the Founding Fathers would have held a British passport until the Treaty of Paris in 1783;
5. Even the much acclaimed — and deservedly so — Bill of Rights, was the direct offspring of the English Bill of Rights of 1689;
6. As for the "tyranny of George III", suffice to read Alexander Hamilton's speeches in the Federal Convention of 1787 [2].

[2] In my private opinion, I have no scruple in declaring, supported as I am by the opinion of so many of the wise and good, that the British government is the best in the world; and that I doubt much whether anything short of it will do in America.

This does not diminish what the United States would one day become at its best, nor the greatness of the Constitution, which remains unequaled to this day.

The author of these lines believes that the United States is the only polity worthy of his criticism:

"Qui aime bien châtie bien".

"Spare the rod and spoil the child".

8.

THE MECHANICS OF CONSCIENCE

A Note on Pain, Guilt, and the Mirror of Conscience

(*April 2025*)

Human and animal minds are alike in this: they flee pain. That is how they survive. Escape is not a learned behavior, it is a reflex, embedded in instinct, inscribed in biology. Those that failed to flee were destroyed. They left no descendants. End of the line. That is why we are here. We are descended from those who recoiled in time.

But the pain we cause to others is not felt directly. It is imagined, and therefore abstract. When I strike someone, I do not feel his suffering. I infer it. I imagine what it would feel like if I were him. But I am not him. He is only a projection — not a self, but a simulation.

This is the origin of what is called conscience — not a natural virtue, but an artificial construction, born of the reasoned assumption that the other is another myself. I know my own pain. I do not know his. I imagine it based on symmetry. That inference becomes intolerable when it places me in the role of perpetrator.

Thus conscience is not a moral organ. It is an internal resistance to viewing myself as immoral. I do not grieve the pain of the other. I grieve the vision of myself as its cause.

This is why many who inflict suffering feel no need to stop. Instead, they reshape their vision of what they have done. They call it duty, or necessity, or fate. They defend their sense of self, not the dignity of others.

Dr. Josef Mengele (C) socializes with other Nazi officers outside Auschwitz concentration camp in 1944. © Getty Images / Universal History Archive

Look at the photograph. Three men, three officers of the *Schutzstaffel,* stand at ease in well-fitted uniforms outside Auschwitz. They are smiling. One holds a cigarette. It is 1944. At the time, both of my grandfathers were within, either alive, or as corpses, or as ashes.

These officers, these men, had feelings. They had friends. They had dogs. They loved their mothers. They held babies. They were themselves loved by those they loved. And yet, just a few yards away, men and women, and

children, and infants at the teat were being sorted, beaten, asphyxiated, poisoned, experimented upon, raped, burned. Not metaphorically, literally.

Did these men know? Without a doubt.

Did they feel what they did? Probably not.

They were not monsters. They were not evil. They were human beings.

When conscience produces discomfort, the mind has two roads:

1. It may accept the inferred reality of the suffering it causes and adjust — a rare response, because it is an intellectual and artificial construction;

2. Or it may distort that reality until it no longer disturbs the self-image.

The second road is the usual one. In this way, conscience is not the enemy of cruelty. It becomes its tailor. It clothes what it cannot cleanse.

And when distortion fails, when one can neither justify nor deny what one has done, one may turn inward. Since pain from the outside can be fled, but pain from within cannot, the only flight left is suicide.

That is why conscience, though imaginary, sometimes kills.

We blame "*evil*". We blame "*monsters*". But these are only convenient artifices, founded in magic and infantile tall tales, which are used to separate

"*them*" from "*us*", to draw a false line between what humans do and what humans are.

But the line isn't there. There is no other species to blame.

The horror is not that the officers outside Auschwitz were inhuman. The horror is that they were human.

This piece is not written to defend them. At the time this photograph was taken, both of my grandfathers had been arrested by the French Gendarmerie, turned over to the Nazi authorities, and deported to that very place. Neither returned.

The Gendarmerie Nationale — that branch of the French Armed Forces which serves as the police force in communes of fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, encompassing 95% of the territory — was never disbanded after World War II. It remains ubiquitous today. And each time I see a gendarme, or think of one, it brings Auschwitz to mind. Is their collective conscience blemished in the least? Rather, wouldn't they indignantly bring me to Justice forthwith if they ever read this piece?

The men in this photo smiled outside the wire. My grandfathers perished within. Their absence weighed heavily on my parents for the rest of their lives — both of whom worshipped their fathers — and by consequence on their two children, my little brother and me.

My mother attempted suicide decades later. She survived, quite miraculously. My little brother did not survive his own double attempt. I'm fine.

I know what was lost. I am not asking for mercy.

And I do not want apologies. No living person is responsible for what their forbearers did. The burden of guilt does not transmit through blood. To offer apologies is to attempt the erasure of one's own discomfort, not the restoration of what cannot be restored.

Likewise, I reject the notion of reparations. To accept money or symbolic gestures for irreversible suffering is to put a price — usually a cheap one — on a loss that is beyond valuation. It is an insult hidden in the wrapping of a gift. It allows the giver to feel cleansed, and the receiver to feel bought, even though the giver cannot possibly bear responsibility for what happened.

True conscience cannot be transferred. It must be earned, by each of us, in the present, through clarity, restraint, refusal to lie, and painful intellectual honesty.

That is all I seek, because only clarity can prevent comfort from becoming repetition.

On Monday, April 29, 2025, 1,850 files were uploaded online by the Argentinian National Archives (AGN), including intelligence reports, photographs, and police records. The documents on "Nazi activities in Argentina" are now available to all.