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upon the concept of premature loss

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of reading an essay which expounded upon what was then deemed the concept of “unloss” - that is to say, the loss of what could have been rather than what has been. It so transpired that I had been discussing similar matters with a student who had spent several years in Canton and Hong-Kong, and he informed me that a word for such matters as they related to human loss could be found in the Cantonese language, which I romanise here as *soeung*. The technical meaning for the term pertains to the premature death of a child or youth before their time, and illuminates many avenues of inquiry. Of course, a society that had use for such a word must have seen its share of premature tragedies, much like our own in the middle ages. Yet more interestingly we might, in a Wittgensteinian sense, play a small game, and transfer this concept from a personal scale to that of the national scale, and observe its results.

What does it mean, for a nation to die before its time? We have some concept of a human lifespan, and thus a commensurate sense that a life has been “cut short” - notice that the very terms we use indicate that life has an expected length - but how might one cut short the life of a nation? Finding no simple answer, we might engage in an inversion: what does it mean for a nation to *not* die before its time?

Of course, the phenomenon of the nation-state being such a recent one (its formation, arguably, within living memory), our obituary listing might be quite short indeed, but nevertheless I will endeavour to answer the question. Consider the case of the Holy Roman Empire: aged, strife-ridden, failing in all three aspects of its venerable title, surely none would protest that its death was in anyway “premature”. Yet if our noble French republic, flush with its African wealth, were to find an end tomorrow by hordes of avenging German soldiers,

would not every citizen mourn? And, perhaps crucially, might we not extend the same sympathies to those nations who have been lost unborn, whom we so nobly claim as colonies and possessions?

It is not through idle interest that I have raised the question of the Sinitic state, such as it is. It is my understanding that many associations for the betterment of the Chinese people have been established, often with their sole goal being the betterment of the weak and thus far hamstrung republic, or its replacement with one that might at last cause the European holds to wane. In literature, I have seen how their poets mourn the loss of national pride, as in the case of Tseng Tse. *Chanson des les Années Passées* shall never fail to move me. And in our colonial possessions in Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan, will we not see the same? They are united in their sorrow, because the nations they might have stood for have been murdered before their time, for our empires to reach their empyrean heights.

The colonial act's essence is the destruction of potential, the loss of not only present freedoms but future possibilities. In the place of equal partners in the international sphere we erect false idols, puppets, mockeries of states whose presence harrasses and oppresses rather than uplifts and inspires. For this cause alone, beyond the innumerable horrors of the yoke of slavery and exploitation, the colonial project ought to be deemed a travesty. We have not only caused unimaginable harm, we have destroyed countless futures. Do not imagine that I am speaking out of simple pity for the loss of uncivilised rights, or out of some partisan sentiment for these states which I will never see. When we witness the death of a child before their time, rage oft accompanies sorrow, and I fear this is what we shall find within these peoples when their swords turn at last from their ancestral foes to our throats, in search of ultimate victory.

J.F., 1928