

# LOOK FORWARD IN CONFUSION

## A Literary Evaluation of Postwar Europe's Interaction with the Past

*This paper uses the works of John Osborne, Azouz Begag, and Peter Maass to deconstruct the generalization that Europeans “developed within the shadow of the past.” The British dramatist, French-Algerian autobiographer, and the American reporter of the Bosnian Genocide, respectively, depict tensions between those who shunned history in order to develop in pace within the postwar global order and those who closed their eyes to the present in a desperate attempt to hold onto the past. This dichotomy helps to explain contemporary sources of conflict in Europe and war-ravaged this foray into post-45 history and literature.*

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Richard von Weizsäcker, President of the Federal Republic of Germany (1985)

Source: *Deutsche Welle*

Recalling Richard von Weizsäcker's 8 May 1985 declaration that “anyone who closes his eyes to the past is blind to the present. Whoever refuses to remember the inhumanity is prone to new risks of infection,” one might conclude that (post)modern Europe developed outside the shadow of the past.<sup>1</sup> Although von Weizsäcker, the sixth President of the Federal Republic of Germany, recognized Germany's role in the atrocities of the Second World War, he suggested that West Germans proceed by “[using] the memory of [their] own history as a guideline for [their] future behavior.”<sup>2</sup> Von Weizsäcker envisioned a Germany—and, more generally, a Europe—that could recover from its crimes and immoral acts, that could skirt around the “shadow of the past.” Unfortunately, many post-45 nations fell short of von Weizsäcker's aspirations. John Osborne in *Look Back in Anger*, Azouz Begag in *Shantytown Kid*, and Peter Maass in *Love Thy Neighbor* portray the relationships between key characters and the past as influencing their politics, weighing upon

their consciences, and determining their dreams for the future; in each case, however, a tension between “the shadow of the past” and “development” arises. The arguments and attitudes voiced by characters in *Look Back*, *Shantytown Kid*, and *Love Thy Neighbor* are representative of post-war British, French, and Yugoslav citizens, respectively, and discussing this dissonance between “looking back” and “moving forward” greatly implicates post-45 Europeans' national attitudes.

In *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne characterizes two societal trends of post-war England by glimpsing into the home-life of Jimmy Porter, the anti-hero who was “born out of his time.”<sup>3</sup> First, Osborne increasingly criticizes a nation whose majority was attempting to socially, morally, materially, and politically “develop” by jettisoning British traditions and values, such as colonialism, nobility, and conservatism. In the exposition, Jimmy drawls, “It's pretty dreary living in the



Azouz Begag, author of *Shantytown Kid* (2007)  
Source: Marie-Lan Nguyen (Commons Wikimedia)

American Age—unless you're an American of course," subtly indicting the British who were futilely attempting to regain empire by emulating the progressive methods of America.<sup>4</sup> More explicitly, Jimmy later exclaims, "Reason and Progress, the old firm, is selling out!" foreseeing a "Big Crash" in those "forgotten shares... in the old traditions, the old beliefs."<sup>5</sup> Britain, with its conservative roots, had been usurped in the global order by the United States, and the nation was striving to "develop" in line with the American posture instead of with respect to past British actions. Osborne perhaps best personifies Britain's abandonment of its history and traditions through Jimmy's friend, Hugh. Hugh is one of these post-45 lemmings who felt "England was finished for us, anyway" and that the "only real hope was to get out, and try somewhere else." Jimmy considered this "giving up" as detestable because Hugh was leaving "his mother all on her own," where Hugh's mother symbolizes the old English order.<sup>6</sup> Through Jimmy and Hugh, Osborne thus contemplates the degree of cowardice associated with throwing past actions, traditions, and predispositions overboard in hopes of making room for the British on the ship of American prosperity.

Opposite of the individuals who shunned British history in the name of "development" were those who were wistfully looking back to days of England's imperial glory instead of confronting the "developing" world around them. Thus, Os-

borne's second critique is one of those individuals who effectively lived in the shadow of the past, "casting well-fed glances back to the Edwardian twilight from [the] comfortable, disenfranchised wilderness" that was the new order of American political, economic, and cultural hegemony.<sup>7</sup> If Hugh embodies the British who had forsaken the past with hopes of succeeding in the new order, then Jimmy's father-in-law, Colonel Redfern, represents those who "spend their time mostly looking forward to the past."<sup>8</sup> The England that the Colonel "remembered was the one that [he] left in 1914, and [he] was happy to go on remembering it that way." The Colonel mourns for the lost dream of imperial glory, lamenting, "If only it could have gone on forever... I think the last day the sun shone was when that dirty little train steamed out of that crowded, suffocating Indian station... I knew in my heart it was all over then. Everything."<sup>9</sup> Faced with the uncertainty of living in an era dominated—materially, politically, and socially—by another nation and absent of "any good, brave causes" for which one would die, many chose to freeze time, mentally occupying the age of British opulence and power instead of confronting the reality of the post-45 global dynamic.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Osborne displays an England torn between those "hurt because everything is changed" and those "hurt because everything is the same."<sup>11</sup> Some are living in the "shadow of the past" while feeling victimized by the "developments" of the present, and others are consciously avoiding the "shadow of the past" in a ruthless attempt for "development." Classifying post-45 Britain as "developing in the shadow of the past," therefore, glosses over the intricacies that made British society as tense as it was in the 1950s.

Azouz Begag, in his memoir *Shantytown Kid*, depicts a similar strain in a France that had reverted from allowing the "free circulation" of Algerians and French to a state of blatant discrimination resulting in Algerian shame of identity, where the condition of "free circulation" is like the past, and the state of discrimination occurs in the present.<sup>12</sup> Here, Algerians are distancing themselves from their heritage with hopes of growing alongside the French. One observes the institutionalized pressure to assimilate through Begag's experience in the French school system. Begag "wanted to be among the top of the class alongside the French children," a surprising goal, considering that Begag's fellow Arab schoolchildren consistently occupied the bottom ranks of classroom performance and that he was often forced to decide between succeeding in class and maintaining friendships with his shantytown peers.<sup>13</sup> On a larger scale, the pattern of fleeing from one's Algerian heritage in order to better assimilate into national French culture is visible in the gradual emigration of inhabitants of *Le Chaâba*, the shantytown, to apartments in French cities, specifically Lyon. Describing the Algerians' wishes to sever ties with the shantytown and with their past in order to "develop" on French terms, Begag writes, "A lot of people started thinking about leaving. Where to? Anywhere," and the trend continued until it felt as though "*Le Chaâba*'s soul was slipping away through the cracks in the planks."<sup>14</sup>

Yet, as Algerians attempted to find their place in French society, the French began to relapse into racial discrimination, forgoing the possibility for social “development” in order to rest within the comfortable confines of the antiquated social order that they had once dominated. When Begag and his friends, upon the request of the piously Arabic Old Ma Louise, began pelting a prostitute and her client who had parked on the outskirts of *Le Chaâba*, the Frenchman yelled, “You bunch of dune coons! Do you think I’m going to let you Arabs start laying down the law in our own country?” before running away.<sup>15</sup> The expression “our own country” summarizes the newly heightened national French perception of French-Algerian relations: although the French had agreed to the “free circulation” of Algerians in the Evian Accords, Algerians were increasingly regarded as unwelcome guests in French territory. Adding to evidence of this perception, Begag concludes the memoir of his childhood by recalling the question of his family’s French landlord: “So when are you going back to your country?”<sup>16</sup> Begag characterizes French nationals as reverting to the “shadow of [their] past” and ignoring previous developments toward social equality, while he shows how Algerians progressively shied away from their traditions, heritage, and history in hopes of “developing” alongside the native French. Just as in *Look Back in Anger*, *Shantytown Kid* demonstrates the historical complexities that are ignored by simply agreeing that all post-45 European nations, here France and its old colony Algeria, developed in the shadow of the past.

reports of our own genocide!”<sup>18</sup> Those who chose to mourn for imperial England instead of contribute to the presence of Britain inspired societal and generational divides, and the French who reneged on the offer of “free circulation” of Algerians fostered the growth of racial discrimination. The consequence of Serbs investing in nationalism and accepting Tito’s death as an opportunity to dominate the Balkans in the name of “revenge” was the largest instance of European genocide since the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, the United States and the powers of Western Europe attempted to evade the mistakes of the past by avoiding the lessons of history entirely. Maass lists “ethnic rivalry,” “tribal warfare,” and the characterization of Slavs as “uncivilized” as the dominant European justifications for why the Balkans were hastily unraveling; these rationalizations were crucial because they “defined the violence as an antimodern and anti-Western phenomenon—an exception.”<sup>19</sup> However, these excuses also prevented Europeans from using their experiences with genocide and fractious European relations to intervene: instead of “guns or ammunition,” America and Western Europe airdropped “feta cheese and pasta.”<sup>20</sup> These actions were met with some criticism. For example, Margaret Thatcher, who left office just before the Balkans erupted, felt that “Feeding or evacuating the victims rather than helping them resist aggression makes us accomplices.” She expressed shame in “the European Community, for this is happening in the heart of Europe. It is within Europe’s sphere of influence.

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## “Discussing this dissonance between ‘looking back’ and ‘moving forward’ greatly implicates post-45 Europeans’ national attitudes.”

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The implications of this pattern culminated in the Bosnian War, chronicled by Peter Maass in *Love Thy Neighbor*. In this iteration, it is the Serbs who march deep into the shadow of their past, resurrecting nationalist images of Prince Lazar and the Battle of Kosovo Polje and calling upon Serbs to avenge their ancestors who had been subjugated by Muslims and their parents who had been murdered by Croats of the Ustashe, undoing Tito’s actions toward creating a unified Slavic people. Demonstrating the Serbian obsession with the past, Maass notes the “vulgar justice... that a man who was born in a concentration camp ended up ruling his own string of camps as an adult.”<sup>17</sup> A Bosnian (ex-)veterinarian conveyed to Maass the confusion and, ultimately, horror resulting from the transformation of Serbian classmates, friends, and neighbors complacent in the development of Slavic unity under Tito into looters, rapists, and murderers: “We didn’t believe that this would happen. This is the twentieth century. We are in Europe. We have satellite television here. Even today, when there is electricity, we can watch CNN. We can watch

It should be within Europe’s sphere of conscience. There is no conscience.”<sup>21</sup> On the whole, however, diplomats from Western Europe treated the Bosnian War as though they had never encountered such a conflict. But “[the] Redmans,” Maass speculates, “knew *precisely* what was going on... they had studied Munich and 1938, and yet they nonetheless participated in the destruction of a European nation and a European people, even though disobedience would have meant nothing more severe than the loss of their job.”<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, by tiptoeing around the siege of the city where Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, by chalking the conflict up to “ethnic rivalry” rather than exaggerated nationalism and absurd bids for Balkan power, by refusing to intervene for fear of proceeding down the same paths that led to the World Wars, by appeasing the Serbs and denying justice to the Bosnians, the powers of Western Europe allowed the past to repeat itself. In their attempts to “develop” a mature response to a European war, these powers ignored entirely


## Look Forward in Confusion



Norwegian UN troops on “Sniper Alley” in Sarajevo (1995)  
Source: Paalso (Wikimedia Commons)

the lessons of the past in a failure of historical consciousness. Thus, while the Serbs regressed into the depths of their past (c. 1389) and shunned the recent unifying developments that had been made in Yugoslavia, other post-45 European

countries acted reciprocally by distancing themselves from the shadow of the past in hopes of “developing” a conflict-free solution to the decimation of a nation.

In 1985, Richard von Weizsäcker made the distinction that while “[The] young people are not responsible for what happened over 40 years ago... they are responsible for the historical consequences.”<sup>23</sup> Less than a decade later, those young people were operating concentration camps, comprising firing squads, gang-raping women and children, digging mass graves, and exacting a reign of terror in Bosnia. One might argue that the statement “Post-45 European countries developed in the shadow of the past” is sufficient to capture the essence of European actions after 1945. However, England, France, and Yugoslavia can be sorted into two contingencies—one of people avoiding the past in hopes of accelerating present development and the other of people embracing inertia and the shadow of their past, evading present developments. Exploring this dichotomy, rather than embracing the umbrella statement, allows for a greater understanding of the societal gaps that served as a place for conflict to fester and grow in postwar Europe. 

## Endnotes

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- [1] Richard von Weizsäcker, "Speech by Richard von Weizsäcker, President of the Federal Republic of Germany, in the Bundestag during the Ceremony Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the End of the War in Europe and of National Socialist Tyranny," May 8, 1985.
- [2] Von Weizsäcker, "Speech by Richard von Weizsäcker."
- [3] John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (New York: Penguin, 1956), 90.
- [4] *Ibid.*, 17.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 55-56
- [6] *Ibid.*, 46.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 15-16.
- [8] *Ibid.*, 56.
- [9] Here, "glory" refers to the geopolitical and economic benefits that Britain gleaned from its colonies as well as the cultural and social comfort that British citizens derived from holding the dominant position in the imperial dynamic; *Ibid.*, 68.
- [10] *Ibid.*, 84.
- [11] *Ibid.*, 68.
- [12] Jeannette Money, *Fences and Neighbors: The Political Geography of Immigration Control* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 117.
- [13] Azouz Begag, *Shantytown Kid* (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1986), 46.
- [14] *Ibid.*, 117.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 41.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 198.
- [17] Peter Maass, *Love Thy Neighbor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 37.
- [18] *Ibid.*, 76.
- [19] *Ibid.*, 14.
- [20] *Ibid.*, 28.
- [21] *Ibid.*, 269.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 252.
- [23] Von Weizsäcker, "Speech by Richard von Weizsäcker."