I would like to begin by expressing my great gratitude and warm appreciation for all the institutional partners responsible for inviting me to undertake the role Treaty of Utrecht visiting Professor.

The Netherlands, very much like my own country, is a place where the pressures of the past exert a powerful influence on contemporary political and cultural life. Those historical pressures are often denied but their effects are felt nonetheless. They have shaped the embattled psychology of our anxious and fearful nations as they attempt to negotiate a new place for themselves in a post-imperial and post-secular world, a world that is currently being re-centred far away from the circuitry of north Atlantic modernity.

There are ancient residues—positive and negative—drawn from the different phases in which our countries dominated the modern world system. There are also a number of specifically twentieth century issues bound up with Europe’s post 1945 political, moral and economic settlement and in particular with the often disavowed history of decolonisation. Lastly, there are problems which arise directly from the belligerent imperial adventures that are currently underway. This latest phase of war, mobilizes, cites and signifies upon past colonial experience, using history to make current conflicts intelligible and legitimate, discovering meaning for contemporary suffering in representations of past trauma. Kipling and Tennyson are back at the centre of a public engagement with the mythography of colonial power:

When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier¹.

In the era of globalisation, comparable instances of conflict over history, memory and national identity have been evident in many locations inside and outside Europe. The French and the British, rather like the Japanese, have been battling publicly over that sort of imperial story to tell their school children about the

¹ The Young British Soldier (1895)
colonial period of their national past. In this moment, all those polities are asking what citizens need to know about their own country in order to be considered politically literate? How much national history should incoming migrants be expected to be familiar with if they are to win access to various forms of civic recognition: as citizen or denizen?

Some descendants of those who were once ruled, enslaved and exploited under the old colonial regimes now dwell in the metropoles. Their representatives have detailed and eloquent, often very critical views about the prospect of the brutal old arrangements being given a cleaned up, ennobled history in which imperialism was essentially charitable and progressive and the subjected peoples volunteered themselves into submission. These problems with history and ethics contribute directly to postcolonial Europe’s crisis of identity.

Political nationalism has long been recognized as requiring systematic forgetting. But, I am arguing that the basic problem, which arose from the institution of national states, has lately acquired a new significance, particularly in circumstances where identity is pursued and cultivated by governments as a bulwark against globalisation’s compound insecurities. The delicate political geometry of national government has been fundamentally changed by the unfolding of neocolonial wars which are legitimated by civilisationism on one hand and—in spite of the fact that the routine scripts of corporate multiculturalism are in circulation—appeals to the oldest, tiredest and most worn out racial assumptions on the other.

Today’s conflicts make our losses, sufferings, casualties and doubts more important than the dubious geo-political exercises that generate them. A tacit hierarchy of race and nation is being articulated within all the chatter about culture and civilization. A complex politics attends its reinscription locally and supranationally. We have been invited to become resigned to race and absolute ethnicity. That resignation cements a view of the world divided into human beings and infrahumans, the bearers of rights and the rightless.

Following Freud, I have described Britain’s unresolved relationship to its imperial history as melancholic. Unlike him, I have been forced to accentuate the postcolonial character of that development. I have become especially concerned with
how the festering social wounds which derive from the collective refusal to mourn or properly to acknowledge the colonial and imperial past, now corrode the life of various European polities. The pleasure that we take in the idea of empire and discover in the mythology of our country bombed into near submission as it ascended the path to ultimate victory over Hitler mean that we must hold on to the past. However, that fascinating past can also be a source of guilt and discomfort. Greatness has, in any case already abandoned us. We are not powerful, our sometime enemies are now richer and happier than we are. Our country’s failure and decay are confirmed by the fact of immigration. The new invaders are completing the task that the Nazis could not finish.

Faced with this melancholia, I suggest that we need to redevelop the idea of mourning as a social practice so that it can include complex arguments about the ethics and politics recognition, restitution and reparation. How might the evident pain and suffering involved in that irrecoverable loss of imperial power and prestige be replaced? What social gains might operate as substitutes for that erotically charged, narcissistic combination of victimage and victory?

I should emphasise that I do not subscribe to a view of melancholia in which the concept is understood primarily as the necessary mechanism of individual identity formation. In this particular social context, melancholic affect means above all that the painful, guilt-inducing loss can be neither worked through nor let go. The traumatized reaction to vanished imperial power and prestige is retained ambivalently.

Melancholia means being stuck with figurations of the past that are both distorted and comforting just like Schwartze Piet whose next appearance among us co-incides so fortuitously with my final lecture in the programme of work. The administration of empire by violent and other means is ideal, honourable and triumphant. That past is pushed out of history into another mode where it can be simpler and purer than it should be: as tidy as those old colonial states and statelets that were famously engineered to have borders with 90 degree corners. The unsettling past is held on to, cultivated, nurtured in a neurotic, pathological way. In the face of moral or legal indictments of colonial government and commerce,
national and racial wounded-ness and victimage start to provide the postcolonial metropole with important sources of identity, pleasure and meaning.

The import of racial technologies sourced in the US, has encouraged the manifestation of Whiteness and more recently Christianity as forms of ethnicity exchangeable within a wider cultural economy. In that system, immigrants are seen as benefiting from special treatment while the authentically local and entitled indigenous are effectively punished by being unjustly deprived of their birthright and required to dwell quietly in a culturally polluted environment that they say they do not recognize.

The history of colonial administration that produced the immigrant as a neighbour is absent so the incomers’ challenging presence becomes inexplicable. They dwell next door only as the result of governmental perfidy and the duplicitous politicians’ contempt for the “white working class” which is invited by mainstream and fringe opinion alike to revel in its own injured condition. This is the climate in which our Prime Minister has sought to recycle the old Fascist slogan “British Jobs For British Workers”.

Refusing to mourn or heal blocks the opportunity to make new attachments. It fosters its own perverse delights. If we were to open ourselves to the critique of colonial and imperial history, we might start to discover things about ourselves and our peerless white and western civilisation that we would rather not have to face. Guilt and self loathing permeate our culture but it seems they cannot be acknowledged. If the bloody, disturbing history of empire does emerge unexpectedly through the screen memory and fantasy of benign imperial humanitarianism, people prefer to imagine themselves to be its victims rather than its beneficiaries and agents. This melancholia culminates in the bitter injuries of rejection: “we helped you and this is all the thanks we get”.

In Britain, right and left share an anxiety that our nation—particularly its young people--has become unfamiliar with if not deeply ignorant about the triumphant past. This failure becomes yet more disastrous because that pattern of repressed imperial history and active, selective filtering and forgetting has been intensified in turn by recent advocacy for a revival of the colonial system in something like a “postmodern” form. That contentious goal should require increased
familiarity with the past glories which are apparently about to be revived. However, the necessary history and memory are distributed unevenly. They lose ground to resurgent imperial myths of pluck ingenuity and masculinity. The Kipling poem with which I began my lecture reappeared recently on the front page of a national newspaper where it had been re-written by a soldier serving in Afghanistan. Instead of the binary split between soldier and native that defined Kipling’s outlook, we were introduced to a more elaborate arrangement in which the treacherous government emerged as a second deadly foe in silent, callous partnership with the enemy:

When you’re lying alon in your Afghan Bivvy
And your life depends on some MOD civvies
When the body armour’s shared (one set between three)
And the firefight is not like it is on TV
Then you look to your oppo , your gun and your God
As you follow that path that all Tommies have trod

Meanwhile, our wild and primitive foes cultivate remembrance of the history that we casually overlook. Our military organizations have different priorities. They do recall the complexity of long-gone, colonial campaigns especially when they were unsuccessful, but politicians and the press proceed as if the country was untrammeled by the lessons previously forced upon it by distant, small wars, bloody counter-insurgency conflicts, retreats, withdrawals, tropical Cold war and that final, simple, irreversible fact of decolonization¹.

These chronic problems become acute when the contemporary issue of torture collides with the dynamic para-politics of human rights. This violation appears less shocking because the imperial legacy provides many precedents for the normalisation of that kind of abuse, for the brutal governance of life judged infra-human according to the protocols of race theory and the normal practice of suspending the law in the law’s own name.

Today, government refuses the opportunities that history offers and compounds the mystification of the past by insisting upon blanket denials of complicity even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The positive
aspect of these revelations is that we are not who we thought we were. People
habituated to disaffected consent and the logic of expediency begin to be less trusting
of what they are told by their rulers. Its negative aspect is that governmental power
responds to indictment of its moral and legal shortcomings with attempts to
manipulate information which become increasingly more elaborate and complicated.
Politics itself is then brought into greater disrepute and institutional disengagement
from it continues.

The characteristic cycle of guilty evasion, filtering, refusal and blockage is not
always noticed. There is great pressure to dismiss and misrecognise its
manifestations as expressions of robust, patriotic commitment and even to imagine
that the problems to which it points will be solved simply by more information. In
pursuit of security and social cohesion and as part their attempts to re-define
national identity, our leaders have told us that it is time to stop apologizing for our
empire and that the struggle against racialised inequality has been concluded. They
insist that if the formerly colonial countries are now incompetent, chaotic or failed
states, responsibility for their descent into necropolitics remains exclusively with
their post independence leadership. Postcolonial melancholia and belief in racial
hierarchy alike insist that Europe has a monopoly on historicity and a privileged
access to the future. The natives, the colonials and their alien kin still represent and
embody the past. But the economic data suggest a different story. We are haunted by
the possibility that they might now represent the future while we might be the past.

These assertions and anxieties consolidate a novel common sense. The
widespread political disengagement they promote places empire and colony, like
racism itself, in the cold storage of undifferentiated anteriority. The integrity of
Europe’s own progress is apparently at stake in the fact that we no longer need to
consider such things. As a result, to direct attention towards difficult issues of this
kind is to invite dismissal as an unserious pseudo-scholar or worse still, a malicious
practitioner of “political correctness” and foolish multiculturalism.

Lest it be thought that these problems only apply in situations where a
colonial history is extensive and undeniable, I wish to emphasise that globally
speaking, these postcolonial relations have incorporated other European nations.
This happens most readily when they employ US racial technology and when, in spite
of the remoteness of colonial history and their national response to military
adventures, they have been drafted as participants in the ISAF in Afghanistan with
sometimes shocking results The avowedly non-violent Swedes have been fighting
Somali pirates, The Germans have been blowing up Afghani civilians while the Danes
have been dishing out brutal treatment to Iraqi detainees. So much then, for the
humanitarian mission which readily annexes development and capacity building to
the engines of security.

Clinically, you will recall that melancholia intersperses self-hatred, depression
and indifference with eruptions of manic elation. We glimpse a social equivalent of
this oscillating pattern in popular reactions to war and increasingly in the different
context created by popular sporting contests the political significance of which seems
to be increasing. These different settings (war and sport) fuse and combine. The
emotionalisation and psychologisation of our theatrical political cultures promotes
their continuity by endorsing a vacuous form of nationalism that finds it difficult to
distinguish one from the other. War is a sport and sport becomes a variety of
warfare. Some recent home fixtures for England’s national team have commenced
with parades of maimed heroes freshly returned from the Afghan battlefields². The
combined appeals to Churchill and Hitler that defined the racism and nationalism of
the English football team’s skinhead followers in the past are rare these days but the
old chant associating the world wars with the 1966 world cup is, like the theme from
John Sturgis’ The Great Escape, seldom muted.

In Britain, perhaps unlike the Netherlands in this respect, the war on terror
and its various successor projects have fed and sometimes have required a wholesale

² British troops were to make a lap of honour at Wembley stadium before England play a crucial Euro 2008
qualifying match. The service men and women have all recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan and will parade
before the game against Croatia next Wednesday. The event has been organised by the British Forces Foundation who say
it will allow the crowds to publicly thank the Army, Navy and Airforce personnel for their efforts in the Middle East. BFF
Chairman is Jim Davidson OBE a conservative comedian who in 2004 publicly left the United Kingdom for the tax-free haven
of Dubai in protest of the Labour Party government. At the time, he declared that “I may as well go to Dubai and be an ethnic
minority there than wait five years till I become one here.” [17] He has subsequently been quoted as attributing his move as
being motivated primarily by the tax-free status afforded him.
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/nov/21/pitchbattle
http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2007/nov/17/newsstory.sport18
http://property.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/property/article431598.ece
militarisation of social and cultural life. This development, which the government insists corresponds to the dynamics of security, has invoked and projected memories of that war directly into the service of present conflicts. Legitimation is discovered in the idea of humanitarian intervention and especially in the liberation of women, homosexuals and other vulnerable groups from barbarism. However, the historicity of armoured humanitarianism has been uneven, fitful and highly selective. We forget that the expansion of Europe into Africa during the nineteenth century was warranted in the same way.

World war 2 is omni-present while its successor conflicts appear to be forgotten actively. Some groups and interests seek to invent, cultivate distribute and manage the memory of past conflicts as a way of bonding a divergent nation and of synchronizing national life judged to be imperiled by multiculture’s dilution of the essential sameness necessary if we are to remain secure. The death of Harry Patch, the last surviving combatant from WW1 and the commemorations of the Normandy landings and the invasion of Poland are some recent events of this type.

How this testing situation should be understood is being hotly if indirectly debated inside and outside formal political institutions where the issue of integral national identity and its attendant social ethics have been instrumentalised. It bears repetition that a nationalist turn has been prompted by governmental investments in “social cohesion” and “social capital” as the primary means to promote security. It has been galvanised by popular reaction against supranational modes of governance, by the break up of Britain’s political union, by the effect of virtual and info-wars and by the impact of neo-liberal political culture which emphasises self-reliance and recasts the programme of strict, reciprocal recognition as a precondition for meaningful citizenship. This novel variety of wounded nationalism confronts emergent varieties of cosmopolitan thinking shaped by the trans-local perils of political ecology, disease and other forces which do not respect borders made by governments. But those dangers defy our agency. Unlike them, xenophobia and anti-Muslim anger specify the immediate task of repair: “It’s time to take our country back” says the English Defence League while the Stop Islamisation of Europe Campaign works with the slogan: "Racism is the lowest form of human stupidity, but Islamophobia is the height of common sense".
New terrors make a retreat into the carapace of an overintegrated national identity appealing. Behind its sturdy shield we can agree that are not what we were and enjoy an enhanced appreciation of the fact that we are nonetheless solidly together. The differences eroded by assimilation and hybridity are reinstated in warm blood. Indeed, primal alikeness is now so important and total that we have become, according to the logic of race and absolute ethnicity, effectively interchangeable even as growing economic inequality makes us less alike. Any trace either of otherness or of dissent places the security resulting from essential connectedness in jeopardy.

This is the setting in which analysis must become concerned firstly by with the way that the national states of an increasingly fortified Europe approach the prospect of alterity—seen too often only in terms of loss and risk—and secondly by the related manner in which they engage the contemporary politics of cultural and social plurality. I submit that both of these responses have been configured by the same underlying postcolonial neurosis. More importantly, both are now fundamental to the possibility of a move away from ethnic absolutism and belligerent nationalisms: political, cultural and methodological. Both are also constitutive of the politics of race and culture which has been recast here as inter-civilisational and religious conflict.

In a discussion of group psychology produced as he watched the rise of Nazism and anti-semitism, Freud, who had been a depressed and disillusioned cosmopolitan since the first world war, identified some important issues for us. He saw the pursuit of something like hypersimilarity as a core constituent of what he called the formation of a “primary mass”. That impossible mode of being together resonates now with the mainstreamed narcissistic moods of consumer culture, with the commercial scripts of corporate and managerial multi-culturalism and with the broader political imperatives of civilisationist thinking in which race, religion and culture coalesce. However, yearning for that combination of particularity and identity arises with the pathologies of group-ness in which a people, race or nation become their own densely idealized object of identification and work to maintain an ideal image of themselves at the expense of the alien others against whom the
favored collective is measured and defined. This is not only a problem for the
beneficiaries of racism but also for its bitter victims.

I want us to discuss several inter-related aspects of this predicament that are evident
in the contemporary political culture of both our countries. I should emphasise that
regardless of many differences, both locations have seen these problems articulated
into a broader politics of race and racism, immigration and belonging. In both places,
a desire for secure identity is associated with the conduct of ongoing wars from
which we prefer to turn away lest they interfere too painfully with collective pursuit
of our sacred conceptions of what distinguishes our nationality, ethnicity or
civilization from others. Indeed, the need precisely to specify the kind of people we
are has become more important as the discourse of civilisationism has taken hold.

Away from the glittering crust of corporate multiculturalism which is far more
influential in Britain than it is here--those ideas about who ‘we’ are remain
stubbornly anchored in notions of racial hierarchy which arose in the imperial period
and will not decay organically in the absence of governmental effort. No less than in
Freud’s time, there are powerful political forces at large which particularly in the
context of continuing economic emergency, are more likely to conform to the
imperatives of securitocracy than the formal dictates of procedural liberalism.

Let me repeat, the first layer of this cultural and psychological crisis derives
directly from the failure to address the sometimes painful history of departed
colonial and imperial power which may be distant but nevertheless it still supplies
potent conceptions of civilization, power and entitlement to the overall architecture
of national identity imperiled by the storms of globalisation. The second stratum of
this crisis of identity, nationality and ethnicity stems from a particular ambivalence
surrounding the history of the second world war. For various reasons, that history
remains contested and seems both here and in Britain to be an indelible feature of
the politics of race, faith and immigration even as the 39-45 war itself slips out of
living memory. These dynamics are organized around and replayed in present
conflicts connected to a past that we dare not recognize or be reconciled with.
Postcolonial and postimperial melancholia is framed by neo-colonial mechanisms
which present us to ourselves as the victims of our impassioned commitment to the humanitarian redemption of stateless barbarism and misogynistic savagery.

In Britain, Dame Vera Lynn’s wartime pop songs are currently and morbidly on top of the pop charts. This is yet another sign that the anti-nazi war still provides our country’s “finest hour” especially for those who did not experience it the first time. Bolstered by veneration of Winston Churchill who is canonized as the patron of a nationalism that requires war in order to grasp the authentic limits and character of the identity of our Island race, it is an especially attractive brew. In the Netherlands, the histories of collaboration and of Dutch anti-semitism complicate the mythology of resistance and the cult of Ann Frank as a national icon with what might be called a politics of shame and melancholic self-loathing which can also be volatile.

Neither national setting allows an easy identification with Hitlerism even though in both places political capital is conspicuously being made by parroting its updated slogans. Indeed as in several different European countries, the islamophobic racists and their ultra-right allies are very mindful of the need to mystify their own political lineage and habits. Civilisationists and securitocrats compare the Koran to Mein Kampf partly in order to defer consideration whether how their own political outlook bears a family resemblance to the aggressive, hateful outpourings of an earlier culturalist racism. This is of course connected to the manner in which as President Obama has pressed towards a reform of US healthcare, he has appeared on posters and internet sites adorned with Hitler’s trademark moustache.

As a result of this dissonance, in both countries energy is expended on proving that (a) we are not as racist as we sometimes sound or as we can discover from the colonial archive and (b) that one can be a patriot, a cultural nationalist and a proponent of fundamentalist, enlightenment objectivism without running the risk of lapsing into the postures of palingenetic ultra-nationalism. It is here of course the totemic figures of Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the nameless, veiled Muslim woman appear on cue. In the UK, the anti-racist movement such as it is, remains wedded to the outdated idea that the best way to defeat the ultra-nationalist right is to show them to be Nazis. Much time and energy is spent on this, but the days when their leaders
could always be relied upon to be out in the woods celebrating Hitler's birthday with Odinist rituals are behind us now.

The rise of xenophobic nationalist of groups like the English Defence League confirms that the politics of race, nation and culture is the heartbeat of a populist phenomenon. It reveals an uncomfortable, fluid dealignment of dynamic, protean political actors that can no longer be defined as simply either left or right. Faced with that change, the history of fascism needs to be rescued from its banalisation as the moral limit of a profane world that needs to mark the edge of its theodicy. Rather than being recovered patchily, in local narratives we need to re-write fascism’s history as Roger Griffin, Umberto Eco, Stanley Payne and others aspire to do: on a cosmopolitan scale.

To present that argument effectively requires a more serious philosophical engagement with the history of race-thinking than has been customary so far. Resolving these problems is an urgent matter because they are integral to the functioning of a sustainable multiculture which will have to become comfortable with its obvious postcolonial provenance. The issues bearing upon the uniqueness of Nazism and its extra-historical character are also current though their problematic effects are less immediately evident. They are most significant where we face the para-political power of xeno- and islamophobia which announce themselves to be wholesomely patriotic but cannot be dismissed solely on the grounds that they are almost always institutionally and organizationally linked to neo-nazi political organizations which may only have an instrumental investment in xenophobia’s nationalist-populist payoff.

Focusing on the postcolonial staging of these processes, requires that we recognize how the dialectical re-writing of enlightenment that followed the Nazi genocide has been repudiated along with all other twentieth-century perspectives that contemplated the association of progress with catastrophe. The resulting intellectual settlement is precarious but nonetheless powerful. It requires a denial of the significance of colonial and imperial history which must remain peripheral even though all the principal zones of contemporary conflict: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran,
Iraq, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya were pushed towards war by the decomposition of the British empire.

The repression of that imperial history seems in proportion to the fact that nazism is represented as an exceptional, unprecedented and absolute evil that belongs only to Europe. Jews are accorded special recognition as bearing the scars of victimization and of an ineffable trauma that we are told cannot be allowed to become another historical event. Shame is rightly here but it is allowed to be nowhere else.

That mass killing must now enter history. Those atrocities were the result of a practical application of eugenic rationality. This was a modern, bureaucratic and hi-tech outrage: fully compatible with the normal tempo of civilisational development. After all, IBM had created the punch-card system that made the killing practicable. Henry Ford and Daimler-Benz had supplied the trucks. Other corporate powers provided the technology that industrialized the merciless implementation of racial hygiene which also mandated advanced health and safety legislation, anti-smoking laws etc.

An authoritarian government with strong and distinctive aesthetic attributes had bonded ultranationalist unreason to racialised governmental rationality. Fascist public culture annexed the epoch-making power of advanced communicative technologies and public relations. It offered itself to its citizen-consumers as a spectacular variety of art. The kitsch dramaturgy of light, fire and stone, revealed that barbarity and refined European civilization were, unexpectedly, fully compatible.

The ethical and aesthetic dilemmas involved here were swiftly accepted as
part of a larger political, philosophical and moral problem that was connected to debates over the general or specific complicities of European civilisation with racism and fascism, over the role of technology and debased, instrumental reason, over the timeliness of lyric poetry and the ethics of documentary representation, indeed over the validity and shifting character of western culture and the political ontology it articulated habitually in nationalist and race-specific forms.

In the shadow of catastrophe, luminous survivor testimony and morally contested memory, culture had to be salvaged and made anew. In novel, perhaps in redemptive forms, art would contribute to a revised definition of what Europe was and what its values would become in the future. Culture could reacquaint Europe with the humanity from which it had been comprehensively estranged but new forms and tactics had to be found. I sense now that we are in a similar position with regard to postcolonial Europe’s colonial pre-histories.

Then, an explicit consideration of the damage that racism had done to democracy and civilization was central to an important phase of critical self-examination. Jews, gypsies and other lesser peoples had not been admitted to the same degree of human being as their killers. They were infra-humans confined to the grey zones where they could be disposed of with impunity as waste. Racism had made that goal acceptable. Primo Levi and other damaged survivors pointed out that racism had facilitated the reduction of the victims’ humanity in the interests of their killers.

The post-1945 reaction against fascism fostered the emergence of a new moral language centred on the idea of universal human rights. These innovations combined to ensure that the legacy of humanism and the category of the human were pending
in liberal cold-war reflections. However, the bloody impact of colonial rule and of the bitter wars of decolonization that followed it were never registered in the same manner. The UNESCO moment did not last long (Levi-Strauss and the UNESCO statements).

Europe’s reflexive exercises were well-intentioned but they stopped a long way short of a properly cosmopolitan commitment to understanding the Nazi period in the context of earlier encounters with the peoples that Europe had conquered, sold, exploited and sometimes sought to eradicate.

The continuity between those histories of suffering was largely overlooked and dismissed (the Swedish writer, Sven Linqvist is an important exception). The broad, human significance of the awful events proved difficult to grasp and discuss. That problem intensified once philosophical and political anti-humanism were lodged at the core of radical and critical thought. Without the buttress of a humanistic outlook shaped explicitly by a non-immanent critique of racial hierarchy, attempts to understand Europe’s colonial crimes fractured precisely along the lines of the very race-thinking which had originally brought these tragedies about.

The strange, infra-human people in the torrid zones, were not merely different from Europeans. They were behind them also. Travelling into their dwelling space was, in effect, a kind of time travel just as there were temporal disruptions when they arrived unwanted inside the postcolonial citadels of overdevelopment.

Mass killing inside the temperate zone had rightly provoked an intense moral debate. However, mass killing in Africa and other remote, colonial places was often merely an expression of the natural disposition towards chaos, barbarity and war found among savage, extra- and pre-historic peoples. At best, colonial subjects had
been classified as the children of the human family. At worst, they were consigned to their doom by the unstoppable force of social and economic progress which joined nature and history together to secure an inevitable extinction.

The colonies had never been allowed to become part of the west’s official, historical world. The insubordinate peoples held under European rule were relegated to a twilight condition that corresponded to the lower value placed upon their lives by their conquerors, rulers and exploiters. They were the refuse of dynamic, global progress.

In these inhospitable circumstances, trying to see Europe’s imperial horrors in the context of its moral authority tainted by racism, remained an unpopular exercise. Western civilisation opposed savagery in a Manichaean pattern so there was nothing else to say.

The movements aimed at liberation from colonial power took a different view. Without renouncing the goal of development, they were determined not to repeat the errors and evils which had distinguished Europe’s modern history. (Fanon and Césaire)

Detailed knowledge of Europe’s colonial crimes was once difficult to access but there is now no excuse not to be intimately familiar with it. The open secrets of genocidal governance, of torture and terror as modes of political administration had been muted so that they did not make uncomfortable demands upon comfortable, metropolitan consciences. Today, the West’s resurgent colonial ambitions have made that history more relevant than ever even if today’s torturers listen to Heavy metal and HipHop rather than to Bach and Beethoven.
Contemporary geo-politics may be burdened by illegal and reckless military adventures, but it is being imagineered so as to reproduce the world in the same Manichaean patterns that previously defined the racial order of the colonies: them and us, sheep and goats, black and white, cross and crescent.

Rather than seek to sharpen those antagonisms and the political theology they project, we must try and find an alternative which could break the polarity of having either to pretend an impossible tolerance for the unbearable or ethnocentrically to privilege the primary group to which one is assigned by the metaphysics of race and the contingencies of nationality and ethnicity.

In my country, the discomforting history of empire has been deeply repressed and dismissed. Rather than work through the unsettling legacy of the colonial past with the aim of contributing to a convivial and sustainable postcolonial polity or as part of a strategy to avoid repeating past mistakes, we are invited into the comforting folds of a revisionist fantasy which promotes the revival of imperialism in what we are told is an anodyne, postmodern form. That choice sanitises the record of brutality and indifference, replacing it with a deluded conception of homogeneity and connectedness which is usually derived from a selective and partial sketch of the country during the second world war—a moment in which our national collective can conveniently imagine itself to be not only culturally homogenous but also a fortuitous combination of wounded victim and righteous victor. For Brits, if not for the Irish, empire is either irrelevant or simply too historically remote.

I believe that for postcolonial and multicultural societies, the key to producing a sustainable and just ethical re-orientation resides in a new reckoning with that abjected history. It alone can provide a moral resource that sustains a healthier
plurality. Shame, not guilt, is the point of departure. It is my sincere hope that the programme of celebration and commemoration leading up to the tercentenary of the Treaty of Utrecht will be a bold and potent contribution to that task.

1 Guardian 24th June 2009