

# Brexit Trade Delusions Show Why Britain Needs to Confront Its History of Empire

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*On 7 December, 2016, nearly six months after the referendum, **Prime Minister Theresa May** gave a speech to the Gulf Cooperation Council in Bahrain. She said:*

*“As Britain leaves the European Union so we intend to take a leap forward, to look outwards and seek to become the most committed and most passionate advocate of free trade in the world.”*

May also cited the East India Company and while it may seem a peculiar and tone deaf reference – historian **William Dalrymple** describes ‘The Company’ as, “the supreme act of corporate violence in world history” – she was joining the dots between post-Brexit Britain, free trade and empire.

Why? Because May understood that the glories of Britain past – empire and free trade – underpin the fantasies of many Brexiteers. We’ve seen plans to build trade with Commonwealth African countries called ‘Empire 2.0’ and ministers including Jeremy Hunt, Michael Gove and Liam Fox champion a new Royal Yacht Britannia (at a cost of £120 million) to rule the waves as Britain strikes trade deal after trade deal.

Where do we begin – or end – with explaining why evoking empire as the inspirational vision for Brexit Britain is grotesque? We could start with how Britain’s imperialism was founded on racist ideologies, white supremacy and brutal violence that racked up a black and brown bodycount in the tens of millions in a ruthless quest for power and capital.

We could explain that our empire’s vision of free trade was built on protectionism, with tariffs and duties imposed according to British interests and enforced by military might and naval supremacy. Looting – a Hindi word for ransacking – raw materials, labour and food, better describes the extractive and exploitative character of Britain’s empire.

Britain’s history of ‘free’ trade is a fantasy. The reality is a long, dark history of putting profit before people. It’s something which continues today, with the UK supplying billions of pounds of arms to Saudi Arabia that have been used to bomb civilians in Yemen and have contributed to a humanitarian crisis where an estimated 85,000 children have died from starvation.



Spiridione Roma’s *The East Offering Her Riches to Britannia*, 1778, commissioned by the East India Company for the ceiling of East India House in London, a panegyric to British colonial domination |

## **Weavers to beggars**

In a 2015 address to the Oxford Union, Indian MP and historian, Shashi Tharoor outlined how India's world renowned textiles industry was dismantled by Britain. "Britain's industrial revolution was premised on the deindustrialisation of India. For example, the handloom weavers, whose products were exported around the world.

The British came in, smashed their thumbs and broke their looms, imposed tariffs and duties on their cloth and began flooding the world with manufactured cloth, the products of the dark and satanic mills of Victorian England," said Tharoor. "That meant the weavers became beggars and India went from being a world famous exporter of finished cloth to an importer. India's share of the world economy when the British arrived on its shores [1600] was 23%, by the time it left [1947] it was down to less than 4%. Why? Because India was governed for the benefit of Britain," explained the author of *Inglorious Empire*, a sobering account of the British Empire in India.

## **Trading in humans**

However, it's the transatlantic slave trade that is the most shocking example of the British Empire's sacrificing of black lives at the altar of profit. Between 15 million and 20 million Africans were shackled and forcibly transported from West Africa to the Caribbean, central America and South America. When Britain abolished its trade in human beings in 1833, 245 years after it began, the government compensated British slave owners £20 million (£17 billion in today's money), for 'loss of property'.

Slavery devastated the continent, causing depopulation and wars and instability, while the loss of tens of millions of men stunted agricultural production, leading to underdevelopment. Just 20 years after America abolished slavery in 1865, the 'scramble for Africa' began and by the early 20th century the vast majority of the entire continent was colonised - and looted - by European powers.

## **Trade and war**

The mid-19th century Opium Wars capture how Britain's 'free trade' crusade overwhelmingly served Britain's interest. Britain declared war on China to protect the eye-watering revenues of its merchants who monopolised the lucrative opium trade. The East India Company forced desperate farmers in India to grow poppies (when they could be growing food to sell and eat), ran vast opium processing factories and the trade with China, where millions were ravaged by opium addiction. When Britain's warships defeated China in 1842, China was forced to accept free trade, including the damaging, morally bankrupt trade in opium. This is a glimpse of what British 'free trade' looked like and why it's deeply troubling to see it and empire being lauded by politicians.

Colonialism and its free trade zealotry established the framework of globalised neoliberalism today, with inequality and pillaging of the global south its defining traits.

## **Empire state of mind**

Since the sun set on empire, Britain has failed to have a meaningful and open discussion

about it and how it's shaped the world today, whether migration in Britain, the slave trade, free trade, its marauding nature, the Opium Wars, concentration camps in South Africa, the Partitions of Ireland, Palestine and India, or why regions of West Africa were known as the gold coast, ivory coast, grain coast and slave coast (as 20-year-old rapper, Dave, notes in his track 'Black').

Instead our institutions display an empire state of mind – it's evident in the treatment of Windrush citizens, British citizens illegally turfed out because of their skin colour, the Foreign Office's recent recruitment drive with adverts asking, "Fancy an African adventure?", and a racist criminal justice system.

This mindset is damaging trade talks: today Indian companies own Jaguar, Land Rover and Tetley, and thousands of steel workers' jobs in Port Talbot are in the hands of Indian multinational giant Tata. And yet sources close to trade talks between India and the UK describe Britain's stance as "we want your business, we don't want your people".



Cape Coast Castle, one of about forty 'slave castles' built on the 'Gold Coast' of West Africa (now Ghana). Its large underground dungeon held up to 1,000 slaves | Credit: Julius Cruickshank/Wikimedia

### **Education, education, education**

Education would help to redress the impact of the colonial propaganda project, Operation Legacy, which systematically destroyed millions of empire documents, and is surely a contributing factor in a near majority of Britons saying empire was a good thing in public polling today.

Teaching empire in schools and universities from myriad perspectives is not only a necessity to unpick the empire fantasies inherent in Britain's national character, but because nearly one in ten people in Britain has heritage in places Britain plundered; it is our collective history.

There are grassroots initiatives doing this work and stimulating much needed discussion and analysis of empire, such as the decolonising movement in universities, Colonial Countryside and Our Migration Story. In time we might see the end of empire nostalgia being used to sell us stuff, such as Marks & Spencer 'Empire Pie' and Gourmet Burger Kitchen 'Old Colonial Burger', and slave auction worksheets being used in a secondary school. Brexit may have bored us to tears, but it's revealed 21st century Britain is haunted by the ghosts of empire and rather than being used to Make Britain Great Again, surely they need to be laid to rest.

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*Featured image: Edward Duncan's painting of the East India Company iron steam ship Nemesis destroying Chinese war junks in Anson's Bay, 1843 | Credit: National Maritime Museum, London*

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