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Lives Scarred by History: Portuguese Colonial War and Disability¹

Text

"Why the hell doesn't anyone talk about this? I'm beginning to think that the one and a half million men who were sent to Africa never existed and I'm just giving you some spiel"

António Lobo Antunes

The Colonial War (1961-1974) is amongst one of the foundations for the socio-political reality of contemporary Portugal. In fact, the democratic transition, initiated with the Carnation Revolution (25th of April, 1974), is intimately linked to the conflict which, between 1961 and 1974, opposed the Portuguese Armed Forces to the independency movements in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. In the African Portuguese speaking countries, the Colonial War was crucial for the independencies, and also had significant repercussions in the long conflicts that followed it in the new independent countries, namely in the conflicts taking place in Angola and Mozambique..

The war for the maintenance of Portuguese colonies was draining the metropolis of funds and men, thus being too hard an effort for Portugal to make at the time. Portuguese Colonial War was fought in three different three battlefields (Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique), lasted thirteen years, led to the deployment of more than a million soldiers, and caused 8290 deaths and 30 000 disabled soldiers (just to state the figures in the Portuguese side). Albeit its historical relevance, the Colonial War has never been given a space of commemoration in the process of the democratic and post-imperial reconstruction of Portuguese society. From various points of view, the disabled soldiers represented the vivid expression of a collective trauma which the democratic social order has wished to forget. In the words of a disabled war veteran:

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I don't know, don't know how to explain it, maybe as a defence for a long time I forgot all about the war, keeping it in a very high attic, or in a very deep cellar, for a long time. And the former soldiers also did the same, generally speaking. The whole population suffered something akin to post-traumatic stress disorder, wishing to forget the war. The 25th of April came, and it was a sort of Spring after a long Winter, not being very convenient to talk about Winter or Spring, and so it remained forgotten for a long time. (Interviewee 1)

In fact, for decades the Colonial War has been a taboo that only now -- fifty years from its inception -- starts to be broken. During the war the dictatorial regime never recognized the existence of a war and it always tried to hide the negative consequences of the conflict (ADFA, 1999). A telling example of this attitude is the way in which the bodies of the soldiers were removed from the boats throughout the night or the way in which the wounded soldiers had to remain out of sight during recovery and rehabilitation (Maurício, 1994; Antunes, 1996). The period after the Carnation Revolution created a socio-political moment in which the War was seen as an unjust and useless conflict, an appalling stubbornness — against the winds of history and the self-determination of African populations — which everybody wished to forget. Moreover, the silencing of the Colonial War was also the product of the conviction that raising the issue would lead to the confrontation of a whole range of acts of extreme violence (including the massacre of entire populations) which ought to involve complex processes of attribution and assumption of guilt. Therefore, a new political and ideological order was founded, which was anchored to an identity narrative of Portugal which actively led to the silencing of the Colonial War.

In this sense, through the recollection of life-histories with the disabled war veterans we aim to give lifelike density to the long-lasting impact of the Colonial War: to denounce the violence of exclusion perpetrated by a policy of oblivion; and to recognize how subaltern testimonies may counter the hegemonic social narratives.

In order to represent the disabled veterans from the Colonial War, the *Association of the Disabled of the Armed Forces* (ADFA) was founded on May 14, 1974. The guiding principles and aims which led to the founding of this association were already apparent before the Carnation Revolution, but it was not until democracy was instated that the association had the freedom and opportunity to assert itself and become an institution. A structure that would address the serious repercussions which soldiers were suffering from after having been scarred by the experience of the Colonial War was declared urgent, as this was the inevitable consequence of thirteen years during which more than one million

youths were sent to the War. In this sense, ADFA appears as a reaction, both to the insufficient responses provided by the Liga dos Combatentes (War Veterans League) and, more generally, to the incipient indemnification policies which were in place until the end of the War. Although ADFA has been successful in achieving some compensation for the veterans, the exclusion and silencing of the ex-soldiers of the Colonial War is still very much a reality today.

From the life-histories and reflections of the disabled war veterans, as from their organized political discourse, a contradiction arises between the war veterans' "excess of memory" (in the sense that the Colonial War has scarred their lives, minds and bodies) and the manifest silence of Portuguese society as regards such a significant conflict. Far from being a clear way of transporting the past to the present, the usage of memory overlaps with the active construction of meaning and the production of narratives. As Antze and Lambek have summarised, this process is permeated by the values and relations of power in vigour in a specific social context:

memories are never simply records of the past, but are interpretive reconstructions that bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, and social contexts of recall and commemoration (1996: vii).

Such constructivism highlights the indetermination of the past itself (Hacking, 1995). In the light of this indetermination, both as far as the contradiction between personal and social memory are concerned, the way in which certain collective experiences are treated by the social memory stand out – in what is the hegemonic narrative of a particular "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983; Connerton, 1989). Based upon this, the relation between Portuguese society and the memory of the Colonial War must be understood in two senses: so as to understand the reasons for the excision of such a significant moment of recent history from social memory, and in which way the memories and individual paths of those who lived through the War are dealing with this silence.

As has been seen from many contexts, the moment when nations open up to confront their guilt and traumas is a particularly challenging and potentially enriching time (Barkan, 2001). In this case, the process represents progress in the relationship between the nations in conflict, but also constitutes an important step in the relationship between societies and ex-soldiers which were forgotten in the meanwhile: "each collective act of remembering makes it more possible for individuals to recollect and tell their personal stories, (...) trauma shared by a whole community creates a potential public space for retelling"

(Kirmayer, 1996: 189). At a time when the omission of violence of the Colonial War is being increasingly questioned by Portuguese society, the conditions are being established for public reflection.

Our research has showed that the lives interrupted by the Colonial War and scarred by disability contain significant elements of marginalisation and distancing in relation to Portuguese society, as a result of the dramatic encounter of these factors of disruption. From this position of “exteriority” arise two exclusion vectors which have been granted very little importance in the context of the social analysis of inequality and the mechanisms of exclusion in Portuguese society: disability and the experience of war.

The first vector relates to the exclusion disabled persons in general. As in other societies, disabled persons in Portugal face serious obstacles to their social participation and inclusion: discriminatory beliefs and attitudes; architectural, transportation, and communication barriers; insufficient, inadequate or non-existent support in the regular education system; exclusionary criteria for higher education and employment; systematic exclusion from the economic activity; precarious salaries and precarious work-conditions (Martins, 2006). Furthermore, the social movement of disabled persons in Portugal is very embryonic, a lasting consequence of the control exercised over civil society during the Portuguese dictatorship (Santos and Nunes, 2004). Contrary to the UK and USA where the politicization of disability through the social model of disability has had an important impact (Barnes, 2003; Hahn, 2002), in Portugal disability remains unpoliticized and attached to the individual’s impairment. Due to the objective living conditions of the majority of Portuguese disabled people, the organizations of disabled people, since its beginning, have focused on improving living standards. The result was setting an agenda centered on the elimination of physical barriers and on the access and maintenance of social benefits to cover the costs of living with impairment. Consequently, the organizations of disabled people ended up investing most of their efforts in the provision of services, functioning as an extension of the Portuguese welfare state. Hence, the human and material resources available in the organizations tend to be diverted from a political stance based transforming of the disabling structures in society.

In such a sociopolitical context, ADFA has been an important agent in the struggle of disabled peoples’ social movement in Portugal. It is one of the most important

organizations of disabled people, and some of the rights conquered for the disabled war veterans have been extended to the disabled people at large. Notwithstanding, the rights conquered have more to do with reparations of war (social benefits, medical care, etc.) than with an effective social transformation towards inclusion and participation in mainstream society.

The second vector of exclusion concerns the social neglect suffered by the veterans upon their return to Portugal, i.e. the neglect of their accounts concerning the fight for social reinsertion. In this sense, the valorization of ex-soldiers' accounts creates a perspective which broadens the way Portugal has been represented at different times. The issues at stake are, on one hand, the ex-soldiers' fight (as veterans and as disabled individuals) for the recognition of their war experiences and accounts; and on the other, postcolonial Portugal, in its defining forms of exclusion and inclusion, as a socio-political reality and identity formation. At stake is a struggle against the oblivion of their experiences of displacement, war and trauma.

In this sense, the lives interrupted by the Colonial War and scarred by disability contain significant elements of marginalization and distancing in relation to Portuguese society, as a result of the dramatic encounter of these factors of disruption. From this "exteriority" position arise two exclusion vectors which have been granted very little importance in the context of the social analysis of inequality and the mechanisms of exclusion in Portuguese society. The first vector is related to the exclusion of the disabled in general and the relation of war veterans amidst the social movement of disabled people in Portugal. This perspective will nourish the idea that the compensation for the war veterans inevitably requires the creation of inclusion factors, which are also necessary for all other disabled people. The second vector, concerns the soldiers' personal histories through social neglect suffered upon their return to Portugal, i.e. the neglect of their accounts and their fight for social inclusion. Interestingly, the experience of war as part of a colonial army and the struggle against oppression upon return entail complex processes of identity formation:

I'm conscious that people don't merge easily their pasts as colonial soldiers with their present as activists for democracy, for civil rights, or any of the kind. They don't merge it easily, and in most cases they haven't dealt with the problem, and that's why the majority of former soldiers either play as victims or as heroes. Remain in the mainstream is not very pleasant. Hero at least in a sense of deserving admiration, they've fought for the motherland, war serving to save lives and not to take lives, and all kinds of stupid ideas. I hear the most stupid things, silly too, which

they say about that, because people want to give meaning to that moment in time, which we've completely wasted. Well, I'm very incongruent. I don't deny that, and don't intend to oppose myself to that characteristic of mine. I'm several things simultaneously, and that's alright, I accept myself the way I am. That's contradictory in me and I accept that condition, I accept that at the time that was the way I thought, as a matter of fact defensible, and honourable. I accept that fact in its own time, as something that should be looked upon with an historical perspective, it was like that at the time. But today I see it as something wrong, I find it right and wrong at the same time, I have no problem in falling into contradictions regarding that subject. I think we should uphold our contradictions, if not we will go on lying to each other and to ourselves. That was so at the time but I've changed, I've learned things. (Interviewee 2)

The silencing of the Colonial War from social memory has a powerful counterpart in the indelible marks that it has left on many of those who fought in the War. We are living in a time in which the silencing of Colonial War in the light of the narrative construction of democratic Portugal is showing signs of increasing permeability to the voices evoking it.

The social space occupied by scarred populations may enable stories to break through routine cultural codes to express counter discourse that assaults and even perhaps undermines the taken-for-granted meaning of things as they are. Out of such desperate and defeated experiences stories may emerge that call for and at times may bring about change that alters utterly the commonplace – both at the level of collective experience and at the level of individual subjectivity (Das and Kleinman, 2001: 21).

In that sense, exploring disability as testimonies of war and social exclusion is to value unrepresented living archives, subaltern histories that challenge the silence and the partial depictions imposed by the elite narratives of colonial history. In that way, the violence that pervaded colonialism and the exclusions that persist in postcolonial societies come forward, as writing of social memory collides with these narratives of disability.

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