



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 30 May 2020



Tchandisila (Heritage): Gamba | 2019-10 | Yara Monteiro (courtesy of the artist)
[digital collage of original photographs from family archives (1960s)]

THE IMPOTENCE OF POST-MEMORY

Roberto Vecchi

More than just a message of unity about our common responsibility for the transmission of memory, post-memory is a watershed. As much as it has been prized in cultural studies and the arts, the memory of the generations who follow those who bear witness has been underestimated by social scientists and historians. It is field that is controversial, at times conflictual, and always strange. The



causes for this controversy are many and it is almost unnecessary to list all of the limits that have been noted: that the field was established within literary and cultural studies as a deformation of theory and critical reflection, that it has a complex relation, emerging in the 1990s in the United States of America, with the establishment of the memory of the Holocaust, that it establishes a problematic distinction between the proper and improper, and, as often happens with cultural fashions, that in some quarters its popularity has transformed it into an uncritical fetish.

Post-memory emerges from lexical impropriety: like all terms prefixed with “pre” or “post”, its definition is delegated to a supplementary concept, which is itself problematic, so the problem is multiplied. In this case, moreover, it is the meaning itself that is improper: post-memory seems to delineate a time at the end of, or beyond, memory. It seems to neutralize and sterilize the concept that it would save and strengthen.

However, beginning from these limits we can infer that more than being a set of categories, post-memory is the fruit of a common concern. If experience (direct, ocular, face-to-face, testimonial, etc.) is the key condition for memory, what is the possibility for memory when experience dies with those who bear it? What is the horizon for memory after the death of the last witness? Debate about the future of memory is tending towards uncertain territory. The reference point is muddled when we speak of individual memories as inexorably destined to erasure unless they are fixed on to some support. (This explains the appeal of the era of testimony measured more in quantitative than qualitative terms.)

In fact, before the term was invented by Marianne Hirsch in the 90s, post-memory was a problem that already existed and was the subject of research. It was part of the less brilliant but more accurately named field of the transgenerational transmission of memory. Somewhat ahead of its time, this framework mainly referred to research on the effect of experiencing trauma. Transmission was organized according to original concepts, like in the field of cognitive psychology. These include *telescoping*, the transmission of memories inscribed at various removes from the traumatic experience, moving from older to newer generations. Later generations in turn make these memories into their own through image and imagination. It is no surprise that the strongest work of this type emerges from Germany in the post-war period, and in the context of psychoanalysis, through scholars such as Jürgen Straub and Kurt Grünberg. It is no surprise, either, that it is closely connected to studies of the Holocaust. Behind the idea of necessarily uneven transmission between generations is Freud, particularly *Totem and*



Taboo. No generation can conceal its psychic processes from the next. The tendency in this case is for inheritance to be felt as a transmission of burdens from the past, accumulated within, and irremediably conditioned by, another generation. In this way we can describe the attitude of the second generation when they inherit traumatic residues from older family members. The transmission is damaging even without experience itself.

In the critical constellation of memory studies, transmission has a broad meaning. Just as post-memory studies was rapidly emerging, James Young suggested that the verb remember can have two meanings. He wrote that one – its conventional form – is when the one who remembers is the holder of the experience, but that “remember” – in quotes – is also when the content of the memory was not experienced. A rotating field like this, which is multiple and slippery, explains the impossibility of reaching an exact definition of post-memory. The Argentine critic Beatriz Sarlo understands this fragility. She suggests that not only “post”-memory, but memory itself, functions as a kind of impropriety (experienced by others, articulated only in fragments) that is reactivated and projected across time. Beyond terminological or conceptual alternatives, the transmission of memory to future generations – post-memory or vicarious memory – reinforces the broader, universal problem of salvaging uncomfortable and threatened pasts. Without prefixes or folds, without adjectives or qualifiers. From one generation to another.

Given her relationship to the work, it is no coincidence that Sarlo comes to think about post-memory or its disappearance through Walter Benjamin’s theses on the idea of history. Benjamin asserts the primacy of memory for preserving the past. The key term, although used discreetly, is “remembrance” (*Eingedenken*). It is characterized qualitatively (not cumulatively) in relation to pasts: through calendar time, not clock time. Above all, time re-asserts its centrality. It fractures the myths of historical continuity, in becoming a force that is not linear, but messianic. Memory casts a paradoxical alliance between materialism and theology, between everyday life and festival-time. Following Benjamin’s lead, we can turn to another powerful image of remembrance that combines fragility and strength, meagerness and resistance: remembrance as a piece of straw. In this weak but persistent image emerges, perhaps, the contemporary value of an idea like post-memory, at once elusive and significant.

Philosophy, from Aristotelian metaphysics to today, passing through Bartleby, shows clearly that impotence is not the opposite of potency. Rather, it expresses another power, the power of no, which



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creates the conditions for the act and its accomplishment. It is in this sense that an impotent concept like post-memory can – as it mediates partial, altered and threatened pasts – become a sign that the memory that seeks to translate the past is always, as Benjamin puts it, “at the instant of danger”. This moment of remembrance illuminates the survival of something that oscillates between false memory and the vertiginous abyss of loss. In its precariousness, this moment encounters an extreme, fragile resistance. It is perhaps the impotence of post-memory which makes it unanswerable. But it is a necessary and inescapable question. It reveals the power of no against the uncountable losses, without trace, of our pasts.

Translated by **Archie Davies**

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MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.

