



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
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Nobel Hungarian writer Imre Kertész with German Chancellor Angela Merkel
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WHO OWNS...?

António Sousa Ribeiro

The title of one of the most outstanding essays by Imre Kertész simply formulates the question “Who Owns Auschwitz?”. Although it is quite short, this is an essay which confronts in an exemplary manner the question of the persistence of memory and of the role of subsequent generations in the preservation of memory. The inescapable question that the survivor from the extermination camp must ask is synthesized right at the beginning:

Holocaust survivors will have to face the facts: as they grow weaker with age, Auschwitz is slipping out of their hands. But to whom will it belong? Obviously, to the next generation, and to the one after that—as long as they continue to lay claim to it, of course.

At first sight, this reflection seems just to express the most elementary common sense. But the question raised is much more complex than it seems, as the final note clearly indicates: memory, even the memory of genocidal violence epitomized by the name of Auschwitz will only survive as long as there is someone to vindicate it. Such a vindication is not based on a simple process of transmission, it represents, rather, a gesture of appropriation, the appropriation of a memory that is not just passively acknowledged but chosen as worthy of preservation. There may be many reasons for this appropriation, not the least reasons that are grounded in a family relationship. But, on a wider level, the most profound reason is rooted in the sharing of a notion of humanity, in a gesture of compassion that leads not just to the desire to gain knowledge of the suffering others have experienced, but to incorporate the memory of that suffering into the framework of our own relation with the world.

In his essay, Kertész leaves no doubt concerning the great critical distance separating him from many forms of appropriation and even instrumentalization of the memory of the Holocaust by a second and third generation, but this does not blur the lucidity with which he analyses the process in the terms I have mentioned and, in particular, it does not affect his clear conscience that, knowledge being a legacy, the form in which the appropriation of that legacy may take place is not subject to legislation by its original holder. Such a lucidity is not universally shared. As a matter of fact, one may easily come across an often resentful and even aggressive gesture of refusal on the part of the first generation concerning the legitimacy of the appropriation of its memories by other generations, especially when there is no biological bond in the relationship. However, without that appropriation, the memory of experienced suffering will not survive. And the fact that this survival will remain in the hands of someone with no other legitimacy than the fact of belonging to a common humanity simply represents a practical demonstration of the enormous potential of processes of memory to the configuration of social identities.

It is apparent that the expansion of memory and, namely, its transformation into public memory often brings along more than problematic consequences, ranging from trivializing manners of appropriation with purely commercial intentions - the vast array of recently published novels with the word “Auschwitz” in the title may suffice as an example - to the appropriation for political ends, most

flagrantly exemplified by the attempts to monopolize the memory of the Holocaust by the state of Israel. Processes of memory and postmemory are not homogeneous nor consensual, they define a field that is intertwined with more or less violent conflicts. Within such conflicts, the question of legitimacy and, ultimately, of memory as a “property”, the question of knowing “who owns”, is invariably present. To answer this question in restrictive terms by vindicating this memory exclusively to this or another group and, thus, preventing its sharing on the widest possible basis, is, in the end, a form of violence and a paradoxical violation of the duty of memory.

If the right of the first generation to its memories is not simply transmitted as a legacy, this entails that there is no “natural” legitimacy for particular groups or individuals to claim that legacy just for themselves. There is no doubt that, for those who are the victims of racism on a daily basis, the question of the memory of colonialism takes on an existential dimension that does not exist in the same way for other social groups. This does not imply, however, that other groups or individuals which are not victimized in the same way should be excluded. This is not a question of speaking “in the name of”, of vindicating any protagonism or of wanting to occupy places of enunciation that may belong more legitimately to others. The question is to create the conditions that may provide maximum resonance and the best conditions possible for a projection into our time of memories which, by their significance, are beyond any form of private appropriation. To create and ensure the conditions of permanence of more memory, as an act of justice and recognition, cannot be complacent with the pursuit of exclusivity - in the name of a utopia of humanity which becomes concrete precisely by not allowing the suffering of the victims to be erased.

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