



MEMOIRS - FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | **MEMOIRS** - CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 27 February 2021



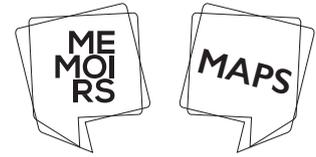
Mercado | Eugénia Mussa | 2020 | courtesy of the artist

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THE COLONIAL UNCONSCIOUS

António Sousa Ribeiro

It is a commonplace to say that the production of memory inevitably and concomitantly carries with it the production of forgetfulness. There are many forms of forgetfulness, the most insidious of which is undoubtedly the erasure of memory, the rewriting of the past as part of a deliberate strategy of intervention in the present. The most extreme form of this erasure is negationism or revisionism, for

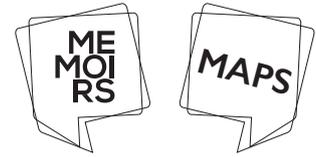


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example, the denial of the Holocaust, which, for good reasons, the legislation of various countries refers to the criminal sphere. There are, however, other forms of forgetfulness, much more innocent, but whose consequences are equally profoundly negative, since they deprive us of instruments of justice and shape our present in an impoverishing and exclusionary way. One of these forms, of manifest actuality in the current Portuguese public debate, is determined by what I call the colonial unconscious.

The history of the different European colonialisms is a diverse history, with different paths in their historical specificity, but which converge on fundamental points. One of these points is based on what can be called the colonial difference, i.e. an ideological construction according to which there is a fundamental difference, an essential dividing line, between the European coloniser and the colonised subject, whose most relevant indicator is the concept of race, but which can also be defined according to several other markers, and which legitimizes the exercise of power and, if necessary, violence against the colonised, including epistemic violence, which only consents the narrative of the colonizer and silences for complete what could be the narrative of the colonized. The concept of difference thus established, basically shaped according to the dialectic of the master and the servant, has settled deep into the European unconscious, and even defines European relations in terms of a North-South divide, as was recently well exemplified by the prejudiced view, by German or Dutch political leaders, of a Southern Europe as inhabited by people without a work ethic, a vision, moreover, entirely coincident with the vision of the African developed in the processes of colonization.

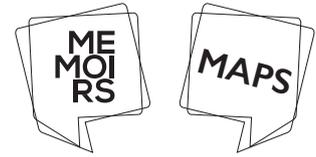
During the 19th century, especially in the second half, with the effective occupation of African territories by the European powers, the colonial project came to be completely confused with the national and imperial projects being consolidated. The strength of the national-colonial narratives developed in this context extends to our present and recurs in the form of a supposedly irrefutable common sense. Portugal is no exception: in essence, the patriotic discourse that became hegemonic in the last decades of the nineteenth century, finding its apogee in the crisis of the “British ultimatum” and defining the colonial possession (the colonial “vocation”) as an inseparable component of a national design, is not structurally very different from what would become the discourse of the New State. This, however, notably through the instrumentalization of the luso-tropicalist thesis, was particularly successful in consolidating a benevolent narrative based on the concept of a national whole that encompassed the “overseas provinces” and presented itself as the natural extension of a historical continuum in which the greatness and exceptionality of the nation were an uncontroversial fact.



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Almost fifty years after 25th of April, it is clear that this successful narrative continues to be internalized even by more recent generations and remains vividly latent, ready to come to light at the first opportunity. Inscribed in the colonial unconscious, it is not by chance that the sphere of affirmation of this narrative is governed above all by emotional dimensions, making it all the more difficult to submit to criticism, namely to historical criticism. Two recent examples bear full witness to this and, while not being in themselves particularly relevant, become very significant as symptoms of the way certain forms of memory worship perpetuate the logic of forgetfulness grounded in the Portuguese and European colonial unconscious.

Much has already been written on the question of the preservation of the coats of arms drawn on the vegetal cover of Praça do Império in Lisbon, representing, among other entities, the “overseas provinces”. It matters little that the historical criticism, for example, of Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti Chaudhuri in their *History of Portuguese Expansion*, has long shown how these coats of arms, added to the design of the square under the XI National Exhibition of Floriculture, occurred in 1961, are spurious in relation to the initial urban project and constituted a supposedly memorialistic instrument to affirm, at a time when the “Empire” was entering its final crisis, the idea of national continuity, the same one that, soon, would serve as a legitimization to the Colonial War. The public outcry of indignation in defense of the permanence of the coats of arms, materialized in a petition with thousands of signatures and in positions taken by prominent figures can hardly find rational explanation and can only be analyzed in the light of the persistence of the colonial unconscious to which I have been referring. Particularly significant, in my view, is a text by landscape architect Cristina Castel-Branco published in the newspaper *Público* of 20 February last. For the author, the preservation of the coats of arms is justified by the “connection to the place” (it is not well understood of whom - of the users of the square, including, perhaps, the masses of tourists who, in normal times, constitute the majority of these users? Of the Lisboners? Of the Portuguese in general?), and by the “community effusion” underlying this connection, again without it becoming clear what this community is. At no point in the text is there any reflection on the meaning of the coats of arms, treated simply as if they were an element of heritage like any other. Once the “naturalness” of the presence of the coats of arms is thus defined - according to this logic, they apparently should remain there until the end of time lest our collective being be seriously amputated -, everything then turns into a simple technical problem, easily solvable, from the point of view of the author, if one passes from the vegetal element to the mineral, inscribing the coats of arms in the form of Portuguese sidewalk.



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Does this mean, then, that the author or those who equally defend the symbolic importance of the coats of arms are motivated by an impenitent nostalgia for colonialism? This will certainly be the case in some instances, but there is nothing to allow generalization, on the contrary. What is beyond doubt is that they are based, one might say instinctively, on an essentialist and static perception of a supposed community and the thoughtless acceptance of a problematic historical continuity, which lead to the disconnection of “heritage” from the context that gives it meaning. The inability to assume that societies are transformed and go through moments of rupture that, over time, lead them to stop recognizing themselves in any kind of memorialist unanimism perpetuates a purely ideological narrative that silences and excludes any alternative memories.

A second recent case, very different, are the posthumous tributes to Marcelino da Mata. The facts are known and have been corroborated, notably by Mário Cláudio, with extensive and direct knowledge of the facts: Marcelino da Mata, an African commando in the service of the Portuguese army, has been the perpetrator of war crimes and was widely known for his complete lack of scruples in the conduct of acts of war and, in particular, in the inhuman and murderous treatment of prisoners. The full responsibility of the Portuguese State is evident in this respect. Since the Estado Novo never recognized that it was waging a war, always defining the conflict as police actions and the maintenance of order against “terrorists” in the pay of foreign powers, it also dispensed with any obedience to the Geneva Convention. From this point of view, Marcelino da Mata was only a particularly cruel executor of a military strategy he integrated with special efficiency. The exaltation of his “individual courage and bravery” in the official praise rendered to him posthumously - as if courage and bravery were values in themselves and there was no need to ask in what context and to what end they were deployed - is only a particularly shocking moment of the continuum of silence that continues to envelop the colonial past. The array of comments that flooded the social networks and the boxes of comments of the newspapers associating themselves to the exaltation of the career of Marcelino da Mata as a patriotic example and a national value was well illustrative of how, for the colonial unconscious, the memory of the victims has no right to exist so that the legitimacy of the dominant national narrative is not undermined.

Among the champions of the supposedly glorious memory of a war criminal there are certainly not only hardened colonialists. From far-right militants to Colonial War veterans, some of whom may understand that they can only make sense of their lives if they make sense of their forced participation

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in an absurd war, and to citizens with very different personal and political positions, there will be everything. But also here, especially in the way in which the rhetorical figure of the “hero”, of the “national hero”, was repeatedly brandished by way of an argument, the selectivity of memory is blatantly revealed and so is the way in which an apparent gesture in defense of memory is a brutal gesture of silencing.

We know from other historical examples, such as the memory of the Algerian War in France, that, as a rule, a long time has to pass before a dispassionate confrontation with a past that is traumatic in many ways is possible. But this confrontation is an ethical and political imperative, and it is an imperative of justice, that justice that is demanded by the deafening silence of the excluded, in the face of which indifference, forgetfulness or simple ignorance are not admissible.

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