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

Saturday, 27 July 2019



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PORTUGAL-ANGOLA: RETURNS AND DETOURS FOR PLURAL MEMORIES IN PORTUGUESE SOCIETY

Irène dos Santos

Since the 2000s there has emerged in Portugal a plurality of narratives on the colonial past, with a multiplication of fictional and biographic accounts published by/on veterans of the colonial war, along with deserters, members of the resistance and anti-colonialists (see Newsletter MEMOIRS June 15th 2019), and *retornados*. Such memories and postmemories, under analysis in the academic fields of

literary theory and postcolonial studies, have contributed to the visibility of the memorial question in public space (1). In parallel, the concept was also mobilised in research on movements of resistance to dictatorship (2): this process as a whole reflects the emergence of multivocality and historical heterogeneity, illustrating the importance of 'memory' as a fundamental element of democracy (3).

Finally, in the 2010s, memory became a public issue. Associated with a post-1974 generation - post-dictatorship, post-colonisation, post-colonial wars, post-repatriation and post-PREC -, this process went far beyond the matter of colonial permanence in Portuguese society. Indeed, this generation claims a new relationship of Portuguese society with its recent past, the construction of politicised memory and memorial policy. This betrays a change in the meaning of memory as an analytic category - it becomes a category of social and political practice mobilised by the individuals and groups we observe (such as the memorial claims of Afro-descendant activists: cf. Newsletter MEMOIRS "Invisible Portuguese"). This phenomenon has been observed in the other former imperial nations of Europe, France in particular in the 1980s, around the issue of racism and discrimination experienced by post-colonial immigrants and their children, a situation that gave rise, after 1990, to a succession of Memory Laws (4). Since then, French society remains characterised by competing memories, a situation that challenges the 'social efficacy' of memory policy (5), seeking reconciliation and democratic togetherness in societies with competing memories.

In 2012, I was setting off for Luanda, Angola, to conduct research on the Portuguese presence there in a context of an accelerated migratory flow following the financial crisis in Portugal. With high media coverage, such departures of skilled manpower resonated as an irony of history, some seeing in them a reversal of power relations between the former metropole and a former colony. In Lisbon, I obtained from relatives and colleagues who had already returned the contact information of 'Portuguese' people (6) who had left to work and, in some cases, even settle in Angola. These included Nuno, an architect expatriated since 2006, but also the son of *retornados*, a part of his story I was told he would refuse to share with me.

This raised several questions. Given the abundance of accounts (novels, autobiographies, photo albums, documentaries made from family archives, theatrical plays, etc.) of the lives of Portuguese people in Africa and their 'return' to Portugal post-1974 emerging in Portuguese public space, why would this individual, who was in his forties and was successful in Angola, married to a Brazilian woman who had

emigrated to Portugal and joined him there, refuse to talk about the past? And what was this past? What connection did he make between his presence in Angola and the fact that he was born in this territory he had left as a child? And what impact did his current experience have on his relationship with this painful family past?

Finally, in one of our exchanges in Luanda, Nuno had much to say about his past as transmitted by his parents, and how his presence in Angola reactivated family memories collectively, reinforcing trans-generational ties. Although his parents always refused to visit him in Angola, other cases show that such 'returns' may reactivate physical ties in the generation of adult *retornados* who never imagined they would ever go back to this lost land.

Nuno's 'return' to the places of his family memory, especially the house where he was born but whose door remained closed to him – "occupied today by an Angolan couple [...] of course they are at home there!" – sheds light on this ambivalence: on the one hand, the often inexpressible desire to go back to an unaltered past; on the other hand, the urge to find one's place in post-colonial Angolan society, far from the colonial heritage.

It seems necessary to make a distinction here between "colonial past" and "colonial memory", since the accounts of individuals and families of *retornados* very often do not refer explicitly to the historical - colonial - situation, but more to 'ordinary lives' (7), sometimes idealised, silencing the experience of colonial domination. Yet, some of these stories also show that such 'returns' to Angola by people of Nuno's generation may actually be critical detours, when they give rise, upon returning to Portugal, to critical postures on the colonial persistence within Portuguese society. In this European context, could the Portuguese case represent an alternative: something that, through a post-colonial journey, may lead to a more egalitarian society that accepts a plural public retelling of the past?

(1) António Sousa Ribeiro & Margarida Calafate Ribeiro (eds.), 2016, *Geometrias da memória: configurações pós-coloniais*, Porto: Edições Afrontamento.
(2) Paula Godinho, 2001, *Memórias da Resistência Rural no Sul – Couço (1958-1962)*, Oeiras, Celta.
(3) Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, 2012, "O Fim da história de regressos e o retorno a África: leituras da literatura contemporânea portuguesa", in E. Brugioni, J. Passos, A. Sarabando & M.M. Silva (eds.), *Itinerâncias. Percursos e Representações da pós-colonialidade. Journeys. Postcolonial trajectories and representation* : 89-99, Braga, Universidade do Minho.
(4) Gayssot Law (July 1990) banning all acts of racism, anti-Semitism or xenophobia; Law of January 2001 recognising the Armenian genocide; Taubira Law (May 2001) recognising the slave trade as a crime against humanity; Law on colonialism (February 2005) on "the positive role of the French presence abroad".
(5) Sarah Gensburger & Sandrine Lefranc, 2017, À *quoi servent les politiques de mémoire*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo.
(6) Quotation marks draw attention to fluidity of identities, especially in a migratory context: in this case, research has shown that some Portuguese identify themselves as Angolan or White Angolan.
(7) Florence Haegel & Marie-Claire Lavabre, 2010, *Destins ordinaires. Identité singulière et mémoire partagée*, Paris, Presses de SciencesPo.

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