



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, 25 December 2021



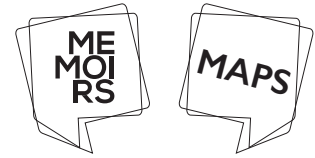
untitled | 2018 | **Nuno Simão Gonçalves** (courtesy of the photographer)

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António Sousa Ribeiro

The first newsletter of the MEMOIRS project is dated May 5, 2018. In it, Margarida Calafate Ribeiro wrote about the postcolonial ghosts loose in Europe and I illustrated this theme by addressing the conflicts of memory and postmemory present in the controversy surrounding the change of street names in the so-called “African Quarter” of Berlin. In my brief text, it was stressed that the imminent change of the Berlin toponymy, with the removal of names linked to the German colonial past, was the result of several years of pressure from organisations grouped in the “Postcolonial Berlin” initiative carried out

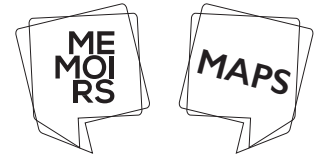


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to a large extent by German citizens of African descent. Also highlighted, however, was the difficulty of bringing to German public memory the memory of the colonial past, parallel to the reluctance of the German State to accept responsibility for, among other things, the genocidal processes that marked that past.

More than three years later, these issues remain extremely virulent and continue to fuel a cyclical public debate in which what some have called the colonial unconscious of European societies remains very much present, translated into an attitude of rejection of the problems of a multicultural society inevitably marked by the heavy legacy of the colonial past. But, on the other hand, much has changed, starting with the growing protagonism of voices that until not so long ago remained inaudible and that increasingly place the issue of colonial legacies at the centre of public attention. There are many factors involved, starting with the broad waves of indignation motivated by violent displays of racism, including the homicidal violence that killed Bruno Candé or George Floyd. But also at other levels, such as, e.g., the gradual change in state policies, of which the German government's recognition of the genocide of the Hereros and Namas in present-day Namibia is an emblematic instance, or at the level of the debate on the restitution of colonial property, a growing attitude of change is evident. In the latter context, among other examples that are surfacing more and more frequently, the decision of the Berlin museums, after years of refusal and controversy, to return to Nigeria the bronzes of Benin stored in their collections takes on a special significance. It is a situation that cannot easily be generalized. After all, in the case of the famous bronzes, the illegitimacy of provenance - the total looting carried out in the course of the British punitive expedition of 1897 - is widely known and documented. The so-called "provenance research" is, in other cases, much more difficult and may not lead to sufficiently conclusive results - quite often, the name of who donated or sold a certain object, the date of entry into the collections of a given museum are known, but it is not known and it is not possible to ascertain under what circumstances this object came into the hands of those who brought it to Europe. In any case, the taboo that has long weighed on the simple idea of restitution has been broken once and for all and it is to be hoped that in the future the idea will continue to make its way unstoppably, all the more so as it is the states themselves who are increasingly assuming their responsibilities in relation to the legacies they carry.

These processes of accepting responsibility are long and by definition always unfinished, either at the level of the State or of civil society. The same happened, after all, regarding the confrontation of German and Austrian public and private institutions with the Nazi past. It took until the 1980s for



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large German companies, faced with demands for compensation of victims of forced labour, to start commissioning research projects on their history in the Nazi years - the first case was Volkswagen, which gave the renowned historian Hans Mommsen the task of researching in detail the company's connivance with Nazi politics. In the case of museums and libraries, the process took place even later. And the debate is far from over, as revealed by the very recent controversy surrounding the integration into the Zurich "Kunsthaus" of the so-called Emil Bührle collection - a collection notoriously derived in part from the swindling of owners catalogued by Nazism as Jews. Under this light, therefore, it seems appropriate, also in relation to the confrontation with the colonial legacies, that the awareness of the complexity of these processes go hand in hand with the refusal of any hasty ending aiming at concluding processes that by nature always remain open - an ending that would basically amount to the perpetuation of violence against victims.

The awareness of the need to review procedures and logics apparently imposed by common sense or by current practices is, thus, particularly relevant. For example, in view of the difficulties of provenance research mentioned above, and on the basis of a definition of the colonial relationship as intrinsically violent, the reversal of the burden of proof is defensible in the context of research into the collections of European museums, that is, the presumption that, until proven otherwise, any object of colonial provenance should be considered suspect, the obligation to demonstrate the legitimacy of its acquisition falling to its depositaries.

This is also why the theoretical apparatus of memory studies has been reconceptualized in relevant aspects. For example, regarding the decisive importance of the victim's perspective, but also with regard to the concept of the victim itself and the need to reformulate it, pulling it out of a tradition that is inattentive to the capacity for action and the multiple forms of affirmation of identity within the reach of someone who refuses the irrevocable fixation on a status of a simple object of violence. Here, too, Karl Kraus' maxim applies that the closer you look at a word, the farther it looks at you. A seemingly unambiguous concept such as that of restitution reveals, under this light, an enormous complexity, requiring an in-depth knowledge of the contexts and actors involved and the creation of a grammar suitable for them. Finally, the concept of postmemory – the central axis of the MEMOIRS project –, which fulfills the essential function of introducing into the equation the following generations, no less involved, although in specific ways, in the sharing of a legacy of violence, appears, at the conclusion of the project, strongly consolidated by empirical work that highlights its productivity for an analysis of postcolonial Europe.

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