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WHICH “LEGACIES” ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

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During an intense debate in France about history and memory, partly triggered by the 23 February 2005 legislation requiring teachers to convey to their students the “positive values” of French colonialism, Jean-François Bayart and Bertrand Romain asked in *L'Esprit* “de quel ‘legs colonial’ parle-t-on?” What ‘colonial legacy’ are we talking about? Though the phrase is used widely and indiscriminately, very few people have offered satisfactory or consistent answers to this question. Of course, any answer is bound to be inadequate and partial. Nevertheless, many voices have invoked so-called colonial and imperial “legacies” without hesitation, qualification, or, sometimes, any critical judgement whatsoever.

Bayart and Romain drew attention to how the expression “*legs colonial*” had become an instrument for political and social demands and a weapon with which to delineate diplomatic strategies, international



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relations and domestic politics, anchored in specific political, ideological and sociocultural positions. The phrase works to justify *present-day* struggles in the old metropolises, in the former colonial territories and even in international fora. As a weapon, it instrumentalises history and is thrown around, inside and outside academia, with little concern for rigour and detail.

The authors sought instead to bring forward several important avenues of investigation that might productively reorientate the ongoing discussions. The latter should begin by recognising the multiplicity of conceptual, methodological, epistemological and analytical problems associated with the idea of “legacy.” It should start, too, by recognizing the diversity of objects and geographies that must be interrogated in order to enable robust (albeit partial) answers to the question posed. Such reflections are necessary for a historically situated understanding of the origins of colonialism and of current regimes of gendered, raced, economic and cultural inequality.

Yet it would be useful to pose a prior question, which often also remains unanswered, at least in rigorous and empirical terms. Which colonial or imperial history are we talking about? What do we know about this past, whether distant or recent? What do we really know about such fundamental questions as occupational or income structures in former colonial societies, or patterns of consumption, degrees of literacy, cultural practices, ideological possibilities, levels of political education and participation, or citizenship and land policies, in the city, countryside or in between?

Furthermore: what do we know about decolonisation itself, a process that was much broader and more complex than a mere “transfer of power”? Or about the early years of independence, about the possibilities and constraints of that moment, about the chasms that opened up between political imagination and ideological compromise and what was indeed possible, given existing historical circumstances? Or about how these problems were complicated by persistent material and symbolic violence and scarcity of resources? In the case of the former Portuguese colonies, we know very little.

Any attempt to understand the contemporary manifestations – implicit or explicit – of imperial and colonial histories requires a modicum of understanding about these questions. It requires that we formulate a response, however provisional, to the question “what colonial and imperial histories are we talking about?”

Without a robust grasp on the historical trajectories of colonialism and decolonisation, how can we reflect on the influence of colonial and imperial pasts on contemporary forms of creativity and cultural



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interaction, on dynamics of social adhesion or conflict, on patterns of geographical and social mobility, or on modes of cooperation or conflict at a regional or international scale? Without first excavating the genealogies and historical manifestations of colonialism and imperialism to establish some plausibly solid reference points, can we really understand the present-day projection of this past in museums and archives, in “memory” or in popular culture, or in gastronomy, architecture or music?

Approaching the idea of “colonial [or imperial] legacy,” involves, among other aspects, reflecting carefully on regimes of evidence and causality, on the historicity of social phenomena, and on the relationship we want to establish between normative questions and scientific study. Or on the possible relationship between history and memory?

Groundless reification and generalization lurk around every corner. Simplistic and rigid dichotomies abound. “Memories” are valued over history, or are assessed without a solid reference to it. Both aspects entail many risks. Ignoring them neither makes them disappear nor mitigates their very negative effects in terms of understanding the past and the present but also of imagining the future.

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