



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 March 2021

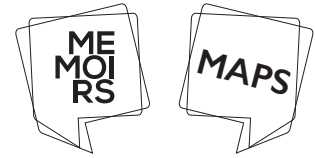


acrylic on canvas | Bakri Ajack | 2020 | courtesy of the artist and Downtown Gallery

DOES MEMORY TEACH OR CAN MEMORY BE TAUGHT?

Roberto Vecchi

The relationship between memory and education is demanding, to say the least. Educating means, above all, sensitizing about how to learn from the past and, thus, thinking about its updating, also through specific disciplines, such as History. But is this so immediate consideration sufficient, which assumes an obvious contiguity between what we have inherited from the past and what we transmit as knowledge? The answer is complex.



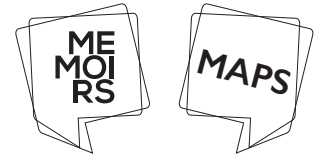
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We have never had access to as many files and documents as today, using simply a keyboard. It is unnecessary to go looking for the past: if we want, the past, in its multiple folds, is - albeit in the digital simulacrum - within our reach. It is right in front of us. However, the paradox is evident, since the ease of access corresponds not to a potentialization, but to a deterioration of our ability to retain and understand the past approaching it and to build a less precarious memory; a memory that overcomes the barriers of individual memories or of the shadows of images projected on screens that do not refer to any knowledge.

Many are the causes of these asymmetries of memory, which seem to reproduce - and even deepen - Nietzsche's "Second Untimely Consideration of the Disadvantage of History to Life" in its possibilities and losses.

We can also consider what was attempted in the face of the abyss of the Shoah, the heart of darkness of the 20th century: few events - including because of the collective guilt it implied - were so long exhibited, shown and commented. On the extermination of the Jews in Europe - in itself a partial definition - a huge public archive and a considerable musealization were built. Parte superior do formulárioParte inferior do formulárioOn the one hand, in a positive way, memories at high risk were rescued from the mnemocide that was rationally planned by the perpetrators themselves,; but on the other, in the educational field, that famous "coming to terms with the past" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) which was a recurring theme of courses, of visits, conferences or school programmes, did not produce the expected effects, i.e. did not produce the definitive rupture of the device of reproduction of racism, fascism, antisemitism, patriarchalism and other authoritarian forms of discrimination. On the contrary, the resurgences of discriminatory intolerances, the regurgitations of racism and colonialism, are present in contemporary society, stronger than ever. The institutionalization of memory (with the creation of ad hoc disciplinary public events, such as the day of memory, on 27 January) created images and imaginations that, however, lost much of the effectiveness of citing and vicariously witnessing to the traumatic past. Memory doesn't weigh by the pound.

This is not to condemn an ever positive function of memory enhancement. If the story is mirrored in the Ciceronian value of *magistra vitae*, the rescued and valued memory has the value of a *monument*. In the etymological sense, the word, derived from the Latin verb *monere*, means



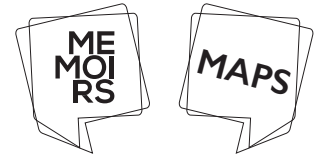
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to remember, but also to admonish, warn, inform. Thus, the presence of memory creates a link with the past that is itself positive. Memory is always the bearer of some knowledge, its activation is itself potentially educational.

But will the single presence of memory suffice to think, to create, to hold an educational event? The answer is, unfortunately, negative. We know that often, in the classrooms, on the occasion of important celebrations, cinema is used to create an immediate contact with the monumentality of memories that are also uncomfortable. At times, efforts to save memories at risk, which are immense and fundamental, lead one to believe that the saving gesture alone is enough to promote a stable inscription of the past within the contemporary cultural and social fabric. It's not like that. The salvation of memory preserves threatened pasts but does not activate any kind of praxis in the use of that past. If we want to find a metaphor for this gesture, we can think that it is as if a philologist were able, through a patient work of reconstruction, to recompose the text (and therefore the meaning) a deteriorated and dismembered work had lost. And, after completion of that labour, the work would be unreadable and inaccessible in a closed space, without effective conditions of reading and appreciation.

By itself, the abandonment of memory to a possibility of meaning only as a rest or, iconically, as a ruin, typical of a cumulative and non-critical tendency, leaves the events to which it refers muted. And the knowledge that could be imparted becomes non-transferable and lost. The specialization of memory in the 20th century, probably its most marked ontological trait, created, in fact, an opacity in the debris left over from the destruction: the debris no longer possesses the capacity of transcendence for an ideal signification of the victims. These no longer die for the fatherland or for a noble cause. The destruction is practiced by a total negativity, a pure reduction of the subject to a biological form devoid of citizenship, rights, relationships, belonging.

This situation complicates the simple monumentalization of memory - without any critical mediation, in its immediate materiality - as an educational and knowledge event. In *Auschwitz en héritage? D'un bon usage de la mémoire*, Georges Bensoussan notes that: "The Shoah subverts the usual intellectual categories and classical concepts of humanist culture taught in schools. It invites us to leave the paths of thought already trodden and to free ourselves from simple but reassuring schemes: barbarism being 'antinomic to civilization', to reject one means to make the other triumph and to prepare students for a life as free adults."



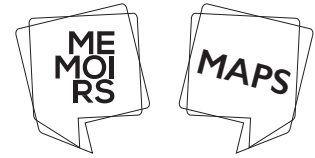
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It could be said that what complicates an equally didactic use of memory is the conceptual complexity it has assumed, which is proportional to the depth of the abysses and the catastrophes that have marked it and, at the same time, have undermined its ability to register or trace. It is the hardly unlockable entanglement that prevents the monumentalization of memory, as it occurred in other times when there was an “art of memory” (as a writing or an interior painting, Giordano Bruno commented) that guaranteed, only by conservation, the production and transmission of knowledge associated with the memory.

These are the obstacles that prevent a direct reproduction of the past only by its simple emergence. More important is to reflect on the uses of the past. Enzo Traverso, in a book that is a powerful and synthetic catalogue of the aporias of memory, in its disturbed relationship with history, *The Past. Ways to Use*, indicates the possible exits from the insidious labyrinth of reuse or past citation, especially of what was most painful and traumatic. One of the indicated exits is the mapping of the force associated with memory and its variation in time. A weak and endangered memory can become, in another context, a strong memory that integrates the many “civil religions” that are substantiated in a cult sometimes partial or stereotyped of the past (many genocides undergo this transformation according to which from a near loss, by force, by time, by quantity, the scale of the impact is changed).

Memory imposes an alliance with critical knowledge. Thus, it can become part of a formative project, of sharing and intergenerational communication of knowledge. The problem, if we will, is how to approach the subject of memory not in a monolithic way, but to perceive how, in its extreme coldness, in the precariousness that exposes it to risks of deformation or erasure, the important thing is to protect and understand the potential of its immense diversity, of its inexhaustible variations, a process - of the mnemologist - that can be assimilated, by its ethical content, to the role of the translator who selects and manages losses and additions without detriment of meaning.

Walter Benjamin's thought was that of a seismograph understanding how modernity altered memory from the conceptualization of experience. Walter Benjamin situates memory based on some qualitative traits that constitute it: remembrance as an alternative dimension of history resembles the metaphor of the calendar - made of the alternation of holidays and working days that displays another typology, not of a simply cumulative time, but of special time. Calendars, in fact, - and not



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clocks - “monumentalize a historical awareness” that still derives from revolutionary and innovative gestures that founded a first strand of modernity.

Reflection on the workings, the combinations, the possibilities of memory, could extend to infinity. The examples cited are intent to show that resorting to memory, by itself, without taking into account its twisted genealogies, its conceptualizations and its crystallized images, does not allow a critical use of the past, and its transformation into an educational event.

Memory can continue to teach only when, in its dimension of monument - in its sense of remembering - it becomes knowledge through a responsible and deep critical screening. And memory is taught, more than by the exposure of objects or by easy essentialisms, by the careful dismantling of the precarious and delicate elements that constitute it - in which the role of selection and forgetfulness are essential - and by its inscription within the historical forces that condition, sometimes negatively, its survival. To teach memory is to share responsibility for the use of the past, to become aware of its extreme fragility through the indispensable critical treatment of its weak traces. This is how memory passes from a residue of the past to a knowledge that opens up to the future.

Translated by de [António Sousa Ribeiro](#)

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