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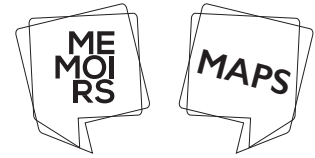
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Montagem Vertical | Eugénia Musse | 2020 (courtesy of the artist)

THE COLONIAL APHASIA AND THE CROSSROADS OF MEMORY

Miguel Cardina



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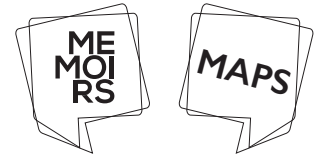
The speech of Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa at the official celebrations of April 25 was somewhat surprising. It was not foreseeable that the intervention of the President of the Republic would focus exclusively on an analysis of the history and memory of the colonial past, despite the controversies that arose, months earlier, around the garden of Lisbon's Praça do Império or the official praise to the late African commando Marcelino da Mata. More than a response to these controversies of the moment, Marcelo's speech seemed to want to incite a necessary debate.

The intervention received almost unanimous approval from politicians and commentators, which is perhaps explained by its somewhat ambiguous nature, now referring to the need to "study the past and dissect everything in it", in contrast to the glorifying visions of the empire, now warning of the danger of "excessive global self-flagellation". It is fair to point out that, although it is true that the PR declared this non-existent symmetry, it also mentioned violence, racism and slavery, in a rhetorical gesture that moves away from those who have been the dominant official topics in the solemn sessions of celebration of the nation and the regime.

A cynical - or less naive - look can see in the speech a way to empty the debate. Something like this: now that it is enunciated in the way it is meant to be enunciated, and that suggested the existence of a battle between glorifiers and scourgers, let us leave it to rest. A naive - or less cynical - look will recognize that Marcelo's discursive performance gives an unprecedented symbolic place to the debate, precisely because it arises as articulated from the voice of the highest hierarchical figure of the State. Perhaps there is something correct in both interpretations.

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On the one hand, it is clear that, by the mere fact that it exists, the speech objectively faced what Ann Laura Stoler called "colonial aphasia".^[1] Referring to the memory of the colonial past in France, Stoler understands that this past has always been present, although "difficult to retrieve in a language that speaks to the disparate violence it engendered". Instead of the notion of forgetfulness, which would refer to something scratched or erased, the notion of aphasia would thus capture this sense of "occlusion of knowledge", evident in the difficulty of constructing frames of analysis capable of properly relating words, concepts and things. The Portuguese Colonial War is one of the cases that Stoler mentions, in passing, as an example of this memorial obstruction. An obstruction that, strictly speaking, can and should be extended to the intimate and wider connection between violence and colonialism.



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But the cynical hypothesis turns out to be also true. About three months after Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's speech, no institutional gesture has derived from it nor has it brought about any change in the terms and domains in which the debates on these issues have been conducted. In retrospect, therefore, it is possible to see it as a kind of temperature measurement for a debate that can no longer be ignored, but one that it really does not want to deepen. In order to do so, it would be necessary to help create the conditions to deepen and disseminate historical research on colonialism and critical study on contemporary representations of the past, as well as to stimulate public policies of memorialization, recognition and reparation facing colonial aphasia.

Decolonization, which began with the resistance of the colonized peoples, had its decisive date in the 25th of April. The coup turned into a revolution results directly from the political defeat in the war. It was succeeded by the end of the empire in Africa and by a revolutionary process of which Portuguese democracy is the heir. In this sense, a good opportunity to debate and stimulate new public memory policies on the colonial past will certainly be the next cycle commemorating the 25th of April.

Recognizing the double rupture with the dictatorial and colonial past as a determining element of the democratic history of the country should be a relevant axis in the celebrations – official and otherwise – of the 50th anniversary of April 25, which will begin as early as 2022. It would be a way to make consequent the challenge that might be seen as being contained in Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's speech.

[1] Ann Laura Stoler (2016), *Duress. Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Duke: Durham and London, p. 128. See the chapter "Colonial Aphasia: Disabled Histories and Race in France".

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