



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

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Graffiti | Eça de Queiroz School, Lisbon | anonymous photo

WHO DEFINES WHAT MEMORIES FIT IN EUROPE?

Bruno Sena Martins

In pursuit of expansion, the far-right has been astute in leveraging a simplistic caricature of identity politics, casting it as a threat to old ways of life, an apology for political correctness and an attack freedom of expression. In this context, a reflection on the place of ancestry, memory and identity in contemporary politics seems crucial. The far-right has grown as a parasite upon neoliberal accumulation, which has created diminishing socioeconomic perspectives for large parts of the population. This situation has favoured right-wing populisms that declare themselves to be anti-systemic while they



in fact protect capitalist extraction. Their strategy is to mobilize prejudice against specific targets: LGBTQ+, immigrants, black people, gypsies, the welfare state, corruption, etc. As Cathy Bergin and Anita Rupprecht write about the American elections:

The simultaneous emergence of a narrative of 'white' dispossession and alienation, where white America has been abandoned by a mythical multiracial elite, played a considerable part in the election of Donald Trump. (1)

In a climate in which the supposedly privileged feel increasingly harassed by economic transformation, social alarm about the alleged abuses of minority agendas has a double effect: it offers a secure past to return to, and reiterates an identitarian superiority - patriarchal, homophobic, racist, ableism and nationalist - which strokes the self-esteem of those who imagine themselves to be a majority.

On the other hand, for one particular political worldview, still dominant in many left-wing parties and movements, the dignity of minority groups has to be achieved through a broad social transformation: the class struggle. From this perspective, the fight against socioeconomic inequalities should, consequently, take account of those whose lives are marked by the intersection between class destitution and other marginalized identities. This is the context for the attack on "identitarianism" from all sides and from relatively established political positions.

Far beyond the fragmentation of the priorities of various struggles, if the democratization of memory gives us anything it is precisely the link between the economic inequalities that permeate contemporary societies and the multiple histories of oppression that forged the capitalist world-system in which we live. Recognizing the space of enunciation of the politics this implies is crucial for democratizing the horizons of social transformation. This process is not immune to the reproduction of essentialisms by marginalized groups and even accusations of inverted oppression (such as the classic fallacy of reverse racism). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a celebrated Indian figure in post-colonial studies, coined the concept of "strategic essentialism" (2) to refer to political agendas in which minority groups mobilize, and fight to represent themselves, on the basis of shared identities which are often defined by their "former masters" (3). In this sense, women are figured as the embodiment of the feminist struggle, black people embody anti-racist struggle, etc.



On the other hand, excessive boundary-making around particular identity struggles has been pointed out to be one of the main drivers of a political fragmentation that compromises the chances for alliances across contemporary anti-systemic struggles. That is, such identity struggles often collapse into “non-strategic essentialism”. Spivak has distanced herself from strategic essentialism, arguing that, rather than emphasizing the moments in which the category of oppressor is strategically mobilized to shore up resistive identities, the concept has come to be used as a license for self-perpetuating essentialism. Put simply, Spivak has called attention to the fact that “essentialism” is celebrated at the expense of “strategic”. Further, Spivak argued that it is dangerous to distort the expression “the personal is political” into “only the personal is political”, an idea that she rejects (4). For Spivak, it is crucial that subaltern groups never lose sight of how their essentialized subjectivity was, and still is, constrained by the discourses that constitute them as subalterns; without this idea, strategic essentialism becomes merely subjugation to the dominant discourse.

Today it is impossible to think about the sheen of the emblematic places of global capitalism - Wall Street, or the City of London - without considering the invisible work of the women who clean the bathrooms, many of them black and / or migrants. We have to consider how women’s work is essential to the structure of capitalism, as Silvia Federici’s work (5) shows. Eric Williams’ famous *Capitalism & Slavery* (1944) (6) demonstrates how capital from slavery was crucial to the financing of the industrial revolution in England and, consequently, for the expansion of industrial capitalism around the world in recent centuries. Speaking of the anti-colonial movement, Fanon spoke of the importance of uniting different struggles in a common history:

As for we who have decided to break the back of colonialism, our historic mission is to sanction all revolts, all desperate actions, all those abortive attempts drowned in rivers of blood. (7)

In fact, only Eurocentric memory could conceive of anti-racist struggle as a mere distraction from anti-capitalist struggle. This would imply amnesia about the colonial violence that constitutes contemporary societies and forgetting how much our democracy is founded on the many historical struggles that brought together anti-racism, anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism.

Translated by Archie Davies



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- (1) Bergin, Cathy; Rupperecht, Anita (2018), "Reparative histories: tracing narratives of black resistance and white entitlement", *Race & Class*, 60(1), 22-37.
 - (2) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1985/1985), "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution: interview with Elizabeth Gross", *Thesis Eleven*, 10/11, 175-187.
 - (3) "former masters", em Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993), "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak", *Boundary*, 20(2), 24-50.
 - (4) *ibidem*
 - (5) Federici, Silvia (2017), *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia, Brooklyn, New York.
 - (6) Williams, Eric (2014/1944): *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
 - (7) Fanon, Frantz (1963), *The wretched of the earth*. New York: Grove Press, pp 207.
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