



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

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s/t (Rádio), from series *Escuta os Bárbaros em Primeiro Lugar, Planalto Norte, Santo Antão* | 2016 |  
Diogo Bento (courtesy of the artist)

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## RITUALS OF A FRACTURED MEMORY

Roberto Vecchi

In Avishai Margalit's *The Ethics of Memory*, one of the classics of memory studies, the author notes that in memory, morality is often forgotten. We need to reflect, therefore, on the individual and collective ethics of the use of memory. This necessity emerges within ongoing conflicts over memory that emerge when the use of the past does not weave communal threads. It emerges when, in the dialectic of salvation and forgetting – the politics of loss – lived traumas are no longer the basis of an inclusive, holistic image of history.



The paradigmatic case of a place where memory is both gridlocked and constantly reproduced, in spite of processes of reconciliation, is Northern Ireland. Its potential for conflicts and disputes over the past is enormous. It is no coincidence that Northern Ireland has been the most stubborn knot in the endless negotiations over Brexit. In spite of the Good Friday agreement of 1998, that created the conditions for peace after three decades of the Troubles, a city like Belfast continues to be fractured. Even within the correlates of the peace process its deep fissures have never healed.

Organizations in the city arrange fascinating, themed tours of places of divided memory and open wounds. The war that tore the memory of Ulster apart is also a tourist product. One of these tours – the “Political Tour”, that begins in the symbolic Divis Tower – is characterized by a very particular element: it bluntly reproduces the fracture that still divides Belfast. This tour of the tormented history of Northern Ireland covers two parts of the city. The first, in the Western, Catholic, republican part, is led by an elderly guide, Jack, an IRA militant, who tells the story of the Troubles from the nationalist perspective. The second part takes place in a unionist, protestant area, with another guide, Robert, who carries the physical marks of the Troubles on his body, from when he was a member of pro-English paramilitary groups. Between the two parts of the city, the wall of the Peace Line divides two worlds, and, still, divides the two men. Their opposing, irreducible narratives of the past resist becoming part of a common memory. The tour comes to its climax in the middle of the road between them.

The rusty gate of Lanark Way separates the unionist neighbourhood from the republican. Even now, twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday agreement, a sombre ceremony takes place as the gate is closed every night, and only reopened the following morning. There, the two guides meet and the group of listeners cross from one to the other. It is an awkward, silent moment, with only a functional handshake. As the unionist guide explains, they are not friends. He emphasizes the crucial point straight away: “our generation will never forgive”. It is immediately clear, in moving from one side to another, that peace is not a fact, it is a process. All the inhabitants of Belfast are caught in the middle of it. Ready to go backwards, as well as to go forwards. The future is not obvious. The duality of the visit captures two distinct rhetorics of memorialization split by (symbolic) materials more impenetrable than any wall.

On the Catholic side, there is a modality for the elaboration of loss and trauma that tends towards the construction of a collective epic. The innumerable deaths that took place on the republican side are



part of a narrative of resistance that emphasizes the justice denied to the oppressed minority since the 1920s. The places of memory which commemorate the past, and the evocation of their dead, reflect this narrative choice. They inscribe the victims within a collective effort to construct a different future. The most touristic version of this narrative are the murals painted on the buildings of the Eastern area (the most famous, probably, being that which commemorates the fatal hunger strike of Bobby Sands and other IRA militants). It is strange to note that the tradition of the murals emerged on the Orange side in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It declined during the ensuing decades, and was then appropriated by republicans as part of a ritualistic construction of their own heroic imaginary. This was yet another cause of conflict; a conflict of representations.

On the unionist side, the narrative is characterized by a double trait: on the one hand, a more individualistic epic; and on the other hand, an appeal to victimhood that seeks to project historical responsibility onto others (republicans, but also the English Labour Party). It feeds an inexhaustible resentment that is alive and kicking. Commemorative rhetoric, based on the individual cult of the dead, here too affects the sites of memory. This functions like the construction of cemeteries: it is difficult to see the collective paradise of memory being called upon.

This division could hardly be more obvious. It is disseminated in all the public rituals of the construction of the past, as much on the republican as on the unionist side. Against the powerfully divisive current of the past, some projects of reconciliation seek to go beyond the threat of new conflicts. It is worth citing two. The first is a 2019 volume, *Reconstructions: The troubles in Photographs and Words*, by Steafán and Bobbie Hanvey. Bobbie Hanvey is a famous photographer who covered many of the tragic events of the silent war (bombed out cars, fires, burials, wreckage, etc.) as he puts it, from a position “behind the lens and between the lines”. Hanvey finds in Steafán, his son’s, lyrical words of the new generation, a poetic of the lived that soothes contrasts and seeks a “posthumous” meaning in still visible scars. It is a full-blown exercise in postmemory.

The permanent exhibition, “The Troubles and Beyond”, in the Museum of Ulster, is another example. As its name suggests, it aims to construct a different public memory of the war. Conceived on the basis of a chronology set out in decades, the exhibition’s objects metonymically place the visitor in relation to a traumatic past. However, it inscribes the materials of memory into cultural history. The idea is clear: the war that ripped Northern Ireland apart was experienced by the whole population; not only by the



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victims, but by all the “survivors”. It is therefore necessary to build a shared memory that integrates the scars into the cultural history of the bloody decades. Cultural transformations of sexuality, and more, intersect with objects from the past. Traumas are inscribed in the everyday. They constitute not a split memory of singular parts, but a holistic memory.

The fissures of Irish memory show other sites of fragmented and conflictual memories in the framework of which, as generations pass, a place for communal articulation can emerge across the generations who bore witness and those that follow. It is possible to overcome the loss of morality in memory. We can establish, through renewed rituals, a collective ethic of memory. This shows that the fractured past has to be used with a sense of responsibility that is public, and not private, that is of the present, and not of the past. This responsibility concerns not only Northern Ireland, but all the unheralded contexts of divided memory. Ours too.

Translated by **Archie Davies**

**Roberto Vecchi** is professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature in the Department of Literature and Modern Cultures of the University of Bologna. He has recently published, with Vincenzo Russo, *La letteratura portoghese. I testi e le idee* (2017). He is an associate researcher with the project MEMOIRS: Children of Empire and European Postmemories (ERC Consolidator Grant n. 648624).

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