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Revisiting Democratic Transitions in Times of Crisis



Review of Manuel Loff, Pilipe Piedade and Luciana Castro Soutelo (eds.), Ditaduras e Revolução: Democracia e Políticas da Memória

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**Manuel Loff, Filipe Piedade and
Luciana Castro Soutelo (eds.)**

***Ditaduras e Revolução: Democracia e
Políticas da Memória***

**[Dictatorships and revolution:
democracy and politics of memory]**

Coimbra: Almedina, 2015. 492 pp.

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Commemorative dates commonly give rise to the production of written and audiovisual material about the past. In 2014, on the 40th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, a significant number of books, photographic albums, street itineraries, films, and radio and television programmes were created in Portugal, featuring the overthrow of the Estado Novo (New State) dictatorship and the revolutionary process that ensued. The rightwing government coalition – which was contested by segments of the population who consider that the revolutionary legacy and the social achievements shaped in the 1976 constitution have been ignored in recent years – had worked to develop a relatively extensive programme of official commemorations. The 25 April Association, which comprises military figures that participated in the coup, refused to take part in the official commemorations at parliament. In 2014, the legacy of the revolution overlapped with narratives and historical framework mechanisms that made it part of the political present.

This is why this book must be welcomed. It results from the research work developed under a project financed by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, entitled “State and memory: memorial public policies on the Portuguese dictatorship (1974–2009)”. The

book is divided into four parts, each one dedicated to a specific geographical and historical context. The first part, which concentrates on the memory of dictatorship and revolution in Portugal, gathers texts by Manuel Loff, Paula Godinho, Cristina Nogueira, Fernando Rosas, Bruno Monteiro, Ana Sofia Ferreira, Filipe Piedade and Luciana Soutelo. The second part, dedicated to the memory of the Spanish Civil War and Francoism, includes chapters by Julián Casanova, Carme Molinero and Pere Ysàs. The third part, with articles by Carla Luciana Silva and Lucileide Costa Cardoso, questions the memory of the civil-military dictatorship that existed in Brazil between 1964 and 1985. The fourth part, which focuses on the European context and the remembrance processes of the twentieth century, compiles texts from Enzo Traverso, Xosé Manuel Núñez Seixas and Luisa Passerini. In total, these 16 contributions produce a diversified look at the construction of political memories relating to the twentieth century, a period which brought together, like no other, the definition of emancipatory hopes with the development of large-scale violence, war and oppression.

This being the formal organisation of the book, an alternative division would be possible between the first text by Manuel Loff and the remaining chapters of the volume. Due to its length (120 pages) and the topic covered (a history of the memory of the Estado Novo dictatorship and the 25 April revolution in the last 40 years), this text is the most ambitious of the book and the one that summarises the main results of the project. It invites us to consider five major hypotheses.

The first is the idea that the Portuguese state has, over the last 40 years, assumed the role of an active builder of evocations and silencing processes. To prove it, the text analyses how the state produced certain “politics of memo-

ry”: commendations, laws, commemorations, pension awards, archival policies, dominant theses in history teaching and the creation of institutions dedicated to memory (or the lack of these structures). We can therefore conclude that the state has developed discourses and actions anchored in both an antifascist memory, which holds the genesis of Portuguese democracy, and in strong dynamics of forgetfulness and erasing of the past, which are dominant in a good part of recent Portuguese history.

The second conclusion is that the memory of the dictatorship and the memory of revolution have surfaced as two sides of the same coin. In other words, the interpretation of one presupposes readings of what the other one was. This occurs because the revolution produced a certain type of ending to the dictatorship – and the empire – which raises questions about what was the Portuguese twentieth century and the dictatorial and colonial experience. Additionally, the revolution questioned socio-economic structures and triggered social and political achievements. This disruptive character has in fact been undermined or seen as an “excessive” parenthesis preceding the establishment of the democracy, which supposedly emerged only after the revolutionary heat had cooled down. In this respect, the text by Fernando Rosas is a valuable interpretative essay on the Portuguese revolution, explaining how political democracy does not exist in Portugal despite the revolution but because there was a revolution.

The third idea introduced by Manuel Loff’s text is that the memory is particularly sensitive to the socio-economical rhythms and political cycles. The periods in the 1980s to mid-1990s, 2002–2005 and since 2011, when rightwing political parties, primarily the Social Democratic Party (PSD), were in government gave

rise to more “revisionist” discourses. The use of this concept of “revisionism” is actually one of most central aspects of this work. In the texts of Loff, Soutelo and Molinero, the concept is used to define a process, developed within the Cold War context and which emerged triumphant in the 1990s, that was characterised by a demonising view of the political transformation processes.

In Portugal, this narrative emerged in the mid-1980s, during the governments of Aníbal Cavaco Silva. The period witnessed the growth of a negative memory of the revolution. The process would consider that the authoritarian dictatorship, in power from 1926 to 1974, would be followed by a Marxist totalitarian dictatorship, as expressed from 1974 to 1976, and particularly during the “hot summer” of 1975. Political speeches, commendations, the inexistence of archives from which to study the dictatorship (this situation would only change in the 1990s, when the dictatorship era files were made available, at the Torre do Tombo National Archive in Lisbon) and the awarding of pensions to agents of the PIDE/DGS, the former secret police, are the elements analysed in order to gain insight into this process of “revising” the dictatorship and the revolution. These elements would also spark acts of “memory rebellion” from the mid-1990s onwards, in defiance of this interpretation which equated dictatorship to revolution.

The text thus guides us to a fourth hypothesis. If democracy was built on the explicit rejection of dictatorship, the truth is that, from the end of the revolutionary period onwards, there was a development in the ways to remember it that configured an “ambivalent memory”. According to Loff, this situation paints a very similar picture to most cases where a democracy emerged without a rupture with the authoritarian past, evoking particularly the cases

of Spain and Brazil. If the parallel seems excessive when taken in absolute terms, some examples, such as the inexistence of an official policy for the creation of memory sites dedicated to the struggle against the dictatorship and to the revolutionary process, point to a common uncomfortable relationship with the past, which is ambivalent in the Portuguese case.

Finally, a fifth aspect that we are invited to consider is the way in which the war, colonialism and decolonisation were – and still are – the main contradiction in the Portuguese collective memory of dictatorship, usually in direct correlation to the perception of the revolutionary years of 1974–1976. In fact, the independence of the Portuguese ex-colonies in Africa (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé e Príncipe) occurred as a result of an event considered almost inexplicable – the colonial war from 1961 to 1974/75 – precisely due to the surviving traces of the lusotropicalist imaginary that saw Portuguese Africa as different, mixed, with relatively circumscribed moments of racism and violence. In the dominant public memory, it was the loss of the empire that led to a social tragedy, translated into the nearly 500,000 *retornados* (returned expatriates), many of whom were, in fact, born in Africa and who now found themselves on European soil for the first time.

The presence of these biographies in the public sphere, especially from the 1990s onwards, would contribute to the increase of a certain empire nostalgia. This served to block indirectly the analysis of war crimes committed in Africa and their civilian victims. In that regard, we should stress that the Portuguese state was never willing to openly discuss the topic. In addition, much research remains to be conducted in historiographical terms, namely from the perspective of integrating the colonial conflict

in a more broad chain of violence and racism on African soil. Regarding this aspect, Filipe Piedade, in the chapter about the memory of the colonial war in the armed forces, analyses army publications to show how the war and the revolution is still a matter of different and even antagonistic perceptions in the military.

Loff's chapter offers a solid contribution to understanding how the memory of the dictatorship and the revolution in democratic Portugal was problematically inscribed in the public domain: how it was shaped, which social and political agents shaped it and which tensions and silencing forces it reveals. Based on a broad notion of "politics of memory" – in which the state is a determinant actor but not the only one – this text can also be read as a reflection on the building of democracy in Portugal. The academic production on the development of democracy in the country, namely that produced in the field of political science, tends to analyse the topic from the point of view of the nature and evolution of institutions. Here, the approach is clearly different, showing how democracy, the child of antifascism and the revolution, maintains a "complicated relationship" with such a past. To know the reasons for this is to question how the dominant classes went through the revolution – an aspect developed by Bruno Monteiro in his chapter about the Porto bourgeoisie's memory of the revolutionary analysis – and to analyse how the dominant speeches about this subject were created and in which way the political cycles put forth certain readings, and certain erasures, of the dictatorial and revolutionary past.

This view brings a particular relevance to some chapters of the book, namely those dedicated to underexposed memories. Paula Godinho approaches extreme-left activism, concentrating on the Reorganised Movement of the Party of the Proletariat (MRPP), a Maoist

organisation about which there are still many commonplaces and generalising views about its activists. From a number of interviews and participant observations at monthly gatherings, Godinho reveals the dense inscription of a past riddled with battles and traumas. Cristina Nogueira, on the other hand, recovers the memory of the newspapers linked to the clandestine existence of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) written to and by women, and aimed at political and cultural formation as well as strengthening partisan solidarity. Ana Sofia Ferreira approaches the issue of the armed struggle in a text which enumerates the activities of the Revolutionary Action and Unit League (LUAR), Armed Revolutionary Action (ARA) and Revolutionary Brigades (BR), organisations which struggled against the colonial-military apparatus during the dictatorship. This chapter also extends the analysis to the Popular Forces 25 April (FP-25), an organisation which carried out attacks in the 1980s, and which Ferreira considers the “unsaid” about the armed struggle in Portugal.

One of the most stimulating dimensions of the book is the invitation to engage in a comparative reflection, which is possible due to the contrast presented by the chapters about Spain (by Julián Casanova, Carme Molinero and Pere Ysàs) and Brazil (by Carla Luciana Silva and Lucileide Costa Cardoso). While there are similarities in the three countries as regards the silencing of certain aspects of the dictatorial experience, some differences become clear in the case of Portugal, which resulted from the fact that the Estado Novo collapsed with a revolution, which was not the case in Spain and Brazil, where the social pyramid was less disturbed during the transitional process. Also of importance was the specific weight of precise historical phenomena – such as the Spanish Civil War, that recently gave rise to a memory revolt set off by a new generation of histo-

rians, social scientists, political activists and family members of victims. This leads us to a reflection about the “victim” – who are the victims? What content should be given to the notion? In which way has this figure become a dominant figure in twentieth-century history, especially within the European context? These questions are raised in the chapters by Enzo Traverso and Xosé Nuñez Seixas. The book ends with a text by Luisa Passerini which invites us to think about the notion of “Europe” beyond eurocentrism and the marginalisation of Europe’s southern periphery. Reading it, it is impossible not to notice the resonance with what is happening today in southern Europe or what we see happening to those trying to cross to “this side” of the European Union’s borders.

Covering different topics and perspectives, all texts show how memory is a spectrum of interpretations, plural and sometimes contradictory, and always permeable to power dynamics expressed in a given present. Memory shapes collective identities and defines perceptions about the evolution of political processes, as well as legitimises ideological options. Precisely for this reason, the critical task facing us consists in questioning the way in which these different mechanisms work, how they are built, who they serve and what type of representations of the past they institute. This book does that.