

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND ETERNAL FASCISM: COLONIAL MATERIALITY AND THE METAMORPHOSES OF AUTHORITARIANISM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the persistence of colonialism within the collective memory of fascism and its manifestations through heritage practices embedded in contemporary public spaces shaped by material legacies that actively anchor projects of domination. Using a qualitative approach, the research explores tensions between remembrance and erasure in urban and architectural landscapes across globalised Western societies. Drawing on the historiography of heritage, social memory, and decolonial perspectives, the study analyses how contesting colonial monuments — including statues of Christopher Columbus, Francisco Pizarro, and Robert E. Lee — provokes reactionary forces that extend beyond historical attachment. Engaging with Umberto Eco's (1997/1998) concept of "eternal fascism", Aníbal Quijano's (2000) notion of the "coloniality of power", and Achille Mbembe's (2011) concept of "necropolitics", the article contends that these remnants function as material crystallisations and spatial supports for the legitimisation of contemporary far-right discourses. The study concludes that the material re-signification of these sites of memory is not naïve revisionism, but rather an essential decolonial praxis to reveal suppressed memories and to prevent public spaces from serving as protective shields for the naturalisation of barbarity and subalternisation.

KEYWORDS

social memory, historical heritage, fascism, decoloniality, public space

MEMÓRIA COLETIVA E FASCISMO ETERNO: A MATERIALIDADE COLONIAL E AS METAMORFOSES DO AUTORITARISMO

RESUMO

Este artigo investiga o colonialismo persistente na memória coletiva do fascismo e suas traduções mediante a função patrimonial, inserida em um espaço público contemporâneo atravessado por heranças materiais que atuam como âncoras ativas de projetos de dominação. Com base em uma abordagem metodológica qualitativa, a pesquisa examina os embates entre a lembrança e o apagamento no cenário urbano e arquitetônico no contexto das sociedades ocidentais globalizadas. Fundamentado na historiografia do patrimônio, na memória social e na perspectiva decolonial, o estudo analisa como a contestação de monumentos coloniais — a exemplo das estátuas de Cristóvão Colombo, Francisco Pizarro e Robert E. Lee — desperta forças reacionárias que transcendem o apego histórico. Argumenta-se, em

diálogo com o conceito de “fascismo eterno” de Umberto Eco (1997/1998) e com as noções de “colonialidade do poder”, de Aníbal Quijano (2000) e de “necropolítica”, de Achille Mbembe (2011), sobre como esses vestígios operam a cristalização material e o suporte espacial para a legitimação de discursos de extrema-direita no presente. Conclui-se que a ressignificação material desses lugares de memória não configura revisionismo ingênuo, mas uma práxis decolonial imperativa, essencial para desvelar memórias subterrâneas e impedir que os espaços públicos continuem servindo como escudos de proteção para a naturalização da barbárie e da subalternização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

memória social, patrimônio histórico, fascismo, decolonialidade, espaço público

1. INTRODUCTION

The public space of contemporary globalised societies is invariably traversed by material legacies that echo, far beyond a supposedly static past, the active anchoring of projects of domination. European colonialism, usually narrated as a historical chapter with clearly defined temporal boundaries, persists in the ubiquitous materiality that shapes our surroundings: petrified in monuments, statues, squares, and avenues, the colonial narrative becomes camouflaged within the urban landscape, rendering the violence of its foundation invisible through its material presence. When these symbols of culture and barbarity (Benjamin, 1940/1994) are challenged by interventions such as those seeking to decolonise heritage, the defensive reaction often reveals the latency of extremism. In this dispute, we often see the mobilisation of contemporary forms of fascism, which use the preservation of colonial memory as a pragmatic instrument to legitimise their agendas in the present.

Published from 1984 onwards, the *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (Realms of Memory) collection has become a classic of social memory for several reasons. Among them, Pierre Nora (1993) offers a series of avenues that help us unravel some of the riddles posed by contemporary monumental continuity. In theoretically addressing the process of transporting memory through history, Nora (1993) makes several efforts to indicate whether such memory survives the transfer, and even under what conditions it might reach its destination. He does so directly, establishing history as the “delegitimisation of lived experience of the past” (Nora, 1993, p. 9). By exemplifying one way in which a fragile and living burden — absolutely perishable, therefore — such as memory may be transported, the author conceptualises sites of memory while simultaneously accounting for the inevitably conflictual condition to which they are condemned throughout their existence: they are places that live through “their capacity for metamorphosis, in the incessant renewal of their meanings and in the unpredictable branching of their ramifications” (Nora, 1993, p. 22).

Let us consider the unpredictability of the ramifications of sites of memory by analysing some monumental examples from the contemporary world. Some time ago,

architects and parliamentarians, as well as a significant segment of civil society, celebrated the installation of a statue commemorating Christopher Columbus in Grand Park, Los Angeles. They publicly praised and glorified what, at that time, was widely understood as a representation of conquest and bravery, discovery and a civilising mission. It would possibly have been unforeseeable to those involved that, forty-five years after the solemn inauguration of that monument, Columbus would once again be in the spotlight, but this time not because of the bravery conveyed by the narratives previously attributed to him: Discovery Day had been replaced by Indigenous Peoples' Day (Gorman, 2018), while the tone of the main press publications gave way to debates concerning the rectification of a tainted past, criticising traditionalist false romanticism and highlighting the need for restorative justice in the face of the resistance of Indigenous peoples. *The New York Times* (Fortin, 2017), for example, when covering the disputes surrounding the sculpture of the American general Robert Lee, began to openly frame Confederate monuments not as neutral historical heritage, but as tools associated with mythical narratives glorifying the slaveholding past, reflecting a social demand for historical redress.

Over time, the naturalised hegemony of White European conquerors was threatened by space gained for interpretations of other facets of history, driven by forces such as multiculturalism and the reconfiguration of political and identity frameworks propelled by the growing influence of digital activism, which has transformed global public debate on several levels. As a result, the image of the discoverer suddenly appeared to collide with that of a genocidal figure. His glory was called into question, and the image of the explorer idol of the past was reduced, for some groups, to fragments, in what most closely resembled a historical implosion. On 10 November 2018, the process of removing the statue in Grand Park came to an end, an act its proponents characterised as the beginning of a new chapter, written on the lessons of past mistakes.

A similar fate befell the monument to the conqueror of the Inca Empire in the sixteenth century, the Spanish Francisco Pizarro, in Lima, Peru. Inaugurated in 1935, the imposing bronze figure was then received as an “illustrious statue of the hero and civiliser” (Hess, 2013, para. 6). Despite forming part of a contested setting, the monument was far from being a favourite among a section of civil society, which campaigned for nine years to have Pizarro's figure removed from Lima's central square (Tobar, 2005). An increasing number of Peruvians gradually began to regard his image as akin to that of a war criminal, responsible for atrocities during the colonial era. In 2002, almost 70 years after the monument was inaugurated, the movement succeeded: one day, architecture professor Santiago Calvo, the leading academic behind the argument in favour of its removal, received a call from a friend who lived next to the square: “Santiago, you won! There's a tractor here knocking down Pizarro's statue!” (Tobar, 2005, para. 17).

Although geographically distinct, these episodes show how colonial traces become the landscape itself, naturalised through time's erosion. When challenged, however, these structures awaken reactionary forces mobilised beyond mere historical attachment

— their conflicts reveal historical forms of extremism updated in the present, finding opportunity for renewal in the staunch defence of heritage. From the perspective that certain monumental references are not merely isolated events from the past but contemporary shadows of the colonial project in the Americas, this article investigates the colonialism that persists in the collective memory of fascism and its corresponding manifestations through the heritage function of institutionalised remembrance. It thus highlights how these material remnants are strategically deployed in struggles over power, serving as a platform for legitimising far-right discourses today.

To envision ways to address disagreements over colonial heritage, it is important to recognise that the proposed subject is permeated by ethical and epistemic responsibilities, as well as an ethical-political relationship arising from the choice of object. According to Nosella (2008), this importance stems from the fact that scientific research is grounded in free and ambiguous choices and is “fundamentally human, political and ethically committed from the very first formulation of the hypothesis to be tested” (p. 271). This research is warranted by the need to understand the factors contributing to the rise of an ultraconservative, supremacist and extremist wave that is showing signs of widespread expansion across the globe, an advance that has returned to the forefront of discussion in various fields of knowledge. This article also addresses this moment by proposing a shift in the epistemic flow of social memory that places heritage at the epicentre of the discussion on the collective memory of fascism, as well as its territorial and symbolic implications.

From a qualitative perspective, Rey (2007) characterises the function of epistemological inquiry as transforming the subject’s production and its complex informational fabric, produced through different pathways, into the “privileged material for constructing knowledge (...)” (p. 15). The following pages result from a methodological choice to better understand the return of symbols associated with a recent past, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of re-signification within urban space. Questioning the return of a symbol is, problematically, to indirectly assert that, at some point, its erasure had been consolidated. Classifying such monuments and assigning value judgements to them makes explicit the bias at the heart of the research and its ethical-political implications.

Building on the premise that “social memory is an eminently ethical and political concept” (Gondar, 2016, p. 23), the research presented here is ethically and politically oriented towards exclusion, marginality, the subterranean, the forgotten, and the erased. This orientation stems from the need to attend to what was not inscribed in marble and displayed in a public square as a marker of national identity. In other words, the aim is to analyse what was suppressed — as conceived in Michael Pollak’s (1989) notion of subterranean memories, as well as in the dynamics of memory suppression described by Todorov (1995/2000) in relation to a memory classified as exemplary. Concerning the return of extremisms in defence of reactionary legacies, it may be inferred that conservation groups make less use of what Todorov (1995/2000) identifies as exemplary memory,

which is characterised by sensitivity and openness to learning, and greater use of what he calls literal memory, in which the subject preserves the memory of its object as a singular fact, leaving no room for contradiction.

Finally, the research is methodologically conditioned by an attitude of openness to critical reflection, considering ethics as a social paradigm. Levy (2014) identifies humanistic ethics as a commitment to respecting individuality in its essence. Through an understanding of their own nature, individuals should therefore be capable of “not demanding that others become as they would like them to be; nor that they themselves become solely what others may want them to be” (p. 35). Additionally, the argument structured here is guided by the Kantian categorical imperative: “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end” (Kant, 1785/2007, p. 69).

To understand the functions of historical heritage in the construction and maintenance of the colonialist image, together with its representation of self and other in public space — and with the continuous mnemonic reconstruction of the past — it is possible to draw on the disciplinary expertise of the historiography of urban and architectural forms, as well as of social memory. Specifically, regarding the identity dynamics of groups and the political and symbolic disputes that shape processes of memory suppression and inscription, we will articulate monumental power through the conflicts over remembrance and forgetting as struggles of power and domination.

2. A CRY ENCAPSULATED IN BRONZE

For those who erect them, and for the recipients of the memories they convey, the monument is a defence against the trauma of existence, a security device. The monument provides reassurance, calms and comforts, warding off time’s being. It guarantees origins and dispels the unease generated by the uncertainty of beginnings. In defiance of entropy, of the dissolving action that time exerts upon all natural and artificial things, it seeks to combat the anguish of death and annihilation (Choay, 1992/2001). Insofar as the monument serves to warn, evoke, and remember, the affective nature of its purpose becomes clear and essential: it is not a matter of presenting or providing neutral information, but of reaching a living memory through emotion (Choay, 1992/2001). In this sense, anything created for remembrance in the present may be called a “monument”, even when its purpose is to ensure that future generations remember events, sacrifices, rites, or beliefs. Thus, heritage may be understood, whether established within the sphere of national or family memory, in terms of its primordial functions.

As Funari and Pelegrini (2006) suggest, the idea of the nation-state emerged from an imagined group of individuals expected to share the same language, culture, origins, and territory. To achieve these objectives, educational devices needed to be developed to disseminate, from childhood onwards, a sense of belonging to the nation among members of society. Scholars of modernity referred to the process intended to “imbue

the young, from an early age, with feelings and concepts that became part of their understanding of the world, as if everything were given by the very nature of things” (Funari & Pelegrini, 2006, p. 16) as introjection or internal indoctrination. We can see that the self-image is habitually mirrored, in idealised form, in the historical heritage of nations as an accumulation of objects that hark back to a shared past. At the heart of these devices as monuments lies their anthropological function of memory, in a task so sensitive that it seems to require operation according to careful conservation protocols which, if carried out “without a historical frame of reference, without attributing particular value to time (...) are as devoid of meaning as performing the tea ceremony while ignoring the Japanese feeling for nature” (Choay, 1992/2001, p. 25).

If, following Choay, we consider the profound tremors that shook the once stable structures of societies subjected to severe and accelerated processes of industrialisation, the historical monument appears to assume the additional task of preserving in time the illusory belief in a pacifying glory, at a time when the avalanche of changes brought about by modernity generated insecurities of various kinds. As the first to explore this context, the French State promoted and controlled, “with all the resources of its authority and powers, the rites of an official cult of historical heritage that became an integral part of the cult of culture” (Choay, 1992/2001, p. 210).

To understand how historical heritage constructs and maintains self-image, we can also draw on the disciplinary expertise of social memory, particularly regarding groups’ identity dynamics. Maurice Halbwachs (1950/2006), a pioneer in the concept of “collective memory”, argues that memory is not solely an individual process, but is instead shaped by interactions with other individuals, through which impressions, experiences, lived experiences, as well as narratives containing elements of group memory, are internalised. Through this group memory, a relationship of belonging and individual identity emerges, inseparable from the collectivity in question.

Halbwachs (1950/2006) explains that impressions may be based not only on individual recollection but also on others’. Whether around historical monuments, at the heart of beliefs, rituals, or processes of learning and communal remembrance, confidence in the accuracy of memorial recall grows within a group, as if the same past experience were relived not only by one person but by several. Thus, memories “remain collective and are reminded to us by others, even when they concern events in which only we were involved and objects that only we saw, because, in reality, we are never alone” (Halbwachs, 1950/2006, p. 16).

The relevance of what Halbwachs (1950/2006) calls “collective memory” extends across identity and culture, a domain in which the hypothesis that no memory is exclusively individual is corroborated by the very nature of personal content, which derives from exchanges with the social world. On the other hand, Michael Pollak (1989) points out that, by privileging the analysis of excluded groups, history highlighted the importance of what he calls “subterranean memories”, which, as part of minority and

dominated cultures, confront official memory, such as national memory. For Halbwachs (1950/2006), against the backdrop of nineteenth-century European tradition, this constituted the most complete form of collective memory. By contrast, Pollak (1989) emphasises the homogenising and destructive character of collective memory insofar as he draws attention to these marginalised subterranean memories, “which continue their work of subversion in silence and, almost imperceptibly, surface in moments of crisis in sudden and heightened bursts” (p. 2). In this conflict between memories, the materiality of places catalyses tensions, requiring reflection on who holds the power to name and protect what should be remembered.

In this sense, Pierre Nora (1993) understands the so-called “sites of memory” as places endowed with meaning imprinted through the action of a social group, which seeks to cultivate it to keep an externalised memory alive, transferring the task of remembrance to these sites. He identifies a threefold meaning comprising aspects that coexist and characterise sites of memory: material, symbolic and functional. His definition implies that a site of memory is delineated when groups’ imagination invests it with a symbolic aura. It must also be sufficiently functional to ensure the crystallisation of memory and its transmission.

However, the establishment of a site of memory does not necessarily entail the occupation of a physical perimeter, since “even a minute’s silence, which seems the extreme example of a symbolic meaning, is at the same time the material delimitation of a temporal unit and periodically serves as a concentrated invocation of remembrance” (Nora, 1993, pp. 21–22). It circumscribes them as spaces of excess and duplicity: they are, at the same time, closed in upon themselves and open to the extent of their meanings. In short, the message encoded by a site of memory is not perceived in the same way by everyone and is subject to the most diverse perceptions and choices, resulting in a lack of moral consensus around that message, as suggested by Winter (2008) concerning the processes of re-signification to which these sites are permanently subject.

Such a possibility of choice, that is, the individual cognitive process that takes place through constant contrast and interaction, leads to the preservation of one piece of information and the consequent suppression of another. Todorov (1995/2000), drawing attention to the impossibility of fully contemplating the past, emphasises that memory is invariably a selection that does not stand in opposition to forgetting, but rather one in which remembering and forgetting complement each other and form a whole. Remembering involves choices — conscious or otherwise — that reveal the subject’s point of view. Ideological and political interests may also shape this selective process, guiding choices about what to preserve and what to erase throughout the work, whether carried out by historians, public authorities, or social activists.

Among controversial historical figures and their monuments, the complexity of the site of memory appears to be closely linked to its permanent capacity for transformation. Choay (1992/2001) highlights archaeological discoveries — as well as what she calls an

advance in the memorial project of the human sciences — as determining factors in expanding the chronological field within which historical monuments are inscribed, which may help explain crises in their meanings.

Within these same propositions, reducing memory to the field of representation — whether monumental, historical or any other form of representation — would neglect the ongoing process through which it is produced. Thus, we must not be misled by representations, mere prostheses crystallised and legitimised within a given collectivity, since “if we think that the social sphere is alive, pulsating and constantly changing, representations are merely the static referent of what is in constant motion” (Gondar, 2016, p. 35). In this way, representation is merely another vector within a vast field of struggles and power relations, where the intersection and continuous reassembly of remembrance and forgetting — primary constituents of memory — produce, among other things, identity, of which groups become aware when, for example, they consider their past, seeking to assess the changes that have taken place within themselves over time: who they believed they were, who they are and who they will seek to become.

3. COLONIAL MONUMENTALITY AND ETERNAL FASCISM

The theoretical framework articulated in the preceding sections takes material form in contemporary monumental reality in different ways. In addition to the examples of disputes surrounding colonial monumentality already presented, consider Charlottesville, Virginia — in the southeastern United States, in August 2017. On that occasion, hundreds of members of the American far right took to the streets under the slogan “unite the right”, gathering to protest against the plan to remove the statue of Confederate general and slaveholder Robert Edward Lee, an icon of the Confederacy during the Civil War. The confrontation took shape as follows: on the one hand, humanitarian activists questioned the continued public presence of a symbol of racial domination; on the other, groups in favour of retaining the monument saw its possible removal as a serious affront to the nation’s history.

On that occasion, representatives of the White supremacist organisation Ku Klux Klan, Alt-right organisations and other new variants of the far right — as well as some sympathisers of German Nazi fascism — carried swastikas and other symbols; they carried Confederate flags and chanted Nazi slogans, thereby defending the integrity of what they described as a pure European heritage. Armed with torches and tridents, they demanded the right to have the symbol of the racist past preserved. Among the nationalists, chants such as “you will not replace us” — directed at American anti-racist activism — and “Jews will not replace us” were heard (Levin & Guenther, 2017, para. 1).

In the aftermath of these events, the violence proved fatal. James Fields drove from his home in Maumee (Ohio), intending to support the White supremacists protesting against the removal of the statue. Upon seeing the group of civil rights demonstrators marching through the city streets, Fields parked his car, put it into reverse and accelerated

towards the crowd, injuring dozens of people and killing activist Heather Heyer (Durkin, 2018). In December 2018, Fields was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. Beyond intentionally inflicting physical harm, the attack carried a warning.

Baierl (2004) explains how fear can be used as a manipulative strategy to influence, control, and even enslave people. He argues that when individuals face threatening situations and become terrified, they tend to choose either evasion or surrender. In light of these contributions on social fear, the symbolic power associated with banners bearing swastikas, as occurred during the 2017 demonstrations, stands out. The revival of this icon transcends Nazi-fascist identity expression: these symbols instrumentalise the power of fear.

There is no doubt that what occurred in Charlottesville was triggered by a heritage-related issue: the municipality's plan to remove the general's statue from the square. To understand how a monument acquires such centrality in extremist political disputes, we must revisit how its narrative was constructed. As Connelly (1977) points out, following Robert Edward Lee's death in 1870, scholars of the Civil War biased towards the Confederate perspective gave rise to the dissemination of a revisionist narrative by employing the term "the lost cause", seeking to sustain the argument that defeat had been anticipated by the anti-abolitionists, but that they nevertheless fought bravely, for the honour and principles of the slaveholding Confederacy, subverting the meaning of defeat and elevating General Lee to the status of an idol.

Approximately a century later, during the commemorative period marking the centenary of the Civil War, between 1961 and 1965, and against the backdrop of revisionist writers, the American nationalist middle class consolidated the veteran as a hero. As the inexorable insecurities of modern times emerged, the image of the general became a support shaped to meet the needs of a national consciousness (Connelly, 1977). Thus, the memorial exaltation of central Civil War figures and the "lost cause" narrative cannot be understood as an insular conflict within United States history, but as a direct and enduring development of the European colonial project in the Americas.

Operating from the notion of the "coloniality of power" (Quijano, 2000), we can see that the matrix of domination based on racialisation survived the formal independence of nations and became rooted in the segregationist framework of the modern State. Thus, when slaveholding totems are fiercely defended by reactionary forces in the twenty-first century, what is articulated in public space is not precisely the preservation of a crystallised past, but the pragmatic renewal of an original violence. It is the shifting silhouette of colonialism described by Mbembe (2016/2017) — a presence that camouflages itself in the urban landscape, deploying the discourse of heritage to continue dictating physical and symbolic boundaries in the present.

Discussions of the survival of forms of reactionary politics throughout history are nothing new. In contemporary times, these forms may re-emerge in fragmented forms, whether made somewhat more palatable, packaged and labelled as the Alt-right — one of

the most recent configurations of the far right, which organised the struggle to preserve the monument in Charlottesville — or openly expressed through Nazi-fascist nostalgists and/or neo-fascists. The fact is that the trajectory of ultraconservatism through more recent times is traced by Umberto Eco (1997/1998), who elucidates the lingering shadow of “Ur-fascism” or “eternal fascism”, which no longer operates within visible boundaries. Still, it remains a constant threat, ever capable of returning and, even more problematically, of undergoing metamorphosis.

The author brings together characteristics of what he calls “eternal fascism”: that which is no longer precisely configured at the heart of the syncretisms in which a new revolutionary order was proclaimed. “Ur-fascism” is ever capable of returning in new guises — including civilian ones — requiring additional attention to the perception of its presence. Although it is unlikely that there will be public calls for the Blackshirts to parade once again through Italian squares, eternal fascism is capable of adopting innocent guises, and “it is our duty to unmask it and to point a finger at each of its new forms — every day, in every place in the world” (Eco, 1997/1998, p. 8).

The monument’s distinctive feature in Virginia is that the statue became an epicentre of violent disputes, anchored by a heritage defence network that mobilises the past to attack the present. Under the pretext of defending heritage, eternal fascism finds a means of operating, silencing counter-hegemonic voices and perpetuating ideals of supremacy inherited from the colonial project. More than a century and a half after the end of the war, civil rights activism is marked by a phase of contestation over the continued presence and public memorial glorification of icons that are characterised, at the very least, in two fundamental ways: as national heroes and as perpetrators of humanitarian atrocities. When confronted with sites of memory such as the statue of Robert E. Lee, we encounter official memory — that is, memory instituted to symbolise bravery and resistance as reinterpreted by a predominantly White, segregationist population. By contrast, as subterranean memory, all that the victims suffered from the beginning of their enslavement through subsequent persecution falls into this category — centuries during which they remained at the mercy of slaveholders, generals and institutionalised racism.

American slavery was abolished by Abraham Lincoln amid the Civil War (1861–1865), on 1 January 1863, through the Emancipation Proclamation, intensifying pre-existing tensions between the North, capitalist-industrial, and the South, agricultural-slaveholding. These tensions, together with the Southern desire for secession driven by the continuation of enslaved labour, intensified (Eisenberg, 1982). In 1865, with the end of the war, the abolition of slavery was reaffirmed with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, making it applicable throughout the now-unified national territory. However, even in the wake of this measure, the Black population remained subject to segregation and the curtailment of rights. It was subjected to intimidation and persecution by organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan, KKK or simply the Klan, particularly in the southern states of the country, which to this day remain haunted by this and other supremacist

groups. For a long time, members of the Klan persecuted, assaulted and exterminated the Black population not only in the southern United States but throughout the national territory (Eisenberg, 1982). Initially formed by a group of former Confederate soldiers — that is, men associated with the southern United States and the pro-slavery faction defeated in the Civil War — the Ku Klux Klan reached four million members and considerable political influence by 1925 (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2011).

This scenario represents only a small section of the dynamics of repression of unacknowledged collective memories. In this case, those of the enslaved Black population of African origin in the southern United States, women and men persecuted for centuries not only under the regime of forced labour, but also after its institutional abolition. Thus, if we were able to question the sites of memory erected to the Confederates about everything they erase, diasporas, persecutions, epidemics, floggings, burnings, forced religious conversions, hunger, rape and genocide would be revealed. Far from merely expressing reverence for a celebrated war veteran under the pretext of projecting national unity, the heritage exaltation of this figure operates as a material device for perpetuating the same barbarity, something increasingly broad sections of civil society have recognised and discussed.

By petrifying a matrix of racial domination in public space, the monument exemplifies how the coloniality of power demonstrates that the colonial project did not end in the past, but assumed the metamorphic silhouette of “Ur-fascism”. The dissent and tensions inscribed in the statue’s reliefs extend beyond its symbolic aura, revealing heritage as a suitable surface for the maintenance of eternal fascism: habitually dispersed throughout the social fabric like a stealthy, colourless gas, its form readily changes state and solidifies when these surfaces of remembrance are threatened, bringing down the pretence of political neutrality and non-partisanship; revealing the true face usually concealed beneath the masks of economically palatable tolerance, bordered by the anaesthetic diversity that keeps neoliberal democracies afloat; crystallising before our eyes as a violently traditionalist and autocratic force that, through the legitimisation of the colonial legacy, demands the contemporary maintenance of its privileges.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As this article took shape, an attempt was made to draw a connection between the colonial monumental legacy and the figurations through which both Umberto Eco (1997/1998) and Achille Mbembe (2016/2017) — who explore and produce distinct concepts, moulded by their own time, space and epistemology — analyse the metamorphoses of authoritarianism.

A theoretical convergence between Eco (1997/1998) and Mbembe (2016/2017) lies in their recognition that authoritarian barbarity is not a historical event that has ended, but a force endowed with extreme plasticity. Eco (1997/1998) warns that, although classical dictatorial regimes may not return in the same form, their core — the “Ur-fascism”

or “eternal fascism” — persists, capable of returning in innocent guises, camouflaged in everyday cultural habits, social frustration, fear of difference and populism. Closely aligned with this idea of insidious adaptation, Mbembe (2011) highlights the continuous metamorphosis of colonial domination through necropower, revealing how the technologies of control and extermination, originally forged through the experience of slavery and the colony, assume diffuse and polymorphous forms in modernity, continuing to dictate who should live and who may be physically and socially discarded.

The tension between the two approaches, however, emerges in their epistemic emphases: whereas the persistence of eternal fascism described by Eco (1997/1998) foregrounds the ideological, discursive and psychological symptoms that permeate societies, Mbembe’s (2011) perspective anchors the reinvention of terror in the spatial materiality of occupation, the warfare of infrastructures and the racism that biologically divides the social fabric. When these propositions are transposed to contemporary debates on heritage re-signification, we encounter the observation that colonialist monuments operate precisely at this intersection, serving as an innocuous cultural guise donned by neo-fascisms to naturalise their ideology in everyday life, while at the same time functioning as spatial apparatuses of a necropower that celebrates the historical invisibilisation and subjugation of racialised populations.

If we dissolve one gram of salt in a jar of water, or add enough solute to saturate it, the visual difference will be little or none, since, after dissolution, the salt will almost completely escape the naked eye. Once we evaporate the solution, regardless of how long the process takes — whether we wait for it to occur naturally or increase the temperature to speed it up — we will find the same quantity of salt that was previously dissolved, now crystallised at the bottom of the jar.

It is precisely at the bottom of this jar that lies the reason for alerting ourselves to the furtive shapelessness of contemporary fascisms and for paying attention to the deceptive dynamics of dissolution, whether that of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the exterminatory supremacy of the Ku Klux Klan, the segregationist laws of the Jim Crow era, or the mechanisms that perpetuate colonial occupation through the fragmentation of urban spaces, condemning entire populations to the absolute power of death. Dissolving does not mean extinguishing, but rather removing from sight, which may create fertile ground for even more concealed actions by groups accustomed to operating clandestinely, such as those who called themselves “invisible empires”.

The way forward therefore lies in the strenuous search for new procedures capable of fostering a humanising consciousness, distanced from the illusory and self-negating precepts of absolute equality, but capable of showing us paths towards existence in which we see ourselves and others in the integrity of our differences, based on collective efforts to confront our controversies. This search supports the mobilisation of a Benjaminian conception of history: one that understands, from the tradition of the oppressed, that the so-called “state of exception” is, in fact, the general rule (Benjamin, 1940/1994, p. 226).

In proposing the task of “brushing history against the grain” (Benjamin, 1940/1994, p. 225) and rejecting the narrative of the victors, this perspective suggests the establishment of an authentic emancipatory state of exception capable of breaking the continuum of violence, prompting self-criticism regarding our own realities and strengthening our position in the struggle against fascisms. Such procedures seem to offer ways of addressing fragmented and sometimes invisible violence, which changes form and traverses time, crystallising whenever the conditions of temperature and pressure are right.

Therefore, while barbarity also works to appear distant through the lens of temporality and the mimicking of its own demise, it remains current and constant as a strand of human ferocity, manifesting itself in the practice of discourse, internalised within civilisation and culture as its underlying premise, and requiring constant monitoring and study in the search for new mechanisms for its identification and elucidation. Demonstrations in defence of colonial heritage demonstrate that the currents of coloniality and fascism operate through a latent and deliberate symbiosis in public space. The re-signification and material contestation of statues — whether those of Columbus, Pizarro or Lee — are not naïve revisionisms, but are closely linked to a necessary form of activism and an urgent decolonial praxis. These are direct, political and fundamentally aesthetic actions which, through the energy of their interventions, result in the public exposure of the remnants of tyranny, racism and xenophobia sedimented within urban fabrics over the centuries.

When social movements and organised civil society challenge these structures, they are not merely fighting against inanimate figures of bronze or marble, but against an ongoing project of power that seeks to monopolise the meaning of the nation, citizenship and, ultimately, who has the full right to inhabit the present. Heritage, in this way, ceases to be understood as a pacified inheritance, revealing itself instead as one of the principal trenches in which contemporary fascisms seek legitimacy, anchored in the exaltation of colonial narratives. It emerges as a place that should remind us of everything that the most common forms of memory prosthesis work to make us forget, revealing the conditions under which Western societies were built, whose camouflaged landscapes increasingly require new refusals of the legacies of subalternisation.

With a view to the unavoidable task of ensuring that public spaces cease to serve as protective shields for the perpetuation of barbarity, the responsibilities of memory and of the records that descend from it prove essential, promoting an elucidation of the persistence of everything that commemorates brutality itself, instrumentalises life and condemns humanity to the uncritical repetition of its own terror.

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