



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
MAPS PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | MAPS EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

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Eduardo Lourenço | 2014 | [Nuno Simão Gonçalves](#) (courtesy of the photographer)

THE LAST LESSON OF EDUARDO LOURENÇO

[Roberto Vecchi](#)

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In the days following the passing away of Eduardo Lourenço, and despite considerable commemorative efforts, the impossibility to encompass an extremely elusive work clearly emerged. The question of the nature of this work and, in particular, of defining the ex-centric status of a scholar like Eduardo Lourenço became abundantly evident: definitions suffering from profound insufficiencies surfaced in public acts and in the media.

As was predictable, almost all commemorations - with some relevant exceptions, among which I would include the sermon by José Tolentino de Mendonça - fulfilled their formal function but eluded the essential questions that may be raised about the most famous intellectual who had ceased to be - without any hagiographic emphasis - the greatest living intellectual in Portugal.



The asymmetry between fame and knowledge was, certainly, the most salient feature of the effort to pay homage. An enigma Lourenço never did anything to untie - what could be defined as a further impropriety, his “eclecticism”, always questioned the stability of any possible definition. And it may be added that, as Alessandro Portelli remarks, definitions, rather than defining an object, address, above all, the horizon of the one who is defining.

The truth is that the problem has long been there. Eduardo Lourenço was, all by himself, a big intellectual family: philosopher, teacher, literary critic, thinker, mythologist, art critic, critic of the cinema, essayist, precursor of postcolonial criticism and cultural studies, writer, man of letters, just to provide a functional and always incomplete listing. He was a triumph, not of disciplines, but of “indiscipline”, in a world more intent on the (sluggish) praise of “specialization”.

At the same time, there are themes that emerge in the work as a whole and follow him like obsessions throughout his entire life: take a look at the first essay - where the dialogue of the young assistant lecturer with Joaquim de Carvalho is apparent - inaugurating the first published book, *Heterodoxy* (1949), “Europe, or the Dialogue that We Miss”. The first sentence in this juvenile pronouncement functions as a manifesto or a programme for the 70 years of critical work that would follow: “The world of Portuguese culture has dragged a twilight existence throughout the last four centuries”.

Eduardo Lourenço made no effort to consecrate himself to posterity, he did absolutely nothing to nourish the fame he enjoyed but was alien to him. His trade was to read, to see, to think, and to write. Actions he performed continuously, tirelessly, with or without an audience, in an indissociable way. Lourenço did not have a strong institutional bond, he did not dispute a particular field (the University, the intellectual milieu, the culture of a country and a continent, the organigram of a party). Such a condition turned him into an extremely free person. This is the foundation of his critical strength and his irreducibility to schemes and conventions. In a certain way, his books “happened” as well, they were not born of a long-premeditated plan: his breadth (about this much has already been said and written) is the one of the essay, the fragment, the attempt to find a more stable form in the stream of thoughts and words.

The pile of published and unpublished works is before us, demonstrating the persistence of the effort to read, to understand the world, without a previous project of transformation or conservation. One evening, in Bologna, walking the streets, before a window-case, in a moment when the University was celebrating his knowledge without borders, he avowed, with an impressive innocence, “if I would have to synthesize what I have been doing, I might just say that I am a curious person”.



The burial of Eduardo Lourenço, the day of national mourning, the pronouncements that could not fail on the occasion of the loss of a celebrated intellectual, suffered, however, from a curious and singular characteristic: in their majority, they were divided between acritical praise and criticism without praise. The first resorted to a rhetoric of occasion, with the inevitable references to the monumental work *O labirinto da saudade*, which, fortunately, carries such a brilliant title that it is not easily forgotten (the contents ask for more sustained effort and may, thus, be discarded).

Criticism without praise, betraying a long-postponed resentment (97 years were a venerable age), concentrated, above all, on the “exultet” that, finally, the work of Eduardo Lourenço was open for discussion. It was a pity that, in many interventions, that which emerged was, essentially, an embarrassing ignorance of what the Professor has effectively written, and criticism concentrated mainly on a biographic “mythology” of Eduardo Lourenço. Which reveals the extent to which certain epistemologies reveal the horizon of the epistemologist, rather than his/her presumed object.

Both positions, however, betray an immense lack of direct and non-mediated knowledge of the work of Eduardo Lourenço. It is, in fact, a labyrinthine work (and the adjective is not metaphorical), fragmentary, complex, which demands an approach that is not extemporaneous or impressionistic, like many approaches surfacing on the occasion of this enormous loss. I would like to think that this is the last lesson bequeathed to us by Eduardo Lourenço. The ferocious criticism of a superficial, innocent Portugal, unconscious of guilt, the bearer of many unthought spots, like voids that, notwithstanding, appear camouflaged with forms of knowledge that are conformist and radical, sophisticated and witless. In the long exercise of loving and passionate analysis that Eduardo Lourenço dedicated to his country, a lucid anamnesis exposes the contradictions, the non-written laws, the idiosyncrasies betraying the permanence of normative, hierarchical, authoritarian values, that were there before and after the contemporaneous fractures of History and that remain, despite everything. In total innocence.

In his farewell to life, Eduardo Lourenço managed to bring together all those who recognized themselves in a substantial ignorance of his real, not imagined, intellectual legacy. What must speak now is - an immense and philologically demanding prosopopoeia - the work he has left us. It will be enough to read it before discussing it, and not vice-versa. This is a process which, fortunately, was initiated before the death of the author and of the cloud generated around it; it deserves to be carried on in a deeper way. The thought of Eduardo Lourenço - complex, fragmentary, enlightening even in its less developed or



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more opaque features - remains at our disposal. To read it and to know it is the best antidote against the simulacra of distorted and partial interpretations. A last lesson, not just a philological one, that will remain.

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Mariamo Miguel | 2019 | Paulo Faria (courtesy of the author)

THIS IS NOT YOUR WAR (2)

Paulo Faria

A month ago, in our first conversation, in this same cubicle in a shopping centre in Costa da Caparica, Maurício (Guinea, 1972-1974), an engineer in his civilian life, did not mention the electric chair in Bula. He told me other war stories. Lots of them. Sitting around the table with him were Marco Mané and other veterans. In that meeting, I was looking for the same thing that brought me here today: exemplary



stories. *Exemplary* in Sophia de Mello Breyner's terms, as in her *Contos exemplares [Exemplary Tales]*. Short stories that crystallize the cartography of a whole universe, a whole torment, a whole epoch. In my case, I want stories that contain within them the whole of the colonial war, the whole of colonialism. Stories like these are rare nuggets. We have to sift through a lot of grit to find them. But Maurício is a tireless raconteur. Our first meeting lasted long into the night, and he offered me a number of uncut diamonds. As the logistics and psychology officer for a cavalry battalion, it fell to him, periodically, to arrange exceptional outings.

"In Bula there was a brothel. All the prostitutes were Manjacas. The families sold them into prostitution, but they were beautiful and they had a taste for it. Every couple of months or so the doctor would tell me it was time for the inspection. I summoned a platoon, or a section at least, and, by surprise, we would surround the house in the morning. We put the prostitutes in a *Berliet* truck and took them to the barracks infirmary. The doctor and the male nurses checked them all. They had Penadur—penicillin injections—ready because all the women who had gonorrhoea... the clap... we gave them the injection straight away. In the arm? No, in the buttock. High up on the right side. But the syringe was enormous, the needle too. The injection hurt like hell. And I had to be there to keep order because some of them were screaming and shouting. And they had to open their legs, obviously. The doctor put a little device in their vaginas, a speculum. He used a little headlamp and he looked up there, and when he saw pus... Sometimes he even said to me: 'Point the light and look. See there?' Almost all of them had pus, only one or two did not. The ones who did not took some tablets, some kind of preventive thing, I don't know what."

When the stories they tell are particularly lurid, the veterans feel compelled to pass moral judgement on their own actions fifty years ago.

"They tried to escape. When we surrounded the house some of them even jumped out of the windows, and we had to take them by force. I said to them: 'We are here to do you good, we aren't here to harm you. We are here to do you good because of the soldiers, but also for your own good. We want to treat you.' And we caught them all. 'Get into the truck, the truck... Into the *Berliet*, into the *Berliet*...' When the treatments were done we took them back and that was it."

The details are repulsive, but I cannot help feeling a secret jubilation at having found yet another exemplary story of colonialism, in the broadest sense of the term "colonialism". Colonialism is doing



something to someone that *we* understand as “good”, but that the person in question feels is “bad”, all so *they* can serve *us* better. To reformulate: colonialism is the instrumentalization of the other, doing them good only to the extent that it benefits us. It’s worth noting that the exemplary character of a story almost always escapes its original narrator.

Maurício did not mention the electric chair in Bula to me, however. He just told me, after Marco had recounted various of the atrocities that he had witnessed, that in the barracks there was a prison and that sometimes, in the morning, the corporal who worked as the prison guard would call him over: “Hey, ensign, come over here. Come see this.” The walls of the cell were covered in fresh blood. Maurício asked: “But who was in here?” And the corporal said: “It was captain so-and-so, he was interrogating a prisoner. Look at the mess he left.” At this point, after emphasizing that, given the amount of blood smeared all over the walls, the prisoners doubtlessly had died, Maurício felt obliged to pass moral judgement, as if anticipating my own, which he must have guessed from my astonished expression:

“But now I want to say something. Today this is shocking, but you have to understand. Those who did that were PIDE guys and... well, guys from the army. But thanks to the information they got that way, and there was no other way to get it, they saved lots of us. I don’t know if I’m making myself understood. War is a whole set up. Because it’s like this: you do a thing that is bad in itself, but it’s done to save lives. And ten, or a dozen, or twenty men could have died, and in the end only one man died... that’s what you have to understand. If you’re there, you understand these things.”

As if to say to me: “Those who weren’t there can’t understand these things.” With this new exemplary story, Maurício showed me the basic logic of war, which is the inevitable corollary of a colonial logic: do bad to others to stop them doing bad to us. Reduced to its crudest foundations, the world is a simple place. Prostitutes open their legs when they are told to. Lives aren’t all worth the same. Information is extracted from men’s flesh like rotten teeth that have to be pulled. What we saw and locked up inside fifty years ago has become a part of us. Don’t ask us to renounce it. Don’t ask us to throw our whole lives away just because the world has changed in the meantime. Don’t ask us to switch places with the others. Even if we wanted to, we wouldn’t be able to. We didn’t lie down on a bed with our legs open. We didn’t let the doctor’s little light flash across the pus of our insides. We didn’t spray blood on the walls of the cell. Others, with more of a taste for it, did that for us.

Paulo Faria, December 2020



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YOUR WAR (2)

Translated by Archie Davies

Paulo Faria (born Lisbon, 1967) is a writer and literary translator. He has translated Cormac McCarthy, George Orwell, Don DeLillo, James Joyce, Charles Dickens and many others. To date, he has published the novels *Estranha Guerra de Uso Comum* (2016, Ítaca) and *Gente Acenando para Alguém que Foge* (2020, Minotauro). His third book, *Em Todas as Ruas te Encontro* (Minotauro), will be published in 2021.

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