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

Saturday, 12 December 2020

Worker | 2019 | Paulo Faria (courtesy of the author)

THIS IS NOT YOUR WAR (1)

Paulo Faria

I am already sitting at the table when the stranger enters the room. It is a windowless, triangular cubicle in a commercial centre on the Costa da Caparica. I am due to meet some veterans from the Colonial War, friends of a former soldier that I know. His name is Marco Mané, and he is our host – he is the manager of this shopping centre and a former African commando in Guinea-Bissau. I've been doing this for several years. I talk to one veteran, who knows others, who know others. I am searching for new

war stories, new details, new voices to join the chorus in my head. I'm making a choral symphony, the choral symphony of our African war. I'm trying to understand what I can, and save up the rest, which I will understand later, when a new voice comes, mysteriously, to cast light on the shadows of one that came before.

The stranger enters, with Marco, who says: "Here is the first comrade", and leaves. The newcomer's body language is reluctant, mistrustful. He says his name is Adriano Oliveira. He adds:
– I don't know what you want from me...

He sits down in the chair opposite me, leans back against the wall and offers me his profile.
– Marco didn't explain it to me well.

I set off on the preamble that I use on these occasions. I am the son of a colonial veteran, who died in 2013. I spoke to many of my father's comrades from his unit after he died. The living memory of the Colonial War is bound to be lost, and I want to preserve it, such as I can. I want to write about it, but I'm not going to write about other peoples' memories, but my own memories of other peoples' memories.

He did not look at me, but at the wall in front of him, against which leant an out-of-date advertisement for a superhero film. His frostiness disconcerted me. I ended by saying, rather abruptly, that I had published novels, as well as articles in newspapers and other media. I shut up. Eventually Adriano turned to me and said:

– It's a shame Marco didn't explain that to me, otherwise I wouldn't have come.

His body language became colder, like someone being hassled by a beggar or an officious police officer.

– They say it's us who made the colonial war, but I didn't make war. I was forced to go to war, which is very different. While others fled abroad, happy as larry.

I didn't respond, nor did I contradict him. The rising anger in his voice let me know that any spark would set off an explosion.

– When I talk about the colonial war, I immediately feel like breaking everything, you know. I was in Guinea, I participated in Operation *Mar Verde*, with Alpoim Calvão, I saw a lot. Listen: I don't take judgment from those who weren't in the war, understood?

He paused, as if to challenge me to say something. An interview I had seen recently by Lissette Orozco, director of *El Pacto de Adriana*, sprang into my mind. In her magnificent film Orozco dissects the process of uncovering the hidden past of her aunt, Adriana Riva, a former agent in the ranks of *DINA*, Pinochet's political police. Orozco's words come into mind: "I don't make moral judgments about my nineteen-year-old aunt, who joined *DINA* and became a torturer. But I make moral judgments about my sixty-five-year-old aunt, who continues to say that those were the best years of her life". I think, but I don't say it out loud, that I have no interest in compiling a handbook of neutral narratives of the colonial war. There are no neutral narratives. The light that I search for in these testimonies emerges when the veterans assume a moral stance, and, whether explicitly or implicitly, make value judgments about the war in which they participated and the things that they did there. A war that was the extension and natural corollary of the colonial enterprise, in which they were more or less passive participants. I don't feel entitled to judge them as young men in their twenties, forced, like my father, to embark for war. Yet I cannot but judge the words they use to talk about the war and its miseries today, fifty years later. Adriano told me that he wouldn't take value judgments, but to abstain from them would be to abdicate my humanity. Each generation, I think, has not just the right, but the obligation, to make moral judgments about the discourse that previous generations use about their actions.

I cannot translate what I am looking for in these meetings with colonial veterans into a simple, telegraphic formula. Among veterans there is a strong sense of community. An almost familial, almost tribal intimacy, which sometimes seems to me to be incompatible with a wider sense of community. It is a communion that tends to exclude me, and all those who have not shared the same experience. What I look for in these conversations are the moments, like epiphanies, when veterans express their belonging to a wider, more comprehensive human community, organized around moral values. This is a community that includes, as equals, the men they fought against, and the children of these men. Both us and them.

– So, I'm off, Adriano concludes. – But look, it's nothing against you.

He gets up and leaves. I've been in situations like this before. An angry veteran is rattled, but says he has nothing against me. It is nothing against the person who is physically there. What he rejects, it seems to me, are the words of a non-veteran on the colonial war. Because, to some extent, every word contains a moral judgment, and the veteran feels that, vaguely. There are no neutral words.

I don't know what he was hoping for. Or who he thought he was meeting. An unfinished sentence made me think that he had taken me to be compiling data about colonial veterans to help provide them with access to healthcare.

The other veterans Marco invited come in, one by one. They introduce themselves. Guinea, Angola. We speak for three hours. One of them, a veteran of Guinea, mentions at one point the electric chair that they used in Bula to torture *PAIGC* prisoners.

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Translated by Archie Davies

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