



Editorial

Revolutions and Their Afterlives

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Editorial


Revolutions and Their Afterlives


José Neves* and Rita Lucas Narra**

The past is never dead. It is not even past.

William Faulkner¹

“It’s too early to say,” replied Chinese Prime Minister Chou En Lai when Richard Nixon asked him for his opinion on the French Revolution. The conversation took place at the beginning of the 1970s, on the occasion of the then US president’s visit to the People’s Republic of China, and in the following weeks the idea would prevail that the Chinese leader, in a register between the sardonic and the metaphysical, was referring to the French Revolution of 1789. More recently – and as if to disprove the old orientalist theme that in the East there is a lingering notion of historical time – the interpreter who accompanied Nixon on that state visit claimed that the Chinese leader was referring to French events, yes, but from 1968. Apocryphal or not, Chou En Lai’s response deserves our attention, as it contains a warning and, following it, an interpellation. The warning tells us not to rush into writing a death certificate for a revolution; the interpellation encourages us to think about the time of revolutions.

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¹ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (London: Vintage, 1996), 85.

It is now widely recognised that historiographical knowledge does not only reflect the era that it identifies as the object of its study. The writing of history is inevitably a meeting place between at least two temporalities: that of the past to which the historian refers, and that of the present in which the historian finds himself when (de)scribing that past – not even the most positivist of historians will refuse the idea that his subjectivity and circumstances mark, to some extent, what he writes and says about the past. Less consensual is the proposition that the dividing line between the past and the present is also subjective and circumstantial. The problem that sets the tone for this themed issue – the posthumous lives of revolutions – aims to explore precisely this hypothesis.

When can we say that a revolution is over? Let's consider the case of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. For some, it was over with the New Economic Policy formulated by Lenin. For others, Stalin's ascension to the leadership of the CPSU brought revolution to its end. For still others, the October Revolution began to bury itself with the principles of peaceful coexistence enunciated by Khrushchev, its flame being definitively extinguished with Gorbachov's *perestroika*. And at the end of the 20th century, hardly anyone doubted that the revolution had died for good with the fall of the USSR – almost always equated with the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, rather than its official end in 1991.

The “afterlives” of revolutions, however, disturb these and other certainties. Over the last decade, the countless measures to erase the memory of the October Revolution that have been taken in different Eastern European countries have sought to honour the victims of the regimes that prevailed in those same countries during the second half of the 20th century; but those measures have also sought to dissolve that revolutionary experience once and for all, as if its death had not yet been fully realised. This kind of half-life of revolutionary experiences also manifests itself in the opposite direction: when there is an effort to salute past revolutionary experiences today, to multiply their “posthumous” manifestations in order to make the present less stable or even to make them operative and consequential in times that would not authorise them in the first place.

By calling for proposals for articles or essays on revolutions and their afterlives, we wanted to encourage the study of the different interpretations and representations of past revolutions, but also the debate around the precariousness of the boundary that separates the present from the past. Our encouragement to problematise this boundary, it should be added, is not due to the fact that we accept a conception of time that is so homogeneous that past, present and future are reduced to a single unit; rather, it is due to our willingness to accept a non-linear perception of time, which suggests the possibility of pasts thought to be moribund returning to present life with unexpected brightness. As if different temporalities are frequently involved in the actions of historical subjects, crediting Faulkner's aphorism that serves as the epigraph to these introductory remarks.

For instance, the leaps in the snow with which Lenin is said to have effusively celebrated the fact that the October Revolution exceeded the 72-day mark, because that was the duration of the Paris Commune, did not just revive the memory of the events of 1871; they also suggest that the historical experience of the Commune, even if it failed, was contemporary with the Bolshevik leader. Just as in 1918, when a statue in honour of Maximilien de Robespierre was erected in Moscow, also the Bolsheviks were declaring that it was too early to formulate a definitive opinion on the French Revolution.²

The Portuguese Revolution of 25 April 1974, whose fiftieth anniversary is the pretext for our editorial initiative, also offers itself up to an exercise of this kind. It would certainly be legitimate to declare – joyfully or disappointedly – that this revolution “died” on 25 November 1975, when the most radical political forces and social processes saw their room for manoeuvre drastically reduced. However, looking at the large commemorative demonstrations that took place in the 25th April 2024, it is also possible to identify a sign that the revolution continues to be an operative referent. And this kind of expressions characteristic of a certain memorial culture of the 1974 revolution (such as the slogan “25 de Abril sempre, fascismo nunca mais”, “25 April always, fascism never again”) seem to have acquired a performative reach in this context, a reach that they had lost and that

² Tatiana Kondratieva, *Bolcheviks et jacobins: itinéraire des analogies* (Paris: Payot, 1989).

was now recovered as a response to another reality that was supposed to be extinct with the fall of the “Estado Novo” dictatorship, the phenomenon of the Portuguese extreme right, which obtained a large result in the legislative elections held weeks before the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of 25 April.

The proposals we received to the call launched by *Práticas da História* can be grouped around three main axis. Some articles deal directly with the problem of afterlives that we have been referring to in this editorial. This is particularly the case with “On Decolonising Revolution through a Lens of Afterlives”, by Alice Wilson. A second axis evolves research into the uses that political theory and philosophy have made of different revolutionary experiences. Having become a relevant political concept in the last few centuries, revolution – here defined in terms of the emergence of the modern concept of revolution, as proposed by Reinhart Koselleck³ – has been part of the work of authors such as Frantz Fanon, Henri Lefebvre, Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Negri and André Gorz, among others who are studied in this issue by Thomas van Binsbergen, Manuela Ribeiro Sanches, Francesco Biagi and José Nuno Matos. The way in which the revolution was felt and given meaning in cultural activities in the arts (particularly cinema, discussed by Patrícia Sequeira Brás and José Filipe Costa) or in its political uses (whether in the context of parliamentary discourse, as in the article by Morgane Delaunay, or in the context of public statuary, studied by Gil Gonçalves, Henrique Pereira and Ana Sofia Ribeiro) constitutes the third axis, this one with particular reference to the memory of the revolution of 25 April 1974. That said, readers can read each of the following texts in the order they prefer!

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³ Reinhart Koselleck, “Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution”, in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 [1969]), 43-57.