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BOOK REVIEWS

Narratives of Political Violence. Life Stories of Former Militants, by Raquel da Silva. New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 157.

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In *Narratives of Political Violence*, Raquel da Silva analyses the life stories of twenty-eight former Portuguese militants from six different violent political organizations (four of them leaning to the left and two to the right) dedicated to distinct causes before, during, and after the Revolution of April 25, 1974, which ended the dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar.

This work is focused on a phenomenon – political violence – and its discursive representation and illustrates how those who once committed violence in the name of political ideals build, through narrative, their experiences of entry, permanence and exit of armed groups. It takes into account the macro-narratives, “the stories former militants tell about the world works, how they explain the engines of social change, and the role they see themselves,” but also the macro ones, “the national and international stories” (p.43). If the former are influenced by the latter,

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these are also constructed through a selection of the former. As Da Silva considers, social reality is a narrative construction; the official discourse on how and why events took place will always result from the dominance of one certain narrative over the remnant. History can thus be seen, and as Foucault suggests, as based on a system of exclusion (Gutting & Oksala 2019). In this perspective, there is no single “History,” but several of these, and Da Silva seeks to give voice to those who have been marginalized.

In order to demystify political violence, the author argues that the phenomenon can never be considered outside the historical context and its political, cultural and social dynamics, since they function as the triggers of the process, not only of radicalization, but also of de-radicalization. Arthur, for example, one of the ex-militants interviewed, believes that his decision to join a violent organization was motivated by the oppressive regime, which did not allow any form of opposition (p.1). Afonso, on the other hand, blames the Colonial War and his military career for the will to defend the country (p. 2).

However, the author departs from deterministic discourses that usually suggest that violence will inevitably arise in certain social contexts or in individuals exhibiting an identity marked as violent. In fact, one of the most relevant aspects of Raquel da Silva's work is the link between political narrative and identity, traced with the use of Dialogical Self Theory. This perspective rejects the idea of an indivisible “I”, and, instead, advocates that one’s identity is “plural, dynamic and multivocal,” and that, therefore, a single individual contains within himself several “I-positions” (“I as a militant”; “I as a militant who perceives violence as necessary”; “I as one of the few people who is prepared to fight the regime,” for example). This means, first of all, that the sense of unity of the self derives precisely from the balance between these “selves” and, secondly, that, at different points in life, the sub-

ject will give preference to a particular “I” (or a certain set of I-positions) in disfavour of others (p.44). Thus, the life narrative of each individual results from the temporary domain of a set of “selves” that are not predefined, but changeable and constantly recreated (p.45). Hence, it can be understood that, at a specific moment in time, the hegemony of an I-position such as “I as militant who perceives violence as necessary” (p. 80) will motivate the individual to join a violent organization. Likewise, the predominance of another “I”, such as “I as martyr-hero”, legitimates the permanence in that group. Finally, the supremacy of a position as “I as one who does not identify with the role of the militant” will prompt individuals to leave the organization. In this sense, subjects respond to the existing macro-narratives based on their various “I” which help build the “perceptions they [the individuals] hold about themselves, others and their political, social, cultural, economic and historical milieu” (p. 4).

An analysis that values narratives and the relationship settled between them and identity has both theoretical and practical implications. In the first place, and as mentioned above, it allows the identity of a violent actor to be understood as multiple and changeable. It also clarifies how this is simultaneously influenced by, and has an influence on, the construction of life narratives, which in turn conditions action. Secondly, this analysis contributes to a valorisation of the voices of violent actors, countering the tendency of their exclusion and homogenization. It also suggests that both radicalization and de-radicalization are processes and not static realities, and therefore, the abandonment of a violent organization is possible. Da Silva’s research also highlights the role of narratives - and their underlying identities - in the concretization of a certain action, thus providing important clues for policy-makers, who must seek to build counter-narratives strong enough to compete with

those in which violence is portrayed as the most efficient way of building a better world.

The investigation of Raquel da Silva also excels by its originality. As the author herself points out, the book marks a contribution to the debate on political violence in general, but particularly, and above all, to the debate on political violence in Portugal. Recently, some works have been published on the theme in Portuguese, such as *Portugal à Lei da Bala – Terrorismo e Violência Política no Século XX*, by Luís Marinho and Mário Carneiro (Agência Lusa 2018), which presents a survey of the most significant moments of political violence of the last century, and even exposes testimonies of some former militants. However, the work of Raquel da Silva is the first to counter the historiographical tendency of the publications on political violence in Portugal, and to rely extensively on the stories told by the ex-militants themselves. It is also the first to do so in English, which may enhance its consideration alongside other publications on the same topic, and favour comparative studies on the narratives of various organizations with a violent nature or, on a broader scale, on violence itself. This book also distinguishes itself from other approaches by resorting to the analysis of discursive identity and by valuing the idea, not always sufficiently explored, that each experience of a subject is associated with an individual process of attribution of meaning and emphasizing that, in fact, the need to attribute a greater sense to events and actions is intrinsic to the human being, and critical to understanding his choices.

Nonetheless, the work would have benefited from a greater articulation between the Dialogical Self Theory and the results from the interviews conducted with the former militants. Although the processes of engagement with and disengagement from organizations have actually been exposed according to the framework of I-positions, it would have been interesting to have the opportunity to know more

extensively the tenets of the theory and to have them more present in the empirical chapters. In addition, the number of I-positions built over the chapters is considerable, and, without a prior or subsequent list of all those mentioned, it can be difficult to recall the totality of them. It might be useful if the conclusion were to retrieve all the I-positions mentioned in a sort of catalogue, which would help to have a more organized and clear idea of the various images invoked by the ex-militants in their narratives.

This said, and aside from the already listed theoretical and methodological contributions of the work, which make it recommendable for researchers of political violence, it should also be noted that Raquel da Silva's work is extremely relevant to the larger society. The dominant narratives persist to constitute the collective memory of a nation and help to establish institutional facts; they become the only known History. Da Silva does justice to the maxim that “memory is not just a private affair” (p. 49) and gives preponderance to other stories within our History, valuing different worldviews and recognizing the importance of these to understand the complexity of society. This is important in any country, but it may be even more so in Portugal, exhorted in 2018 by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), to rethink its narrative of the “discovery of the new world” and, in particular, the history of the ex-colonies. In the same line of “rebellion of memory” (ECRI 2018, p. 31), and against revisionist discourses that still emerge, it is important to give voice to others forgotten, so that violence is understood, especially when it arises against authoritarian regimes, as a sign of a dysfunctionality in society and as a forewarning to perhaps more persistent and worrying problems.

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