



Memories of a Glorious or Difficult Past? Portugal, *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* and the (Lack of a) 21st Century Reckoning

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse a particularly influential case of memory continuity in Portugal, that of *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*. Spaces of collective memory (such as public monuments) raise questions about what we celebrate, remember or rescue from oblivion, providing an opportunity to rethink the trauma. As such, care for public spaces is associated with ethical and cultural values. One of the difficulties with certain monuments has to do with the fact that they recall actions that today we see as traumatic acts. Thus, it is important to reflect on a critical use of memory. On August 8, 2021, *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* was the subject of a graffiti. One of the sides of the monument could read: “Blindly sailing for money, humanity is drowning in a scarlet sea”. A great controversy immediately arose around the meaning of this gesture, as well as the role played by a monument that, after being temporarily built in 1940 for the Portuguese World Exhibition, was, in its current version, inaugurated in 1960, on the occasion of the fifth centenary of the death of Infante D. Henrique. This episode reignited a deeper cleavage around the uses of history and memory, the Portuguese colonial past, and the role of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* as an instrument for the reproduction of nationalism. In this sense, and with the authors proposing a new theoretical frame of reference based on the thought of Arendt and Ricoeur, its critical reading becomes relevant.

Keywords Collective memory · Empire · Ricoeur · Arendt · Lisbon · *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* · Portugal

Our specialty is the invocation of the shadows. History is a kind of cinema of the soul for us. And it is always the same old film playing: The Lost Empire. [...] Less than a million peasants, shepherds, and fishermen, it wasn't any more than that, in a remote corner of the world, hardly noticed by anyone—and then, almost from one day to the next, this collective madness, intoxicating, head-long desire to discover, on our own, everything that could be discovered. The whole thing lasted only fifty or at most a hundred years, but we have never

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recovered and are unable to forget it. Only somehow we can't quite remember the massacres we carried out... [14, p. 159].

1 Introduction

Soldiers, priests, aristocrats, monks, writers, scientists, sailors, poets, and explorers—all stand together on a Lisbon waterfront in Belém, not far from the actual place from which their ships left Portugal, defiant to the innumerable tourists that pass them every day. All following Prince Henry the Navigator, their eyes most often turned on the horizon, while set in stone, the figures seem to be frozen in time, forever sailing on a caravel—with a cross-like sword and the Portuguese coat of arms on it—towards what for them, and later generations of Portuguese, came to be known as ‘the New World’ (see Figs. 1 and 2).

A tale of great explorers, faraway lands and glorious conquests—this is the story that the monument, known as *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* (the Monument of Discoveries), tells its visitors, of which there are many, given that the statue is



Fig. 1 *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* (Author: Sadowski, M.M. 2022)



Fig. 2 Figures at the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* (Author: Sadowski, M.M. 2022)

continuously listed as one of the top attractions in Lisbon (see, e.g., [1]). Certain historical facts are, however, excluded from this romantic narrative: neither the fate of the indigenous peoples nor of the slaves brought to the Portuguese colonies from all over the world is mentioned even in a symbolic way.

Padrão dos Descobrimentos was constructed during the time of the Portuguese dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar known as the *Estado Novo* (1928/1933–1974), a regime whose one of the main goals was furthering traditional and nationalistic morality among the Portuguese, a major element of which was “the glorification of the Portuguese nation and its five-century-old overseas territories (the Ultramar)” [41, pp. 330–331]. Such a whitewashed and oversimplified history of ‘the Era of Great Discoveries’—often assuming the shape of a banal *lusotropicalist* discourse [28]—was a particularly vital element of the regime’s official narrative. This narrative endured the fall of dictatorship in 1974, given that in its essence, it both predates and is stronger than *Estado Novo*.

As António Costa and Miguel Jerónimo [12, p. 98] remark, the imperial narratives became consolidated in Portugal in the 19th century and remain present to this day, be that in school curricula or mass media, which are all engaged in propagating a particular image of the ‘Great Discoveries’; a narrative so influential that it even impacts the country’s foreign policy—as the two note further, “with each crisis of Portugal’s European integration, the old colonial or imperial space returns to the public sphere as a geostrategic, economic and cultural alternative.”

In spite of engaging in decolonisation immediately after the 1974 Revolution, the imperial collective memories returned with full force in the 1980s, although adapted to the changing times. Their first institutionalisation took the form of the establishment of the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries (*Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses*—CNCDP) in 1986, which was tasked with cultural promotion and research of the ‘Great Discoveries’ but in a way allowing for a “rethinking of national identity” [37, pp. 1–3, 26]. Later, in 1996, the Community of Portuguese

Speaking Countries (*Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa*, CPLP) was also established, continuously referring to the past and heritage that Portugal shares with its former colonies, glossing over the difficult aspects of this common history [6, p. 30]. Ultimately, the 1998 Expo in Lisbon [see 43] was organised under “The Oceans, Heritage of Humankind” theme, putting the reoriented historical narrative into a global spotlight, whereby, as Sieber noted back in the day,

rather than emphasizing racial genius and purity, or national cultural exceptionalism, the past is now evoked to legitimize Portugal’s history as a transnational broker, a facilitator of dialogue and communication between the world’s peoples, cultures, and nations, and a bridge between East and West, as well as North and South. Mediation and brokerage, cross-cultural exchange, hybrid forms, multiculturalism, and the Portuguese experience and expertise in facilitating all these feature in the new nation-building discourses during this new postcolonial age. [...] the claim to a universal relevance of Portuguese cultural genius still remains [62, pp. 550, 561].

Perhaps it is not surprising that such a narrative endures: Portuguese was the last colonial empire to come crumbling down, in 1975, with the end of independence wars in Africa [6, p. 28], and the country’s—and Europe’s in general—last colony in Asia, Macau, was returned to China only in 1999 [56, p. 6]. Thus, the imperial experience is still fresh in Portuguese collective memory; furthermore, as one of the characters of Hans M. Enzensberger’s essay on Portuguese identity remarks, not realising the broader implication of his words meant as an insult, “It’s not so easy to get rid of an empire” [14, p. 159].

The main purpose of this paper is to ask the difficult questions regarding the ‘getting rid of an empire’, pondering upon the pervasiveness of imperial memories in a post-imperial society, analysing the case of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* given its role as a tangible artefact that acts as an anchor for a much broader narrative. Importantly, while we may be focusing on Portugal, the spectres of colonialism are still haunting the many different metropolises, as they are called upon to come to terms with their past atrocities. As such, we hope that our mostly theoretical ruminations will provide some answers to how the post-imperial processes work—or should work.

Importantly, throughout our analysis, we take a legal semiotics perspective. As noted by Anne Wagner et al., such an approach emphasises “the dynamic character of legal concepts,” as well as stresses “the importance of interpretation and the construction of meaning.” As such, it is uniquely advantageous when employed “in response to new problems, changing power structures, changing societal norms and new faces of injustice,” opening up a research space whereby the “established doctrines are reconsidered, reformulated and partly replaced by competing doctrines and hypotheses” [67, p. xi]. Given that legal semiotics “combines altogether theory and practice, finding both their references in law and other sciences” [1, p. 78], it has already been successfully used in the analysis of “visual legal meaning making,” often undertaken within diverse sites, codes and contexts [61, p. xxxvii], thus

making it a particularly useful methodology in this investigation of the physical *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* and of the immaterial narratives it represents.

This paper is structured as follows: in the first, theoretical part, key notions of collective memory and national identity are introduced, along with the acknowledgement of the unique relationship between a monument and the cityscape. The second, conceptual part proposes a novel way of looking at difficult memories of the past based on the work of Hannah Arendt and Paul Ricoeur. In the third part, a case study of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* as a focal point of Portuguese imperial memory is conducted. Ultimately, in the concluding part, the theoretical, conceptual and practical elements of our study are brought together in a broader discussion on not only the post-imperial narratives present in Portugal but also in post-colonial societies in general.

2 Part 1: Beginning a Voyage into the (Un)Known: Collective Memories, Cityscapes and Monuments as Carriers of the Past into the Present

To explain the ways in which certain narratives may be anchored in a physical space, a monument, we shall begin by introducing the concept of collective memory. Defined as “a social memory, one which is not created individually, but within a group, with one person having a wide array of collective memories functioning on different levels,” for example, that of “a family, a class, a city, a nation—and today also of the global community.” In certain instances, those social perceptions of the past “can be and are influenced by a number of factors, in particular by governments, both on the local and the national level” [57, p. 221]. As such, collective memory is closely related to the question of identity, with the two “always dependent upon one another” [32, p. 74]: the “shared narratives of a community’s past,” the different collective memories, act as the basis for a society’s “identity and cohesion” [5, p. 147].

It needs to be noted that the questions of memory and identity are never far from the issues of power: collective memories are always “shaped in accordance with a certain notion of what ‘we’ or, for that matter, ‘they’ really are,” as a group’s “memory is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful” [59, pp. 177, 179]. As such, “‘the past’ and social remembering are major forces in contemporary politics” [5, p. 149], particularly in regard to the building of national identity.

As Rudolf De Cillia et al. acutely remark, most nations, even the smallest ones, are composed of citizens who do not know one another but still share a particular sense of belonging, sustained by culture and the media, one that ends where the border begins, given that “no nation identifies with humanity in its entirety” [9, p. 154]. This feeling of commonality is based on the specifically constructed “stories about identity, origins, history and community”—collective memories—which have the goal of ‘moulding a national identity’, the shared “understanding of oneself as located in a temporally extended narrative” [4, p. 69]. The process of reshaping the past to fit the national soul (and the current purposes) is most often fairly easily achieved for those in the positions of power, given that “most of the participants”

of the events in question “are dead, and while immortal as symbols, can speak only through the tongues of present day interpreters” [29, pp. 3–4].

As a result of these political processes of reinterpretation and reconfiguration, the collective memories laying at the basis of a national identity bring together real historical events and “narratives of ancient origins or of prelapsarian ‘golden ages,’” thus placing “the collectivity inside a shared history, a history constantly reaffirmed and reproduced through resonant rituals and symbols,” which, while reinterpreted in contemporary times, are deeply rooted in the past [4, pp. 70–71].

Among these symbols, a particular place is occupied by cultural and natural heritage, given that “the built and natural environments are vital elements in the transmission of social memory” [5, p. 148]. As such, the role of heritage is particularly vital for social cohesion, with culture playing a major role “in the construction of nations and national identities” [9, p. 155].

Cultural heritage has been defined as “the broadly understood tangible and intangible products of cultural past (ranging from buildings through whole urban landscapes and then traditions to digital cultural heritage),” which are “of notable historical, social, religious, artistic, architectural, etc., importance for the local, regional, national and (or) global community which has a dynamic relationship with them based on collective memory” [58, p. 101]. Out of the many different dimensions of the relationship between collective memory, identity and heritage of particular interest in this article are those taking place in cities, especially those related to built monuments.

As Michael Sorkin poignantly notes, cities’ vital role in contemporary society is linked not only to their role “as necessary sites of production and exchange” but also “as armatures of agreement, the physical register of accumulated compacts and memories” [64, p. 12]. The collective memories present in the cityscape may be “attached” both to its tangible elements, the “objects and markers that we can perceive such as monuments, rituals, processions, or street names,” and its intangible aspects, coalescing “around the sense of place closer to a structure of feeling and the sensory dimension of memory than to a concrete ‘thing’” [35, p. 2].

Prominent monuments such as the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* are particularly important carriers of carefully crafted and selected collective memories from the past into the future, circumnavigating the present by anchoring national identity and giving people “inspiration [...] by glorifying past achievements” [57, p. 215]. In the case of our case study, the particular set of narratives carried by the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* may be recognised as imperial memory, a fundamental element of imperial identity. As Geppert and Müller acutely note,

the imperial past is all around us. Decades have come and gone since the dissolution of Europe’s great colonial empires, but the footprints they have left in the realm of memory all over the world are plain to see. Legacies of empire are present in the demarcations of state borders, in architecture and urban topographies, on the pedestals of monuments, in books, on cinema screens, in photo albums, on the internet, in public rituals and in political debates [19, p. 1].

They are not a permanent fixture of the daily lives of post-empire societies per se; rather, like other collective memories selected by those in positions of power to be sustained through their authority, imperial memories are employed to further particular political goals, in that they are most often reimagined to fit a particular narrative [see, e.g., 30, pp. xiv-xv].

Such a perseverance of past memories of an empire is not a novelty: already in the second half of the nineteenth century, the tales of the glorious past French ‘conquests’ in North America and of Europe under Napoleon were used as a basis of the official narrative, one motivating further colonial expansion of the now republican France [7, p. 3].

As such, we would propose to understand imperial memory as a type of collective memory held by a society that ceased to be a metropole but that continues to employ the different colonial narratives of the ‘glorious past’ as a major element of their identity (i.e., imperial identity). Even though these collective memories are continuously reimagined, they nevertheless allow the society in question to maintain a link with the feelings of grandiosity of the yesteryear, no matter how close or how far away from the truth they may be, through, *inter alia*, the different spaces linking the past with the present, e.g., monuments “created under imperial conditions” that “point to the active legacies of empire in the making and remaking of” the post-empire reality [19, p. 4]. Before moving on to our eponymous case study, however, we propose to introduce a conceptual framework that will unveil the shades behind imperial memories, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*.

3 Part 2: Delving Deeper into the Sea of Memories: Trauma, Forgiveness and Politics between Arendt and Ricoeur

I continue to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory—and of forgetting. The idea of a policy of the just allotment of memory is in this respect one of my avowed civic themes. [53, p. xv].

Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. [3, p. 237].

We begin this section by quoting Paul Ricoeur and Hannah Arendt, believing that their philosophical contributions are complementary to the problem under study. Analysing the case of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* as a heritage site that translates a certain colonial narrative, which, as we have said, subtracts or leaves invisible the fate of indigenous peoples and enslaved people brought to the Portuguese

colonies, it becomes clear that the *Padrão* is an example of ‘difficult heritage’ that carries memories of the empire in a post-imperial society. In other words, it reveals the celebration of a collective memory that renders an invisible part of the narrative identity that needs to be constructed. Thus, we first recover from Paul Ricoeur the healing effect of ‘memory work’ on the way we narrate the past [50–52, 54] and the relevance of building a ‘narrative identity’ that integrates traumatic elements and eliminates ‘epistemic injustices’ [25, p. 72]. Then, from Hannah Arendt’s reflection, we call on “forgiveness as a political category” to deal with an irreversible or factually unalterable past [3].

The past is a process that can always be reopened and taken up again in the name of victims who have been ignored or repressed until the present. Paul Ricoeur sees the human agent as heir to traces of history, capable of forgetting and forgiving [50, p. 536] in the process of caring for individual and collective “wounds of memory” because “the wounds of memory are both solitary and shared.”¹

If the link between memory, identity and power has been recognised, how can collective memory be narrated differently? Is it possible to exercise ‘active’ and ‘critical’ forgetting, rather than ‘escapist’ and ‘passive’ forgetting? Without being able to dwell on ‘narrative identity’ [cf. 8; 10], let us focus on the close dynamic that exists between *collective memory* and *individual memory*. We inherit traces of past history as a *consolidated narrative*, in other words, one that is ready to be celebrated, repeated and taught. It is on this basis that what Fernanda Henriques calls “the search for new narratives about the past” [25, p. 73] is exercised.

Fernanda Henriques draws on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, particularly his work *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, to articulate memory, history and forgetting in relation, above all, to women’s studies [24], whether through repression or manipulation, which is always about erasing or hiding people, facts, or situations that generally represent the victims, that is, those who suffered defeat or those who did not achieve “discursive visibility” [25, p. 74]. In short, we are targeting the “dispossessed narratives [...] removed from the chance of being remembered and celebrated, to whom justice must be done by bringing them to the light of memories” [25, p. 74].

The possibility of new recollections reveals, first and foremost, that the past is mutable and plastic. In this way, personal and collective identity can always be narrated in another way, revealing who we were at all times and bringing to public light what remained invisible or untold. If identity is linked, as we have said, to the notion of belonging and heritage, it is therefore important to follow Henriques, who is interested in revisiting collective memory [24, pp. 77–80]. What needs to be retold are obliterated narratives, penalised by distortions or subjected to total invisibility,

¹ “The wounds we are dealing with here are both wounds of personal memory, sometimes imprinted on the flesh by the loss of a loved one, and wounds of collective memory, inflicted by the violence of history towards liberation and justice. In this regard, we must remember the paradox of memory, which means that there is nothing more personal, more intimate or more secret than memory, but that the memories of one another, between relatives, neighbours, foreigners, refugees—as well as adversaries and enemies—are incredibly entangled with each other to the point that sometimes we can no longer distinguish in our narratives what belongs to each person: the wounds of memory are both solitary and share” [48].

authors and theoretical productions on which this philosopher calls *epistemic injustice* or *cognitive injustice* is committed [24, p. 72].² It is possible to narrate the past in another way, integrating narrative segments that have been erased from celebrated history, and “in order to legitimise the rightness of *raconter autrement* [telling it differently] our common past, it becomes essential to understand the effective role of memory in the construction of this identity and to denounce the distortions that canonical narratives have produced over time in this construction” [24, p. 79].

For Ricoeur, it is important, on the one hand, to combat the forgetting of certain past events (combating ‘escapist forgetting’, to the question of which we will return to later) and, on the other hand, to critically reconsider the meaning given to the past (asking for the category of forgiveness). For the process of this reconsideration of the past, in a short essay entitled *Can forgiveness heal?* [52], Ricoeur presents forgiveness as a ‘healing’ that, through memory, operates on common notions of trauma, fragility and wounds:

To speak of healing is to speak of illness. Now, can someone who is not a doctor, psychiatrist or psychoanalyst talk about illness? I firmly believe so. The notions of trauma, wound and vulnerability belong to common consciousness and ordinary discourse. It is precisely to this dark background that forgiveness proposes healing [52, p. 35].

For the philosopher, as we have said, the initial human condition is that of heirs, and we have a duty to remember this inheritance. What does it mean to “make memory” if the past is already done? It is not a question of changing the facts but of establishing rethought narratives about those facts. In this sense, we can talk about “memory work” and “memory criticism.” In his fragmentary work *Live to the Death* (2011), in which the philosopher confronts the dying of one who knows himself to be finite and the work of mourning in life, Ricoeur states that “memory is nothing without narrating. In addition, narrating is nothing without listening” [53, p. 52], in a way underlining the thesis that narrating requires a discipline of attention. It is the lost voices, marginalised by the current of canonical history, that should be listened to, reinvented and brought to the stage.

The new narrative is thus brought into the “conflict of interpretations” and presents itself as the product of a “finite rationality” [24, p. 118]. This finiteness of rationality does not weaken the work to be carried out but reveals its maximum and continuous relevance through the plasticity of *raconter autrement*, building an identity that “is not an immutable block.”³ This *retelling in another way* imposes a certain amount of “active forgetting” with a therapeutic effect. Unlike “escapist

² As the philosopher acknowledges, her inspiration comes from a title by Fricker [18], although this work focuses on “social practices.”

³ “[...] memory, extended by written history, is essentially focused on the past: it is retrospective. However, the work of memory would be in vain if it did not help us to live in the present and project ourselves into the future. In this sense, memory only half contributes to our identity: I will put this half under the heading of ‘narrative identity’; what we are is not an immutable block; it is the product of a life story, itself entangled in that of others; thus, our identity is made up, on the one hand, of what we are able to tell about ourselves in a life narrative, at once intelligible to our reason and acceptable to our heart” [55].

forgetfulness,” which consists of ignoring the evil committed against a community, Ricoeur proposes thinking about “active forgetfulness” through work on memory, which the philosopher calls “the work of mourning.”⁴ It becomes necessary to rethink, as in mourning, an evil that is irreparable. The work of mourning aims to reconcile with what cannot be fully restored. What is the specific evil that “active forgetting” combats? How do we look at the cruelty or evil associated with slavery or colonialism? Can any narrative make sense of the evil or cruelty that took place?

Evil is indescribable; in other words, it cannot have any meaning (logical, discursive, historical, etc.) [23, p. 67]. Evil is irresolvable as a “scandal,” and in the face of evil, says Ricoeur, we can only *stand against it* [49, p. 62]. This is not a problem that can be solved theoretically but something that reveals the tragic dimension of existence. The theoretical answer is insufficient for the problem of evil, and we can approach it creatively through effective commitments to action [23, p. 67]. Coexistence with evil is therefore approximate and one of resistance.⁵ The only alternative is the “refusal of evil,” evil as a *non-being* [23, p. 69]. Faced with the existence of evil, Ricoeur argues, we can only position ourselves by participating against evil: “For action, evil is, first of all, that which should not exist, but must be fought against” [51, p. 32]. On this point, Ricoeur agrees with Hannah Arendt, who, although we examine immediately below, recognises that forgiveness has a “political grandeur” [52, p. 40]. Ricoeur has in mind “active forgetting” and not “vanishing forgetting;” as we have said, the former works on evil, and the latter obliterates it. The “forgetting of escape” actively ignores an evil perpetrated, for example, in a community. Conversely, “active forgetting” is equivalent to “mourning work” and represents work on the irreversible past, putting into dispute a new interpretative narrative of that same past.

The *irreversibility of the past*, which cannot be factually altered, and the *possibility of the future*, integrating the past into a new narrative, are two premises of Hannah Arendt’s thinking that we will analyse now. The way we narrate the past integrates it into the present, and the past can call for the category of *forgiveness*, a generous act that, with discretion, can deal with the irreversible past. As the philosopher rooted in the Jewish tradition rightly observed, “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the sphere of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth [...] the role that he made this discovery in a religious context [...] is no reason to take it less seriously in a strictly secular sense” [3, p. 235], and the measure of this *forgiveness* has a human criterion. It is not said that humans must forgive because God forgives but that each human agent will be forgiven (by God) if they forgive their neighbour [3, p. 292]:

⁴ “Neither the work of remembrance nor the duty of remembrance can be carried out without another work, the work of mourning. Mourning is different from lamentation. It is an acceptance of the loss of loved ones and of everything that will never be returned to us. We have to accept that there is the irreparable in our possessions, the irreconcilable in our conflicts, the indecipherable in our destinies. A successful mourning is the condition of a peaceful memory, and to that extent, a happy one” [55].

⁵ “The specific case of the question of evil represents, by antonomasia, the tragic dimension of existence, insofar as, as Ricoeur tirelessly reiterates, evil demonstrates not only that the theoretical answer is always incomplete and approximate, but, more than that, evil forces us to find other modes of relationship than just the strictly theoretical ones, demanding a commitment to effective action” [23, p. 67].

forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose "sins" hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation [...]. Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell [3, p. 237].

The traumas or evils inflicted (slavery, racism, colonialism, patriarchy, etc.) in the past (and in the present) need to be revisited, but the way to work with collective memory is not simple. For Hannah Arendt, forgiveness, as a political category, is relevant to dealing with the "irreversibility of action," as has been said, but it should not be granted universally [46, pp. 741–751]. Not everything that has been done can be dissolved by forgiveness, and for Arendt, not everything is forgivable:

The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call "radical evil" and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene [3, p. 241].

The philosopher argues that only what we can condemn can be forgiven, removing "radical evil" (such as that experienced in the Second World War) from the horizon of what can be forgiven [cf. 41, p. 741–751]. Arendt's philosophy attempts to rethink the human condition based on the fact that humans are born—the category of "natality"—their ability to "beginning something new" [3, p. 246]. The human agent marks his existence by what new he introduces into an old world. Man arrives in a world that precedes him beyond his will; he inherits it and knows it through canonical history. The categories of 'forgiveness' and 'birth' are therefore fundamental in politics because we are not condemned to what is irreversible and we can always start something new.

For Hannah Arendt, what marks the *human condition*, more than its mortality, is the fact that we can always start something new. If Ricoeur starts from the condition of *heirs* and *narrative identity* as finite, selective and capable of being retold, Arendt emphasises the empowering dimension of human action, capable of starting over or 'beginning something new': "Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven" [3, p. 241].

Analysing the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* in light of these reading keys should eliminate a second danger of memory work, against which Ricoeur warns:

the work of memory has a second front: the danger of repetition; this way of replaying humiliations—but also heroic deeds—has something pathological about it, which prevents the true work of memory, which is not limited to hunting down facts, but is dedicated to explaining, to understanding how everything happened, in order to purge the heart of hatred, revenge and vain glory. Understanding does not stop us from condemning and praising, but it frees the passions from their obsession, which condemns memory to an immobile piety. It is on this work of memory that the duty to remember is grafted, which I want to talk about from the point of view of the wounds of memory [55].

The duty of memory thus prolongs not an obsession (the repetition of what the past was) but the impulse to care for the *wounds of memory* (the past in dialogue with the present). The history celebrated and taught, according to the *duty of memory*, will give visibility to ignored elements such as the trafficking and enslavement of people, as well as reveal the heavy racist heritage associated with it. Therefore, as Ricoeur says, “the work of memory requires courage in the face of the temptations of a forgetfulness that works in the service of final omission” [55]; it is this “work of memory” that can make “good use of the wounds of memory”⁶ towards a reconciled or at least more peaceful memory.⁷

At the end of his essay *Can forgiveness heal?*, Ricoeur does not shy away from responding with what he considers to be actions for a problem whose resolution cannot only be theoretical but which requires the greatness of certain concrete gestures and agents:

On the other hand, we recognise the greatness of certain political men, such as Chancellor Brandt or President Havel, or even the King of Spain and the President of Portugal, in terms of this ability to ask for forgiveness from the victims of the exactions committed by their predecessors. In the political sphere too, the important thing is to destroy the debt, but not to forget it. It is then that forgiveness, by virtue of its very generosity, proves to be the cement between the work of remembering and the work of mourning [52, p. 40].

4 Part 3: (Not) Reaching the Destination: The Case of *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*

The *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* is one of the urban elements that make up what Elsa Peralta [38] has been calling the ‘memory complex’ of Belém. This corresponds to a portion of the territory of Lisbon that is deeply linked to Portuguese

⁶ “An exhortation to do the work of memory against both forgetfulness and nostalgic repetition. The good use of the wounds of memory is summed up in fidelity to this exhortation” [48].

⁷ “Neither the work of remembrance nor the duty of remembrance can be carried out without another work, the work of mourning. Mourning is different from lamentation. It is an acceptance of the loss of loved ones and of everything that will never be returned to us. We have to accept that there exists the irreparable in our possessions, the irreconcilable in our conflicts, the indecipherable in our destinies. Successful mourning is the prerequisite for a peaceful and, to that extent, happy memory” [48].

imperial memory. As is well known, given that memory is well alive and is the object of dispute on the scientific, political and ideological levels, this complex has proven to be particularly susceptible to controversy in public debate.

At this point and above all based on the experience of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, we would like to explore how this “existential condition” has permeated this territory from its genesis to the present day. Indeed, if, like Ulrika Fortuna [16, p. 104], we assume “that heritage is always a selection and a choice,” a permanent negotiation between technical-scientific visions produced by specialists and academics and popular and spontaneous visions, even so, imbued with social legitimacy, it could hardly be otherwise.

As the former capital of the Portuguese colonial empire and the epicentre of its maritime expansion, it is in Lisbon that the main symbolic and material elements alluding to that time or, better said, to its collective memory are inscribed. Effectively, as stated by Nuno Domingos and Elsa Peralta [38, pp. XXII-XXIII], “the imperial experience brought a differentiated imagery configuration to imperial cities, both with the importation of exotic mannerisms for the architecture of imperial cities, and with the construction of a monumentality praising the dignity of the imperial capital.”

Against this background, according to Peralta [38, p. 65], the Belém area “is the most paradigmatic case of inscription and condensation in the national public space of a memory alluding to the Portuguese colonial empire. The *Jerónimos* Monastery, the *Belém* Tower, *Praça do Império* (Imperial Square) and its Gardens—where the Portuguese World Exhibition took place in 1940—and the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, make this area a ‘memory complex’ associated with the Portuguese imperial experience”.

Indeed, the 1940 Portuguese World Exhibition (not to be confused with the aforementioned 1998 Expo introduced above) constitutes a fundamental landmark in a highly selective, apologetic and celebratory process of (re)construction of the national identity, of morphological and symbolic transformation of this territory. For Luis Torgal [65], for example, the simultaneous use, in 1939–40, of the centenary of the formation of nationality and of the Restoration essentially aimed to reinforce the authoritarianism and nationalism of the *Estado Novo*, which, at the time, was still without the collapse of great European dictatorships and, in Spain, with the victorious emergence of Francoism from the civil war of 1936–39, experienced a moment of enormous euphoria and enthusiasm. Moreover, in these years, Lisbon definitively assumed itself as the “Capital of the Empire, in which the urban planning project—controlling and centralising the respective urbanisation process—was allied to the ‘imperial image’ of the country’s capital, in the dominant political-ideological facet of regime” [15, p. 307].

It was precisely with the urban intervention carried out during the Exhibition of the Portuguese World (June 23 to December 2, 1940) that the monumentalisation of *Belém* took place [11] and that the first version of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, conceived by the architects Cottinelli Telmo and Leopoldo de Almeida, would be built on a temporary basis. According to Alice Alves and Vera Mariz [2], the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* was conceived to be the ‘brand image’ of the celebration, thought to function as an urban element closing the *Praça do Império* over the

river and, above all, having as an assumption its ephemerality. It was not intended to be a “commemorative, solemn and respectful monument” [2, p. 479].

As Natasha Revez [47] describes, after the closing of the exhibition, a large storm caused the destruction of several of the buildings and monuments that had been purposely constructed for the event, including the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, which, built in staff, would partially crumble and see the statue of Prince Henry the Navigator fall into the Tagus River. Following the severe damage caused, the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* would be dismantled in 1943 to make its ‘return’ about two decades later, in a gesture that Alves and Mariz [2, p. 483] associate with the very nature of the regime of the *Estado Novo* itself. Insofar as, “returning to the same iconographic message, twenty years later, reinforcing its perenniality in concrete and stone, with the continuity of the regime’s ideology thus underlined. Even in the face of troubled times, this monument turns out to be a testament to the maintenance/longevity of the ideology and the almost total mental immobility of the regime.”

It should be noted that, at that time, the *Estado Novo* was under enormous international pressure for its denying the right to self-determination and the independence of the African colonies and, internally, the opposition candidacy of Humberto Delgado in 1958 that had generated a wave of popular mobilisation against the regime. As José P. Monteiro [33] suggests, it is in this context that “the *Estado Novo* engendered a national propaganda strategy to reinforce its status and power,” which involves, among other things, a discursive-ideological adjustment in which the ‘Colonial Empire’ gave way to the ‘Portuguese Overseas Project’, also replacing, in official terminology, the designation ‘colonies’ with ‘overseas provinces’ and rescuing the civilising and evangelising mythology of Portugal.

In this sense, and taking advantage of the opportunity provided by the fifth centenary of the death of Prince Henry the Sailor, the current version of *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, built in concrete and stone, would be inaugurated in 1960. As mentioned above, it takes the form of a caravel (a vessel closely linked to the Portuguese maritime expansion); it is placed in a prominent position on the prow facing the Tagus, a statue of the Prince holding a caravel in his hands, and, on the sides, thirty-two iconic figures (monarchs, colonisers, navigators, evangelists and artists) of the ‘Age of Discoveries’. At the base, a compass rose measuring 50 m in diameter, curiously offered by the government of South Africa (during the Apartheid era) that same year [34], is placed.

In the following year, with the beginning of the colonial war in Angola and the capture of Goa, Damão and Diu by the Indian army, the political-ideological management of patrimonialization, of the process of reconstruction of collective memory and national identity that the *Estado Novo* had been operating for several years, suffered enormous disturbances [27]. As is known, the opposition grew until, in April 1974, the Carnation Revolution took place and the way in which Portuguese society looked at its past and at the collective memory sedimented by the *Estado Novo* changed.

Perhaps for this reason, as argued by Peralta [38, p. 94], it was only in the 1980s, after the post-revolutionary period had passed, that the *Belém* district and, for even more the same reason, the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* “would resume its role as a space for political and symbolic intervention.” António Costa [11] highlights how,

in the second half of the 1980s, heritage became the object of greater attention, with the debate around the area of *Belém* and, more recently, Peralta [40], deepening this understanding and highlighting the importance of the inclusion, in 1983, of the *Jerónimos* Monastery and the *Belém* Tower on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Monuments. It was there, in the Monastery, that in 1985, Portugal's accession to the then European Economic Community (later known as the European Union) was ultimately signed.

In this context, abandoned since 1974, the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* would begin remodelling works in 1985. Regarding this process, Peralta writes that

the works would allow public access to the viewpoint, auditorium and exhibition hall, making the Monument visitable and integrated into the tourist-heritage complex of *Belém*. The potential, productive or disruptive, of the encounter with historical narratives laden with ideological content dissolves in the aestheticisation of spaces, promoting a detachment from history while promoting an approximation in relation to memory. Its main users are foreign tourists [in 2019, 90%], although these spaces maintain active programmes of school visits, generally based on thematic workshops alluding to the history of monuments and the Portuguese Maritime Discoveries [39, p. 99].

Almost half a century after the establishment of democracy, Cristiano Gianolla et al. [21] suggest that Portugal has not yet been able to critically re-examine its imperial past. However, these authors also add that in recent years, the debate around this issue has intensified, mainly due to the appearance of a growing number of African and Afro-descendant academics and activists intervening in the Portuguese public sphere. Along the same lines, although acknowledging the importance of research work to break public silence on this matter, António Ribeiro [48, p. 7] considers that this process owes much more “to the growing social visibility of representative voices of what can be called ‘the post-memory’ generation of the colonial process. Voices that, individually or in groups, forge more and more possibilities for public affirmation, in particular, and with a special impact, in the field of the arts.” Indeed, underlines Peralta [39, p. 124], “after decades of silence, the ‘wounds’ of Portuguese colonialism, above all slavery, colonial wars and the repatriation of nationals from colonial territories, began to gain a counter-hegemonic representational space within Portuguese imperial history, with various forms of expression in the national public space and in the city of Lisbon.”

In this respect, the year 2017 proved to be particularly important due to a wide range of events, such as the organisation of the Cycle of Exhibitions *Testimonies of Slavery. African Memory*, within the scope of the Lisbon 2017 Ibero-American Capital of Culture initiative; the holding of the *Racism and Citizenship* Exhibition at *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*; the presentation, by *Associação Djass*, of a proposal for the creation of a ‘Memorial in Honour of Enslaved People in Lisbon’, within the scope of the Participatory Budget of the Municipality of Lisbon; the controversy triggered by the statements made by the President of the Republic during an official visit to the House of Slaves, on the island of Gorée, in Senegal; the intensification

of criticisms made to the construction project of a Museum of Discoveries; and the inauguration of a statue in honour of Father António Vieira [see 20].

It is precisely in this light that we should look at the debate that has recently arisen in Portugal—in the press and on social media—about the relevance and appropriateness of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*. After, in February 2021, a Socialist Party deputy defended in an article entitled ‘Salazarism is not dead’ [63] the destruction of *Padrão dos Descobrimentos*, a few days later, in response, the Chega party, a nationalist extreme right movement, presented its first candidate for Lisbon City Council next to this same monument—a luminous illustration of the way in which the “extreme right tries to take over the intellectual debate and everyday mentalities” [44].

On August 8 of that same year, the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* would appear one morning with the phrase “Blindly sailing for money, humanity is drowning in a scarlet sea” inscribed over 20 m on one of its façades. Although police authorities quickly noticed the occurrence and the Lisbon City Council, which oversees the monument, proceeded to clean the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* [17], its graffiti would reignite the debate around the collective memory of Portuguese and its heritage. The European arrest warrant issued against the two young men responsible for graffiti by the Judiciary Police proved to be unsuccessful. Effectively, as the journalist Ana Henriques [22] suggests, the fact that the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* is not legally classified as cultural heritage—something that reveals a significant dissonance between its appreciation by common sense knowledge and what specialised technical-scientific knowledge effectively considers an object of appreciation—may have made this process unfeasible and, we might add, is a very poignant omission on the part of the Portuguese authorities by itself.

5 Conclusion

Returning to the ideas of Arendt and Ricoeur, the dialogue with the irreversible past can be done collectively. The past is unalterable, but telling it differently (*raconter autrement*) is possible. Arendt states that *forgiveness* (which deals with the past), as well as the category of *promise* (which deals with the future), requires consideration of the other, of the community, of plurality. Furthermore, for forgiveness to be effective, it is important that it is clear what must be forgiven (the evil inflicted); forgiveness therefore requires a pedagogical dimension. It is necessary to make clear the evil that is being rejected so that the work of memory can take place, linking memory, history and oblivion, as stated in the title of *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* [41, 42, pp. 21–31].

The opening to the narrative of a traumatic memory must, among its elements and in line with what was argued, return to evil as an irresolvable mark of existence, as a tragic element. Criticism and rejection of evil apply to evil itself and not to the memory that is narrated. In this work, it is important to map the notions of “imposed memory,” “authorised history,” and “publicly learned and celebrated history” to understand the challenging notion of difficult heritage. The resulting memory

(“authorised history”) cannot be one of escaping evil (“escapist forgetting”) but of an approximate dialogue with the trauma (“work of mourning” and “active forgetting”), recognising the difficulty at each step, as it is not a problem with a theoretical resolution, *prima facie*, but which requires the greatness of certain concrete gestures and agents.

Taking a step back to the big picture perspective uncovered by our legal semiotics approach, it becomes clear how the case of *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* shows us how cultural heritage may act as a contentious repository of collective memory, furthermore one deeply imbricated within the Lisbon urban fabric. In this context, disputed uses of memory are constantly resurfacing, thus triggering political debates that are particularly intense in countries with post-imperial memory, such as Portugal, and even more so in their capital cities. Law, politics and their visual representations, such as the *Padrão*, intersect, establishing dynamic, multi-faced narrative frameworks, waiting to be uncovered.

In these specific settings, as was already highlighted, the past is often perceived as a traumatic experience that needs some sort of healing. Both Arendt and Ricoeur provide an alternative framework to address the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* as a site of post-imperial/colonial negotiation and, looking more broadly, the post-imperial memories of other countries. Arguably, in this way, those hidden voices of the past do not resurface as threats to a mythicised ‘Golden Age of Discoveries’ but, instead, as pivotal elements of a more nuanced and inclusive narrative in which memory can be used to strategically reconfigure our collective memory and the role cityscapes play within collective remembrance.

There are already some signs that Portuguese identity may be evolving in such a way as to confront the evils of the past, thus following Ricoeur and Arendt, albeit slowly: on April 25, 2023, the anniversary of the 1974 Revolution, the country’s President acknowledged that the country needs to apologise and take responsibility for slavery; at the same time, however, remarking that the colonisation of Brazil also had positive effects [36]. Additionally, the question of the restitution of some cultural objects from Portuguese museums to the former colonies has recently been raised in the public debate [60].

Leaving these developments, whose analysis would merit a separate study, aside, it needs to be remarked that the place of the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* in the collective memory of not only the Portuguese but also when thinking about Portugal in general seems to be cemented for the foreseeable future, as proved by a recent case: the Vatican Post first created and then pulled back following controversies a commemorative stamp celebrating the 2023 World Youth Day in Portugal. It reimagined *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* with Pope Francis in lieu of Henry the Navigator and the young in place of other figures of the monument [31]. Such instances are a reminder of the challenges surrounding not only the coming to terms with the difficult past but also the pervasiveness of local official narratives on the international level. Applying Arendt’s and Ricoeur’s ideas to public policies, while not being a panacea to all issues surrounding difficult heritage, would at least be a step in the right direction.

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