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The Social War in Memory

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“There was a war, apparently not very well known, and hardly at all here, where it took place; in more distant lands it was considered very important, and while it lasted it attracted the attention, which was not unmixed with hope, of princes, friends and enemies, near and far; first covertly and inconspicuously, and finally openly, some with fear and alarm, and others discreetly, with subtlety and craft.”

Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, *Guerra de Granada* (1610)

A few years ago, a television program, “Memories of the Transition”, was broadcast and subsequently released as a videotape, produced by an employee of the communications media who, in compensation for the services he performed on behalf of the history of power, saw how his work was unanimously acclaimed and marketed with guarantees of large profits. It was just one contribution among many others (the “memoires” of retired politicians, for example, or the carefully-selected and self-serving secrets confided to journalists working on their behalf) to the paralysis of

memory and therefore of history; an example of what Debord called *unanswerable lies*. The political period spanning 1975 to 1981, corresponding to the diligent replacement of the Spanish ruling class after the death of Franco, known by the name of the “Transition”, was presented as a carousel of changing personalities who, discreetly, from office to office and from meeting to meeting, with the invaluable assistance of the selfless efforts of media gossips and the ambiguous toleration of the highest levels of the state, cobbled together the new political system of domination. When the masses appear they do so as background extras, always ready to follow the prudent and wise orders of their leaders, the absolute protagonists of the spectacle of history in their role as its exclusive masters. This history, reduced to a chronology of power, spiced with backroom anecdotes and gossip, illustrates the extent to which individuals have been expropriated of time, where they are only present as objects and where historical life is monopolized by the real elites and their representatives. It was not always like this; this usurpation had an origin, it is itself historical, which is why the function of the charlatans of the mass media consists not so much in telling us who is who in the ruling class *of other times* and rehabilitating one or another bad reputation along the way, as in concealing the moment of this usurpation, and denying the existence of autonomous social movements that took place not that long ago. Domination strives to bring about the disappearance of historical knowledge, because the knowledge of history is the only way that, by bringing the past into the present, the comprehension of what is new becomes possible, and therefore, it allows the elaboration of proposals to transform society on emancipatory bases. As Ibn Khaldun said concerning the diverse forms of historical falsification, “*charlatans possess in the arts of knowledge a very broad field of endeavor: the meadows of ignorance are always ready for their labors*”. Someone might object that, in the final reckoning, it is after all the facts that

count. With the spectacle, however, the facts themselves pass into clandestinity. Not only is the road to reality crowded with obstacles placed there by falsification, but the road itself is indiscernible. There is no critical opinion, because there is no public space or media where such an opinion could take shape and be manifested, and in such conditions, everything remains the same. The spokesmen of the spectacle can film, say or write whatever they want, and can do so whenever they want, at the time of commemorative celebrations, for example. Since the facts rapidly become obsolete amidst the avalanche of information, the falsification that serves power brings them up to date, reinventing them if necessary, in accordance with the totalitarian method. “*All history was a palimpsest*”, as Orwell wrote in 1984, “*scraped clean and rewritten as often as was necessary. In no case would it have been possible, once the deed was done, to prove that any falsification had taken place.*”

The perpetual present is the basis of modern society; the abundance of pseudo-events reaches such a point of banalization that it simultaneously abolishes and distorts time: once memory disappears, all past events recede into the antiquity of the epoch of the Patriarchs. Facts such as May '68, the Portuguese revolution of 1974 or the assembly movement of the Spanish workers of 1976–78, all seem strangely remote, as if they had not really occurred; and even though tens of thousands of people participated in them, almost all of them still alive, it is extremely difficult to provide an account of these events that makes any sense, an account that recalls them as recent episodes of the social war, as moments of a historical process. Likewise, if we consult the entry under “Italy” in an encyclopedia or a digest of current affairs, or if we stumble across some ephemera concerning 1977–78 in the press, we may be sure that we will encounter the kidnapping of Moro, an inexplicable terrorism and, at most, Negri and the Red Brigades. No one would ever know that the Movement of '77 was a movement without leaders, the

most profound subversive movement of modern times, nor will there be any discussion of the situation that was most pregnant with revolutionary possibilities that ever arose in modern capitalism, which is why no one will ever be able to acquire the least understanding of the stage-managed State terrorism—the “strategy of tension”—or the essentially counterrevolutionary function of the so-called communist party and the trade unions; nor the manipulative role of the communications media or that of partial and recuperative contestation; nor the disastrous effect of the pseudo-debate about armed struggle or the depressing spectacle of the “dissociated” and the “repentant”, the ultimate consequence of the armed struggle, and, finally, no one will know anything about the decisive role played by drugs in the acceleration of the decomposition of the rebel milieu.

All of these things are the results of a series of proletarian defeats; the loss of memory is merely one aspect of the corollary of defeat, the disappearance of revolutionary thought: “*memory, as such, is only the extrinsic mode, the unilateral moment of the existence of thought*” (Hegel). Nothing escapes falsification and trivialization—which is inflicted on both the insurrectionary strike in Vitoria as well as the Seville Expo—except due to the stubborn efforts of a handful of people who practice the subversive activity par excellence in these dark times: memory. Memory is the best weapon to reconstruct a community of rebels, however restricted it might be, the only place where autonomous communication is possible. With it one recovers historical points of reference and the new constestatory movements can consider their activity as the continuation of the previous wave of subversion, and inscribe it in the course of history. Then, by confronting the unilateral discourse of power that only speaks of the imperatives of the economy and technological progress, and refuting its version of the facts, to the extent that they are capable of re-appropriating the past and controlling their present—the mission of historical memory, re-

calling Hegel, “*is the pure comprehension of what has been and what is, events and actions*”—they will pave the way for the unification of the struggles where they will have to create, *ab ovo*, the conditions for an anti-economic secession of larger groups that will allow for the appearance of conscious history.