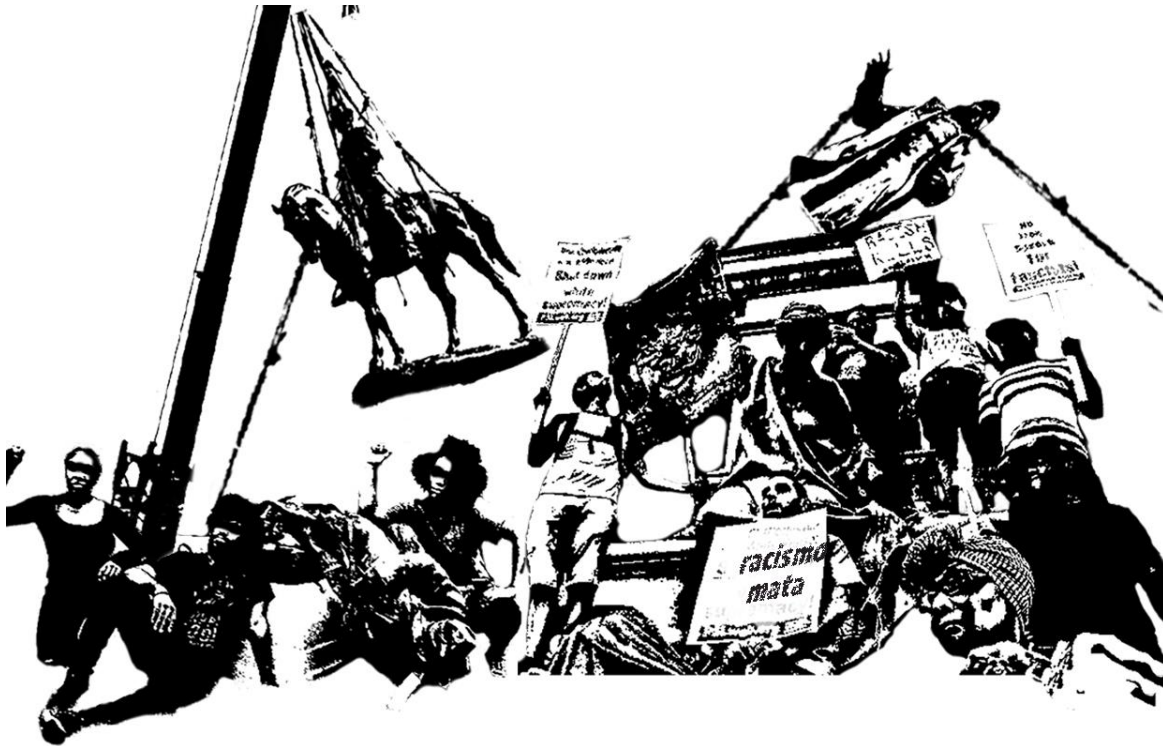# Systems of conflictivity   Dec. 2023

DECOLONISATION; DEMOCRATISATION; GENOCIDE; RACIAL-GENDERED INTERSECTIONALITY; STATE VIOLENCE; STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

Collage: Vinicius Kede & Flávia Trizotto

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Beyond the state-centric categories of war/peace, the ongoing genocide against Indigenous and African-descendent populations on the continent which Lélia Gonzalez renamed 'Améfrica Ladina' – recognised neither as a civil war nor as an international conflict – calls for methods of analysis which respond to what and whom has been excluded from the debate as a condition of possibility for its reproduction. By means of transnational and diasporic perspectives – which neither begin nor end at state borders and limits, nor rely on universal or particular/relative decrees – it effectively repositions inherited Eurocentric categories for thinking about violence towards instead relational accounts of systems of conflictivity.

Abstract

In places where violence functions as the norm sustaining systemic inequalities – and, hence, not as a moment of exception or as the occasional breakdown of order – it becomes necessary to reconceive the peace and conflict archives in ways which take into account structural insecurity and socio-economic precarisation. From the perspective of postcolonies, we can perceive the multiple and imbricated ways in which conflict springs from the inequality embedded in relations of power. Beyond episodic framings of conflict and conflict resolution, mediation or transformation, the concept of 'systems of conflictivity' enables us to grasp, then, the determinants of violence as a continuum in a manner which linear causality (of periodisation and events) fails to do so.

Thus, this contribution seeks to reposition the terms of debate by making room to work through possible responses in terms of reparation, the redefinition of political community and the revindication of effective citizenship rights as a means of protection against state and para-state violence. Given the modern/colonial sanction of the state monopoly on the legitimate use of force, only by taking on state-centric conceptions of violence can we begin to re-imagine pathways ahead. To think of violence relationally is to alter our understandings of conflict and (in)security, by shining light on how the dynamic of oppression necessarily activates, and indeed is activated by, the dynamic of privilege and its accompanying illusions of peace for some at the cost of others.

Against prevailing forms of relating to territories and subjects rendered peripheral – as centred on images of violence, disorder, deviance, criminality, informality, exceptionality and crisis, at best deemed objects of intervention or analysis generally wanting of knowledge and culture –, the move to refocus our attention to systems which generate conflictivity, be they manifest or latent, opens up more sustainable routes for dealing with structural and relational violence. That while dealing with the permanent problems of lived racial-gendered insecurity, rather than with isolated events or hegemonic perceptions of (dis)order and (in)civility.

Introduction: Thinking systems of conflictivity

In places where violence functions as the norm sustaining systemic inequalities – and, hence, not as a moment of exception or as the occasional breakdown of order – it becomes necessary to reconceive the peace and conflict archives in ways which take into account structural insecurity and socio-economic precarisation. From the perspective of postcolonies, we can perceive the multiple and imbricated ways in which conflict springs from the inequality embedded in relations of power. Beyond episodic framings of conflict and conflict resolution, mediation or transformation, the concept of 'systems of conflictivity' enables us to grasp, then, the determinants of violence as a continuum in a manner which linear causality (of periodisation and events) fails to do so. Thus, this contribution seeks to reposition the terms of debate. This it does by making room to work through possible responses in terms of reparation, the redefinition of political community and the revindication of effective citizenship rights as a means of protection against state and para-state violence. Given the modern/colonial sanction of the state monopoly on the legitimate use of force, only by taking on state-centric conceptions of violence can we begin to re-imagine pathways ahead.

I: Beyond inherited Eurocentric lenses for reading violence

To think of violence relationally is to alter our understandings of conflict and (in)security. This is achieved by shining light on how the dynamic of oppression necessarily activates, and indeed is activated by, the dynamic of privilege and its accompanying illusions of peace for some at the cost of others. Against prevailing forms of relating to territories and subjects rendered peripheral – as centred on images of violence, disorder, deviance, criminality, informality, exceptionality and crisis, at best deemed objects of intervention or analysis generally wanting of knowledge and culture –, the move to refocus our attention to systems which generate conflictivity, be they manifest or latent, opens up more sustainable routes for dealing with structural and relational violence. That while dealing also with the permanent problems of lived racial-gendered insecurity, rather than with isolated events or hegemonic perceptions of (dis)order and (in)civility. The proposed concept thus enables systemic analysis to be carried out of the political, economic, social and cultural relations of power which condition, legitimate and can potentially serve as sites for intervening in the reproduction of violence.

The global architectures of human rights, such as those authored by the United Nations (1948) and other international forums invested in brokering peace, tend to be limited in their capacity

to intervene in these situated, relational and imbricated dynamics. The norms, standards and pacts generated in and through Eurocentric experiences of war and holocaust do not address centuries of (de)humanisation practices, honed in colonial slavocratic laboratories, which continue to uphold the modern/colonial remaking of the world in the image of an idealised liberal Western world. And the 'epistemicide' (Carneiro 2018) that ensues: namely, the annihilation, appropriation and devaluing of non-Eurocentric knowledge systems.

Here, we can discern what Frantz Fanon (2008) referred to as the 'zone of being' and 'zone of non-being' to express how hierarchies of humanity were established in racial and mutually exclusive terms, so as to affirm Europe's self-image and imperial pursuits. As a consequence, these 'narcisstic pacts' – to wield Cida Bento's (2022) contemporary articulation of whiteness as solipsistic forms of conceiving and acting in the world – prescribe that the affirmation of the humanity of some depends on the negation or questioning of that of others. Inherited Eurocentric lenses for reading and responding to violence, which take recourse in humanitarian interventions poised to transcend conflict and the political, arguably create more problems than they resolve. Put differently, let us reflect on the following question: Who needs human rights?

Facing the limits of the current politico-epistemic conditioning of this debate, we can grasp how those whose civil rights, among other constitutionally protected social, economic, cultural and political rights, are systematically disregarded comprise the prime targets here. This is due to the fact that, prior to recognition as a citizen, one's full humanity needs to be recognised – and, indeed, respected in both an institutional and intersubjective sense. From postcolonial, anticolonial and decolonial perspectives which assume a racial-gendered frame of reference, it becomes possible to confront these incommensurabilities which divide more than just spatial borders, boundaries and limits.

Judicial-normative notions of a 'liberal peace' do not register in the zone of non-being, where, like in Brazil's territories and favelas rendered peripheral under ongoing (para)state military occupation, violence is the norm and residents are effectively denied access to state protection – or even mediation to legal recourse – as racialised subcitizens. We are talking about a black-majority country (IBGE 2022) where registered data on the assassination of black youth supersedes international standards of genocide: a life is extinguished every 23 minutes (Flasco 2016). In reality, we need to multiply this number, not only by the many unregistered assassinations and disappearances by state and para-state agents, but also by the countless

reverberations of deaths-in-life: mothers, kin networks, neighbours and whole communities attacked, together with possible points of reference for generations to come.

The ways in which we treat death says a lot about how we treat life. And the dispute over the recognition of racial violence as a contemporary anti-black genocide in Brazil and throughout the African diaspora (Flauzina & Vargas 2017; Nascimento 2016) touches on this central nerve. If we do not deal with inequalities and the disproportionate distribution of violence on racial-gendered bodies in the present, any efforts taken to reconstruct systems of conflictivity will prove unsustainable in the long term. At a minimum, the conditions will be created for new conflicts embedded in enduring power asymmetries, often veiled by the false opposition between what is deemed legitimate state violence and that attributed to para-state, militia or organised-crime agents – the latter being rendered illegitimate despite the state's complicity in the conditions of its reproduction. We can detect these dynamics in the so-called 'war on drugs' which continues to mobilise, in the name of public security, a vast range of legitimations of violence in the peripheries, where militarised state occupation serves to deepen racial segregation in Brazil's cities.

Methodologically speaking, we are dealing with an apparently contradictory unity, one which functions to sustain the current order of things: namely, the elite appropriation of the state apparatus and the simultaneous undermining, both directly and indirectly, of its peripheries, whose inhabitant are denied access to the means of legitimate self-defence.

II: Repoliticising the debate

The concept of systems of conflictivity equips us to repolticise the debate in the face of the technocratic solutions that prevail within the security-development nexus, which, more often than not, take the symptomatic for the diagnostic when it comes to the chronic and cyclical violence witnessed in postcolonies.

Much of this depoliticisation takes place because, in the postcolonies, conflicts are often miscast in the course of adhering to a developmentalist frame – neutralizing them as dilemmas of an incomplete modernisation, understood in an economistic or cultural sense. We can perceive the same paternalistic tendency in the overarching go-to argument of 'weak' or 'corrupt' states, put forward as if corruption were the cause and not the effect of current troubles.

The available responses to problems framed in this way are limited. Wagers on political or economic liberalisation ensue, alongside recipes for social and cultural 'progress' and the persecution of the informalised modes of subsistence locally configured in the state's militarised presence / infrastructural absence. In turn, the so-called helping industry (or mindset) takes over with its social-development missions and ready-made formulas for overseeing institutional or interpersonal capacity-building, empowerment or domestication – while seemingly proving incapable of intervening in theses dynamics of oppression and privilege.

Here, for instance, we can think of the proliferating mainstreamed gender projects, which seek to empower and protect women and girls through the promotion of non-violent masculinities and community-pacification programmes in the peripheries. This occurs in places like Brazil, where Black boys and men constitute the primary target of the lethal state violence committed by military and paramilitary agents, as conveyed in the data cited above.

The pathway to hell is, after all, paved with good intentions.

If we take seriously the premise that conflict is constitutive of society, the conversation which follows must be centred not on peace or pacification but on the redistribution of violence (Mombaça 2016). Also key here are the disputes concentrated on questions of legitimacy, prior to those of legality. Given the reigning state monopoly on the legitimate use of force, ultimately at stake, then, is the (de)formation of our political imaginaries.

To think about conflict without investigating structural power asymmetries as its underlying determinants will not get us very far here. Only by giving up on a linear notion of time – an ostensible pre-, during and post-conflict phase – can we grasp the hold which systems of conflictivity have on those involved. Identifying a hiatus for intervention can then follow.

Beyond the state-centric categories of war/peace, the ongoing genocide and epistemicide against Indigenous and African-descendent populations on the continent which Lélia Gonzalez (2018) renamed 'Améfrica Ladina' – recognised neither as a civil war nor as an international conflict – call for methods of analysis responding to what and whom has been excluded from the debate as a condition of possibility for its reproduction (Flauzina & Vargas 2017; Krenak 2019a, 2019b; Mbembe 2021; Nascimento 2016). It effectively challenges our conceptions of inter

or intra-state conflict, bringing about a transnational and diasporic perspective. The latter neither begins nor ends at state borders and limits, nor relies on universal or particular/relative decrees; inherited Eurocentric categories for thinking about violence are hereby repositioned instead towards relational accounts of systems of conflictivity.

Depoliticised debate over corrupt democracies, failed states or incomplete development/modernisation do not grasp the terms by which the state makes itself present/absent in the postcolonies. Namely, by means of its normalised and disproportionate use of force against the zone of non-being. This is forged by the established parameters of anti-blackness, contained and violated as the condition of possibility for sensations of peace and security for the zone of being, gated by the narcissistic pacts of whiteness. In sum, analytics of exceptionality, of lack or of selectivity end up reproducing this veiling of structural violence.

III: Recreating pathways

In consequence, we need to urgently create the political, social, economic and cultural infrastructures required for each and every person, from her or his own place, to assume the 'response-ability' which is fitting of them. More than active citizenship, this represents a fundamental remaking of pacts. The incommensurabilities existing between the zone of being and zone of non-being attest to the disservice which ideals of peace and democracy can bring about under the veil of formal equality and security. Claims to human rights, as strategic as they may be, do not tend to put these conversations firmly on the table.

Considering our next steps, a vital question then remains: How to (dis)engage narratives which propagate, legitimate and applaud the use of violence to sustain the inherited project of society, authoritarian in nature and founded on the basis of the hierarchisation of power, knowledge and being?

Processes of (re)building 'memory' must inform the initial course of action towards the construction and circulation of alternate narratives, grounding the political and intellectual discernment required of us (Kilomba 2019). In a country constituted as a colony and foreign-trade company like Brazil, set to serve a metropolis beyond its territory, centrality was given and constitutionally preserved to the 'right to property' and individual subjects idealised as

property-owners – even of themselves and other persons, a reflex of the positionalities of white men as Euro-descendants of the ruling (post)colonial elite. To remake the fundamental pacts which give form to the principle of democracy, we must centre the 'right to live' and to have life respected – to have the power to live one's life fully and with respect for one´s humanity. To affirm life, as a priority, recasts existing rights enunciated under the exploratory, extractive colonial grammar and its hierarchisation of the (sub)human.

It is imperative to humanise what and whom has been subject to historical and structural dehumanisation. This to confront myths of superiority and entitlement, to counter every expression of imposed inferiority. Also, to tell the histories systematically negated, erased or appropriated through the narcissistic pacts of whiteness in being used to legitimate state violence.

An effective politics of reparation requires dialogue with prevailing needs and demands to ensure relevance and sustainability are achieved. Methods of self-definition, self-valuation and self-determination, as elaborated by the political thought and action of black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2021) and interlocutors, are the key to unlock the necessary steps ahead. Contrary to the pacifying impulse which upholds an order sustained by violence, the search for effective decolonisation and democratisation conjures a political disposition working the practice of decolonisation as a means to an end and not an end in itself – as necessitating the creating anew of our political languages and imaginaries.

Instead of approaching conflict in terms of resolution, transformation or reconstruction, to think of systems of conflictivity and everyday relationships is to recentre the discussion on democracy. This enables us to position the latter as crucial to investigating the root causes of cycles and continuums of violence. Namely, through structural and historical perspectives going beyond the state-centric classifications of war/peace – whether demarcated as domestic or international.

This politico-epistemic move marks the urgent necessity for the democratisation of the debate, first and foremost, and the creation of new languages which interpellate those positioned as primary targets of (para-)state violence in a postcolonial world in relation with those who benefit from it. Recognising the limits of a technical-rational vernacular and its approaches to violence, a number of social movements have generated concepts and methodologies of access and

intervention in and through creative and artistic languages. That is, ones disputing legitimacy before legality, as a means to the end of remaking the fundamental pacts that reproduce the predominant systems of conflictivity, oppression and privilege informing contemporary society.

Here, in the hope of continuing this vital conversation, we offer up preliminary cartographies (Gill et al. 2023) collectively produced to broaden the horizons of our political and intellectual imaginations and effectively re-orient us in the field:

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