



## RECENSÃO

# *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism,* de Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, por Afonso Dias Ramos

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AZOULAY, Ariella Aïsha

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Afonso Dias Ramos

One of the most intensely anticipated book launches has been ten years in the making, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's 600-page volume *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), and it duly delivers on its promises to radically rethink archives, history, museums, and photography. With encyclopedic scope and scale, but the uncompromising urgency of a political manifesto, this landmark publication is the culmination of over a decade of thought-provoking reckonings with imperial violence by the Brown University professor, curator, and filmmaker. It says something about this book that most reviewers consider it a handbook for the vexing issues of our time, yet all seem to have read a different copy. Covering an impressive range of contentious topics and jumping between specific situations and overarching generalities, it does not lend itself to quick summations. It keeps moving in unexpected directions and across multiple registers, making a provocative case for unlearning our complacency with inherited political formations – concepts like archive, art, document, human rights and sovereignty, institutions like borders, nations, and citizens, disciplines like history, law, and theory, and categories like

the new and the neutral, all of which drive what she describes as imperialism's "progressive credo". All of this, Azoulay claims, determined how the world is shared, experienced, and represented, pigeonholing bodies, lives and acts of violence as distinct and final, so that they can be consigned to the past in order to make way for the future. This is not yet another counter history, Azoulay tells us, but a *counter to history*.

Spanning centuries and countries, from the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492 through European colonialism and Palestine today, this is a critique of and intervention in imperial knowledge production and the technologies that made it possible and keep it alive – e.g. museums, archives, history – and it entails reimagining everything from cultural institutions, modes of being and belonging, to the viewing of photographs. As an impassioned call to change, it is daunting at each turn, bristling with searching detail and disturbing insight. Compellingly and elegantly composed, it never indulges in the endless rhetorical questioning that saturates contemporary discourse, but it actually thinks through, with actionable injunctions, complex ideas of reparation, restitution,

and restoration. As a polemical tract it often steps out of depth with its sweeping claims and no-holds-barred style, simultaneously targeting expert knowledge in her attacks and positioning herself against critical thinkers and professional historians tout court – and at times, the book does play fast and loose with theory and history – as well as insistently pitching the book as praxis, not theory.

Hannah Arendt (1968) once famously contended that Walter Benjamin's exceptional achievement was to have "discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability", referring to his study of Kafka, whose "reaching down to the sea bottom of the past had this peculiar duality of wanting to preserve and wanting to destroy." But for Benjamin (1968, p. 223), it had been the advent of photography which, more than any technology, instituted such a crisis in modern structures of perception and experience – that "tremendous shattering of tradition", as he described it – vesting images with deep revolutionary potential. Instead of lapsing into the all-too-common impressionable citationism and fawning reverence around the German critic, Azoulay has been one of his most challenging readers, in tense dialogue with his dialectical attachment to images and ideas of an incomplete past with latent possibilities – his messianic history, Jacques Derrida later clarified, should not be taken as neither theology nor teleology, but only ever *as* potential. This notion of potential history was retooled by Azoulay as an "onto-epistemological" experiment, which at once

questions the nature of things and how we understand them, both refusing the unending violence of the past as well as formulating alternative ways to co-exist in the world. This aims to subvert the "imperial shutter", Azoulay's master metaphor throughout the book, which means the framing of history as a camera lens, by delimiting and then partitioning the world according to splits in time, space, and the body politic (between documented/undocumented, citizen/noncitizen, and the perpetrator/victim), upon which differential treatments are enacted. "Thinking about imperial violence in terms of a camera shutter", Azoulay explains, "means understanding how this brief operation can transform an individual rooted in her life-world into a refugee, a looted object into a work of art, a whole shared world into a thing of the past, and the past itself into a separate time zone, a tense that lies apart from both present and future" (p. 6). As with recent coinages like Allen Feldman's "photopolitics", it is telling that the key term here is camera-derived but in fact a concept of political theory, an indication of how radical critiques of global modernity, political sovereignty, and human rights are being formulated through critical thinking on and with images. This is not a book about photography – though it could be paired with Azoulay's new film, *Un-documented: Undoing Imperial Plunder* (2019), and parallel curation of *Errata* in Barcelona, an exhibition with a series of self-described "rehearsals" in non-imperial modes of archival literacy and repairing printed errors with

annotated books and reworked images. But this project builds upon her essential earlier studies as *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) and *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography* (2012), which reoriented thinking about photography as event rather than image, admitting relationships and ways of belonging beyond national borders and categories of citizenship, to ground this medium as a central imperial technology. The camera, Azoulay unambiguously declares, has “made visible” and acceptable imperial world destruction and legitimated the world’s construction on empire’s terms” (p. 45). For long the claim had been that empire could not be thought without visibility, but Azoulay pushes the current contention that visibility cannot be thought without empire farther than anyone, calling us to imagine the history of photography not as an isolated invention of white males in the mid-nineteenth century, but with its origins lying in the “New World” in the early days of European colonialism. Such a provocative hypothesis no doubt polemicalizes it as part of a long tradition of picture making that put together the colonial world order. But even as it serves her critique of imperial progressivism – taking Arago and Benjamin to task as ultimately beholden to the “new”, thereby subscribing to a construction of end times – Azoulay seems lured by the obverse trap, the foundationalism of a redemptive return to an original scene, a pre-1492 world. “We do not require more grandiose motions forward”, she contends, but “slowed-down spaces for repairing [...]

and reviving precolonial patterns and arrangements ungoverned by Man” (p. 98). In her discussion of images, Azoulay productively lays out three categories of photographs for unlearning imperialism (the untaken; inaccessible; and unshowable), exploring a broad range of stirring examples, from the unavailable pictures of the mass rape of hundreds of thousands of women in 1945 Berlin to the unshowable photographs of the mass deportation of Palestinians in 1949 – housed at the International Red Cross Archive in Geneva, they can only be printed with approved captions, so they are shown as drawings here. Taking visual absences as a productive site from which to rethink history, Azoulay does not attempt to fill any gaps in the archive, since – and here, her overriding attempt to polemicize frequently stands in the way of more flexible readings, defying even her own counter-examples – she identifies it as a place of imperial violence whose material items reveal more of the imperial project than the taxonomies of the people and events it organizes, sterilizing and neutralizing documents in a stable past, presenting history as inevitable. According to Azoulay, a potential method implies reading the “records of destruction as proof of persistence and right to survive” (p. 187), harboring in them the seeds of “a different modality, that of reversal, rewinding, repairing, renewing, reacquiring, redistributing, readjusting, reallocating” (p. 56).

This book importantly expands the focus from photographs to documents and objects in archives and museums.

Insisting that forced migration of people and artefacts are one and the same, Azoulay views “museums and archives” as “a major force of racialization and hence world destruction” (p. 29). This comes out of and responds to a unique momentum following Sarr-Savoy report’s (2018) plea for returning looted objects, taking Achille Mbembe’s view of restitution as a technocratic ploy, since the loss was not of objects but of the lifeworlds they inhabited. “Restitution implemented unilaterally as a magic solution”, Azoulay declares, “risks substituting a substantial accountability and closure to violence” (p. 9). In addition, inscribed in looted objects are “the rights of the dispossessed and their lost worlds, the rights validated not by state papers and documents but through objects, architecture, ceremonies, rituals, orders, genealogies, habits, skills and traditions” (p. 452). Whether this entails a Western museum’s inability to contextualize a Congolese sculpture of a Belgian colonial officer who killed multiple people, or Walid Raad’s project on the objects lent by the Louvre in Paris to their branch in Abu Dhabi, built with forced labor to refinance the home institution, Azoulay considers imperial plunder as “an ongoing process” (p. 168), since, in her implacable view, what are called works of art are, in actual fact, congealed forms of material dispossession, and yet, as “unruly objects” (p. 156), they nevertheless refuse to comply with the narratives and tags imposed upon them.

*Potential History* at times breaks through the gridlocks of contemporary thinking with shocking clarity, but also

often veers into well-trodden paths delivering seeming insights which have long been around – is it really still contested that colonialism exceeded its formal end, or that archives are not neutral spaces, and museums are political? Unlearning imperialism would require nothing less than, in Azoulay’s estimation, the entire overhaul of all of the “political terms, structures, institutions, concepts and laws commonly identified as modern” (p. 24). A tall order, indeed. In short, potential history is “the transformation of violence into shared care for our common world” (p. 57), the pursuit of a “wordly sovereignty” in lieu of “imperial sovereignty.” She is not short of ideas for this, in the interstitial sections to chapters, calling upon historians, for instance, to go on strike – after W.E.B. Du Bois, who stopped going to archives due to their vitiated trap – asking museum workers to view asylum-seeking as “a counter-expedition by people in search of their objects and destroyed worlds” (p. 160) or else suggesting that “all monuments must fall” to attack international law’s failure regarding Israel, claiming that Palestinian “rights are dormant in the trees, valleys, dishes, fields, seeds, objects, structures, ruins, norms and traditions that still subsist” (p. 478). Campaigning against the past sealed off as an archive, the invention of the document as a single ontological entity, and the thrusting drive of the new as a catalyzer of history itself, Azoulay refuses to leave unchallenged any of the heavyweights that have shaped the dominant terms with which we think about such issues today – from Foucault

to Derrida, Saussure, and Sebald – a testament to the enduring radicality of her interventions, each page tantalizing readers with the genuine prospect of turning out to be cutting edge, and leaving them determined to honor the intensity of her commitment by intensifying their own. This is as rare as it is invigorating in the merry-go-round of contemporary theory and criticism.

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