

# Narratives and public action in the ruins of the Perus Cement Factory

Narrativas e ação pública nas ruínas da Fábrica de Cimento de Perus

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## Abstract

In this paper, I interpret the relationship between abandonment and remembrance based on possibilities for re-signifying the Perus Portland Cement Factory. Abandoned since the 1970s, the facilities of the bankrupt Companhia Brasileira de Cimento Portland are today the object of cultural actions organized by social movements in Perus, a district in the northwest of the city of São Paulo. The movements aim to recapture personal and collective memories of the so-called Queixadas Strike, which took over the factory for seven years and left to the territory an identity of struggle for rights and citizenship. Based on the analysis of interviews, I discuss the counter-narrative created by one of these collectives, the Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque, to oppose oblivion and announce the potential of its territory.

**Keywords:** industrial heritage; working-class struggle; social movement; narratives.

## Resumo

*Interpreto as relações entre o abandono e a rememoração a partir das possibilidades de resignificação da Fábrica de Cimento Portland de Perus. Abandonada desde a década de 1970, as instalações da falida Companhia Brasileira de Cimento Portland são, hoje, objeto de ações culturais de movimentos sociais de Perus, distrito da zona noroeste da Cidade de São Paulo. Estes procuram retomar memórias pessoais e coletivas da chamada Greve dos Queixadas, que tomou a Fábrica durante sete anos e legou ao território uma identidade de luta por direitos e cidadania. A partir da análise de entrevistas, discuto como um desses coletivos, a Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque, elabora uma contranarrativa que se opõe ao esquecimento para anunciar as potencialidades de seu território.*

**Palavras-chave:** patrimônio industrial; luta operária; movimento social; narrativas.



# Introduction

They mobilized all existing police forces there and those from outside because they arrived with “bructos” at that time a novelty and the most advanced means to disperse the crowd. The neighborhood was awakened at 5 o'clock in the morning by a parade of vehicles of all kinds. They distributed flyers clarifying the company's side, labeling the striking workers as loafers, claiming that the Union was composed of communists and thieves who aimed to ruin everyone, including the neighborhood, and that housewives should pressure their sons, neighbors, and husbands to return to work. With this, they managed to resume factory operations. That's when the repression began, along with a hunt for anyone involved in the strike. They arrested, beat, prosecuted – essentially engaging in all forms of persecution. (Breno, 1977, p. 38)

This testimony was written by João Breno Pinto, a labor leader, about events in the 1960s that unfolded at the facilities of Companhia Brasileira de Cimento Portland. Located in the northwest of São Paulo city, the Cement Factory of Perus was the first large-scale cement production plant in Brazil. Its cement was crucial for urban expansion, river covering, major infrastructure projects, and even the construction of the federal capital. Designed by Canadians in the 1920s, the factory was purchased by the Abdalla Group, which in the 1950s faced accusations of subjecting workers to harsh conditions. Fed up, the workers maintained a non-violent strike for seven years until the company went bankrupt in the 1970s. Since then, only ruins remain of the factory.

In this article, I interpret the relationship between abandonment and remembrance through the case of the re-signification efforts at the Fábrica de Cimento Portland de Perus. As Kühl (2010) emphasizes, the challenges of preserving industrial heritage in Brazil involve complex theoretical, methodological, and technical-operational paths. Similarly, Rodrigues (2010, p. 39) warns that aspects related to labor are often undervalued: “considered less noble, workplaces are sites of professional identity development that simultaneously harbor difficult memories, such as the curtailment of freedoms.” By focusing on the preservation of industrial heritage as a reminder of workers' struggles, we fulfill Perrot's (1988) objectives in establishing this category as historical subjects. From this perspective, I discuss the possibilities of preserving industrial heritage with focus on valuing struggles for rights.

The challenge lies in how to connect the ruins of a factory – its often monumental materiality – to the memories of workers who built families there, had their rights violated and confronted their oppressors. It's not just about ensuring the physical preservation of these spaces but also safeguarding the personal and collective memories of the workers. How, then, can we use ruins to tell inspiring stories of social struggle and resistance?

With this question in mind, I analyze how the actions of a political-cultural collective counteract the erasure of the working-class memory of the Cement Factory. The Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque is a non-profit organization that emerged in 2005 from the initiative of a group of young residents of Perus, a peripheral neighborhood in the northwest zone of São Paulo (Figure 1),

characterized by the worst socio-economic and cultural indicators (Quilombaque, n.d.). According to the Map of Inequality (Rede Nossa São Paulo, 2022), Perus ranks second in maternal mortality rates among the city's districts and is among the top ten districts for violence against women and cases of femicide. During the Covid-19 pandemic, neighborhoods like Perus, lacking any hospital beds, exhibited the highest rates of infection and death (Instituto Pólis, 2020): while the average proportion of virus-related deaths to total deaths in 2021 was 24.6%, Perus reached 30.2% (Rede..., 2022). Furthermore, in terms of public amenities, Perus has only one municipal library as a cultural center directly related to its cultural activities.

These and other dimensions of vulnerability converge towards the notion of "urban spoliation" (Kowarick, 1979), and it is from these data that the focused collective acts to prevent this framework from leading to reductionist views of life in the peripheries. Through cultural initiatives, they seek to highlight the potential of the territory, valorizing its identity and roots. Without ignoring the dramatic situations that curtail citizenship, the Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque mobilizes different agents to make other aspects of Perus visible. One of these actions revisits stories like João Breno's account of the "Perus" strike to attribute new meanings to the carcass of the Factory that occupies part of the neighborhood's landscape.

Figure 1 – Highlight of the Perus District in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo, 2024



Source: GeoSampa (2024).

Starting from an approach that combines an emphasis on public action with narrative analysis – which will be discussed in the next section – the research was based on a qualitative case study, with interview analysis as its main technique, as discussed in the third section of the text. This theoretical-methodological strategy was used to discuss broader contexts of heritage preservation (Peria, 2022; Peria & Farah, 2023), but here we focus on a more specific object. I seek to question how the narratives articulated by the Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque about the Cement Factory of Perus can re-signify an apparently abandoned heritage.

The delineation of what I will call a counter-narrative is presented in the fourth section of this text, dedicated to the presentation and interpretation of the case. In the fifth section, I link Quilombaque's recovery strategies with a broader framework of analysis on cultural actions in the peripheries, demonstrating that this is not an isolated episode but a trend and application of shared knowledge about political practice. Understanding these points, I propose that the actions of this collective in the realm of memory and concerning a "forgotten" industrial heritage can serve as a model for understanding ways in which the meanings of these ruins can be reconstructed.

## Actions and narratives beyond public policies

In the case studied here, as we will see, official policies regarding the cultural heritage of São Paulo city are characterized by abandonment,

disrespect, erasure, and the primacy of private interests over public ones. However, rather than solely exposing these issues, the research leading to this article was focused on seeking spaces of resistance where areas neglected by public policy become sources of meaning.

For this purpose, the approach to public action in the field of Public Policy proves to be a fruitful path. This perspective starts from the understanding that "governments do not have a monopoly on the public, and the public has never relinquished its willingness to act publicly" (Spink, 2015, p. 13). In other words, what we consider public is constructed daily not only by the State but also – perhaps primarily – by Civil Society. Studies employing this definition have begun to use the term "public action" to designate interventions in public life more broadly than "public policies." According to Spink and Burgos (2019), the centrality of the notion of "public policy" can create a false impression that everything begins and ends with the State when in reality there exists a variety of "action languages." As noted by Abreu (2019), within this diversity lies the interconnection of state action, public pressure on the State, and public action itself.

Acknowledging a "performative cacophony" (Spink, 2013), this approach allows us to study the interplay between different forms of public action; in our case, different ways of performing heritage actions. The notion of public action thus serves the analytical purpose of accounting for the multiplicity of forms of public engagement (Spink and Silva, 2014), and the underlying question becomes how to "describe the mutation of collective experiences" (Cefaï, 2009, p. 16), rather than just identifying successes and failures in

specific state actions. Indeed, this conception complicates analysis, as public action by and for the public can emerge from anywhere and take various forms – it happens everywhere and in all formats. Therefore, we assert that the approach to public action calls for and invites academic awareness of how non-state actors organize themselves around issues that become "public problems" worthy of attention. Regarding this process, Cefaï (2017a) asserts that we should focus our analyses on the creation of common environments and concerns:

People come together, associate, discuss, become uneasy, become indignant, and begin to question and discuss again. They find allies to lean on, politicians or experts who relay their voices, or other organizations with which to associate. [...] In doing so, they constitute themselves as a 'public' – the collective part of self-work, subject to the test of transformation concerning problems, others, situations, and institutions [...]. (Ibid., pp. 196-197)

Here, studies on social movements are a necessary catalyst for deepening analyses linked to the public action approach. We must acknowledge that "the relationship between social movements and political institutions is contingent and mutually constitutive, with implications or effects produced on both societal and institutional actors" (Carlos, 2015, p. 86). Thus, the multiple performances of the public, by both the State and civil society actors, are closely intertwined, not in a homogenizing manner, but through various "interaction repertoires" (Abers; Serafim; Tatagiba, 2014). It is important to understand, therefore, that

public action by the State and civil society occurs across more ambiguous and fluid boundaries than commonly imagined. Public action is not a singular, harmonious, unison, extraordinary, or well-defined event but rather a diffuse, everyday, shared, and contentious phenomenon. If public policy is one of many forms in which public action is performed, analyses must focus on understanding how other performances occur and what relationships are constructed within this "cacophony."

In this seemingly unstable framework, we can perceive great creativity, and thus, this mobilization is also a "laboratory of experimentation" (Cefaï, 2017b, p. 129). This creativity, it is important to remember, arises from the urgent need to build solutions in scenarios of symbolic, material, or institutional violence, and in situations of neglect and disregard, such as those we will analyze in discussing the case of the Perus Cement Factory. Viewing these "laboratories," therefore, should not result in tranquil and recreational defenses of social action but rather a reminder that resistance persists against oppression.

At the cost of some repetition, the aim here is to sensitize our perspective because the notion of public policy does not encompass all that we want and need to study, and in this lack, it invisibilizes processes and people who are acting (have always acted and will continue to act) for the public good. It is in this sense, too, that the approach to public action is often presented in conjunction with a normative view on the intensification of the democratic process. Regarding the recent political context, research has shown that in contrast to the

actions and inactions of the federal government – such as institutional disarray (Abrucio et al., 2020), the deconstruction of established public policies (Gomide; Sá e Silva; Leopoldi, 2023), and institutional harassment of public servants (Lotta et al., 2023) – and amidst the emergency scenario of the covid-19 pandemic, new spaces for collaboration and network building in civil society have emerged (Alves and Costa, 2020; Andion, 2020). As argued by Borges (2020):

In a period of democratic rollback by the State, collective action emerging from society gains centrality and needs to be understood in its potential to generate opportunities for resistance and democratic reinvention. Analyzing how this collective action has been constructed can shed light on understanding possible spaces or interstices for resuming public action despite contrary state actions. (Ibid., p. 178)

Observing this tension in the field of cultural heritage, we therefore admit that there is not just one form of heritage action; it is a plural, polysemic phenomenon constructed by many actors beyond and within the State. We start from a strategy favoring the search for places of conflict, where the diversity of narratives – cacophonous performances – can emerge, disrupting even if momentarily, the coherence of the official narrative. It is within this disharmony that other identities can be heard; we refer to this apparent noise as counter-narratives – similar to the "counter-uses" described by Leite (2007) in his study on the popular appropriation of the historic center of Recife. These are "counter" narratives because they oppose not only a notion of

heritage but also a heritage practice oriented towards the erasure of anything that threatens a pacified narrative.

The idea of a counter-narrative, according to Czarniawska (2017), suggests that certain narratives have been elevated to official status while others fulfill the role of questioning such selection. For Gabriel (2017), counter-narratives act to refute and challenge an identified dominant narrative. While master narratives work based on naturalization, counter-narratives emerge by producing imbalance (Hyvärinen, 2021). Andrews (2002, p. 2) uses the image of "stories that act 'under the rug' of dominant narratives" to characterize counter-narratives. Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt (2021) draw attention to the creative aspect of counter-narratives, which can be a vector for social change. In the context of peripheral mobilizations in defense of rights, Comelli (2021) attributes a central place to the struggle for narratives as a form of "urban cultural activism." In the field of tourism, Noy (2012) emphasizes the need to:

Emphasize how stories, beyond their functions of describing and organizing the world, are also structures of power; vehicles for the performance of social hierarchies, exclusions, and Otherness. A critical perspective brings to light the immense performative power of narratives in the tourism industry and raises a set of questions about the constitution of social agency. The shift from structural and functional approaches to more critical approaches involves not only a change in the interpretation and analysis of narrative contents and themes but also a shift in focus to questions of who has the

rights and resources to retell narratives publicly, and who or what is implicated in them; who has a well-ordered narrative and who has a (non-)traumatic narrative punctuated by silences and stammers. (Ibid., pp. 135-136)

We must emphasize two central characteristics in the relationship between counter-narratives and dominant narratives, a fundamental issue for our reflection. Firstly, the counter-narrative is defined by opposition; its emergence is closely linked to the denial of what is understood as the dominant narrative. Secondly, the counter-narrative is consummated only by proposition; its urgency is interested in the imperative need for the substitution of a socially established plot. In these terms, the counter-narrative is a strategy of creative rejection (Peria, 2022). Referring to Freire's idea of cultural action for freedom (Freire, 1976), it involves being open to both denunciations and announcements. Our reading of counter-narratives proceeds from the broad spectrum of opposition-proposition. It is not static but in constant motion to produce new imbalances and foster new dispositions.

The narratives heard for this research and woven into this article, articulated by agents of a political-cultural movement in Perus, denounce the abandonment of cultural heritage while also proclaiming stories of resistance and struggle. By creating a community tourism trail among the remnants of the Perus Portland Cement Factory, they recount the stories of strikers and point to signs of decades of neglect. While proposing a different narrative for the ruins of a factory from the first half of the last century, they oppose deliberate forgetting in favor of real estate speculation. They commemorate the

labor disputes of the 1960s that had the Factory as a stage and question the reasons for erasing the history of social movements in the city's peripheries. It is on this pendulum between denunciation and announcement that the next sections delve into discussing ways in which ruins of industrial heritage are re-signified.

## Methodological note

The results obtained during the research stem from a qualitative and intrinsic case study (Stake, 2005). Without seeking generalizations and comparisons, we acknowledge that delving into the idiosyncrasies and ordinariness of a single case can offer original reflections and generate theoretical-empirical resonances. It is important to emphasize that we frame the case study as the narratives constructed by a social movement, the Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque, about an industrial cultural heritage, the Perus Portland Cement Factory. Therefore, we do not focus on the various other narratives articulated by the collective or on productions by other agents about the same historical object. Thus, the choice to discuss the narrative of the Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque about the Perus Portland Cement Factory is purposeful due to its potential to teach us ways in which an apparently abandoned and ruined heritage can be re-signified and valued for and by the community.

To grasp the complexities of a counter-narrative, the primary data collection technique was testimonial gathering, both primary and secondary. By seeking videos produced by the movement itself and other available materials,



it was possible to enrich the range of voices capable of telling us stories about the Factory. In this direction, a series of interviews produced and made available by the Museu da Pessoa provide rich descriptions of the lives of central figures in the early years of the collective. The lengthy interview with José Soró is of particular interest, as "Mestre Soró" is recognized as a prominent community leader in the Perus neighborhood (Moreira and Veloso, 2019), and having passed away in 2019, over fifty pages of his words constitute unique material. Additionally, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals crucial to the cultural and heritage actions practiced by the Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque.

We understand the notion of narrative not only as empirical material but as a strategy for producing this research (Langley, 1999). Therefore, the narrative analysis presented in the following pages seeks, in addition to cohesion, to provide an interpretation of Quilombaque's counter-narrative that stimulates productive reflections on the limitations of current public policy on cultural heritage and the possibilities for its reinvention.

## The cement of memory

Cleiton "Fofão" Ferreira de Souza (2020, p. 9), one of the founders of Quilombaque, has previously written that "to speak of capacity and potentiality in the periphery, one must return to the past and understand the processes of transformations and developments that occurred in these places." In the case of Perus, it is impossible to separate the history of urban growth in the neighborhood and its social

mobilizations without remembering the Cement Factory. This factory was established in the first half of the 20th century (Moreira and Gold, 2017; Bortoto and Bezerra, 2019) with foreign capital aiming to become the country's first large-scale cement production plant to meet the demand brought by urbanization. According to Soró, the entire neighborhood revolved around events centered on the factory: "The factory had around eleven hundred workers at one point. And the Perus neighborhood was always small, so basically everyone lived around the factory or the factory revolved around the neighborhood; everyone had a relative working in the factory" (Museum..., 2017). According to Cleiton Ferreira de Souza, "Everything revolved around this cement factory; in 1926, there was electricity here, but the neighborhood only got electricity in the 1950s, almost the 1960s. So everything revolved around this factory; those who worked in the factory had credibility" (Cleiton Fofão, interview, 2021). For Mestre Soró, this "is quite a long story," but even so, we must pay attention to his words:

In the 1950s, with the arrival of Abdalla, the confrontations intensified, and it was the rest of their lives that the workers faced the woes of the 'bad boss'. By the late 1950s, the confrontations were already fierce because the guy was like a dog chewing on a mango. So the people who worked at the factory used to frequent, for example, a bar near the corner, they gathered a lot there, or in the square, the assemblies were in the square, and somehow, they decided to start a riot, things escalated, it caught on, and they started making some noise. And they began to face fights and win them because they had a tenacity, a willingness to fight that was impressive. One of them said, 'Ah, you guys look like 'Queixadas' (peccaries).' Which is a



wild boar, which I know very well from my childhood. In Mato Grosso, in the woods, you grow up, there are various fears that are placed, and there are very concrete fears; one of them is called a peccary. The scariest animal is the peccary. And they attack in packs. So how did they become peccaries? It was because of this story, this association with pigs that gather in packs, they attack and don't stop until... There is this resistance, this firmness. They came to be called the Peccaries (*os Queixadas*). Then came Mário Carvalho de Jesus, who became a lawyer for the union, and Mário came from pastoral and humanist movements, he went to France, spent a year in occupied factories, which was a movement of people linked to Gandhi, non-violence, Martin Luther King, that period at the end of the 1950s. And Mário brought here a proposal for a strategy of resistance, which was the so-called non-violence or permanent firmness. They thought 'non-violence' was too soft... for those who carried cement and ate cement dust and carried stones, so they decided to call it permanent firmness. That's what wins any contest, being firm all the time and not giving up, that's what makes the other... So they started the strike in '62, which lasted three or four months. Then they were all fired, then they went to court, and while the case lasted until '69, they remained on strike. And they remained in movement, they went on hunger strikes, they spent all these years fighting until '69, when they won the right to reinstatement in court. Seven years of days on strike, that's why we consider it a seven-year strike. These are the *Queixadas*. (Museum..., 2017)

Let's break down the stages of this narrative. It all begins with the so-called "bad boss", abuses, violence, and lack of rights for the

factory workers. According to Breno (1977, p. 37), one of the strike leaders, workers at Grupo Abdalla suffered from "payment delays and inhumane working conditions". According to the main lawyer of the Union, "the workers lived in fear" (Jesus, 1977, p. 41). The organization of the workers happens organically, in the square and at the bar. They mutiny and are nicknamed. The peccary, both the animal and the worker, attacks in packs and does not give up. The struggle gained strength and new names with the arrival of a lawyer trained in the trenches of the French labor and Christian organization. Permanent firmness reverses the game of violence from the boss and the repressive state apparatus, and thus, the Peccaries remained on strike for seven years (1962-1969) during the military dictatorship (Figure 2).

A verse from one of the jongos' chants, a rhythm of Afro-Brazilian music prevalent in the Southeast region and at Quilombaque festivals, states: "The chorus starts, in the dense forest / but queixada taught me to fight without the sword" (IMS, 2020). The strike ended in 1969, and in the 1970s, the factory went bankrupt. However, the queixada memory, primarily passed down orally due to the scant documentation of the period, is seen as the seed that sprouted into subsequent social mobilizations, characterizing Perus as "a neighborhood of struggles." Cleiton Fofão asserted at a gathering organized by the Historical Heritage Department of the Municipal Secretary of Culture that "the *Queixadas*' struggle never ceased, their organizational form and various fronts branched out. When there's a social struggle of importance to the neighborhood, the community organizes itself under the legacy left by the *Queixadas*" (DPH, 2020). Even without participating in the strike, the experience of the Cement Factory workers served as inspiration for

Figure 2 - Assembly at the Union Headquarters (1962)



Source: Fragoso et al. (1977).

the generation that founded Quilombaque; after all, those workers "understood their potential at the time: if Brazil was developing and needed cement, they realized that if they stopped everything, they could hold the upper hand" (Cleiton Fofão, interview, 2021).

Establishing this memory as a shaper of the neighborhood's identity was not an easy task. Continuing this struggle is not merely about establishing connections with the ethical and political inspirations of the *queixada* organization, but above all, it is about ensuring that the phenomenon of the *Queixadas* is not forgotten. The loss of physical and symbolic remnants of the "Perus strike" demonstrates the imminent threat of forgetting, thus the work with the personal memory of strike participants was crucial, capable of passing on their inspiration to younger generations. Reflecting on this process, Master Soró recalled:

João Breno had already passed away but encountered Tião, Mr. Oliveira, and all the elders, Dona Maria Velci. All these great leaders who had been fighting here for 50 years and from whom I learned a lot, finding many of them suffering from depression... It had to do with depression and with this overall disillusionment. We fought to build a country, a world. Imagine now how they are... I said: 'Rescuing this memory, valuing these people, is also a way to lift them out of depression.' So this commitment, this relationship with these old masters that I know will last until the end. And harnessing their fire and let's set it ablaze, incinerate and such. This is one of the greatest victories that I am deeply honored to have achieved. (Museum..., 2017)

In the struggle for the *queixada* movement's memory, immediately after the factory's deactivation, the community mobilized

for the entire space to be transformed into a cultural center incorporating a workers' memorial, thereby turning the Factory into a space for public use focused on valorizing the intangible heritage of struggles. The initial glimpse of realizing this project occurred during Luiza Erundina's term as Mayor and Marilena Chauí's term as Secretary of Culture from 1989 to 1992, as recalled by Master Soró:

Very important things emerged. One of them, which Marilena brought, was the idea of rescuing the memory of social struggles. [...] Right from the start, Marilena was already talking about the Queixadas, she knew the people, Mário Carvalho, and then they got into this thing of rescuing the memory of the factory, of the Queixadas workers. So every Tuesday, people would sit down there and it was all about conversations, people recorded, and wrote books. [...] The process for heritage listing began, and it was good because I think it was one of the first listings that encompassed both material and intangible aspects. So the heritage in Perus was listed, but so was the struggle, and all the significant things: the union... Anyway, it was born within this process. In a year, when the memory registration ended, the listing was already underway, so much so that at the end of the government, she came to celebrate the listing. (Museum..., 2017)

Embedded in the very methodology of working with preservation, the political commitment of the Mayor and the Secretary allowed the concept of permanent firmness, present in Perus since the 1950s, to influence cultural policy decisions. The realization of this project is evident in the listing of the Factory,

which took into account the work with the oral history of former *queixada* strikers (Retroz and Borges, 2021). The then Director of DPH, Déa Fenelon, stated that among the goals of her administration were:

The implementation of oral history projects, through the collection of testimonies related to the city's daily life, the memory of factory labor, and social movements, aims to expand the universe of records related to the city's memory and history. Technically supporting popular movements in the city, towards organizing the records of their memory and preserving their traditions and cultural references, under conditions of autonomy. (Fenelon, 1992, p. 32)

Consistently, Raquel Schenkman, a DPH employee and Director of the organization from March 2019 to mid-2020, affirmed that "the listing of the Perus factory is one of the initial listings by DPH and emerged from the community's engagement, which has always been involved in this heritage discussion." (DPH, 2020) Resolution No. 27 of 1992 from the Municipal Council for the Preservation of Historic, Cultural, and Environmental Heritage of the City of São Paulo (CONPRESP) defined the listing not only of remnants of the Factory but also of the headquarters of the Cement and Plaster Industry Workers Union of São Paulo and a set of workers' residences. The text unequivocally justifies the listing: "Considering the importance of memory as a foundation in building history and the relevance of the memory of the workers of the Brazilian Portland Cement Company Perus as a symbol of a certain form of organization, struggle, and resistance of workers." (Conpresp, 1992)

Therefore, it is undeniable that the *Queixadas'* and their successors' struggles were able to yield practical results in terms of public memory policies. From mobilization into public action, the organized community managed to influence official bodies to prioritize the preservation not only of the factory's material remains but also of the immaterial memory of worker resistance. However, if the listing represents legal-institutional security against the complete loss of the narratives that had the Factory as their setting, public policy has not proven capable of fulfilling its tasks of valorization. Regarding current interactions with preservation agencies, Camila Cardoso, coordinator of Agência Queixadas, a branch of Quilombaque dedicated to cultural tourism activities, admitted that "the relationship isn't close, and funding even less so, there are discussions, but partnerships don't always materialize." (Camila Cardoso, interview, 2021) In an interview with Cleiton "Fofão", the same sentiment was expressed: "We engage in dialogue, but there are no results, no resources either." (Cleiton Fofão, interview, 2021) The preservation agency is the area with the least resources in the department with the smallest budget in the municipality, exacerbated by the advancing precariousness of public service: "The Secretariat's structure is dilapidated, people can't keep up with projects, calls, there aren't enough staff. One technician handles a hundred, two hundred projects." (Cleiton Fofão, interview, 2021) The situation is dire for the preservation and respect for *Queixadas'* heritage, as can be inferred from Cleiton "Fofão's" account of an incident:

We went to the Cement Factory once, and the owner rented it out for police to train with paintball... It has both material and intangible protection from *Queixadas'* efforts, and they're training with paintball. We reported it, and it stalled. But it's the least we can do... They painted the entire factory using our memory space, a place of non-violence, for shooting practice... to target our community later. We have to stop it. If we don't go there and straighten things out with these guys [heritage agencies], nothing will happen. [...] Every day a piece of the factory falls, and that's it. If we don't preserve it, no one will. (Cleiton Fofão, interview, 2021)

The property still belongs to the "bad boss." Heritage and legacy: the third generation of the family holds onto the place for dubious reasons. There are two gates to access the space: the first, where the *Queixadas* picketed, is always open and occupied by a motorcycle school; the second is always locked and protected to prevent the ruins from becoming homes. It was a long journey of strategically friendly conversations between the Community and the gatekeeper for a degree of trust to be established, allowing Quilombaque some access to the memory site. Within the ruins, nothing is done or undone because the action of time is cheaper; the management motto of that space seems to be "Let it fall." The dispute over the meanings of the Factory is constant; in Fofão's account, it is again about the struggle between the police force and the memory of *Queixadas'* workers. The final statement in his testimony is significant, showing the characteristic non-conformism of the counter-narrative. If

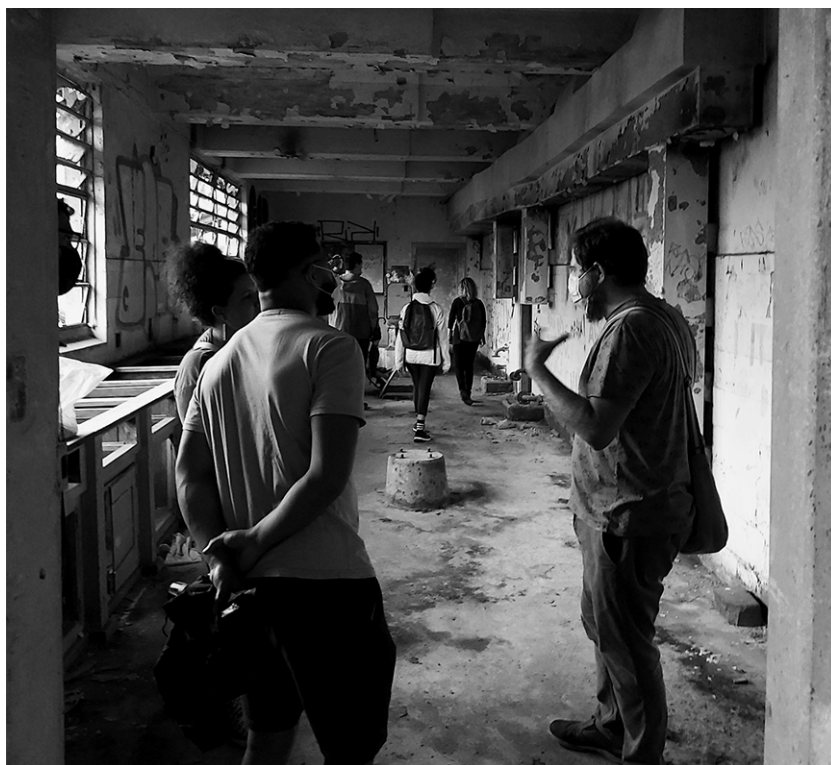
preservation does not occur through public policy instruments, the public action of social movements in Perus fills this void.

In this context, agents of the Quilombaque Cultural Community have been working to articulate, since 2014, within the framework of the Strategic Master Plan review (Sandeville; Fernandes and Bortoto, 2016), the establishment of a museum with unique characteristics. Without a defined physical space, the concept of the Tekoa Jopo'i Territorial Museum is that "our territory is an entire cultural heritage" (Camila Cardoso, interview, 2021). It was through intensive engagement with resident groups that these spaces were

identified: "We didn't think alone or merely academically about this territory, which is why we call them places of memory and affection because they were conceived with the people from this territory" (Camila Cardoso, interview, 2021). Divided into several trails, the Queixadas Agency organizes visitor groups seeking to explore the stories of that territory through the voices and narratives of its residents, hence Cleiton Fofão asserts that "this museum is a classroom where history is told where it happened" (DPH, 2020).

One of the trails within the Tekoa Jopo'i Museum is called "Queixadas Memory" (Figure 3). Along the route, visitors can immerse

Figure 3 – "Queixadas Memory" Trail and explanations in the old Factory laboratories



Source: photo by the author (2022).



themselves in the monumental ruins of the Factory. Approaching the old furnaces and chimneys, one sees vegetation invading the concrete; factory and forest blend together. The structure that ravaged landscapes a hundred years ago is now slowly engulfed by roots and leaves; the cement that was once bagged to cover the city's rivers now forms the ground where rainwater flows and new trees grow. It's a labyrinth: the sense of scale is lost, everything is grandiose, from the screws scattered on the ground to the storage silos, and especially the rotary kiln where raw materials were crushed alongside lead spheres and the chimney that emitted toxic smoke.

During the tour, the guide narrates the strike's history, making a very transparent choice about which narratives should be valued and whose voices should be amplified along the Museum's path: "I could go through the Cement Factory and tell the story of the strikebreakers, which is also part of the history, but our focus is on the *Queixadas'* perspective, which is another side" (Camila Cardoso, interview, 2021). Covering all phases of the Factory and its subsequent urban and population impacts in the neighborhood, the journey's focus is on the "legacy of the *Queixadas'*":

So it is very important for Brazil's history, this factory, and this process of workers' struggle because there's a development: when they organized themselves, they built the National Labor Front, another powerful organization born here in Perus, and after that, they went to provide training there in the ABC, which resulted in the arrival of a worker as president. These are contexts of struggle development that we also need

to understand. Hence the importance of this workers' organization process here in the territory. (Cleiton Fofão, interview, 2021)

With this narrative, the ruins of a factory abandoned by the government and market are populated with stories of struggle and resistance. Contrary to neglect, the "Queixada Memory" trail exposes the dark and violent sides of industrial progress while proposing possibilities for reinventing these heritages by the community itself. Opposing a narrative of oblivion that justifies the material decline of the Factory, they present to the public sphere a narrative valuing the territory and its identity. Against its use for shooting practice, they transform the Factory into a cultural and educational space. During the walk, we see ruins but hear ways to celebrate events and characters often buried.

In the wake of this valuation and rescue action, another more recent initiative is relevant. The establishment of the Queixadas Memory Center – Sebastião Silva de Souza marks another phase of appropriation of the history of workers' resistance by Perus' cultural movements (CMQ, 2018). Aimed at collecting, restoring, and preserving textual, photographic, filmic, and oral documents, the Center constitutes an intense effort to build an archive of Queixadas' resistance. With broad access provided by the Tainacan system, it is possible to research personal stories of workers. Its organizers, one of them the granddaughter of a Queixada worker, admit that the ideal place for the Center would be inside the Factory, so those stories would return to their origin. However, while the use of its facilities is restricted, the

Sebastião Silva de Souza Center operates in space provided at the Padre Anchieta Library, the only one in Perus.

The Factory populated by visitors and guides from the Territorial Museum and Queixadas Agency, and the archive of the Memory Center are effects of long public action processes – we must consider that they began with the strikers themselves. From the 1960s to today, political contexts of action have been radically altered, but our narrators from Perus insist on uniting their struggles under the sign of the "Queixada heritage." Whether under dictatorship, a Workers' Party or Malufist government, neoliberalism, or real estate market pressures, the example of "Perus" workers taught through oral tradition serves as a guide for the political actions of young movements in the territory. Observing daily neglect, falling walls, and intentional deterioration of material heritage, these mobilizations are rooted in the immaterial, in memories, to tell another side of history. In the same space, they can tell stories of police paintball training, but also of workers' struggles that led to the election of a worker as president. By providing oral accounts, personal documents like work permits, and photos of picket lines and assemblies, they counter erasure with co-memoration. In the same ruins, they denounce the abuse of the "bad boss" while announcing workers' strength.

The counter-narrative mobilized by Quilombaque alters, in the discursive field, how the territory and its memory spaces are represented. The ambiguous relations between the Cultural Community and the State in the field of public preservation policies, which designate as heritage but allow for paintball training, remind us that the public is constructed upon various and

multiple grammars. Moving between different "interaction repertoires" (Abers; Serafim and Tatagiba, 2014), participating in a "performative cacophony" (Spink, 2013), and acting as a "laboratory of experimentation" (Cefaï, 2017b), the patrimonialization actions discussed constitute strategies of social movements that use memory as cement. In the next section, we will briefly relate these actions to broader perspectives of re-signifying public spaces to reflect how an apparently empty and silent heritage is transformed into a source of valorizing memories of people and movements from the periphery.

## The cemented memory

Public actions concerning the industrial heritage analyzed in the case of the counter-narrative by the Quilombaque Cultural Community about the Portland Cement Factory of Perus closely resemble movements of resemantization of the term "periphery" described in other studies. In recent proposals, movements from peripheral areas of Brazilian major cities are interpreted as part of a process criticizing reductionist and derogatory views of these territories. As proposed by Comelli (2021), the categories "peripheral/slum-dweller" are mobilized for various purposes:

One notices the difficulty in addressing the supposed identity of the favela, suburb, or periphery dweller for the construction of insurgent urban struggles. In some cases, such a category may function as a mere reinforcement of stereotypes generated from hegemonic worldviews about the city. In others,



this identity can translate and connect the pluralities of bodies and urban demands; it can serve as a guiding thread for counter-hegemonic citizen narratives. In a way, the peripheral/slum-dweller identity is a kind of tension that simultaneously reduces and connects: it connects complex identities fighting for the Right to the City while compacting them and reducing them to a certain type of territory. (Comelli, 2021)

In this dispute over meanings and semantic uses, D'Andrea (2013, p. 26) focuses on cultural and artistic movements to understand how they have sought since the 1990s the "resignification of political action in the peripheries." Similarly, Raimundo (2017, p. 146) states that the choice to engage in cultural fields by these collectives is not without reason: "These new perspectives that construct the city, ways of being and experiencing daily and political experiences, find in art a privileged language to express a multitude of reflections, questions, criticisms, utopias, and projects." In a complementary manner, Oliveira (2021, p. 36) asserts that cultural action in the peripheries is "a complex of actions and symbolic practices of resistance to mechanisms of oppression, mobilizing the resignification of constitutive elements of this peripheral landscape and signaling changes in social structure." In agreement, these studies demonstrate a trend of association between cultural actions and social movements from peripheral regions to affirm that they can also construct their city as active characters, ultimately as historical subjects. Contrary to marginalization, these collectives occupy spaces as hubs radiating different manifestations such as dance, theater,

communication, literature, sports, education, tourism, visual arts, and their multiple interconnections.

Acknowledging this framework, we see that Quilombaque's practices do not unfold as an isolated phenomenon but as a node in a complex network of individuals, groups, collectives, and movements—a network that may have begun with housing cooperatives, ecclesial base communities, and party movements in the São Paulo periphery of the 1980s, as studied by Kowarick (1979), Caldeira (1984), and Sader (1988). In the constant search for inspirational references from the past, collectives like Quilombaque and the Queixadas Memory Center seek to resignify what it means to be born in Perus. We witness the emergence of the "peripheral subject" (D'Andrea, 2013), not merely a resident of a specific geographic location, but a historical subject who assumes and takes pride in their condition and, from there, acts politically.

In this sense, Quilombaque, the Museum, and the Agency are part of a broader and older movement of expanding the meanings of "periphery" and "peripheral." The material and symbolic occupation that these agents promote in the ruins of the Perus Factory should thus be viewed as an instrument within a larger cultural and political project. The use of what remains from a moment of industrial prosperity serves the function of questioning whether the sign that marks the territory and its people is that of abandonment or resistance. By bringing visitors to the Factory, managing to access it despite restrictions imposed by owners, narrating stories of strikers, highlighting their strategies, exposing the threats suffered and rights violated, collecting, preserving, and

communicating personal collections of workers – they say: "here, there was a struggle." As the vegetation slowly overtakes the Factory, walls collapse, and its corridors are used as shooting ranges, strategies to prevent the narrative of the Queixadas workers from being lost under the rubble are ways to cement a seemingly fragile memory in the community.

Returning to the theme and updating the meanings of "permanent firmness," the studied actions prove effective in constituting a counter-narrative against erasure. While the State and Market act directly or indirectly to lose the physical remnants of the industrial heritage of the Perus Factory, public action agents seek creative means for its counterpart, the intangible heritage of workers' memory, to continue inspiring political-cultural activities in the territory. In the Freirean dynamic of denunciation and announcement, this counter-narrative keeps the Factory and the Queixadas workers constantly in the memory circuit while the pressures of the dominant narrative push them towards oblivion. In the next section, concluding this text, I aim to suggest that the actions of the Quilombaque Cultural Community and the Territorial Museum can inspire other initiatives for resignifying industrial heritages.

## Final words

In this article, theoretical perspectives from the public action approach and narrative focus on public policies have allowed us to move beyond an excessive focus on state action regarding heritage to observe the multiple discourses shaping the valorization of memory sites.

On one hand, the concept of "performative cacophony" helps us appreciate the richness of public space and the diverse agents who, harmoniously or conflictually, construct public issues and responses. On the other hand, the narrative perspective enables us to understand that the study of heritage is more intriguing when we question not just the thing itself, but the discourse surrounding it. In this direction, the use of the concept of counter-narratives shifts the focus to the contestation between different ways of assigning meanings to heritage by articulating the critique of a dominant narrative with the proclamation of a resistant narrative.

The practice of interviews and documentary research, seeking testimonies, has allowed various voices to be woven together to understand how the action of the Quilombaque Cultural Community regarding the Perus Cement Factory constitutes a counter-narrative against oblivion. This action involves telling the stories of striking workers while showcasing the remnants of the Factory. Camila Cardoso warns that "from the bibliographies available today, we are closer to community-based tourism, while we have not yet written a book or pursued a master's or doctoral degree on resistance tourism" (Camila Cardoso, interview, 2021). Based in the community, yes, but centered on the valorization of the resistance that made the territory a stage. With a significant impact on generating employment and income, and primarily grounded in the "places of memory and affection" of elders such as Sebastião Silva, Seu Tião Queixada, and Mestre Soró, "resistance tourism" articulates the denunciation of abandonment and neglect with the announcement of the territory's potential.

Perhaps this political-cultural action strategy can serve as an example for occupying memory sites relegated to oblivion. Further research could explore more examples of "resistance tourism" acting upon industrially degraded heritage, where labor struggles are

often the first to be forgotten. As taught by memory movements, including the Queixadas in History, there is no emptiness among the reinforced concrete ruins of the abandoned Perus Cement Factory.

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**Translation:** this article was translated from Portuguese to English by the author himself.

Received: January 24, 2024

Approved: May 27, 2024

