

Political opportunity and collective mobilization in post-revolutionary Portugal – the case of a socio-environmental conflict in the Portuguese inland (1974-1980)

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ABSTRACT

The Portuguese Revolution of 1974 spawned a complex set of social movements. In general, the historical literature has tended the revolution as an epiphenomenon of major structural political change. This article analyzes the interactions and interdependencies between local collective action and institutional agents in the context of a study of socio-environmental conflict in the Portuguese inland region of Beira Baixa. The conflict involved a group of smallholding peasants against a mining company that opened an open pit mine close to the village. The motives that drove collective protest are examined in face of the structural political transformation processes, and the theory of collective action is used to observe how institutional agents acted and relied on local mobilizations to accomplish their political agendas.

KEYWORDS

Portuguese Revolution of 1974, Beira Baixa, Local collective action vs. institutional agents, Socio-environmental conflict

I Introduction

Seven months had passed since the April 25, 1974 Revolution, when the *Jornal do Fundão*, a weekly regional newspaper announced in broad headlines the dramatic situation of a village on the brink of death. The village was Gaia, a rural community in the municipality of Belmonte with 300 inhabitants. The menace came from the mining company that, against the “will of the people”¹, was planning to dredge the plots sitting near the hamlet.² The Revolution could not have come at a better time for the local smallholding peasants. In April 1974, the dredge was just a few meters away from the gardens and orchards that fed a large number of households. As the machine approached the houses and surrounding plots, a chorus of protests rose in an outcry strong enough to resonate beyond the boundaries of the municipality, reaching a wide array of political agents and forces on a national scale. Wary of the possibility of losing their valuable property, a group of landowners stood out to campaign against the mining company in a quarrel that brought to the surface deep resentments against industrial mining activities and its collusion with the dictatorship in the past.³ It was a conflict about the control of ecological resources that meandered through the twists and turns of national political transition.

The political opportunities offered by the Revolution and by the post-revolutionary period frame our analysis, allowing us to see both the influence of structural political change on grassroots mobilization as well as the reliance major political forces had on local social movements. The implicit micro-sociological scale reveals how a varied array of political forces, while pursuing their power consolidation strategies, engaged with local social movements as a means to win social recognition and legitimacy.⁴

2. A methodological mix: ethnographic and archival research

The very nature of the object of study and its time-span called for a mixed methodological approach where archival research was combined with

¹ *Jornal do Fundão*. Nov. 24, 1974.

² A machine owned by the corporation, Dramin, had been strip mining the deposits of tin ore along the Gaia Valley since as early as 1970. After 1974, the foreign capital of the company passed on to state control.

³ Industrial mining in the Gaia valley started in 1914. Until 1949, an American company (Portuguese American Tin Company) used a single bucket dredge to explore the alluvial deposits of tin ore, leaving a trail of environmental devastation that echoed in the memories of generations to come. See SILVA, Pedro Gabriel. *No Rasto da Draga*. Castro Verde: 100Luz, 2013.

⁴ CEREALES, Diego Palacios. *O poder caiu na Rua – Crise de Estado e acções colectivas na Revolução Portuguesa*. Lisboa: ICS, 2003.

oral history, the latter prompted by an ethnographic incursion. On the one hand, written documentary sources could shed light on the representations and memories locals have about certain events and facts. On the other hand, collaboration between oral history and ethnography also seemed an inevitable resource given that anthropological fieldwork can provide for a closer and more thorough insight into social memory.⁵

The available space does not allow for a detailed presentation of the methodological apparatus although some of the basic proceedings will be highlighted, especially those articulating ethnographic inquiry and historical sources.⁶ Between 2004 and 2011, a series of visits to Gaia were intertwined with archival research and interviews outside the village, searching for testimonies that could provide a better understanding not just of the 1974-1980 conflict, but also of the social, economic and environmental impacts of earlier mining works in the region. This represented also a basic condition to avoid imprinting a univocal image of how locals and mining companies dealt with each other. On top of that, crossing multiple testimonies with personal and official correspondence helped avoid a monolithic view of the community either during the first decades of mining exploration (from 1912 until 1963) or during the 1970s.

In the case at hand, the way in which the 1970s conflict was noticed by the researcher represents a good example of the advantages of articulating ethnography with archival investigation. Indeed, we noticed that a quarrel occurred during the mid-1970s, not while conducting fieldwork in the village and its vicinities, but, inadvertently, when consulting state archives. There, among an assortment of official correspondence, property lease contracts, maps and old blueprints, lurked a handful of photocopied letters signed by local landowners addressed to government officials. These letters, the first to be spotted, dated from 1974 and 1975, stressed vividly the claims of a series of landowners against a mining company, acknowledging that a wide popular mobilization was about to burst. Further research in Belmonte's municipal archives turned up more specimens of correspondence protesting against mining, though the most prolific source of popular correspondence was the

⁵ COLE, John and WOLF, Eric R. *The Hidden Frontier – Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; SOBRAL, José Manuel. *Trajectos: O Presente e o Passado na Vida de uma Freguesia da Beira*. Lisboa: Instituto de Ciências Sociais, 1999; GODINHO, Paula. "Movimentos sociais rurais: questões de teoria e métodos". In: *Mundo Rural – Transformação e Resistência na Península Ibérica*. Lisboa: Colibri, 2004, pp. 89-106; SILVA, Pedro Gabriel. "Collective Mobilization and the Social Memory of Environmental Destruction – A Methodological and Theoretical Frame Proposal to Socio-Environmental Conflict Analysis". In: *Narratives and Social Memory: Theoretical and Methodological Approaches*. Braga: Universidade do Minho, pp. 267-282.

⁶ An in-depth look at the methodological and theoretical framing of the present investigation can be found in SILVA, Pedro Gabriel. "Colective Mobilization and the Social Memory...". *Op. Cit.*

private archive of a local informant, only to be found later on.⁷ Fueled by these findings, the oral inquiry in the field could be directed to scrutinize the hows and whys of the conflict, its origins and original players, its objectives and results, its repertoires and vehicles, its actors in and outside the locality, its supportive forces and major foes.

Ethnography, again, presented an invaluable advantage when it came to address the issue of the conflict with locals. The conflict was buried deep in social memory and the initial inquiries about it were often confronted with the informants' resistance. The adoption of an ethnographic approach granted access to the hamlet's social network, hence contributing to overcome the obstacles when it came to reach the social memory of the protest. The conflictive nature of the protest should not to be neglected: after three decades, the conflict still oozes resentful recollections of interpersonal relations that went sour, of broken family relationships and shattered community connections. Although it was presented as a community outcry by the protesters in their vast correspondence and in the local press, the mobilization never got to fully engage all the villagers and ended up opening wounds in the tissue of local social relations, scars that time could not amend and people still preferred to veil.

3. A conflict in the village in an era of national Revolution

In 1969, the tin dredge returned to the valley of Gaia, 20 years after the Portuguese American Tin Company (PATC) had shut down their dredging operations in the area. This time, a Brazilian venture group, Dramin, refitted the old machine salvaged from the scrapyards where PATC had left her, and, from 1970 until early 1974, mined the unexplored tin left by the previous American company. In March 1974, after wandering the western half of the valley, Dramin's dredge reached the vicinities of the village and was about to enter a three-hectare stretch of land called *Marradas*. It was an area previously spared from dredging by the American company, from whose soil Dramin expected to extract 250 tons of tin ore, a "third of the country's annual production", its executives claimed.⁸ To the local landowners, the *Marradas* plots were also tremendously valuable, symbolically as well as materially, since they were filled with subsistence polyculture gardens and olive groves. The property was divided into 1200 to 4000 sq meter plots taken care of by the owners or by other villagers under lease contracts. In terms of land distribution and the local inheritance system, such a property had unique

⁷ One of the protest leaders (subject of a future reference).

⁸ Exposition by a landowner, 25-11-1974, Câmara Municipal de Belmonte (CMB), box 227, correspondence 1974-1976.

characteristics, especially considering its irrigation conditions and its role as a complement of the domestic economy.⁹

The main force behind the mobilization was António (a pseudonym), a 27-year-old worker in the automotive industry and heir of a couple of landowners with a plot in Marradas.¹⁰ His role in setting up of the movement was decisive, as recognized by himself and other participants, as well as by Dramin's former employees and managers. He organized the first meetings and wrote the earliest complaints. He was also a key element in widening the mobilization to the community and in gaining the support of the municipal authority and some left-wing political parties or organizations such as LUAR.¹¹ Four other landowners gathered around António, creating the nucleus that pushed the protest forward. This core group mobilized its familial, neighborhood and friendship networks, heightening solidarity around their cause and expanding the movement's social basis.

It is worth mentioning that, among the five leaders of the protest, three of them, aged between 50 and 60 years old, shared a personal and family history of contraband and clandestine mining. They belonged to the few households that did not depend on PATC's wage labor and represented cases of families that prospected and marketed tin illegally. A sixth element would join the group, a disgruntled landowner that had a series of complaints about Dramin's conduct during an earlier dredging on one of his properties.

The April 25 Revolution came at a propitious time for Gaia's landowners. The revolutionary events opened up a series of possibilities for the manifestation of popular dissent. Once confined to clandestine actions, often in line with the strategies of everyday resistance,¹² social contention was, then, replaced by open public manifestations of dissension.¹³ The city streets, town squares, churchyards, road crossings, *Casas do Povo*¹⁴ and theaters came to be rallying locations where political discussion took place.¹⁵

⁹ SANTOS, António. *Heranças – Estrutura Agrária e Sistema de Parentesco numa Aldeia da beira Baixa*. Lisboa: Edições Dom Quixote, 1992.

¹⁰ António worked in the city of Guarda, 20 kilometers away from Gaia.

¹¹ LUAR, an acronym meaning "moonshine" in Portuguese, stands for the League of Revolutionary Unity and Action – a left-wing clandestine organization founded in the early 1960s by the notable oppositionist to the New State, Palma Inácio.

¹² SCOTT, James. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

¹³ GODINHO, Paula. "Movimentos sociais rurais: questões de teoria e métodos". *Op.Cit.*

¹⁴ The *Casas do Povo* (People's Houses) were facilities erected during the New State Estado Novo in the villages and townships intended to serve as community meeting points, to host cultural events and provide health and social care services.

¹⁵ BERMEO, Nancy. *The Revolution Within the Revolution: Workers' Control in Rural Portugal*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986; BARRETO, António. *Anatomia de uma Revolução – A Reforma Agrária em Portugal 1974-1976*. Lisboa: Europa-América, 1987

Collective rallies, excluded from political life during the dictatorship or confined to the demonstrations associated with the regime's *mise en scène*, became, after 1974, an unmistakable expression of popular participation in national politics. The events following the April 25 military coup opened what Tarrow defines as a political opportunity for the emergence of social movements. In Gaia, post-Revolutionary institutional transformation and the equivalent mutation in the architecture of political powers provided a series of opportunities for landowners to maneuver against Dramin's plans and counter the symbolic, legal and economic power that mining companies had historically acquired.¹⁶

4. Grab the opportunity, create opportunities: the strategies of collective mobilization in Gaia

Facing the imminent risk of expropriation, the landowners organized themselves into a cohesive core and, between April and September 1974, the mobilizations took shape. During this stage, according to António and two other fellow campaigners, the group met in the evenings or late afternoons, after finishing their agricultural tasks, in the cellars of houses and, amid snacks and drinks, devised together their strategy of opposition. On certain occasions, friends, relatives and neighbors joined these seminal conspiratorial gatherings. For the leader, those earlier casual assemblies served primarily to establish a common collective stance of refusal towards Dramin's proposals, to decide which steps should be taken to move forward and, overall, to raise a shared belief that it was worthwhile fighting, because the "times were different".¹⁷

The immediate strategy implied exposing the problem to a realm of institutions that the landowners recognized as being capable of influencing decisions on their behalf and to the regional press. In the words of António, it was of the utmost importance to "get [everyone] in the scuffle"¹⁸: political parties, municipal authorities, the state secretaries and ministries in charge of agricultural and extractive activities, the head of the government, the district's Governor, the Armed Forces Movement (MFA),¹⁹ clandestine political

¹⁶ NASH, June. *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us – Dependency and Exploitation in Bolivian Tin Mines*. New York: Columbia University Press; DE WIND, Josh. *Peasants Become Miners – The Evolution of Industrial Mining Systems in Peru 1902-1974*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1987; GUIMARÃES, Paulo Eduardo. *Indústria e Conflito no Meio Rural: os Mineiros Alentejanos (1858-1938)*. Lisboa: Colibri, 2001.

¹⁷ António, interview, June 11, 2010.

¹⁸ António, interview, June 10, 2010.

¹⁹ The MFA was the military branch responsible for the coup. Although the executive power was handed over to a civilian agency, the MFA maintained an important role in the democratic transition process, especially until the end of 1975.

organizations (such as LUAR), the press,²⁰ and, later, the National Environmental Commission (CNA). As another early active campaigner stated, “we had to make noise and call out those who could help us cry louder”²¹, which meant calling in the “political parties that stood on the peoples’ side,”²² a circumstance corroborated by a company manager still living in Gaia: “then they came with the parties, the LUAR, the MRPP²³ and all of that, messing with the people’s minds”.²⁴

From the intimacy of the landowners’ cellars, the movement finally went public when, in October 1974, the first popular assembly took place in Gaia’s elementary school. The meeting, widely attended by the community, also counted on the presence of Belmonte’s Municipal Administrative Commission (CAM) president and some elements from the local MDP/CDE structure.²⁵ This rally broadened the protest to the community, with the dissenting landowners gaining the solidarity of the majority of Gaia’s inhabitants to their cause. By the end of the year, the movement had presented itself as the voice of a collective in defense of a *locus*. Though privately owned, this space was represented as common heritage under menace by a mining company and its dredge – the “people’s enemies”.

In the search for allies, the movement saw in Belmonte’s municipal authority its first major institutional ally. Ideologically and politically close to the progressive left, and strongly influenced by the MDP/CDE’s local faction, this interim executive represented a *natural ally* in support of the “poor”, “humble” and “plundered” collective, as the contesters presented themselves²⁶.

Sensing the MFA’s prominent role in the regime’s transition process, Gaia’s contesters soon tried to gain the military’s support, inviting them to come to the village and see the locale for themselves.²⁷ With or without

²⁰ In a letter sent to Dramin, in October 1974, a landowner told the company that he was about to “publicize [popular discontentment] through the means of social communication at their disposal”. (Regional Direction of Economy of the Centre (DREC), Proc. 797, v. 1).

²¹ Fernando, interview, January 20, 2009.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ PCTP/MRPP stands for Portuguese Workers Communist Party/Reorganization Movement of the Portuguese Proletariat, a Maoist political organization.

²⁴ Francisco, interview, April 7, 2005.

²⁵ The MDP/CDE (Portuguese Democratic Movement/Electoral Democratic Commission) was a progressive left-wing party with a significant voice in Belmonte. REED, Robert Roy. “Managing the Revolution: Revolutionary Promise and Political Reality in Rural Portugal”. PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1988.

²⁶ As observed by Cerezales, the recognition of the post-revolutionary municipal administrative commissions depended heavily on popular backing; its political legitimacy was, in part, granted through close contact with the population and by keeping in touch with popular demands. CEREALES, Diego. *O poder caiu na Rua... Op.Cit.*, p. 92.

²⁷ Letter sent by a landowner to the Prime Minister, Vasco Gonçalves, 10-04-1975, private archive.

invitation, the MFA did come in January 1975, in the course of the cultural dynamization campaign (*Campanha de Dinamização Cultural e Acção Cívica*) promoted in the region of Beira Baixa.²⁸ Eager to solve the “people’s needs” and “to bring the April 25 spirit to the most remote villages”, the MFA’s sympathy for the landowners’ cause was evident. As the MFA openly announced its willingness to “join the people”²⁹, the contesters saw an opportunity to gain a powerful ally from the emerging forces of post-Revolutionary change. When asked about the conflict, an informant said that the first recollection that came to her mind was, precisely, the calling of the military and the sense of empowerment felt from the MFA’s reaction: “With Dramin, that was a heck of a story! We even went to the Castelo Branco barracks [...]. We went there to call in the troops to defend the people. [...] The soldiers were on the people’s side”.³⁰ On the MFA’s side, backing up popular movements fitted its strategy of socio-political legitimation, eloquently expressed by the watchword “People/MFA’s alliance”. During the first three months of 1975, the MFA promoted a handful of meetings and assemblies, although it was unable to reconcile the different groups involved.

The MFA’s participation in the conflict can be understood in the context of the erosion of the state’s ability to enforce its authority and secure public order.³¹ The wearing down of police authority became evident when, in April 1975, a tumult flared up in Gaia when a clash between Dramin’s workers and a dozen villagers reached the brink of physical confrontation. As remembered by the movement’s leader, the incident was provoked by the visit of an engineer sent by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, to listen, *in situ*, to the complaints of the protesters. When called upon, the National Republican Guard had to be transported in private cars owned by villagers and, once there, they were unable to appease the tumultuous protesters. Perceiving the deterioration of police power, the contesters directed their efforts to call in LUAR.³² For a week after the incidents, a handful of LUAR’s operatives stood in the village controlling the circulation of mining workers and securing the safety of the most prominent activists, especially those whose lives were threatened.³³

²⁸ An extensive insight into this and other campaigns can be seen in ALMEIDA, Sónia Vespeira de. *Camponeses, Cultura e Revolução – Campanhas de Dinamização Cultural e Acção Cívica do MFA (1974-1975)*. Lisboa, Colibri, 2009.

²⁹ *Notícias da Covilhã*. February 1, 1975.

³⁰ Maria (fictitious name), interview, January 30, 2009.

³¹ BERMEJO, Nancy. *The Revolution Within the Revolution*. Op.Cit., BARRETO, António. *Anatomia de uma Revolução*. Op.Cit.; CEREZALES, Diego. *O poder caiu na Rua... Op.Cit.*

³² Besides some vague memories shared by locals, the presence of LUAR in Gaia is testified by a pamphlet instigating popular participation against the mining company’s “imperialism”.

³³ In the aftermath of the Revolution, forces like the Public Security Police and, especially, the National Republican Guard, were viewed with suspicion, given their role as instruments of public order during the New State. In some cases, entire units were disarmed by the MFA

Facing increasing pressure from Dramin and from the state's mining services, and aware of police inadequacy in safekeeping public order, the calling of LUAR shows how the movement perceived opportunities and took advantage of the available resources. Meanwhile, for LUAR, protecting and supporting the *people's cause* presented an opportunity to fulfill the organization's anti-capitalist agenda. Thus, it was in the rubble of state authority that Gaia's protesters moved in search of support. LUAR and the MFA were more than just physical instruments of backup available to the protesters – they represented important symbolic reinforcements.

If the participation of the military in the conflict was more visible, on the other hand, the role of the Government is somewhat harder to grasp, in part due to the vertiginous succession of administrations and the volatility of the political circumstances that accompanied their formation. From the politicians led by Vasco Gonçalves, between July 1974 and September 1975, the contesters expected no less than their sympathy and institutional assistance. These progressive administrations presented an obvious opportunity duly seized by the movement organizers. A clear indication of governmental endorsement can be found in the support given by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. Indeed, it was a decision produced in July 1975 by a service under the Ministry in charge of the agricultural affairs that awarded the Marradas' soils the highest quality, thus limiting its use to agrarian activities. By doing so, the landowners benefited from the recently decreed legislation implemented to protect high-value agricultural land. The backbone of the soil protection legislation was the 356/75 and 357/75 decrees, a pair of bold laws focused on preserving agricultural areas against the productivist tide that had characterized territorial management since the 1960s.

During the IV and V Provisional Governments, between March and September 1975, the harmony between Oliveira Baptista's Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the anti-mining movement of Gaia was glaring.³⁴ However, soon after the VI Provisional Government's fall

and constrained to operate. Several authors understand this circumstance as a sign of the institutional state crises that followed the April 25, military coup. CEREZALES, Diego. *O poder caiu na Rua... Op. Cit.* REZOLA, Maria Inácia. *25 de Abril: Mitos de uma Revolução*. Lisboa: Esfera dos Livros, 2008.

³⁴ Fernando Oliveira Baptista was called to head the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries under Vasco Gonçalves' IV and V Provisional Governments. Though not affiliated to the Portuguese Communist Party, Oliveira Baptista was a progressive agrarian engineer who stood at the head of one of the Revolution's most dire tasks: agrarian reform. See BERMEO, Nancy. *The Revolution Within the Revolution. Op. Cit.* Like his Secretary of State, Agostinho Carvalho, he held a high esteem for small-scale family agrarian systems and a critical view of large-scale productivist systems. Consult BAPTISTA, Fernando Oliveira. *Portugal 1975: os campos*. Porto: Afrontamento, 1978; SILVA, Pedro Gabriel. *No Rasto da Draga. Op. Cit.* Indeed, some of the programs implemented under his ministry were directed at smallholding

(September 1975) and with the I Constitutional administration (September 1976), a new political trend, less compromised with radical leftist agendas, moved the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries further apart from the protesters.

As the early institutional allies began to lose their political influence, the soil protection laws of 1975 kept sustaining the anti-dredging claims. After 1976, besides thist legislation, the movement counted also on the endorsement of the National Environmental Commission (CNA), with its highest official, Correia da Cunha, getting personally involved in the quarrel³⁵. His vigorous participation ended up reinforcing the validity of the soil protection decrees in Gaia, presenting the State mining services with an unexpected campaigner against mineral extraction. Thus, Gaia became a battle stage, not just between Dramin and the local smallholders, but also between the agendas of opposite state organizations like the CNA and the General Direction of Mines and Geological Services (DGMSG). Accordingly, the conflict in Gaia served as an opportunity for the CNA (by then, an agent in the forefront of Portuguese environmental policy) to bolster its claims for the adoption of an alternative form of development that would not compromise the nation's scarce agrarian resources. On the DGMSG side, a resolution in favor of Dramin would allow an exception in the application of the soil protection law, thus consenting a precedent that could influence mining projects in other sensitive locations elsewhere in the country.

The CNA, through the commitment of its president, established itself as the ultimate – and almost certainly unexpected – institutional ally of the movement at a time when all political opportunities seemed to be shutting down one after the other. This agent's attitude and role in the quarrel can be understood in the frame of inter-institutional conflict. For the movement, the CNA presented an opportunity when institutional allies were running short. On the other hand, local collective mobilization against mining came at the right time for the CNA, providing a solid base and a concrete case to exercise its mission of environmental regulation.

peasants. It is not strange that it was under Oliveira Baptista's leadership that the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries became one of the most prominent allies of the Gaia movement.

³⁵ Correia da Cunha was one of the first Portuguese politicians to openly embrace an environmental agenda. Before the 1974 Revolution, he held a seat in the National Assembly as part of the so-called parliamentary "liberal wing", participating in a series of international high-profile meetings to discuss environmental policies. Soon after the Revolution, he took hold of the presidency of the National Environmental Commission where he was particularly active in resisting the advance of public and private construction in high-value agricultural land and natural habitats.

The public utility of the Marradas plots was finally declared in 1979, under the IV Constitutional Government led by Mota Pinto.³⁶ The decision opened the way for the expropriation and subsequent dredging of the area. Vital to this overturn was the 36/79 Law, exempting mining activities from the 1975 soil protection legislation. Dramin and the DGMSG, under the direct involvement of its head, Soares Carneiro, were decisive in the process.

However, the expropriation never took place. In 1980, the landowners agreed to lease the plots to Dramin. The conflict, staged in public since the first moment, faded out in the discretion and intimacy of individual bargaining between property owners and the mining company. After five years of incessant protest and resistance, the anti-mining movement in Gaia did succeed in stopping the expropriation process, thereby delaying the dredging of their most valued plots, and, ultimately, increasing their property value. Indeed, the lease of the plots provided their owners with substantial monetary gains compared to the amounts initially offered by Dramin, enabling the property to be reclaimed after dredging.

5. Beyond political opportunity structure: identity and emotions in the forging of contentious repertoires

The most prominent instrument of dissent used by the protesters in Gaia was the sending of letters and petitions.³⁷ Besides serving as a gauge of the collective mobilization's verve, this correspondence provides an inestimable source for understanding how contentious argumentation against mining took shape.

The use of letters is a rather common instrument in the gamut of the repertoires of contention.³⁸ In Gaia, such a resource is subject of additional interest as it was the most prolific and constant instrument of protest throughout the entire length of the conflict, directed at more than 20 recipients. For the most part, the letters were handwritten and the differences

³⁶ Mota Pinto headed the IV Constitutional Government (1978-1979). This administration was formed in accordance with President Eanes' initiative, revealing a clear center-right tendency. Its actions were marked by political pragmatism and a will to cast aside post-Revolutionary progressive political agendas. See SILVA, Pedro Gabriel. *No Rasto da Draga. Op.Cit.*

³⁷ At least 67 letters and petitions related to the conflict over the Marradas plots were identified, scattered throughout institutional and private archives.

³⁸ TILLY, Charles. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. New York: Random House, 1978; DIGGS, Diana and RAPPAPORT, Joanne. "Literacy, Orality, and Ritual Practice in Highland Colombia". In: *The Ethnography of Reading*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 139-154; SCOTT, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990; GUHA, Ramachandra. "The Environmentalism of the poor". In: *Between Resistance and Revolution – Cultural Politics and Social Protest*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997, pp. 17-38.

in form and substance of the writing show that they resulted from a plurality of senders. Some letters were dictated by illiterate individuals to their neighbors and next of kin as confirmed by the interviewed informants. Interviews with protest leaders and their descendants as well as with surviving contestants also confirmed the idea that the writing of personal letters was not dependent on any specific directive, unlike the petitions, that were written by the leading group of protesters.³⁹

The first letter was posted in October 1974 and the last one in September 1979. More than 60 letters denounced Dramin's corporate action as hegemonic, persecutory and vile. The toll of subscribers amounted to 163, a third residing in adjacent villages and in the capital city, Lisbon. The letters represent a valuable instrument for the analysis of popular participation in the conflict, since they expose (i) the emotional aspects of social mobilization, (ii) the role of perception and memory of past environmental destruction, (iii) the engagement between individuals and the environment, (iv) the strategies used by contesters to reach power holders and gain institutional allies, and (v) they reveal negotiations with the mining company as a cloaked form of resistance.

In this correspondence, agrarian resources were integrated within a line of reasoning and discourse that refused the assumption that national development depended exclusively on industrial progress. Agriculture, even in its subsistence form, was presented as a viable alternative to mining. Accordingly, the rural landscape was portrayed in idyllic terms, presented as an autochthonous *pastoral* made from telluric images where the Marradas plots stood as a historical landmark connecting the present with a mining-free past.

By keeping a constant flow of written information, in line with Scott's idea of dialogic strategy,⁴⁰ the movement tried to maintain an open channel of communication with its interlocutors in the state as well as with other institutional agents, never stopping to promote the movement as a collective body. Throughout the dozens of letters and petitions, the local collective emerges as an inseparable part of the environment, tightly bound to the landscape. A rural landscape that was not portrayed merely as an outlying scenery, but as a living context where people dwelled,⁴¹ where the Marradas

³⁹ Though the authorship of petitions fell upon the movement's five leading figures, they managed to gather large numbers of signatories in the village, as well as in neighbouring communities, as will be addressed later.

⁴⁰ SCOTT, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Op.Cit.*

⁴¹ INGOLD, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. London: Routledge, 2000.

holdings were deemed to be “the cause of the people’s existence and [...] its reason to live”.⁴²

The Marradas plots, placed in between the village core and the rest of the already dredged valley, acted as a *landscape buffer* – “a real garden”⁴³ of “enormous and bountiful olive trees”⁴⁴ that divided the hamlet from the rest of the valley’s extension of “rocks and sand”.⁴⁵ More than a struggle for the control of ecological resources, the letters show how protesters integrated the environment in their vocabularies and repertoires of contention. These scripts also demonstrate how locals conceptualized a particular landscape in connection with a set of production practices fully dependent on the preservation of agrarian resources.

The main arguments inscribed in the petitions and letters denounced the domestic dependency on these plots while highlighting their sentimental value. The correspondence also conveyed a discourse impregnated with the memory of environmental deprecation in the past and self-portrayals of humbleness and disempowerment.⁴⁶ A self-portrait of humility was an identity statement meant to broaden mobilization and enhance the movement’s cohesion.⁴⁷ This humbleness was suggested in at least 22 documents, where protesters claim to be part of the “good dutiful people [...] who cheerfully live from what the land provides them with”.⁴⁸ This was an identity either taken personally – “[I am] a humble woman of this community,”⁴⁹ “[I am] a poor illiterate [man]”,⁵⁰ or collectively – “poor people”,⁵¹ “tiny little people”,⁵² “small”,⁵³ and “weak peasants”,⁵⁴ “these

⁴² Petition to the Prime Minister, Lourdes Pintasilgo, September 20, 1979, private archive.

⁴³ Letter sent by landowner to the Presidency of the Minister’s Council (PCM), 20-2-1978, CMB, box 228.

⁴⁴ Petition subscribed by four landowners sent to the CNA, 15-12-1976, private archive.

⁴⁵ Letter sent to the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAP), 16-12-1976, DSRG-DREC-ME, folder 797, vol. 1.

⁴⁶ The letters envisage a rhetoric conforming to what Peet and Watts call regional discursive formations, meaning “certain modes of thought, logics, themes, styles of expression and typical metaphors [that] run through the discursive history of a region, appearing [...], disappearing [...], only to reappear with even greater intensity in new guises”. PEET, Richard and WATTS, Michael. “Liberation Ecology: Development, sustainability, and environment in an age of market triumphalism”. In: *Liberation Ecologies: environment, development and social movements*. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 16.

⁴⁷ POLLETA, Francesca and JASPER, James. “Collective Identity and Social Movements”. *Annual Review of Sociology*. v. 27, 2001, pp. 283-305.

⁴⁸ Petition, 15-12-1976, private archive.

⁴⁹ The expression used by the subscriber was *povo*, literally, this translates into “people” and, in this case, it bears a double sense, meaning community or township. Letter sent by a Gaia resident to the PCM, 23-2-1978, CMB, box 186.

⁵⁰ Letter sent to the PCM, 20-2-1978, *ibid*.

⁵¹ Letter sent to the PCM, 21-2-1978, CMB, box 228.

⁵² Letter sent to the Prime Minister, Vasco Gonçalves, November 1974, CMB, box 227.

⁵³ Letter sent to the PCM, 20-2-1978, CMB, box 228.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

good people”,⁵⁵ “the most underprivileged”.⁵⁶ The register of humility was inversely proportional to the portrayal of opponents’ hegemonic and prepotent character– the “bogeyman”⁵⁷ company, “big landowners, driven by the worst instincts”,⁵⁸ working “like a pack of dogs”,⁵⁹ “meaning to drive everybody to starvation”.⁶⁰

Embodied in popular narrative, the engagement with the milieu, besides contributing to identity construction, also set the ground for emotions. Preserving agrarian resources meant striving to maintain relational continuums between people and place, as this couple of smallholders suggested in a letter to the Ministry of Industry and Energy (MIE), in 1975: “[the Marradas plots are] a friendly land [...] to which we owe everything [...] because there’s no doubt that it gives us everything we have; almost every inhabitant of this village has an acre or two there.⁶¹ Or as poetically stated by others: “The people’s very existence lies in these furrows [...] their roots, their hopes, their bread, their life, their pride and all their wealth; if they were to disappear, you might as well dig a ditch and bury all these humble people in it”.⁶²

What we are presented with here is an expression of a relationship with the environment built on and maintained through everyday experience and practice.⁶³ This engagement is vividly illustrated in these lines:

Here, people work from dawn to dusk, with no fixed hours, no days off, not even Christmas, no dole, no social security, and all for a miserable return. Nonetheless they love their land, for once they’ve watered it with their sweat; it gives them their bread and their living. They have their roots in this land, it’s where their parents and grandparents lived and where they, their children and grandchildren will choose to remain.⁶⁴

Emotions were also instrumental in the conflict: (i) in the negotiation between landowners and Dramin; (ii) in popular resistance against mining; (iii) in the mobilization of community supporters; and (iv) in mobilizing allies. Emotions heartened the pleas directed at institutional powers and

⁵⁵ Letter sent to the Prime Minister, Vasco Gonçalves, 10-4-1975, private archive.

⁵⁶ Letter sent to the DGMSG, 1976, private archive.

⁵⁷ The original expression was *papão* (bogeyman). Letter sent to the Prime Minister, Vasco Gonçalves, 10-4-1975. *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ The expression used to refer to Dramin was *latifundiários* (large landowners), similar to the political rhetoric used by the large agrarian reform movements in the south. Ppetition sent to the MAP, 8-12-1976, DSRG-DREC-ME, folder 797.

⁵⁹ Letter sent to the Prime Minister, Vasco Gonçalves, November 1974, CMB, box 228.

⁶⁰ Letter sent to the MAP, 16-12-1976, DSRG-DREC-ME, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Petition, 5-5-1975, CMB, box 186.

⁶² Petition subscribed by four landowners sent to CNA’s President, 15- 12-1976, private archive.

⁶³ INGOLD, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment. Op.Cit.*

⁶⁴ Petition subscribed by four landowners to the CNA, 15-12-1976. Private archive.

political organizations – in addition to asking for their support, the movement’s emotional tone contributed to intensify Dramin’s demonization. The mining company and the dredge surfaced in popular rhetoric as the ultimate symbol of ruin and death: “we can’t allow the dredge to ruin the people’s wealth”,⁶⁵ “they mean to starve us to death by taking away this morsel of land”,⁶⁶ “if this land was to be destroyed [...] dozens of families would be thrown into misery, abandonment, misfortune and famine”.⁶⁷

5. Conclusion

The conflict in Gaia can hardly be taken as a manifestation utterly dependent on political and regimental transformation, despite the undeniable influence of Revolutionary changes on local mobilization. Together with structural political factors, local contentious action was linked with the social memory of the region’s mining past. Indeed, the campaigners vividly recalled the experience some of them had had (or had heard of) regarding environmental destruction. Another indicator of the conflict’s historical depth is to be found in the life histories of some of key participants: common to the most prominent contesters was a family history punctuated by illegal mining activities and resistance against the American company in the first half of the century. Reminiscences of “non-resistance” under authoritarian rule joined the memories of environmental depredation, revealing the conflict of 1974-1980 as an opportunity to settle the score with a past of silencing and repression. As such, opposing Dramin stood also as a means of compensating for the injustices of the past.

This idea brings us closer to Zald’s perspective that the opportunities for collective mobilization can also be found outside the political realm.⁶⁸ According to the author, the movements themselves can conceive opportunities from past historical events. History is converted into an opportunity for contentious action as the movement uses the social memory of mining intervention and environmental depredation in the past as structuring elements of contentious discourse. Hence, the vocabularies of protest in Gaia emerge as socio-cultural constructs stemming from the memory of past experiences.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Letter sent to the Prime Minister, Mário Soares, February 1978, CMB, box 228.

⁶⁶ Letter sent by a female landowner to the MAP, 16-12-1976, DSRG-DREC-ME, folder 797.

⁶⁷ Petition subscribed by four landowners sent to the CNA, 15-12-1976, private archive.

⁶⁸ ZALD, Mayer. “Culture, ideology, and strategic framing”. In: *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements – Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Frames*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 261-273.

⁶⁹ Taussig offers an interpretation of the importance of ritual practice and discursive arrangements among miners in South America as socio-cultural constructions meant to overcome capitalist appropriation of natural resources and the grievances brought to the

On top of this, the conflict of Gaia revealed that political opportunities worked both ways. The protest in the village emerged and grew from the perception locals had of a political time period particularly favorable to public manifestations of discontent; however, the very same movement was able to generate opportunities from the structural political realignments. This is to say that the social mobilization in Gaia represented an opportunity for several emerging forces and state organs battling for political and social legitimation in post-Revolutionary Portugal.

Observing Gaia's conflict through the Revolution enables the Revolutionary process to be looked at from the angle of grassroots political action in rural milieus. This view shows how popular mobilization can stem from within the *locale*, rebuffing the representations of rural population as inactive collectives, dependent on external agency, unable to act on their own. Indeed, the protest held in Gaia reveals the agency of some of its people and their role as social and political actors in the midst of a complex institutional transition. This interpretation questions Tarrow's suggestion that collective action emerges as a response to difficulties in accessing financial, organizational and state resources.⁷⁰ Local protestors managed to organize the mobilizations by searching to actively engage with state organs and the powers that emerged through the post-Revolutionary political transition. Ultimately, the vitality of the protest resulted from the successful access to state institutions and the constant support of allies within and outside the state structures.

indigenous peoples by the colonial market system of exploitation. TAUSSIG, Michael. *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

⁷⁰ TARROW, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

