

TRANSLATED ARTICLES SECTION

António Carlos Cortez A reading of Portugal:
a questioning book

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“Without history we are outside the present and therefore the future – historical consciousness reconciles us with ourselves. Not like a court or a couch, but with the effective possibilities of social transformation. That’s why we wanted to write this book. Being in the present requires us to confront the past to envision the future. And the starting point for doing so is this: what is the history of the social formation to which one belongs? You need to know your own history to be part of it as subjects” (p. 17).

This is how we enter this powerful book by Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa: authors of the uncomfortable, heterodox and therefore essential book *Breve História de Portugal: a Era Contemporânea 1807-2020* [Brief History of Portugal: the Contemporary Era 1807-2020] opportunely published by Bertrand. Varela and Della Santa’s thought (it should be noted the latter is Brazilian, with extensive teaching experience in this country, and with a solid perspective on social issues that today cannot be considered outside of the resurgence of totalitarian drifts, in which Brazil constitutes one of the laboratories of neo-fascism) cannot be reduced to a simple socialist or leftist primer. The use of such throwing weapons, for an eventual attack on a serious and documented object of investigation, will say more about those who wish to denigrate this book and its authors, than about the present work. It’s a book that tells you what it wants and for what reasons: “The reader has here [a book driven] by three convictions of the authors: firstly, all men and women are intellectuals, even if not all of them perform the role of intellectuals. The act of thinking and acting, creatively and autonomously, is inscribed in all areas of human activity, from the foundations of language to the division of labour – and in all relevant spheres of life.” Two other convictions: the observation that the world of labour obeys the logic of hierarchy: there are those who command and those who obey, being centred on power relations: between those who govern and those who are governed, this is how social reality is structured. Brecht, the German playwright (and the strength of the authoritative arguments shields the argument of many chapters in this volume), serves Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa as manna for the discourse they seek to disseminate: they are historians committed to the *res publica*, they have for themselves that, as the author of *Mother Courage* sustained, “a long time is not forever”. In fact, if another premise, “Know thyself”, coming from Socrates, and which animated Gramsci’s thought, also mobilizes the power of thought in this inquisitive book about Portugal, this is due to the fact that the authors verify, in the wake of the various heterodoxies and utopias of modernity, that the conception of the world is a construction imposed on the subordinates, the humiliated and oppressed of this world. The case that needs to be studied in this book is simple: our country. But studying Portugal from a broader framework of social movements: from the French invasions to socialist movements and the great strength of trade unionism in the 19th century, from the First Republic to the 25th of April 1974 and up to the present: the end of the Social Pact in 1986, the creation of “*Geringonça*” (“Contraption”, a word christened by one of

the leaders of the Portuguese right and which undermined, from the beginning, the truth of the alliance between left-wing parties after the troika and the right-wing government of Passos Coelho – and language matters, because describing a historical alliance in this way is, without a doubt, indoctrinating); the central thesis that the Carnation Revolution began in Africa with the independence movements of the 1960s; finally, the dictatorship of Salazar and Caetano and the Estado Novo in the light of Bonapartist ideology, the source of fascism and, from a critical perspective, about finances, associative movements and popular revolts (statistics, transcripts of speeches, crossing of issues of social history with literary issues. The chapter on the Casino Democratic Conferences and the Generation of 1870, the driving force of socialist thought in Portugal, is masterful). Much of what is said here should make us think about our present in the light of a true thesis – this one: with the clear intention that the classes holding power maintain their economic monopoly over the country, Portugal participates in the great tensions of a Modernity that has, in Walter Benjamin's famous allegory, its emblem: the Angel of History looks at the ruins of time.

By integrating the various chapters of this volume into a broad historical angle (reminiscent of Adam Schaff's syntheses) subordinated to social and socialist thought, and from which perspectives of true social democracy are not absent (Olof Palme's aim: a democratic and Christian politics, in fact and not in name), this book shows us the State as a real instrument of affirmation of the bourgeoisie and expropriation of workers' autonomous means of production.

The 19th century is, in Portugal, as in Europe, "the transnational time of the Revolutions of the South": development of journalism, multiplication of literate and bookish culture, unstoppable dynamics of the corporate movement with a socialist or anarchist matrix; revolutions that, in our case, despite being late, put in confrontation, in the struggle between those who rule and those who obey, the Church and the enlightened bourgeoisie. What did they stand for? The liberal bourgeoisie uses Utopia as a project for the future, the Church and the aristocracy, the counter-revolution, conservatism, the pre-fascist triad God-Fatherland-Family, in an attempt to restrict the imagination as a dynamo of political action.

This is, no doubt, one of the most intriguing touchstones of this *Brief History of Portugal*: between the military and landed aristocracy and the capitalist bourgeoisie, the nineteenth-century monarchy clearly mirrors one of the betrayals of the elites: it was the replacement of a class of ancient lineage by another class of modern lineage. The maintenance of class privileges justifies the fight of the 20th century: bourgeoisie vs. workers. The First Republic, filled with courageous progressivism (the researchers clearly emphasize fraternity ideology, the effort to grant women the same rights as men), did not fulfil Antero's promise: "Christianity was the revolution of the ancient world. Socialism will be the revolution of the modern world." The working class, industrial workers (precisely *Voz do Operário*, founded in 1889, functions as an aggregating symbol of this critical spirit – José Mário Branco, in 2019, and Fausto Bordalo Dias, in 2024, both were veiled there, in a sign of unequivocal civic consciousness) struggle, as Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa emphasize, against the tentacular machine of oppression: censorship, persecution of individual freedoms, index, informers, institution of fear

as a straitjacket from which people cannot be freed except by an enormous effort of giving voice and body, sacrificing millions of lives, to freedom as the supreme goal of History and Peoples.

Brief History of Portugal has absolutely remarkable chapters: the pages dedicated to the first general strike of the Portuguese labour movement, the clear and direct way in which the authors explain the logic of surplus value, the motive behind wage exploitation, the memory of names today ignored by the Portuguese (from the deportation of the leader of the Association of Rural Workers of Évora, in 1912, José Sebastião Cebola, to the death, in 1972, of Ribeiro Santos, a university student, to the large teachers' demonstrations in 2022-23, not forgetting the police charges at 25 de Abril Bridge ordered by Cavaco Silva, the list of indignation and struggle of the Portuguese people is here rigorously and passionately described and analysed), everything converges to make this book – may it be read by many, by everyone – today, in 2024, one of the cornerstones of what is inscribed in politics as a possibility of building the Polis: Utopia. The explanation of why we participated in the First World War; the successive demonstrations of the working classes against the rising cost of living (strikes, parades of unemployed people in Lagos, workers in Setúbal abandoning their workplaces against speculation in the price of bread; in Aveiro the street fights between fishermen and the National Guard, that year of 1915, like others, absolutely driven by the indignation of the poor), rationing, hoarding, sectoral strikes, the betrayal of Afonso Costa, the "union buster", much of what we read with Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa should lead us to ask a question: when will we, without paternalism of any kind, take our future into our own hands? But the authors do not answer this question... Or rather, they respond, but through the voices of poets and novelists (from the neo-realists to Saramago, from Manuel da Fonseca to the "Three Marias"); they respond by writing inspired pages about Antero and the protest song of the 1960s/70s and when, in a sagacious way, at the end of the book, they transcribe memorable pages from the great struggle for freedom: "What honest heart of a worker would not be indignant at the idea of serving as an instrument of the interests of his natural enemies against his friends and brothers?" (p. 450).

If, as Walter Benjamin once said, "history neither condemns nor absolves", it is certain that, as these committed professors, researchers and authors argue, "social destiny [only changed] through self-determination. That was the revolution in the last two hundred years." In 2024, on the brink of a war that could be apocalyptic and when, once again, from Trump to Bolsonaro, from Orban to Putin, from imperialist China to a Europe hostage to the interests of a self-elected Commission, more than ever, reading this book and other books that awaken us is already preparing the end of successive "states of exception". Was it not always in the name of "states of exception" that, from Hitler to the Russian intervention in Ukraine, from the dictatorships of South America to Pol-Pot, from the arrest and death of Rosa de Luxemburg to the concentration camps and gulags, oppression was advocated as normalized life? "We must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to the truth," said Benjamin. Raquel Varela and Roberto Della Santa pursued this worthy design.

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