

## Delayed Enlightenment: Philosophy in Twentieth-Century Portugal

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to present a panorama of the major trends in philosophy in twentieth-century Portugal to those unfamiliar with the subject and the language. It discusses both the authors and works most relevant and recent contemporary surveys of the topic by researchers, both in Portugal and abroad.

This paper is a short presentation from a doctoral dissertation on twentieth-century Portuguese criticism. Thus, much of what is presupposed here relates to a series of discussions concerning various segments of the social sciences and the humanities in contemporary Portugal. Philosophy, like most if not all of the social sciences and the humanities, remained at bay in Portugal's universities throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century and, in fact, that aspect of its existence greatly contributed to the definition of philosophy in Portugal as an element of modern critical discourse. In a global perspective, our view is that the modernization of Portuguese society, i.e., the creation of a public sphere, occurred only in the twentieth century, whereas in most of Western Europe it formed gradually between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (from, say, Erasmus to Benjamin Constant).

The greater part of the discontent of the Portuguese *intelligentsia* towards Portugal, its history and culture, derives from the uncomfortable perception of this backwardness, which belittled the country vis-à-vis its main cultural

model, Europe (and in particular France). Therefore, our analysis is embedded in some of the main aspects of Eduardo Lourenço's critique of Portuguese culture (some of Lourenço's essays have recently been translated into English under the titles, *Chaos and Splendor* and *This Little Lusitanian House*). But our focus is, unlike Lourenço's, not so much on the singularity of the Portuguese experience of philosophy as it is on the relation of the Portuguese integration of philosophy alongside the humanities and social sciences into the university system in the second half of the twentieth century.

It is striking how the collapse of the Portuguese monarchy in 1910 symbolizes a vast and intense surge of discussions related to Portugal's national identity that stretches from the 1820s (the beginning of a liberal political regime in Portugal) until 1974 (with the revolution of April 25<sup>th</sup> establishing the democratic order of today). In those early years of the twentieth century, all major trends of the Portuguese *intelligentsia* discussed with a remarkable vigor the status and prospects of the Portuguese nation. There are two decisive reasons for this: first, the ruling class empowered by the new Republican regime had asserted itself in 1890, when a British ultimatum to Portugal, in order to gain control of a stretch of Portuguese-controlled African land (then connecting Angola and Mozambique), aroused a massive patriotic feeling amongst college youth. Twenty years later, those young protesters were already speaking *ex cathedra*, leading newspapers, controlling political parties, and the 1910 revolution provided the perfect opportunity to recreate Portugal according to the progressive ideology they had sustained since the late nineteenth century.

Second, they were not alone. In fact, they were in power, unquestionably, but they were already obsolete. As early as 1915, all the major trends of a specifically twentieth-century generation of Portuguese *intelligentsia* were defined and active. All of them will present themselves by way of cutting ties with the old republican rhetoric: the *saudosistas* of Teixeira de Pascoaes, a poet and a mystic who will claim a uniqueness to Portuguese feelings and language, related to the word "saudade" ("to miss"), a supposedly distinct trait of the Portuguese character; the futurists, led by Sá-Carneiro and (despite himself) Fernando Pessoa, modernists who dreamt of a modern Europe in contradictory terms and who would soon disperse, with some of them ending up as fascists; the politicized *integralistas*, a conservative, oftentimes pro-monarchist, faction that greeted the pre-modern Catholic tradition of custom and power in Portugal as defining the country's identity; and, last but not least, those who established in Portugal the modern sense (in Constant's terms) of liberties,

whom we shall call “critics” (in the 1920s the most relevant were António Sérgio and Raul Proença), for they had the same social role (functionally, at least) that “critics” as different as Erasmus, la Boétie, Spinoza, Bayle, Shaftesbury or Condorcet had in their time concerning Europe and its institutions.

It must be noted that all four trends were inchoative and belligerent, lacking a strong inclination towards any “common generation” factor. In fact, the journal of the 1920s designed to unite all of these young intellectuals against the Republican establishment (*Revista dos homens livres*) only lasted for two issues. Some of the “saudosistas” became “critics” (notably Jaime Cortesão); some of the futurists (*maxime*, Ferro and Almada) ended up being more useful to the fascist regime created in the 1930s than to the politicized *integralistas*. But the great majority of all of these “young men” had at least one thing in common: their professional independence from the university system. A good number of them were high-school teachers, a very well regarded profession at the time. Others were journalists, politicians, publishers, lawyers, and all the other usual professions of intellectuals.

All four trends rejected Republican politics, albeit for different reasons. Futurists had no common specific political agenda and their modernist experience in a country deprived of a modern public sphere ended in the immediate failure that one should expect. Later, they were rediscovered for their literary merits, particularly in the case of Pessoa, who was not only Portugal’s greatest poet but also its leading prose writer. “Saudosistas” were engaged in a form of virtuous isolationism set up not so much against Europe as in the defense of the pagan Christianity allegedly specific to the Portuguese soul. The theory of a split progress, a material one attributed to northern Europe and a spiritual one to Portugal, originated from the work of Sampaio Bruno (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and was developed by Pascoaes and Leonardo Coimbra. In the second half of the twentieth century, it was refashioned by the so-called “Portuguese Philosophy group.” *Integralistas*, in turn, despised all forms of democracy, and the Republic as well. And the critics, despite their pro-republican feelings and sympathetic feelings towards democracy, were more and more displeased with the corruption and lawlessness of the Republic. All of this mounted to create a climate of great polemics around the causes of Portugal’s decay, a topic in itself inherited from the nineteenth century’s most influential generation, the “Geração de 70.” *Saudosistas* blamed the attempts to introduce cultural modernity in Portugal for it; futurists had no real overall thesis, just a general contempt for the masses; *integralistas* accused

modern democratic and Bolshevik tendencies of a liberal Republic; and the critics attributed it to the insufficient modernization of the country. They longed for Europe.

We are now in the early 1930s. The Portuguese Republic floundered in 1926 and the military rule yielded to a new Civil Constitution in 1933—the New State (Estado Novo) of Salazar, pro-fascist, nationalist, conservative and antidemocratic. With the absorption of the *integralistas* by the new regime, the self-isolation of the *saudosistas* and the self-destruction of the futurists, the young generation of 1915 condensed itself into the “critics,” a coherent and active group striving for the overthrow of Portugal’s regime and the change of its social structure. But in the 1930s the likes of Sérgio and Proença, and Cortesão, were no longer alone. A new generation had risen, with new conceptions of what Europe ought to represent to Portugal: Marxism had entered the Portuguese intellectual scene.

It is noteworthy that Marxism arrived in Portugal in a theoretical way, via José Rodrigues Miguéis and Bento de Jesus Caraça, but soon became identified with *neo-realismo*, a literary style updating nineteenth-century realism in order to expose social injustice in fictional form so as to escape censorship. The political use of art endorsed by *neo-realismo* had its counterpart not so much in the official art as in the modern art theories inspired by Proust, Bergson and Gide and introduced in Portugal by José Régio in *Presença*, a journal that ran from 1927 to 1940. Régio and his partners (such as João Gaspar Simões and Adolfo Casais Monteiro) were essentially devoted to aesthetics, although the Marxist accusation of “neutrality” towards fascism is obviously unjust, considering their involvement with oppositionist circles. Nevertheless, in the late 1930s critical discourse on Portugal was still developed outside the university: Sérgio was a publicist, Régio a high-school teacher, and the communists stayed underground. Meanwhile, a series of purges in Portugal’s universities had removed many of those deemed “misfits” in the regime’s eyes, such as Sílvio Lima, Aurélio Quintanilha and Bento de Jesus Caraça. This persecution also extended to other levels of teaching, for instance, the practice of expelling high-school teachers to the Portuguese colonies in Africa, where they contributed to the local awareness of the nature of the metropolitan regime.

In general terms, Portuguese critical discourse organized itself around two conflicting images of Europe: a progressivist one, democratic and liberal, joining Sérgio and Régio; and a revolutionary one, inspired by the USSR. Gradually, with the growing historical remoteness of the democratic and lib-

eral experience in Portugal, the first trend lost relevance. And the USSR's key role during the Cold War contributed to the enlisting of the Portuguese *intelligentsia* in the ranks of the Portuguese Communist Party, the most effective opposition force to the regime of Salazar. But the success of the Marxist doctrine among Portuguese intellectuals during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s also had a parochial side to it. It was a non-theoretical Marxism. The diffusion via novels and short stories of *neo-realismo* accounts for part of this, but not all. To understand this we need to envisage the philosophical setting of Portugal during the twentieth century.

In the generation of 1890, Positivism played a key role as an ideological mind frame. In the 1915 generation, no mind frame of such a magnitude is to be found—except, of course, anti-Positivism. Over time, theoretical questions lost precedence to a more immediate political agenda, but the amateurish and polemical character of the philosophical argument typical of the Portuguese *intelligentsia* remained the same. As for the humanities, they were obsolete, and the social sciences nearly non-existent.

But the political pressure exerted by Salazar's regime had unexpected effects. Not only did exile to the colonies serve to send some of the more qualified teachers available in the 1930s, 40s and 50s to the more underprivileged parts of colonial Portugal, but the vigilance over academic work led to a more technical and professionalized form of intellectual dispute. This accounts for the gradual updating of the humanities (literary studies in particular) and for the growth of the social sciences. As far as philosophy goes, although Marxism had a great effect on the formation of consciousness, it remained mostly partisan, with no serious philosophical studies until the current regime was established. In fact, the rare attempts to integrate Portugal in the European philosophical debate all ended in minor local disputes: as examples, see the Portuguese instances of logical positivism, phenomenology, existentialism, and Vatican II Catholicism. Only the remnants of *integralismo* and *saudosismo*—assembled in the "Portuguese Philosophy" group that attempted in the 1950s to restore some ideology to the Portuguese mind frame *via* neo-medievalism—had a distinctive stance that differentiated it from the category of pale imitation that encompassed the previous trends.

So, in a way, the public role of philosophy in modern Europe, as propaganda for modern liberties, never came to exist in Portugal; in the first half of the century, that role was exerted mostly through a historical and political debate that had scarce space for philosophy; in the second half, it became an



academic affair, like all the social sciences and humanities, creating a new public that was vaguely familiar with western Europe's trends and Marxist culture, which allowed for the successful revolution in 1974—but only in an indirect and subsidiary way. As for the “Portuguese Philosophy,” although it imagined itself as representative of a “true, deep Portugal,” it was quite irrelevant to the great majority of the Portuguese people, *intelligentsia* or not.

An interesting case study could be the role played by the twentieth-century “*estrangeirados*.” “*Estrangeirados*” is a notion (“made strangers” would be a translation as bad as any other) made current by Sérgio in the 1920s in his polemic against the *integralistas* concerning Portuguese isolation vis-à-vis Europe's modern scientific culture. Sérgio contended that a good number of Portugal's finest minds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were laid to waste by the general reluctance to embrace modernity; for this reason, he wanted to send young students abroad to create a new intellectual elite that would bring Portugal up to date in the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1950s, we can witness a good number of Portugal's most relevant intellectuals departing the country and not returning until democracy was restored in 1974: Eduardo Lourenço, Vasco Magalhães Vilhena, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, etc. I believe that a case defending the cultural role played by the twentieth century “*estrangeirados*” would be of special interest (in a more developed format) to a non-Portuguese speaking public, for it depends on the relation of Portuguese *intelligentsia* with its European, American and Brazilian counterparts (for the vast majority of them).

However, it is relevant to point out that both the “*estrangeirados*” and the “Portuguese Philosophy” group are scarcely mentioned in Portuguese philosophy's current self-image. Take, for instance, the two articles dedicated to philosophy that are included in *Século XX—Panorama da cultura portuguesa*. Together, they affirm most of my presentation here, both in terms of what they say and in terms of what they omit. Lourenço writes a short essayistic text, noting the scarce theoretical imagination of the Portuguese and how that has contributed to a rendering of philosophical issues to the religious framework of Catholic theology. Despite the criticism of religion in the late eighteenth century by the Marquis de Pombal, and the blows of nineteenth-century liberalism (Herculano) and socialism (Antero), the religious bias of “philosophical” thought remained in Portugal until the Republic. Lourenço lists Comte, Bergson, neo-Kantism and mysticism as the main elements of the great divide among Portuguese “philosophers” of the period: rationalism

vs. intuitionism. But he also points out that the rationalism acquired since the 1930s has a Marxist bias, very pragmatic and sub-philosophical until the current regime. In conclusion, Lourenço notes how, in the late 1920s through the 1930s, philosophical work gradually transferred itself to the University, despite the persecutions; this over time amounted to a real change, unlike the apparent originality of the “Portuguese Philosophy” group, which was possible only in a backward, isolated country.

The long-term consequences of that gradual change are evident in António Marques’s article concerning the institutionalization of philosophy in the Portuguese university, and, from there, its introduction into Portuguese contemporary culture. Significantly, it addresses the period starting in the late 1960s. The very gap between the years discussed by Lourenço and Marques, the decades of the 1940s-1960s, contains, in our view, the most crucial years, when in their entirety the humanities and social sciences make their way into the university, undermining silently the regime from within. In the second note to this text, Marques admits that he is writing in the name of a contemporary philosophy opposed to the very presumptions of previous philosophy, especially the so-called “Portuguese Philosophy.” But his stance is opposed as well to the theologically biased phenomenology familiar to Eduardo Lourenço (Marques correctly associates him, by the way, with Pessoa’s influence). This philosophy of the last 35 years is, *in nuce*, a list of academic papers and dissertations, distributed according to specialized branches (political philosophy, logic, etc.), and reveals a tendency towards inbreeding and self-adulation that remains very Portuguese to this day. In fact, when Marques notices on page 53 a continuity between earlier hermeneutics and contemporary philosophy, though without elaboration, he is exactly correct: this is a continuity that pervades all things in a very small society with very conservative elites and that is visible from the very title of his paper, “Self-legitimation and Autonomy” (my translation).

The not-so-vaguely Blumenbergian title echoes not only Marques’s influences but also the very element he emphasizes throughout the paper, the relevance of the institutionalization of philosophy in university life for the sake of its very existence. Such a process, however, took decades to achieve and cannot be described without mentioning all the conflicts of the past and present. In what he silences lies a good deal of what is more relevant (even if more backward) in the philosophical speculation that has taken place in Portugal in the last 50 years. Sharing his viewpoint, we shall not dispute the relevance of the dialogue with Europe. But to understand the current crisis in the academic

teaching of philosophy it is necessary to examine its past in relation to the social sciences and humanities, and its future as part of a European network of universities in the making (a.k.a., the Bologna Process).

#### Note

Readers interested in viewing the bibliographical references for this article can find them, along with other indications, in the published version of my dissertation, entitled *Portugal Extemporâneo* (INCM, Lisbon 2005).

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