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Colonial narratives and second class citizens in contemporary Portugal

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On June 10th, 2005, Portugal’s National Day (celebrating Camões, the epic poet of the age of discoveries, as well as Portuguese communities in the Diaspora), televisions reported the first *arrastão* ever in a Portuguese beach. *Arrastão* refers to the act of rapid raiding of a group (namely people on a beach) by a group of thieves, generally children and youths. The expression originates in Brazil. It is the superlative form of the noun *arrasto*, derived from the verb *arrastar*, meaning to sweep up, drag, pull, or tow, as in fishing boats that harvest large quantities of fish with a huge net pulled by the boat. A possible translation would be “big sweep”. The news mentioned a large group (hundreds, literally) of young men from the so-called problematic poor suburbs of Lisbon. This description was implicitly racialised, and some amateur cell phone camera images did indicate the *colour* of the ‘perpetrators’, contrasting that of bystanders bathing in the sun. Rumours spread instantly, both on and off the media, generating a sense of confirmation: Lisbon had finally exploded, so to speak - the anticipated outcome of life conditions in the poor suburbs; of their African immigrant demography; of the misfit character of the so-called second and third immigrant generations; of the perceived growing insecurity due to

crimes publicized as having black authorship. The fact that the *arrastão* happened on June 10th could also be seen as an indication of politicized rebellion.

As a matter of fact, a few weeks later an extreme rightwing group did stage a demonstration against the *arrastão*, immigration and insecurity. The problem is that by then it was already public knowledge that *it had not happened*¹. All had been a misunderstanding, so the police and the media were to confirm. A large group of ‘black’ and ‘white’ youngsters had indeed been on the beach at Carcavelos; there had indeed been some conflicts - among them; the police did intervene; and large numbers of these youngsters did run across the beach – but they were running *away* from the police. In spite of police denial of there having been an *arrastão*, some media insisted on the version, and social rumor took care of the rest. It was up to rumour to confirm the realness of an event that never happened. One can still hear people mention it, as if denials of the event were weaker than the imagination of the possibility of the event – and the ‘reality’ of visual ‘confirmation’ of a ‘dark’ human mass running, jumping over ‘white’ bodies. In 2006, a police related institution was using the example of the *arrastão* in its consciousness raising activities targeted at so-called problematic youngsters. The conditions of possibility created the possibility of the condition – the event itself.

So Lisbon had finally ‘exploded’, but hadn’t *really* exploded. Let us not go into some interesting issues raised by this case – such as the liminal nature of the beach as a social space; the exhibition of bodies and of that which is perceived and categorized as ‘race’; the use of cell phone cameras as image capturing information and broadcasting devices; the use of citizen sources

¹ <http://www.eraumavezumarrastao.net/>

by the media, thus transforming notions of the public space; or the place occupied by Brazil in the Portuguese imagination and the eagerness to import the *arrastão* model; or even the social geography of Carcavelos beach as a point of intersection between the Cascais Riviera (a periphery that does not see itself as a periphery) and the poor suburban peripheries (interpelated as such), perceived by many as ‘black’ and ‘immigrant’; or the contradiction between the police as the state’s authority, on the one hand, and its lack of *authority* (since its negation of the event was denied by the public); or the social fear felt towards young black people as those who shall perpetuate the problems resulting from immigration; and so on and so forth.

For our purposes here, let me start with the role of immigration in the representations of the now small country (as opposed to the large country portrayed by the colonial dictatorship). I will start with the opposite of what could be expected, that is, immigration as a threat. Instead, immigration can and is increasingly perceived as an index of development of the host country – something that is possible because of the *underdevelopment* of the immigrants’ countries. Phenomena such as the incidence of ‘gang crime’, the formation of a ‘gangsta culture’, the coming of age of Portuguese hip hop cultural expressions or, for that matter, an *arrastão*, can all be conceived in the imagination as indexes of a broad notion of ‘development’, that is, ‘things that happen in rich countries’. To that extent, they are desired events, practical confirmations of the perceived reversal of positions from a Portugal of emigrants with an E to a Portugal of immigrants with an I. This play of words is actually used in national discourse, in spite of numbers that indicate the Emigration with an E is not only still happening but has actually grown in recent years – albeit in a hidden way, thanks to new modes of emigration, namely temporary, erratic

and across a Europe without borders. The country that is not small (as the colonial slogan used to say) – colonial, imperial, emigrant and internationally isolated – supposedly became a small country – national, ‘immigrant’ and integrated in Europe. Its former ‘greatness’ constituted its smallness (international isolation, emigration, national poverty, mono-ethnicity); its present smallness constitutes its greatness (European integration, immigration, relative affluence, pluriethnicity).

The episode of the *arrastão* also denotes the negative expectations of mainstream media and society towards Portugal’s black population. ‘Black’ – *negro* or *preto* or *de cor* or *africano*, according to different subject positions and relationalities (and not to mention harsher and more insulting terms) – is what lies under the mixed perception of immigration, poor suburbia, petty crime and street insecurity, and cultural expressions like rap or hip hop. These realities, as in the present case, are not only highly policed but mediated by the police force – that is, the general mainstream public’s perception of what is going on is in itself a matter of police. The notion of the gangs, inspired in US movies could not be farther from reality and yet has colonized the imaginations. The *arrastão* imagery is taken from another inspiring context for crime, namely urban Brazil, in particular Rio de Janeiro. Later when the Paris *banlieue* riots of late 2005 took place, the question was ‘when is it going to happen here in Portugal?’ Can it happen in Portugal?’ One does not have to be a stern constructionist to understand that the question is the first condition of possibility for the occurrence of that which is asked.

Any careful observer – and much more so an anthropologist – cannot help but to see the web of contradictions that is Portuguese postcolonial representations (for a systematic view of this see Vale de Almeida 2000).

The easy and quick association of the *arrastão* with black criminality sharply contrasts with current representations of the Portuguese as non-racist. These representations are rooted in the colonial history, especially in lusotropicalist discourse and the way it was formatted for domestic consumption. Naturally contradictions are the very stuff of social relations, and hegemonic representations have a very thin borderline with ideology. But what seems to be specific of the Portuguese situation is the fact that explanations for the so-called non-racism are rooted in a colonial process – that is, the kind of historical process that par excellence constitutes race and racialization. I will not go into colonial discourse and knowledge here – it is fortunately the object of much and very good Portuguese scholarship. I would just like to propose the following working hypothesis: perceptions of immigration, and the new forms of social relation add to the crisis of the national narrative (of which immigration is a part – but not the whole, if one thinks of labour flexibility, the weakness of the Portuguese welfare state, neo-liberal political economy, or the crisis in political representation). The Europeanist narrative is going through a weak phase and all that seems to be left is a repressed colonial narrative.

After fifty years of dictatorship and colonial regime, as well as colonial wars that went all the way into the seventies, democracy was formally re-established in 1974 and in the following two years the colonies became independent. In 1986 Portugal joined the then EEC, thus achieving the goal of a reorientation towards Europe that was hesitantly started in the late years of the liberalization period of the dictatorship under Marcelo Caetano, Salazar's successor. Benefiting from European funds, a so-called golden period took place in the nineties and culminated with the celebrations of the 500 years of the Portuguese Discoveries and the opening of Expo 98. This was also the beginning of a period in which immigration

became socially and politically salient, as a result of labour needs for structural reconstruction with European funds (it was not the first migration ever – Capeverdean migration since the sixties had already built a strong imagination of blackness and africanity in Portugal).

When in 2005 the *arrastão* happens / does not happen, Portuguese society had already produced a new categorization of its plurality – and certainly it did so with the help of specialized knowledge and institutions of civil society and the state. This includes a dichotomy between Portuguese nationals and immigrants; the latter are divided into Africans (*Palops*), Brazilians, and eastern Europeans (*do leste*). Residual categories would be Indians and Chinese, for instance; European expatriates are not taken into account; and Gipsies are seen as a specific Portuguese ‘caste’. This taxonomy resorts to history, geography, and language, but it is race/ethnicity that comes back in full splendour from the repressed colonial memory.

Why did the *arrastão* happen (yes, because it did happen – it just didn’t happen at Carcavelos beach)? Because the colonized are among ‘us’. Not for the first time, of course. But the amnesia regarding the black population up until the 18th century, or that regarding the previous presence of Jews and Muslims is as strong and entrenched as the negative over-visibility of contemporary Portuguese blacks. This has created an extraordinary exception in the hegemonic lusotropicalist narrative of miscegenation and of Portuguese colonial practices: immigrants are not those ‘we’ mix with. The colonized peoples supposedly acquired our language; it was offered to them as a gift, but it was supposed to be used in their lands, and these are now part of lusophony, that new empire of compensatory geolinguistics. The narrative of mixture and miscegenation is

based on a gift that refuses the counter-gift: some Portuguese supposedly mixed with Africans; in the process lusotropical societies were supposedly created; the Portuguese offered cultural materials; but nothing was supposed to ‘come back’ to Portugal – nothing cultural, and even less so ethnic or racial.

The epitome of this way of seeing, representing and managing – of governmentality – was the legal apparatus (but also anthropological, ideological, literary, administrative) that guaranteed and promoted the separation of the population of the colonial territories from that of Portugal. Let us call it the Colonial Constitution. The material processes of acquisition of surpluses, raw materials, and labour, wore the trappings of a sort of culturalism that actually obeyed to a racial logic in the law: the division between citizens (Portuguese metropolitans and white), natives (African and black, *indígenas* whose culture would be preserved through separation and who were subjected to compulsory labour laws), and *assimilados* (assimilated). This was an infinitesimal category – a project of category – of people who through effort, Christianization, the learning of Portuguese, the training in habitus of dress, work and demeanour (or performances thereof) would have to demonstrate to be deserving of accessing a mitigated citizenship. The process was not far from our notion of a mimesis of the colonizer.

When postcolonial Africans migrated to Portugal, they did so in order to occupy class positions that deprive them of any added value as localized exotics. They now occupy the margins of the centre, in relations of production as in social geography. Their previous status as colonial natives continues through a new kind of compulsory labour. The roots of their nativeness are compulsory too: nativeness is now glossed as

nationality/citizenship, that which turns them into foreigners, that which bars their access to citizenship in Portugal. Their only way out is again ‘assimilation’, now glossed as ‘integration’ in official discourse and the management of immigration. The former process did not amount to more than 1% of the colonial population in colonial times. The latter, characterized by a similar degree of bureaucratic demand, legal barriers and state discretionarity, will not produce, under current circumstances, more than the small percentage of those who will be able to escape the vicious circle of a form of exclusion defined by terms such as ‘problematic neighbourhood’ or ‘second generation’. The state’s sovereignty is a game of vigilance over the coincidence between territory, language and subjection to state; but it is also one of creating culturally competent subjects and culturally incompetent ones, through complex procedures for accession to cultural competence.

The process of postcolonial reconfiguration of the Portuguese state is based in the creation of a geopolitical space (corresponding to a previous sovereignty) within the globalized world. At the same time, it is based on a form of European integration that challenges traditional concepts of national sovereignty. Two new categories of the democratic regime are part of the former: ‘Palop’ as a euphemism for ex-colonies, and Lusophony, a process of transformation of language into a common ground of identity – but without a radical criticism of claims of property, ancestry or linguistic legitimacy (in sum, what one could call “linguistic sovereignty”). This process replicates lusotropicalism’s culturalism, since it stresses the cultural plane and un-stresses political-economic processes of colonial times. Within the cultural plane, it emphasises the Portuguese gift and refuses the African counter-gift.

I have presented as a working hypothesis that what is being constructed as the ‘problem of immigration’ is happening at a moment when Europeanization is not yet a full identitary alternative, and the only historically rooted narrative available is that of late colonialism. In this sense, the constitution of subjects in the Portuguese postcolony risks to reactualize the colonial constitution I alluded to – with its citizens, natives and assimilated; its lusotropicist culturalism; its elision of the political economy of compulsory labour; its discursive repression of race; and of course the return of the repressed. Let us however be careful not to, yet again, exceptionalize Portugal. The problem is not just Portuguese. That which is Portuguese is just the fact that colonialism is recent, that the society is colonially marked and that there is considerable growth in immigrant population. My second and final hypothesis has to do with a wider and bigger contradiction that characterizes the acceleration and deepening of the process of globalization of capitalist neo-liberal economy, a process that nonetheless allows for the persistence of the sovereign nation-state model and of political subjects as national political subjects. That is, drawing from Seyla Benhabib’s work, the contradiction between, on the one hand, accessibility to civil rights, to citizenship, through national belonging and, on the other hand, a growing recognition of the universality of human rights. These rights become critical – they enter a crisis – in the characters and situations of migration, especially when migration becomes a wide phenomenon. Several human rights can not be safeguarded and guaranteed when subjects suddenly occupy two positions: that of citizens of the nation-state of origin and that of residents of the nation-state they migrated to. A contradiction is thus established. Nationals have a privilege regarding labour rights, public services and the welfare state, as well as having a say in democratic decisions and in the access to certain cultural capitals. The demand for assimilation /integration is close to a provocation.

Unless of course civil rights and the possibility of citizenship are understood as universal human rights – something no one seems to be eager to propose, much less accept. There is silence around this, especially when a fundamentally naïve question is asked: why is the free circulation of commodities and capitals praised whereas the free circulation of people (I don't mean labour) is not. The answer is seldom given: it is through the ban on free circulation of people and access to citizenship that people can circulate as commodities, allowing for exploitation and, at the extreme, for human trafficking (the kind of extreme case that mobilizes emotions while hiding similar characteristics in the circulation of illegal labour).

Some of you may ask what this has to do with issues of national narrative, sovereignty and the construction of political subjects as citizens. The answer is that the narrative cannot be simply cultural. More than that: if we restrict it to culturalist assumptions we are hiding those material processes which are part of processes of meaning making. Attempts to reconcile the contradictory terms that I outlined in the last paragraph have been frustrated, from republican universalism to state-promoted normative multiculturalism. As in the case of the lusotropicalist narrative – whose humanistic contours die on the beach (*et pour cause*) when we unwrap its ideology – multicultural narratives wither when we detect the objectifying premise that is at its root: the notion that there are different cultures corresponding to different peoples corresponding to different territories of origin, separate but equal, and who only contact in the processes of exchange or consumption of cultural products. Multicultural experiments – again, as normative policies – assume there is a regulatory agency that defines who is tolerated and who tolerates, leading often to serious inequalities in the civil and human rights' planes. Alternatively, the republican universalist model of citizenship does not avoid the

juxtaposition of an exclusive national narrative, as the French case demonstrates.

Revisiting Portuguese colonial narratives – those of state, knowledge, the arts, people – is a fundamental step towards an understanding of the configuration of the community of subjects and citizens of/under the Portuguese state today. It is especially important for an understanding of the growing social and cultural complexity that results from processes of immigration. Such complexity occurs in a wider context at two levels: on the one hand, that of European integration, a space where other colonial stories and histories, and other migrations, took place and where the sovereignty of the nation-state has been undergoing interesting challenges. On the other hand, we have a global context of growing contradiction between nationality-based civil rights, and universal human rights. The episode of the *arrastão* – that never happened but did happen, and is happening as we speak – allows us to rethink Portugal as Europe's youngest postcolony.