

{ TRAFARIA PRAIA }

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PORTUGAL: A GLANCE AT A LONG HISTORY

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PORTUGAL, WHICH LIKES TO SEE ITSELF AS A “GARDEN OF EUROPE PLANTED AT THE SEASIDE” (IN THE LINES WRITTEN BY ITS POET TOMÁS RIBEIRO), LIVES WITH THE IMPRESSION THAT EUROPE HAS FORGOTTEN IT BY THE SEASIDE. INDEED, A COUNTRY LIKE PORTUGAL STILL REQUIRES INTRODUCTION TO OUTSIDERS, EVEN THOUGH IT HAS HAD AN EXTREMELY CLEAR AWARENESS OF ITSELF FOR 800 YEARS, AND HAS HAD MORE OR LESS THE SAME BORDERS FOR 600 YEARS, WHICH IS UNIQUE IN EUROPE. EVEN IN GLOBAL TERMS I BELIEVE THAT ONLY JAPAN BEATS PORTUGAL IN THIS ASPECT, BECAUSE THE PACIFIC OCEAN SETS IT APART AND DEFENDS IT.

Against the rules of geography, Portugal has managed to preserve itself, as sovereign territory, in the western corner of the Iberian Peninsula, an achievement that even Catalonia couldn't manage. No historian can explain such stubbornness, particularly when it is said that one of the marks of the collective character of the Portuguese people is that of easy-going and mild habits. But, over the centuries, touching on this key of identity has made them immediately forget all softness and mildness, and only the force of arms has spoken in the dialogue that guaranteed them their much-prized independence. This is a moment to recall Blaise Pascal and his reasons of the heart that intelligence does not understand. They are inheritances from long ago that are of great importance in Portugal. The one thousand kilometers of coastline, riddled with beaches and tourist advertising, encourage that image of lightness in life, softened by the waves and sunbathing.

Yet the reality of the Portuguese imaginary is something different. And understandably so. It is still a mystery to historians that such a small country began the expansion of Europe beyond its borders when in the 15th century its sailors set off into the Atlantic in search of new lands and seas. First they gained some experience along the African coastline, and then gained enthusiasm from the discovery of islands whenever they moved away from *terra firma*. Then there was the European pressure to find an alternative route for the spice trade, after the fall of Constantinople made it so much more difficult for Christians to make the trade route to the Orient. The will to find a solution led the Portuguese to India, thus removing the central role that such places as Venice had previously enjoyed in that commercial activity.

Those were years of wild euphoria in which Portuguese sailors set out for the four corners of the planet, to China and Japan, to Newfoundland and Brazil, and sailed around the world for the first time. It was a century of pioneering achievements in world history that even to this day fuels the Portuguese imagination, no matter how much effort may be expended in channelling the country's attention toward the future. Luís Vaz de Camões, the great Renaissance poet who celebrated those epic events, is still a national emblem. Fernando Pessoa, another great poet, a modernist from the first half of the 20th century, made a good attempt at creating a new epic projected into the future, a "Portugal-becoming," but the tyranny of the past held out, and still holds out, softly felt and supported.

Likewise, no one is capable of clearly explaining the strange break that took place after those decades of Herculean effort. The historian George Winius suggests that perhaps Portugal spread itself too thinly over routes that were too tenuous. It did not have enough people to send to all the places its sailors reached, and thus was limited to a network of dotted points only linked by journeys by ship. Some of these points were dissolved into local cultures, while others mixed with the locals and grew, as in Brazil and Angola. And—in another mystery—the global network that continued until China took over Macao lasted longer than any other empire, only falling when, at the end, the winds of history in the second half of the 20th century blew strongly and unfavourably.

The result of all this was, however, a dispersed language set up in enclaves (one of them being the size of half a continent, as is the case of Brazil). This was added to by so many other enclaves formed by the Portuguese who, in the centuries after the global adventure of the 16th century, emigrated to these and other points on the planet: United States of America, various countries in South America, Canada, Australia, South Africa. Seeking a term that might give its name to this network of Lusophone spaces (*luso* is the adjective deriving from the original name of Portugal, Lusitânia), they invented *lusofonia*, which is not totally accurate because it bears the etymological (and ideological) marks of the European root that

is so strongly set within it. Today, when Brazil (and even Angola) stand up to the former colonial power, they feel it is a little culturally remote. The idea that language unites is somewhat volatile, yet it continues and persists, but after all it only reflects something deeper: the common culture that generated it. And the cultural affinities are there to be seen.

The network of routes that Winius mentions are still evident today, added to by those that centuries of emigration have also created, transforming the Lusophone space into something that transcends geography. This is largely a universe of memories and affections that have many different facets, including the negative marks left by the errors of empire and colonization. The supposition of European cultural and racial superiorities left visible scars that the spirit of present times brings back to life. And yet one can see throughout this world the circulation of narrow paths like lines of ants that inevitably cross over each other because they follow routes that have long been established. There is the fear that all of this may be no more than a Portuguese attempt to indirectly recuperate its lost hegemony. (And there are those who take literally Pessoa's statements such as "My homeland is the Portuguese language," or his zeal for creating a new empire, that of the Portuguese language.)

History reveals, however, particular signs that attenuate a neo-imperialist attitude on the part of the former colonizing power. What other country ever switched its imperial capital to a colony, as Portugal did when the king took his court to Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, to flee Napoleon's invading troops? And there were those who suggested transferring the capital of Portugal to Luanda in Angola. This took place in the second half of the 20th century, when the last leaders of the empire (António de Oliveira Salazar and Marcelo Caetano) refused to let it go.

The strangest aspect of this whole picture is the *de facto* absence of an economic or political project of hegemony. When seriously pressed for their reasons for considering the maintenance of these Portuguese-language interchanges to be so important, Portuguese people usually end up admitting that they are mainly connections based on affections. "Ideological rationalization!," state those who are most politicised toward the left. But not even these individuals can avoid being on the same wavelength when they are talking from abroad. And all of this just makes the mystery more complex.

The 400 years that followed the maritime adventure of the 1500s came to an end in 1974, specifically after the revolutionary movement begun on April 25, 1974. It was impossible to prolong a fruitless struggle against the winds of history. Suddenly the young men in the armed forces who were having to act in Africa in stubborn defence of the dying empire became the leaders of a revolution that had never been seen before. The empire collapsed

in a moment, and instead of funeral flowers, there was in the country an overwhelming festival of red carnations celebrating freedom and the future. At a stroke, Portugal was in the hands of its young people. It was a collective delirium, a utopia unexpectedly sown in that garden planted by the seaside.

In 1980, a contemporary Portuguese writer, Almeida Faria, wrote an epistolary novel entitled *Lusitânia*. At the beginning of the story, a Portuguese man who happens to be in Venice exchanges correspondence with family members in Portugal. In the meantime, a letter from Portugal, dated April 25, 1974, tells him of the death of his father. For any reader who is unaware of the history of Portugal, this detail of the date of the famous revolution of the carnations would mean nothing. Yet it is the key to the story. Without the slightest allusion to the political events of that day, this letter simply announces a personal incident: the death of his father. It is not necessary to be a follower of Freud for one to understand the symbolism.

An 800-year-old country had suddenly lost its father, and it seemed like all of its past was being buried at that moment. Four hundred years with its back turned to Europe and of insolent adventures in the “Brazils,” “Índias,” and “Chinas” ended abruptly with an immense desire to come home, to forget the centuries that had passed, to reorganize life and seek some form of reintegration with modern Europe. At the beginning the enthusiasm was for the so-called socialist Europe, but the young people soon realized—or maybe they did not realize, but external powers made them see it—that they could enjoy themselves in destroying the past. They should, however, exist in relation to the future because they would either fall in with their European neighbors of the North and the Center, or they would go back again to being once again “proudly alone,” as their former leader Salazar intended. Except now marching to a different drum.

These were tough years of struggling, and the allusion to Freud may be prolonged here. It has been a close struggle between the principles of pleasure and reality, with the latter having won, as usually happens in nonfictional history. Portugal reentered Europe. But it did so in fits and starts, because once again the tyrannical weight of the past was felt; it did not evaporate as quickly as the generation of the 25th of April of 1974 believed it would. This group is still determining the destiny of Portugal and is well aware of the fact that the time the Portuguese people set out paths and futures is long gone.

Many people resigned themselves to accepting that others should open up the path, while they would enjoy a calm retirement pension, thus adding to the troops of those who, having greatly celebrated the European alliance, are now regretful about such a rushed marriage. As Pessoa, now much more quoted than Camões, might have stated, they wished “to go to India and rest.” Meaning, leaving off utopian dreams and accepting Portugal’s

geopolitical place as a destination, learning to use the generosity of nature that such an amenable landscape and climate has granted it. Thinking of the country as a *petite plai-sance*, as Marguerite Yourcenar called her house on the island of Mount Desert, in Maine, on the coast of the United States of America.

But Portugal is full of surprises. Just like its landscape, which in such an exiguous territory surprises one at every turn with new angles, the same is true of its people. One only needs to scratch a little at the surface to discover a layer of young people moving in a frenzy of creativity on all levels. For those who know the country, this is not unexpected. The last decades have shown a great number of remarkable practitioners in several different areas: José Saramago (literature), Manoel de Oliveira (film), Paula Rego (art), António Damásio (science), Álvaro Siza (architecture), and Emmanuel Nunes (music), among others.

In fact, this generation is multiplying, and there does not appear to be any branch of human achievement, from arts and humanities to science and technology, that does not, every other day, produce good news for Portugal. It might be one more young person receiving an international award, another member of a team discovering a scientific fact, a new voice, a new sports star, a skilled hand painting something unexpected, or an invention with great commercial possibilities. Even in *fado*, the traditional genre of Portuguese music. There is an unending supply of new names and faces transforming this music, which has always been so associated with the neighborhoods and back alleys of old Lisbon, into something that can be heard and appreciated in Japan or New York, as it touches a chord of human, and universal, sensitivity.

These last years have been tough. Those who have the mournful kind of *fado* in their heart, who accept the fate that history seems to have reserved for us, even point to the weather that we have been given this spring of 2013. It is a winter that has yet to end, where April never seems to be born, confirming the uselessness of fighting against historical time. As if even the famous song “Avril au Portugal,” which was for decades an icon of Portugal abroad, no longer makes sense today.

But a further—and attentive—look must be taken at this new generation of artists, inventors, and creators of all kinds. It can be those who insist on remaining in Portugal, or those who take advantage of the old routes to go back to the world our ancestors opened up, or even those who venture into routes that have never been traced before. Each is one more manifestation of that strange vitality that goes on resisting the past, that keeps its personality in Iberia, and that makes a point of existing, reminding us that 800 years of history does not sit easily with fashionable trends. The new generation may go with the flow, and even invite others to surf in the Portuguese waves, but it is capable of making waves as well.