

An End or a Beginning for Portugal ?

Some Notes on the Legacy of 25 April 1974*

A complete generation of Portuguese have passed into adulthood since the heady days of the 1974 Carnation Revolution. For this new generation of Portuguese, globalisation, European integration, and the information revolution are much more significant to their lives than corporatism, colonial wars and the Carnation Revolution can ever be. The chasm that exists between the present generation's real life experiences and the experiences of their parents and grandparents could not be wider. In all, the 1960s and 1970s are as remote to them as the 1930s and 1940s are to everyone. We can all recognise that the present is shaped by the past, but, with the passage of time, it is much more difficult to assert that events that occurred thirty years ago have a greater influence than those that occurred five or even ten years ago.

We are now standing at a moment in time in which it is possible to shed much of the ideological and reverential baggage of the past. While we may acknowledge the actions and sacrifices of older generations, we should no longer be obliged to bow to them. Perhaps it is now time for a few pedestals to be swept away, and for a much more sober assessment of the recent past to be made without seeking approval from those who participated in the events that made the history. With the passage of time and with the release of new archival material, the significance of the participants' (often unreliable) *memoires* is reduced. Many latter-day myths have fallen as a result of this process - for example, the competence of the British military high-command during the First World War was not publicly challenged until the release of documents through the thirty and fifty years rules.

The victors enjoy a prolonged period during which they can impose their interpretations of the past upon the common memory. Without access to the tools that can be used to challenge these « perceived truths », investigators can do little more than seek to navigate a path through the competing elements and try to emerge with more or less objective conclusions - yet these conclusions are themselves based on highly subjective premises that

* This essay is an expanded version of the author's contribution to the debate « Será o 25 de Abril solúvel na história portuguesa ? », *Quartas Jornadas internacionais de estudos de Lusotopie : Portugal na longa duração*, Oporto, 28-30 November and 1st December 2001.

are then subject to the approval of a society that has been « conditioned » to dismiss theories that run counter to the official « perceived truths »¹.

Is it therefore possible – or even permissible – for a new generation of scholars to deconstruct the « mythology » that has for the past thirty years been built around the events and the legacies of 25 April 1974 ? Will we see a more ideologically neutral theory of the revolution develop – a theory that neither dismisses the significance of this date as an irrelevance nor blindly accepts the generally acceptable « perceived truth » that 25 April 1974 represented the beginning of a clear rupture with the past ?

This new scholarship, if it is to develop, will encounter several significant difficulties in obtaining even a modicum of acceptance within a system of ideas that has transformed the Carnation Revolution and its authors into the saviours of a people – leading them, like Moses leading the tribes of Israel, out of the darkness of slavery into the bright light of freedom. Criticism of the deliverers is not to be accepted lightly. The events of 25 April have been constructed and reconstructed, and yet even now, almost thirty years later, there has been very little serious work done on the actual motives and contexts of the revolution that challenges the « perceived truths » that have been handed down through the years. There are some faint signs that something is stirring, however, with new studies investigating the social, political and economic context of the period immediately prior to the military uprising². Such work must be encouraged and applauded, for if we are to appreciate the « real » impact of 25 April on Portuguese society, we must first obtain a clearer understanding of just what 25 April was. Was it the culmination of a democratising process that had already been underway for several years, and which was influenced as much by international events as it was by domestic ? Was it the result of elite disquiet, designed to protect particular interests from the possibility of a systemic collapse ? Did it represent a complete break with the past, effected with the clear goal of creating a democratic polity ?

The « perceived truth » is that 25 April 1974 was the date that Portugal's transition to democracy began. The Armed Forces' Movement (MFA) has been credited with finally ridding Portugal of the final decaying remnants of Salazar's regime, and with setting Portugal firmly on the path to social/liberal democracy. Without 25 April, we must assume, Portugal would have remained immune to the economic and globalising realities of the past thirty years : an accommodation may or may not have been made with the African liberation movements ; and the New State would still be secure (if in another guise).

There seems little point in developing counter-factual arguments to demonstrate that this would not be the present had 25 April not occurred. Portugal is today a modern western European democracy, a full member of the European Union and of the western military and economic club. Its democracy is consolidated and, despite an obviously growing disengagement between the political elites and the population, there is very little

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1. Noam Chomsky is perhaps the most important contemporary exponent of this idea that our perceptions of the past are deliberately shaped and reinforced by a victorious elite whose main aim is to transform subjective interpretations of the past into objective « perceived truths ». See, especially E.S. HERMAN & N. CHOMSKY, *Manufacturing consent : the political economy of the mass media*, London, Vintage, 1994, and N. CHOMSKY, *Necessary illusions : thought control in democratic societies*, London, Pluto, 1989.
 2. See, for example, J. CASTILHO, *A ideia de Europa no Marcelismo*, Lisbon, Afrontamento, 2000.
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evidence suggesting any desire for a change of regime³. Even if we are to accept that 25 April set in movement a process for change, is it reasonable for us to blindly accept that Portugal would not have just as easily adopted a more peaceful transformation from authoritarianism? As the Soviet Union and its satellites were celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1987 there were few signs that would suggest the entire edifice of Soviet Communism would be swept away before they could celebrate the 75th. The nature of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc caught everyone by surprise – for despite the earlier transformation in Poland, and Gorbachev's introduction of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* in the USSR, who in 1987 could have imagined that the system would collapse so rapidly and with such finality?

No political regime has a divine right to eternity, not even democracy. Just as it has been said that « the past is a foreign country », so too can we securely assert that « the future is unknowable ». We can only hypothesise, and while this may be one of the main weapons in the armoury of those who hold the keys to history, allowing them to control our perceptions of the past, it can also be a potent weapon in the hands of those who seek to develop new theories of the past that challenge the officially sanctioned « perceived truths ». The difficulty does not reside within the theoretical developments or in the construction of new interpretations, rather they are related to the process of locating an audience, and then getting this audience to accept these new interpretations. These difficulties should be seen as challenges, however, and it is important that the academic community accept them with gusto – just as the *Encyclopedists* of the French Enlightenment did as they declared their opposition to the orthodoxy of their time.

In the euphoria that was unleashed in Lisbon as the city emerged to encounter tanks in the streets instead of the expected trams, it became easy to forget that a storm had been brewing for over a decade. Recognition of the very real ideological divisions that existed within the Armed Forces was one of the first casualties of the uprising, as the troops responsible for expelling the dictatorship were hailed as conquering heroes. The inability of the junior officers who planned and executed the coup to ensure full closure with the transmission of power to them from the ousted Caetano has not been seriously investigated. Rather than examine why the MFA accepted Caetano's insistence on handing power to Spínola rather than let it « fall into the street », an official mythology has been developed and sustained that the leaders of the uprising were willing to accept being sidelined in order to prevent a bloodbath. Yet there is little credible evidence to suggest that the dictatorship was in any position to oppose the momentum of 25 April – and even less that Spínola was any better placed to prevent anarchy. Instead of investigating the very real ideological divisions within the Armed Forces Movement prior to April 1974, and its lack of preparation to assume authority, the official « perceived truth » suggests that the MFA emerged as a « potent » and injured institution, enabling it to assume a large degree of charismatic legitimacy as the « defenders of the people ». It was not until the revolution was underway that any real attention was paid to the divisions that existed within the revolutionary forces.

3. Compare, for example, the studies published in *Análise Social*, « Portugal político, 25 anos depois », XXXI (154-155), 2000, with those in « Portugal : o sistema político e constitucional, 1974-1987 », Lisbon, Instituto de ciências sociais, 1989.

Post April 1974, the popular gaze was diverted by the events of the revolution itself, with the various MFA factions competing with each other and the newly formed civilian political parties for the hearts and minds of the Portuguese people. There has been no real effort to trace the origins of the revolution and the 25 April uprising to events during the dictatorship in such a way as would tease out and clearly demonstrate the processes that had been underway since at least 1958.

Whilst the MFA's origins in the Captains' Movement are well known, very little comment is made of the fact that the Captains' Movement was originally formed to protect the corporate interests of the permanent officer corps – principally against the new regulations that enabled enscribed officers with combat experience to obtain accelerated promotion. Whatever the merits of this cause, it was certainly not a politically motivated movement against a dictatorial government. Whilst it is undeniably true that certain politicised elements were incorporated within this group of young officers, it could be just as true to argue that men such as Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho and Melo Antunes – the leading political figures within the MFA – came from a different tradition, one that could trace its active opposition to the years of Delgado, Botelho Moniz and Henrique Galvão. Yet in the official « truth » this is an aspect that has been swept under the carpet.

The mythology that had been perpetuated with respect to the Carnation Revolution has effectively prevented Portuguese historiography from taking a broader look at the effects of the social and economic changes that were taking place during the 1960s and early-1970s. The student protests, the wave of emigration, economic developments, elite opposition to the Salazarist/Caetanist system have all been studied in isolation, as if their impact on the changes that followed the Carnation Revolution were negligible. The Carnation Revolution, according to the official history, changed everything.

How true is this ?

How true is this ? How do we measure the cumulative effects of the wave of protest and opposition that emerged during the 1960s ? What was the impact of the international milieu : student protests in Paris that almost brought down the Republic ; civil rights and anti-war protests in the United States that brought that country to the verge of a civil war ? Within the restricted universe of the Portuguese world, can we truly reduce the significance of the 1958 elections, the 1961 attempted coup, the student protests, the emigration and Salazar's death to mere incidental details ? How true is it to say that the Carnation Revolution – the military uprising of 25 April 1974 – was a turning point ? Can we not also say that the international and domestic situation made the dictatorship increasingly untenable – both domestically and, crucially, internationally. As the dictatorship became more isolated, it became increasingly desperate. The colonies were to be held at all costs, regardless of the social and economic costs involved. It was a political decision that was made by a regime that had already lost the support of its people. It was a political decision that divided even the regime elites. In effect, is it too far fetched to argue that the colonial wars, whatever the original

motivation driving the regime, had become a diversion to draw attention away from the regime's deteriorating domestic and international situation ?

If we are to adopt a more long-term view, and if we accept that the events of the 1960s and early-1970s played a crucial role in that it de-legitimised the regime to such an extent that it was no longer tenable, then can we not also view 25 April 1974 as the final act in a process that had begun as early as 1958, and which gathered its own momentum throughout the years that followed ? Without seeking to deny the bravery of those who took part in the events of 25 April 1974, it is a fact that very little of lasting note was achieved during that day. Yes, there was the symbolism – the relatively peaceful overthrow of a 48 year-old dictatorship ; soldiers with carnations in their gun barrels ; Caetano's surrender at the « siege of the Carmo ». However, the 48 year-old dictatorship was not as stable as its longevity suggests, and it had been showing signs of serious internal fracture since, at a minimum, Salazar's incapacitation ; the revolutionary troops who took control of Lisbon were, in their majority, young conscripts who were under orders and, undoubtedly, pleased that they were not on their way to Angola – there is no evidence of a popular anti-regime movement amongst the privates and NCOs⁴ ; Caetano ultimately refused to surrender to the MFA forces surrounding his refuge in the Carmo, preferring to surrender to General Spínola, who was not a member of the MFA, and who had taken no part in either the planning or the execution of the coup.

Bringing the Civilian Politicians to Centre

By viewing the Carnation Revolution as an ending, rather than as a beginning, we are then better able to say that the transition to democracy began with the ending of the revolution in 1976. By doing so, we place greater responsibility for Portugal's transformation onto the shoulders of those civilian elements who laboured in the background between the election of the Constituent Assembly in April 1975 and the publication of the new constitution one year later. By bringing the civilian politicians to centre stage, the significance of their efforts can be seen in a much clearer light – free from the dust and confusion thrown up by the revolution that was going on around them. It allows us to measure the importance of their vision and of their determination not to be caught up in the revolutionary politics that were, when all is said and done, little more than a side-show to the main event, which was to create a democratic polity out of the ashes of the dictatorship.

The concrete legacy of the Carnation Revolution has been short-lived. The plans and dreams of a non-aligned socialist republic never got past first base. The Communists' desire for a Soviet-style system was brought low at

the first time of asking, and ceased to be a realistic alternative after 1975 – if

4. Maria de Medeiros' film, *Capitães de Abril*, released in 2000, does make reference to the lack of political activism within the conscript rank and file. The film opens with a young woman unsuccessfully pleading with her conscript boyfriend to flee to France rather than be sent to Africa. Several other scenes also make note of the conscripts' lack of revolutionary fervour, culminating on the parade ground where the officers have to fight amongst themselves before actually provoking a response from their men.

indeed it ever had been realistic. Likewise, the hopes of creating a Lusophone federation were dashed almost as soon as they were announced. The military did manage to retain its position over the civilians, but this tutelary position was effectively ended with the first revision of the constitution in 1982 – in any event, it was not something that the western powers could accept. The farms, factories and banks that were nationalised at the height of the revolution have almost all been returned to their previous owners – a consequence of western pressure and Portugal's reliance on international financial support and its desire to join the European Community. By the late-1970s and early-1980s, Portuguese workers were once again at odds with their employers and their government : wages were unpaid, prices and rents were rising, and unemployment was becoming a significant fact⁵.

Significant Contributions

What the Carnation Revolution did do, however, was to provide a space within which the transitional process could proceed more or less openly. The exiled political elites were able to return and, under the cover cast by the revolutionary confusion, they could begin to put into practise on the ground the lessons that they had learned and the plans they had developed either clandestinely or in exile. However, to say that the Carnation Revolution brought democracy to Portugal is not so very different from saying that the Colonial Wars brought democracy to Portugal. The Revolution and the Colonial Wars both represented significant contributions towards the end of the dictatorship. However, they were not necessary (Spain's democratisation occurred without a colonial war or a military uprising) let alone sufficient contributions. The real significance of 25 April 1974 does not reside in the symbolism and mythology of the uprising and revolution. These events were the final death throes of a political system that had been created during a different age, and which had outlived its usefulness. Just as in 1926-28, so too in 1974-76. The confusion created by the military's attempts to alter the political system in the 1920s facilitated the emergence of the New State, while the confusion of 1974-76 enabled the civilian politicians to develop their own system – both independently of the armed forces.

« Independently of the armed forces » is a significant phrase here. 25 April 1974 was, primarily, a military undertaking. Civilian involvement in the planning and execution of the coup was practically non-existent as the civilian political leaders only returned after the uprising. Civilian intervention during the revolution was treated with suspicion by the MFA, which did all it could to prevent the emergence of an independent civilian solution to the regime question. The fact that the civilians emerged victorious is more down to their skills and tenacity against the revolutionaries than it ever can be to the bravery of those officers who took

to Lisbon's streets at dawn on 25 April 1974. The Carnation Revolution of 1974-76 was significant, not because it *brought* democracy to Portugal, but

5. See D. CORKILL, *The development of the Portuguese economy : a case of Europeanisation*, London, Routledge, 1999.

because the revolutionary turmoil created a diversion that enabled democracy *to be brought* to Portugal.

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