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**Portugal 1976: At the Crossroads**

“In the events of late November, the Portuguese left and the working class have suffered a defeat.” With those words, we began our long essay for *Radical America*, “Portugal: The Meaning of November 25.”<sup>i</sup> In the article we summarized “the growth of the popular power movement through its various developments,” leading to the November debacle. The first draft had been submitted toward the end of January, leaving sufficient time for editing and revision before the final deadline some weeks later. To arrive at the conclusion stated above, Tod and I accomplished little else in the month since we had gotten this assignment - with the usual pause for the holidays - than read, think, talk and write about Portugal until we delivered the twenty-six page manuscript.

We reconstructed the drama that stepped off in the spring of 1974, and, over the succeeding year and a half, had brought Portugal to the brink of revolution. In line with the general analytical drift we presented in the PIC bulletins, Carl Feingold’s contribution here saved us from shameless impressionism, but imposed a political straight jacket that was compensatingly alien in its orthodoxy and style. Tod and I both understood, however, that just saying what occurred wasn’t enough; rigorous interpretation was the coin of Marxist revolutionary theory. And we relied on Carl’s near Talmudic grounding in the Trotskyist revolutionary playbook to frame our “agonizing reappraisal of recent events.”

Those events had moved at a staggering pace. By mid-November the Portuguese working class – acting in its own name - had mobilized a series of mass actions that intimidated the governing majority in both the military and the affiliated political parties. On November

12th “tens of thousands of striking construction workers surrounded and besieged the Premier’s residence and the Constituent Assembly, demanding wage increases.” Ignoring the government’s pleas, military authorities “refused to intervene, or rescue the two hundred Assembly members trapped inside.” Given that a significant number of soldiers in local units had already assumed a revolutionary posture thanks to the agitation of the far left parties, they weren’t likely to follow orders to bust up the construction workers. Thus no such orders were given. Humiliated after a thirty-six hours standoff, Premier Azevedo caved in and acceded to the workers’ pay demands. This blow was followed two days later when “a giant demonstration of some 150,000 was organized by workers’ commissions from one hundred and twenty factories in the greater Lisbon industrial area.” Such numbers would have been the equivalent in the U.S. of a demonstration of 4½ million trade unionists. <sup>ii</sup>

Near and far, observers wondered if, under such a *conjuncture*, the magical moment of ‘dual power’ had arrived in Portugal where the decisive action of one party or the other would determine if the status quo ante would be restored, or if state power would be transferred to a revolutionary government? So uncompromising were these demonstrations of the popular will that the balance of forces seemed indeed at the tipping point. And yet political power was clearly monopolized at the top, while at the base, beyond the ambiguous leadership of the strong, but hardly revolutionary, Communist Party, and the willing but essentially impotent tendencies of the Far Left, the workers lacked an organized pathway to power. Given time such an option might develop, but at that moment any grab for power was transparently premature.

Viewed from above, the force of numbers alone in that surge of raw strength by the workers was cause for alarm. Fears mounted that the gradualist parliamentary agendas favored by a majority on the Council of the Revolution, military and civilian, socialist and

centrist alike, could be derailed if the situation arrived at the point of no return. Or what was equally feared, that forces of reaction might attempt to restore the fascist past. The country was after all deeply divided. Most of the revolutionary militants and their working class sympathizers were concentrated in the southern industrial zone around Lisbon; popular sympathies in the north were wedded to authoritarian social relations that lingered from the old regime, and the large population of faithful small holders were relentlessly sermonized by the Catholic hierarchy on the evils of godless communism, and thus largely antagonistic to revolutionary change.

Civil War may or may not have been a genuine threat, but such a vision apparently infected, not only the ministers in Premier Azevedo's Sixth Government - which had barely survived the workers' siege - but a large faction of the Armed Forces Movement - the MFA - which dominated the Council of the Revolution. The ideological alliance of the military and the people was resolutely abandoned by a majority of the officers, some of whom had already moved behind the scenes to form units of elite commandos for use when circumstances permitted. Moving quickly between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of November a plot was hatched within the MFA, more precisely a series of gambits, leading to a provocation that would justify such forceful intervention.

To bait their trap, the former military revolutionists voted to remove the one officer in their midst, Brigadier Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, who had captured the hearts of both the masses and the common soldier. A man of considerable charisma, he was being dubbed the Portuguese Fidel Castro, but with little measure of Fidel's political sophistication and consistency. As a captain grown alienated by the colonial wars, Otelo had been a prime mover in the MFA overthrow of the fascists, and now held a prestigious command over COPCON, a national force

created to secure the revolutionary process against organized reaction. Otelo was not removed from COPCOM, but only from its command over troops in the Lisbon Military District.

For some weeks military members of the governing body had been trying to get units under Otelo's command to expel leftists who had taken control of major TV and radio stations; the troops, instead, were welcomed by the occupiers and won to their side. The move by the MFA to distance Otelo from these same elements in COPCOM was met with equal defiance; the troops ignored the ruling and refused to take orders from the officer appointed to replace him, forcing the Council to suspend the order against Otelo.

It wasn't just the loss of control over important media outlets, now hostile to the government, which had put the majority of the Council on high alert, but the fact that the troops themselves were becoming more and more militant. About half the troops stationed around Lisbon, having formed their own revolutionary organization, SUV – Soldiers United Will Win – had marched in uniform during one mass demonstration in late September. By November 21<sup>st</sup>, a number of officer from the MFA's own ranks were calling for “the establishment of worker's power based on independent workers' organizations and for the arming of the working class.” And Otelo too, had appeared to make his availability, if not exactly his position, known, announcing that “he would always be on the side of the people.”<sup>iii</sup>

The Council used an anticipated call for a two hour general strike by the PCP as the occasion for “an all-night session, and once again voted to oust Otelo from his command.” Dismayed by this decision, a detachment of paratroopers in the early morning of November 25<sup>th</sup> “proceeded to occupy three air fields.” Air crews were forewarned, and “able to fly out most of their planes” before the paras arrived. The NATO airbase near Porto was immediately

reinforced, while “small farmers and landowners under rightest influences cut the roads to the north and east of Lisbon.”<sup>iv</sup>

The paras, who we described in our article as having been “heavily radicalized” by the mass actions that fall, met no opposition from the troops stationed at the airbases, where “fraternization” was the social coin. What needed to be understood, we explained, was that the action of the paras had not been unprecedented “in the context of Portuguese politics” in these volatile months. On several previous occasions troops had taken direct action to resist military reorganization or to force the removal of certain commanders.” And here we tendered the judgment that “the aims of the November 25<sup>th</sup> “uprising were far from insurrectionary.” What set this rebellion apart from other earlier episodes of defiance among the ranks, “was the government’s determination to seize upon it as the pretext for a general crackdown on the left.”<sup>v</sup>

Declaring a state of siege, the government temporarily closed all newspapers and broadcast stations where hundreds of leftists were dismissed. Virtually all the radical military officers, and some key members from the ranks, were detained, and among them 140 were imprisoned. The Council suspended all labor negotiations until January, and canceled the recent wage increases won by the construction workers. The MFA was dissolved as a political force, and all soldiers’ assemblies and commissions were banned. In mid-January Otelo was arrested and charged with participation in an attempted coup on November 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>vi</sup>

Our article covers these developments, and identifies many of the major players in far greater detail than I feel required to reproduce here, but it’s worth digressing a bit to examine what, “with the benefit of hindsight,” we flagged as the main lessons to be learned from the setback after November 25<sup>th</sup>.” And here no doubt Carl provided the Leninist yardstick to isolate what had gone wrong in language that could play for readers of the Marxist-shaded Left. It was

evident, we said, that segments of the left had confused a revolutionary period with an insurrectionary one; taking of state power had never been on the agenda. But in our assessment the keystone of the failure was, not the recklessness of youthful revolutionaries, but the immaturity and weakness of the “organs of working class power.”

To thus conclude is, of course, to conclude nothing. The hard news was that there would be no revolution by the workers in Portugal. But our zeal for that revolution had been great, even if we always suspected there could really be no revolution of the type we imagined under the conditions in which all the players of the Portuguese drama found themselves. We knew we had been lucky to witness a process in which state power had been shaken, a revolutionary vision that would dissolve itself into a Western-style parliamentary democracy, a far better arrangement than the outmoded, repressive fascist state it replaced. I say this in the present; it’s not how I would have felt at the time.

An emotional attachments to the comet we’d been chasing kept Tod and I busy well into 1976 writing post mortems as events in Portugal plodded along. Unable to report on the pace of an on-going revolution, we shifted toward accounts, often political incantations, of how workers who had gotten a taste of their own power now valiantly fought to defend the gains achieved, if not in the barracks, then at the point of production: the wage increases, workplace democracy, self-management reforms, and the like. In the face of threatened military crackdowns, there were uninterrupted militant actions and strikes by workers in various sectors to protest against austerity measures that the Socialist Party-headed government seemed all too eager to impose at the behest of both domestic capitalists and foreign investors.

We had adjusted our sights to take in the true balance of forces, and henceforth focused our writing on criticism of the Socialist Party and its collusion with Western powers, and on the

workers' demand that if austerity were to be the price of attracting foreign investment then that burden must be assumed by the owning classes, and not come off the backs of those who produced the wealth. Although, for exactly whose ears outside our revolution-junkie circles we intended that message in our writing I'm not sure. But in the weeks after the appearance of the *Radical America* article in April, Tod and I got out two more editions of the PIC Bulletin, and wrote a second piece for *WIN* magazine, which the editors taking a gentle swipe featured on the cover as, "Portuguese Alphabet Soup." Whereas our title asked grandly and abstractly, "Is Portugal Moving Toward Socialism or Fascism."<sup>vii</sup>

Two things about this article now stand out for me. I don't think we or other serious observers on the Left actually imagined or believed that restoration of a corporate fascist state in the Salazar mode was a genuine threat. It is rather quite clear when looking back from a more critically centered distance that powerful societal forces behind the establishment of parliamentary democratic forms were at the forefront of those who wished to bring Portugal into the modern world as a productive member of the Western European community. They weren't revolutionaries, nor fascists; they believed the invisible hand would always strive to bake a bigger and bigger capitalist pie, and everyone's slice would grow in proportion. For these elites, the idea of altering the cut – redistribution – was the greatest of all heresies. What we had witnessed were the growing pains Portugal had gone through to reach that point.

My other retrospective reflection is to find remarkable how we still, and perhaps in a tone exaggerated by disappointment, revved up the rhetoric of revolutionary exhortation. In one article as if channeling the voice of Lenin himself, we thundered about "the tasks for revolutionaries in Portugal today." I see in this heroic pose a gesture of our unshaken faith, a

sign of how deeply, how purely and how blindly we had lent our hearts to those timeless ideals of fraternity and equality.

In the colder reality of our minds we were now observing how the genie of revolution must be put back into its bottle slowly, or how long it can take a once spectacular and popular production to creak to the end of its run. By the last week of April, our deadlines met, Portugal was preparing to elect its first democratic government, and I can only assume that our involvement in that country's fate remained sufficiently strong to dictate a final trip to Lisbon. The mystery is, why that task fell to me alone? I can piece one explanation from our files. Tod and Pam Booth had just been off to Paris, and what with Eddie no longer on call, we'd hired a competent and reliable secretary named Valerie to handle routine administrative matters. But other pressing commitments to amnesty or the emerging GI union issue, and the endless management of our direct mail campaign, left Tod to cover the home front.

This fact may explain why I made a joyless if dutiful journey, about which my memories are so cloudy that I can recall only the comfort of refuge in my favorite Lisbon hotel, an unassuming holdover in the continental style, where a traveler of middle means sojourning in the city would still find high standards for both room and board. I was on the demi-pension plan for breakfast and dinner, white linen affairs, formally served by professional waiters with long, dour Moorish faces, all the classical dishes of the Portuguese kitchen available and scrumptiously prepared. One particular image, apparently indelible, always springs to mind, as I see myself seated at a table as the fruit is served, cored, peeled, and quartered, on a plate with desert sized fork and knife. Clearly I was under-stimulated by my mission to report on a parliamentary election, and floating off in a zone of existential vapors.

In the article Tod and I would publish in the *Progressive*, written I'm sure that spring, but which did not appear until the October issue, we declared the elections a victory for the left whose parties had combined for 53% of the popular vote, the Socialists having gained a sufficient plurality to govern. We reported further that, once the Portuguese electorate had secured their legislature, they returned to the polls to elect a president. General Antonio Ramalho Eanes, who had enjoyed a strong position on the MFA and helped engineer the current political landscape through the swift repressive actions of November 25<sup>th</sup>, won that office with a vote of over 60%, an indication perhaps of popular preference for a traditional stone face in an office that wielded considerable power over the armed forces and the judiciary.

There was one twist in the presidential election that had not been foreseen. General Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, only recently released from detention and cleared of the charges against him, was a late entry into the race, and who, at 16/2% as we commented, "received an unexpectedly large vote," more than twice that of the candidate for the Communist Party. We read this as one hopeful sign that, while the country's proletarian revolutionary spirit was banked, it smoldered still, even if Otelo was always more show than solution.

Then we reported what I suppose had been an improvised move on my part. "Just after the election one of us traveled to the city of Castelo Branco in central Portugal, near the Spanish border," and thus I can provide a single concrete reference to what else I did during that stay besides eat pears with a fork. And further, that the objective of this side trip to a region not greatly distant from Lisbon, but with one foot in the countryside, was to track down and interview a man named Jose Domingos, "a thirty year veteran of the anti-fascist underground," and now district leader of the local Socialist Party apparatus. If, as the title of our article suggested, Portugal was at a "crossroads," well so were its authors.<sup>viii</sup>

From declaiming “the tasks of revolutionaries,” we now fell back on a more muted message. We underplayed any analysis from the revolutionary left, while noting its ongoing influence in the unsuppressed currents of the “popular power” movement which had shifted from agitation in the barracks to a scandalous housing crisis, within which the workers as aggrieved tenants still had a taste for militant resistance. We continued to look askance at the Communists, who, despite their electoral gains and substantial base among the country’s organized working class, we could never abide given the discredited Soviet model they espoused. Thus blinkered by our own biases, we had simply given too little attention to how the substantial Communist block would thenceforth influence domestic politics and policy on behalf of the working class, independently of their ties to Moscow.

In any case, an historical opening begun on a high note of revolutionary promise in April 1974 had been sealed, and the workers were no closer to control of the means of production than they’d ever been. Their battle remained in the pull and take over distribution of the beneficences created, and stingily distributed, under the hegemony of a capitalist economy. In this process European workers by world standards weren’t doing too badly at the time. And while prospects for their kindred workers in Portugal may have been brighter than we allowed, our criticism of the new Socialist government under Premier Mario Soares remained bitter; our lip service to “victory of the left” notwithstanding, we now scrambled to emphasize “the deep gulf” between the Soares leadership “and the militants” at the party’s base.

I’d no doubt come to nominate Jose Domingos as the embodiment of this internal conflict through referral from a leftwing co-thinker in Lisbon, which then saw me duly dispatched on a train to Castelo Branco. I have to fill in the circumstances with the obvious possibilities, meeting over coffee or brandy at his home, the party office or at his place of business? But which place

of business? Domingos did not volunteer if he had come to his success through humble channels or had been born to the middle gentry, the owner now of a Shell gasoline station, a General Motors dealership and of large land holdings. These were the two economies of the Castelo Branco region, semi-industrial in the city and a mix of agriculture and forestry on the periphery, and Domingos had a hand in both of them.

In what would be our final published commentary on the Revolution of the Carnations, we asked Jose Domingos to draw a distinction between the two principal parties of the left who would possess, each in its measure, real political power in the coming struggles. “The CP,” Domingos observed, “is made up mostly of militants who know what they want. The base of the SP, by contrast, is less ideological, less clear. They generally desire social justice and thoroughly oppose the old fascist regime and its allies, but they want to achieve change without violence or disruption. Their general level of discipline cannot be equated with the Communists.”

Most of the SP members were “*de emblema*,” added another man present at the interview. “They publically display the party’s symbol but can’t be considered activists.” On the other hand, Domingos estimated that “at least 15,000 members spread throughout the country are serious militants, actively engaged in organizing and defending a bone fide socialist program... expropriation of the landed rich, nationalization of all key industries... co-ops that will allow small land owners to bypass intermediaries and directly import equipment, seed and fertilizer, as well as to directly distribute their goods to customers, and massive public works projects to eliminate unemployment.”

How, Domingos was asked, can such a program be accomplished without an open confrontation with the owning classes? “It can’t and won’t,” he replied with a smile. “But we

should make sure that when confrontation comes, it is under circumstances favorable to the majority of the people.” That spin was no different than what had been articulated by the leftwing of the social democracy from the moment generations earlier it had abandoned armed struggle over parliamentary gradualism as the road to socialism. Whether or not Sr. Domingos was just playing his wide eyed interlocutor, or whether this was a vision that sustained his own idealism, I cannot say; what is clear is that the internal capacity of capitalism in the industrial and postindustrial ages to adapt to evolving demographic, technological, and financial developments has not yet brought the fulfillment of the socialist program as tallied by Sr. Domingos any closer to fulfillment. The social democracy, on the other hand, has had a decent run, subject to an ever increasing set of reverses since the halcyon years of the post-World War II economic boom.

Our valedictory to the Portuguese Revolution came in the article’s final sentences, where we looked to the “fifth column” of true militants among the Socialists, and the remaining “popular power” forces that had coalesced around Otelo’s candidacy for the presidency, to ensure that “the revolutionary drama in Portugal will continue for some time to come.” “What still cannot be predicted,” we lamely concluded – and perhaps believed – was “which forces the outcome will favor.” On that note we left Portugal dangling at her “crossroads,” it being already quite clear that our own yearlong fling with this revolutionary adventure was drawing to a close. An early sign of this came in a letter I received in Lisbon from Tod in which he expressed both surprise and disappointment about not having received a single order for our *Radical America* essay since I’d left New York a week before.

The fact that we had likely written our article for the *Progressive* soon after my return home in early May, and that Erwin Knoll held it for months before publication, is another indication that general interest in the Portugal question among American leftists had tapered.

The “Portuguese Alphabet Soup” piece for *WIN* was also written in this period and appeared in June. This brought forth an angry letter to the editor from David McReynolds in a July issue of the magazine. “Uhl/ Ensign,” he seethed, “weigh in as among the most naïve political writers ever to appear in *WIN*.” That we were naïve, I readily concede. But McReynolds hung that accusation on a question that was debatable. He claimed we had “adduced by reading a book issued by International Publishers and authored by a member of the CP-USA’s National Committee” that the Communists in Portugal could be taken at their word about seeking “a peaceful transition from one stage of the revolution to the next.”

In this same letter, but speaking from the other side of his mouth, McReynolds anointed the author in question, Gil Green, as a man “he knew and respected,” and “one of the very few members of the Communist Party USA whose personal word I trust.” We, on the other hand, could hardly trust Green “to trumpet to the world that the PCP favored the armed seizure of power.” Notwithstanding his trusted communist amigo’s good word, McReynolds was convinced they “may well favor such action.” But to anyone else who’d read us on this subject it would have been obvious that we hardly depended on Gil Green to inform us that the PCP was a reformist, and not a revolutionary party.

McReynolds was a diehard social democrat and member of an obscure remnant of that stuffy tendency. His suspicions of the Soviets, and of any communists in their orbit, had roots that were both deeper and different than ours. Like our earlier critics in the letters column of the *Progressive*, McReynolds was also impatient with our rebottled New Left pseudo-Leninist rhetoric, onto which he likewise projected his virulent and time stamped anti-communism. But he seemed particularly annoyed, if only by inference, that the young *WIN* editors had run our

piece at all, given that their editorial board – of which McReynolds was a member – “emphatically... does not urge the armed seizure of power in Portugal.”

I have to admit that neither Tod nor I held David McReynolds in great esteem. In person he had a dismissive, condescending manner, which may have been easier to pull off had he not cut such a slovenly figure. The building on Lafayette that housed *WIN* magazine, a bright and enthusiastic band of youthful members of the War Resisters League, and where McReynolds also had a roost, was a half block off the Bowery, and one not knowing the man might, by appearances, mistakenly have cast him among neighborhood’s forlorn reeks and wrecks.

This was the uncharitable subtext that likely informed our very long reply to McReynold’s stinging criticisms. We quickly dispensed with the absurdity of his double-edged endorsement of Gil Green, the *good* communist, then “turned toward the heart of the matter,” McReynold’s “fundamental misunderstanding and ignorance of the unique political, economic and social conditions of Portugal today.” And in that polemical key we rolled on for three additional pages treading over his politics in the same rude manner he had trod upon ours. At the end we faced him defiantly across a principled divide to which McReynolds could attach no ambiguity. “If Portugal is to achieve socialism,” we snarled, “it will come through an armed taking of power, not via the parliamentary road. (Let us not shrink from this reality!).”

Encasing that final warning in parentheses, I suppose, was a bit of melodrama to underscore our ominous intentions. Indeed our hard line on revolutionary violence proved too much for the kids at *WIN* – pacifists, too operate under ideological discipline - who now fell sway to the editorial board’s righteous grumblings, and rejected our letter. The glibness with which New Left activists like us spouted our revolutionary line was a scandal to a seasoned old pragmatist like Dave McReynolds. But much can be made of the period in which one was

radicalized. And in the wake of the intense years of opposition to the Vietnam War, it was perhaps not so surprising that many of us radicalized in those years still adhered to a strand of revolutionary romanticism. And that dream was at least fleetingly abetted and prolonged by the unanticipated vitality of the ‘Lisbon Commune.’

As late as October, I was rhapsodizing in a letter to Steve Rees about how, in Portugal’s upcoming local elections, “the revolutionary left is still much in presence.” Being confirmed internationalists, we were no doubt heartened to hear that, but our tenure as Portugal watchers had run. After that, anything newsworthy about Portugal, returned to its status as a European backwater, would have competed for attention with whatever was newsworthy anywhere else.

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i . “Portugal: The Meaning of November 25,” *Radical America*, March/April 1976.

ii . “Portugal Information Bulletin, #1, December 6, 1975 at Cornell.

iii . *Radical America*, op cit.

iv . PIC Bulletin, op cit.

v . *Radical America*, op cit.

vi . Ibid.

vii . *WIN*, June 10, 1976.

viii . “Portugal: Still at the Crossroads,” *The Progressive*, October 1976.