

# Old Wine in New Bottles

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**A**mong the many curious questions raised by the Portuguese revolution is: Why did so many career officers, proudly wearing the decorations of a colonialist fascist state, emerge as such passionate militants of the left? Three explanations are commonly offered. First, it is said, the social origins of the younger officers are closer to the working class than to the aristocracy; second, contact with African freedom fighters convinced them that they too should be Third World revolutionaries; and third, social intercourse with educated draftees drew them into the contemporary climate of opinion.

There is evidence for each of these theories, but they are finally not satisfactory. Officers of the radical wing of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) had declared themselves forthrightly dedicated to ending the exploitation of man by man, but much of their rhetoric about the means of reaching this transcendental ideal differed not at all from that of the Salazarists and other fascists. That is, the enemy was the same—social democracy, political parties, and anyone who dared question the motives or wisdom of the rightful leaders of the people. That the people seemed to be receptive to outworn democratic ideas only indicated, in the view of the soldier militants, their immaturity and need for proper guidance.

Half a century ago, in 1926, General Gomes da Costa, who led the revolt that overthrew the Portuguese First Republic, echoed the words of Mussolini:

The parliamentary system has outlived its day... what we need is a real National Government which will enable the State to fulfill its mission on a basis of justice and honor. But only the army can create such a government, only the army can give the citizen liberty—safe and sane liberty of the kind he needs (Antonio de Figueiredo, *Portugal: Fifty Years of Dictatorship*, 1975).

The “real national government” that emerged under Dr. Salazar allegedly embodied an ideology called cor-

poratism. Although associated with the avowedly fascist governments of the thirties, corporatism comes in a variety of nonfascist theoretical versions. Once popular with Catholic social thinkers, many of whose descendants probably now call themselves socialists or Christian Democrats, the name appears to have disappeared from the conscious awareness of educated Americans under forty, although there recently has been a spirited debate among political scientists about whether corporatism might not be considered a proper term to describe a variety of disparate government systems, ranging from Sweden to Brazil.

Corporatism, as once preached in Portugal and elsewhere, affirmed that uncontrolled capitalism, liberal democracy, and Marxism were subversive of Christian idealism. Society should find a means of meeting people’s real needs without the corrupting influence of political parties and demagogic electoral politics. It was believed that society had been better organized in the Middle Ages, when social groups allegedly had organic representation through guilds and other corporate entities. Such a system could be adapted to modern times in order to re-create a society in which class warfare would be replaced by class cooperation.

The mechanism for doing this was a system providing representation for social groups—such as workers, peasants, fishermen, industrialists, professionals, and so forth. The Portuguese Constitution of 1933 brought together representatives of such groups in the Corporative Chamber of the legislature. The corporate state had its true believers, as well as some willing to give it a try, but the Bishop of Porto was not far wrong when, in a famous letter to Salazar in 1958, he characterized Portuguese corporatism as a means of depriving the workers of their natural right of association. The Corporative Chamber had about as much to do with running Portugal as the Supreme Soviet has to do with running the Soviet Union.

Seeing a way to save the people from themselves, as expressed by their free choice in conventional electoral politics, the left revolutionaries of 1975 invoked an idea that they called popular power. It involved organizing

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working people and soldiers through residents' committees and self-management schemes. The language of revolutionary officers on behalf of this policy sounded remarkably similar to the social theorizing of Portuguese fascism: the word "corporations" had been replaced by the term "popular power." The music changed, but the melody lingered on.

The exhilaration of imaginative political experimentation, mass rallies with thousands of raised fists and thousands of voices roaring slogans in unison, revolutionary posters, occasional minor violence, and classy protest songs aroused the spirits of leftist leaning people throughout the capitalist world. Portugal's left totalitarians had a cheering squad that included many who—unknown to themselves—held precisely the same kind of views as the mainstream militants of that Portuguese Socialist Party they tended to believe was guilty, as charged, with being a jerry-built, pseudosocialist instrument of counterrevolutionary reaction. Leftist excesses were excused as the standard operating procedure of social revolution or dismissed as inventions of the bourgeois press.

The truth is that Portugal's radical military, Communists, and left sectarians were pushing toward a totalitarian state. That they failed to achieve it is no reason for crediting them with moderation. These forces differed among themselves, but were united with the fascists of the radical right in their abhorrence of the institutions of democratic pluralism. In the words of Captain Cabral e Silva of the First Engineers Regiment, in an address before a popular power assemblage, "Socialism in freedom is no socialism at all" (*Diário de Notícias*, June 30, 1975).

The mainstream of American liberalism, leaning on the coherent bourgeois interpretation of the *New York Times*, appeared to understand that democracy was the issue in the struggle between the Portuguese radical left and moderate left. To radicals, of course, "moderate left" is a contradiction in terms. Because Portugal's radical right had been driven underground and the moderate right and center had been diminished by harassment and persecution, the democratic left had become the right. Who wants to support the right?

One does not have to be raised in an antiliberal tradition in order to favor the destruction of freedom in the name of social revolution. Some Americans who think of themselves as belonging to the democratic left accept elements of the radical interpretation of Portuguese events. It is an emotionally satisfying version. Whenever anyone, anywhere in the world, attempts to end the exploitation of man by man, the CIA springs into action. If Kissinger or *Time* is against something, it can't be all bad. It is all very simple.

Some radicals who think of themselves as democratic have an affinity for totalitarianism and revolutionary violence. They want to smash the oppressors. They aspire to a society where people will be unable to organize peaceably against their salvation. Such would-be dictators of the proletariat are allies of liberals on questions such as the excesses of a Joe McCarthy or J. Edgar Hoover, but in the kind of societies they would

establish such excesses fall far short of the horrendous norm. For them socialism in freedom is no socialism at all.

What made these people most hopeful about the Portuguese revolution was the evident readiness of those in charge to trample ruthlessly on the rights of any faction suspected of being to the right of them. Paul Sweezy, that grand old man of American Marxist totalitarianism, explained it nicely in *Monthly Review* ("Class Struggles in Portugal," September, 1975):

The MFA doubtless would have liked to skip elections altogether, but it was stuck with them as a result of a promise made the year before at a time when hardly anyone, and certainly not the MFA itself, anticipated the overthrow of the dictatorship would precipitate a profound revolutionary process. It is, I think, a sign of the growing maturity of the MFA as a serious revolutionary force that when such a process did develop, it was unwilling to allow it to be cut short and very likely reversed by what could perhaps be called an electoral coup. The MFA probably thought that the Platform of Constitutional Agreement with the Political Parties was the best way to insure against a coup without violating the pledge to hold elections; and that may well have been the wisest course in the circumstances that existed following the defeat of the March 11 putsch. But there is no doubt that a heavy price had to be paid. The fact that nearly two-thirds of the votes were collected by two quintessentially bourgeois parties masquerading as "socialist" and "social democratic" has given invaluable ammunition to the enemies of the Portuguese revolution, both inside and outside the country....

Unable to transport the moderate left to Siberia or the Isle of Pines, Sweezy makes unmistakably clear what he thinks of it:

Engels somewhere remarked that it was a sure thing that on the day after the revolution the entire opposition would be solidly united under the banner of pure democracy. One appreciates the profundity of the observation when one reads day after day in the *New York Times* and other loyal apologists of capitalism and imperialism about the dreadful violations of democracy (and socialism too, no less!) perpetrated by the wicked Portuguese militarists. And if someone says to me that I malign the Portuguese Socialist Party by calling it bourgeois and tries to drive home the point with the assertion that it is no more bourgeois than most of the other European socialist parties, I answer: Exactly so—neither more nor less.

Exactly so. An orthodox Communist, or a person sympathetic to Sweezy's line, has nothing but contempt for those who have failed to master the science of history. Freedom of the press, elections, and due process of law are to be defended as means of subverting capitalist imperialism; when that end has been accomplished, they are no longer useful—except, perhaps, as empty rhetoric in constitutions designed to gull the credulous.

The credulous are always with us, innocently awaiting the next opportunity to be bamboozled. The exhilarating three-ring circus of revolutionary fanaticism that made Portugal so dear to the hearts of infantile leftists of all ages has devastated the Portuguese economy—that is, in concrete terms, the living conditions of the Portuguese people. With mass unemployment, inflation, continued political guerrilla warfare, bullyboys of the right legitimized in the eyes of a large constituency by the somewhat tamed bullyboys of the left, it is obvious that Portugal's hard times are not going to reach an easy resolution.

Such problems must now plague any government—left, right, or center—but, if past experience is a guide, had power fallen into the hands of a left totalitarian regime, there would be little bad news from Portugal. Political refugees would be dismissed as rightists, egoists, or anachronistic misfits. Portugal, we would be told, always was a country of emigration.

Were a left totalitarian government in power, political imprisonments would not arouse the kind of international attention summoned on behalf of Pinochet's victims, Basque terrorists, or the sundry prison brothers in the U.S. The inevitable deterioration of the economy would be denied, ignored, or blamed on the CIA. Sincere reporters, on guided tours, would be moved by the intelligence and sincerity of the bright young men in charge of the interesting social experiments whose counterproductivity might be admitted years later. They would perceive native doubters as worms, deserving the fate of worms.

Perhaps, after many years on a lavish Soviet dole and a steep rise in the price of cork, real economic growth might take place. The great revolution, which incidentally might have ruined the lives of tens of thousands of people, would then have objectively proven its worth. By the end of the century my hypothetical Portuguese People's Republic might nearly reach the economic level of Franco Spain in 1975.

Portugal does not seem to be headed down that road. If it limps toward the democratic center or the undemocratic right, its sores will be openly displayed for all to see. If it muddles through toward an imperfect social democracy, it probably will be ignored.

**C**riticism, like charity, should begin at home. The United States pursued policies in Indochina that unnecessarily prolonged a lost war, inflicting terrible suffering upon millions of people. No matter how altruistic its original purpose, America was implicated in many foolish, cruel, and dishonorable acts. To the typical non-Communist opponent of the war, pointing out evils on the Communist side seemed to be irrelevant or to partake of playing the Administration's game. Recent revelations about the scurrilous acts of the Presidency, FBI, and CIA have not enhanced America's reputation among idealistic liberals.

These events, plus domestic social problems, have multiplied the numbers of those susceptible to the ideologies of the left and strengthened that perennial proclivity for selective indignation created, in part, by lifetime exposure to opportunistic and pop culture an-

ticommunism. If an ideology were judged by its declared enemies, communism would rate high marks. Hitler was an anti-Communist—unlike Stalin, he never believed in the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

This should not blind anyone with a commitment to liberal ideals to the fact that some of the worst abominations of our abominable age were perpetrated by governments created by left ideologies. At the high point of the Soviet concentration camp universe the mainstream of liberal and progressive people throughout the world not only refused to look at the Soviet horrors, but uncritically welcomed the promotion of Stalin's Soviet Union as an essentially liberal and progressive force. That mentality persists, as evidenced in the eagerness with which elements of the intellectual left responded to the totalitarian trend in Portugal. To paraphrase a Portuguese proverb, suckers grow without watering.

A political philosophy that glories in the creation of societies that require total loyalty, imprison legitimate opponents and political innocents by the thousands, and totally own the communication media does not deserve credit for "good intentions." There is a family resemblance between despotic regimes, whether of left or right, which differing origins and rhetorical traditions do not conceal. Certainly some such regimes have economic or social accomplishments to their credit, but, if these were nearly as great as claimed by starry-eyed admirers, there would be little need for the repressive apparatus.

Margarete Buber, a German Communist who found refuge in the homeland of triumphant socialism in the days of Stalin and Hitler, recounted in a memoir—*Under Two Dictators* (New York, 1951)—her successive sojourns in Karaganda and Ravensbruck. The Russians, at the time of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, in the spirit of détente, repatriated the German Stalinists they had stowed in the gulags. Upon receipt of the shipment, the National Socialists immediately forwarded their unfortunate countrymen to their own concentration camps. When asked to make a comparison between her two unenviable experiences, Margarete Buber, not surprisingly, admits she did not care for either. There were differences in the German and Russian styles, but both systems were vile.

The writings of Solzhenitsyn, Sakharov, and others have created a new interest in the oppressive side of Soviet reality. One wonders how long it will last. The generation that experienced the Second World War failed to pass on to the young a living sense of the enormity of totalitarian oppression in the twentieth century. The German death camps and the Soviet gulags exist on the edge of awareness as extraordinary but possibly meaningless phenomena—as is seen in the philosophy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Perhaps they are meaningless, if man is meaningless; but one thing should be clear: Fascist and Communist totalitarianisms were the outcome of similar political behavior patterns. Parties and theories may change, but the underlying patterns continue. No matter how beautiful the ideal, when, in the right circumstances, purist fanaticism feeds an unleashed drive for power, the means become the end.