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SOCIAL CRISIS AND CONFLICT IN THE  
PORTUGUESE RURAL AREAS**

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## THE DYNAMICS OF GLOBALIZATION:

### Social Crisis and Conflict in Portuguese Rural Areas

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In the light of globalization theories, this paper analyzes the causes of the unrest and social conflict which have become widespread in rural Portugal during the last ten years. The strong modernizing impetus of globalization could not be maintained by the weak, unprepared private and public structures in the countryside. Portugal's rural areas have experienced a generalized inability to take advantage of the new opportunities afforded by globalization. New vulnerabilities and dependencies arose, including the abandonment of farming, the decline of traditional production, the collapse of modernizing programmes, distrust of state policies, and the general spread of a pessimistic state of mind, discontent and revolt.

#### Globalization, Internationalization and Modernization

The concept of globalization has been interpreted as "an intensification of worldwide social relations" (Giddens 1990: 64) and, at the same time, as "a multifaceted phenomenon with economic, social, political, cultural, religious and legal dimensions intertwined in most complex ways" (Santos 1995: 253). Globalization, however, should be looked at as a dialectical process of global/local interaction whose impact, positive or negative, on a given region or locale, depends as much on the intensity of the factors of globalization, as on the intensity of the local responses which oppose them. The localized effects of the processes of globalization, or "localized globalisms" (Santos

1995: 263), and the type of responses arising to them, vary significantly from society to society. They are directly related to the position of the society within a strongly hierarchical world system. In this sense we may refer to hegemonic forms of globalization and subordinate nation-states, regions, or localities.

The impact of globalization is initially uncertain. The probability is that it will have detrimental effects on different areas of social life, generating unrest and social conflict. Such outcomes appear to be higher in non-core societies, especially those most open to international interaction, where endogenous factors capable of promoting effective responses to global destructuring are weak or nonexistent. As Bonanno et al. point out, "in locales left behind by the hyper-mobility of global capital, the negative consequences are often most evident in terms of unemployment, underemployment, environmental degradation and community decay" (Bonanno et al., 1994: 23).

Portugal is a good example of this type of society. Semiperipheral in the world context, it has been characterized by a high vulnerability to penetration by hegemonic forms of globalization such as the weakness of its economic, social, or cultural regulating mechanisms and its high social heterogeneity (Santos 1993; Hespanha and Reis 1992; CES, 1995). This social heterogeneity is responsible both for its particular vulnerability to the processes of globalization and for an unequal and contradictory impact of these processes on different sectors of society.

Given the close relationship between globalization and modernization in semiperipheral societies like Portugal, the differential impacts on the various sectors of society become particularly relevant. The least modernized sectors of Portuguese society have the least capacity to resist or negotiate in the face of globalization and, as a result, suffer its most destructive effects. It is in the light of this combination of globalization and modernization that I seek to analyze the social crisis and discontent it has generated, particularly in the

rural areas of Portugal (Hespanha 1996) since accession to the European Union.

At this point, I would like to distinguish the concept of supra-state integration and modernization from that of globalization. First, the increased internationalization of Portuguese society since accession to the European Community in 1986 has been notable. This internationalization is the result of an interstate regional agreement that created the European Union. This internationalization of society should not be considered identical to the phenomenon of globalization. As Dollfus (1993: 23) explains, the international field is traversed by fluctuations which are normalized and regulated by the decisions of the states as a consequence of negotiations and understandings. The global/transnational field, in contrast, is without frontiers, escaping the control and regulation of states.

Among the factors of crisis within Portuguese society are processes which transcend this interstate level similar to those that characterized the economic restructuring of world capitalism. This necessitated the structural adjustment of national and regional economies, including the dismantling of the agricultural welfare state through the liberalizing pressure of world commerce (Servolin 1989) as well as the modernization of productive structures that resulted from the intensification of market competition on the global level (Eisenstadt 1967).

In analytic terms, this internationalization may be seen as a lower or more immediate level of globalization, which operates as an amplifying or reducing mechanism of global forces. Thus, the aggravation and the multiplication of unrest in Portuguese rural areas which derive from European integration can only be understood in the context of other, more global, changes.

Secondly, there is a distinction between modernization and globalization resulting from the fact that, in societies of intermediate development such as Portugal, there exists a temporal concomitance when the two phenomena

appear. The relationship between the two phenomena, however, does not appear obvious. The hegemonic projects of globalization have become identified with the expansion of forms of capitalist modernity. The dramatic intensification of global interactions in the last two decades is also based on complex combinations of modern and post modern forms (Santos 1995:271). In the particular case of rural Portugal these combinations continue to manifest many pre-modern remnants, some of which have become the object of global pursuit, particularly in tourism, cultural heritage, and the environment.

### Global Processes and Local Responses

European integration has involved different mechanisms of globalization, giving rise to varying responses of the different social sectors, and causing unequal impact within these sectors. What is specific to global-local interaction in Portuguese rural areas is a generalized inability of the different strata to benefit from the potentially positive impact of integration.

Thus the rural world has been launched, over the past few years, into a crisis manifest in almost every aspect of social life. This has been translated into innumerable signs of unrest including the abandonment of agricultural activity and the decline of traditional village activities, the rural exodus and the ageing of the population, the lack of initiative or failure of individual and collective projects, and the loss of faith in the protective role of the public institutions.

Between 1989 and 1995 the agricultural population declined from 846,800 to 585,100 (-31%) and farmers over 54 years of age increased from 57,7 to 64,8 percent of the total farmers (INE, 1997). In the same period, the number of farms in Portugal dropped from 598,742 to 450,636 (-25%), although the cultivated area declined only by 3.3% since those who gave up were mostly small farmers (INE 1995).



Four factors of unrest have emerged in this context of global change. Integrally linked, they are responsible for the critical situation of small agricultural producers and for the weakening of their capacity to mitigate the crisis.

#### 1. Portugal's agricultural markets and the European CAP

Because of their higher costs, Portuguese products benefited, in the affiliation agreement with the EC, from a period of transition designed to permit gradual adaptation of agricultural production to European prices. Political measures were established for technical and financial assistance to farmers in their efforts towards modernization. However, the results were deceptive. On the one hand, the push to modernize was very selective. It affected only a small fraction of agricultural production and, of those who modernized, most units were of greater than average size and situated in only three of Portugal's seven agricultural regions (Avillez 1992:694).

On the other hand, the changes introduced by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and the revision of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1992 and 1993, caused radical alterations in the assumptions that had led farmers to invest in modernization which in turn had disastrous effects the most expressive of which is the indebtedness. Portuguese farmers' indebtedness in 1995 reached US\$2,300 million and the average expenditure in interest per farm increased 30% between 1989 and 1992. More or less one fourth of the agricultural added value is currently used by farmers to pay for interest and amortisation to credit institutions.

In addition, the transitional period for Portuguese agricultural products was ended with the introduction of the Single European Market in January 1993.

The direct effects of entering Europe's enlarged agricultural markets were disastrous for Portuguese agricultural production. Since 1987 the share of agriculture in the national economy, measured by the percentage of the national gross added value, declined from 5.9% to 2.7%. At the same time, the investment in agriculture, measured by the formation of fixed capital, declined by 40%. Average incomes in agriculture fell by 50% between 1989 and 1994. Since 1990, when the second phase of transition started, the prices of the inputs increased more than those of the final products; concomitantly, there was a decrease in the prices of some agricultural products, caused by an increase in imported products, while prices of the inputs remained high. The "price scissors", which until 1988 had had an evolution that favoured farmers; after 1988 there was an increasingly unfavourable evolution which was reflected by a negative average growth rate of approximately -2.0 percent. According to the official data, between 1989 and 1992, Portuguese agricultural prices fell more than in any European Community country: 33.6 percent, compared to the EC average of 16.1 percent. The income of about 55 percent of Portuguese farmers dropped below the national minimum wage (INE 1997).

Subsequent effects were more diverse and generally negative, both for farmers and the country. These included the reorientation of domestic consumer preferences towards imported goods and the lack of a market for national products; an increase in the level of debt by producers who had invested in modernization; the abandonment or forestation of good quality farming land; and the increase in the agricultural trade balance deficit. Between 1985 and 1993, around US\$3,300 million was transferred into Portuguese agriculture by way of national and community assistance for the adaptation of agriculture. The positive impact of this transfer was nullified, however, by the drop in agricultural prices, the non-reduction of the costs of production, and changes in the Common Agricultural Policy.

## 2. Reduction in the protective role of the state

After a period of Euro-pessimism during the 1960s and 1970s, the European Union has emerged increasingly as a supra-state entity which has, in turn, diminished many traditional capacities of its member states, especially those within its periphery such as Portugal and Greece. As if this loss of importance and efficacy of the nation-state regulatory mechanisms were not enough, at the same time nation-states have progressively become the major force reducing world capitalism to the national level (Cox 1990). Simultaneously, the structural adjustment imposed by world capitalism on national economies is being absorbed by European supranational institutions but then returned in an amplified form to member states.

In agriculture, policies which sought for decades to help small farmers survive in a market economy have been undergoing a systematic dismantling since accession (Hespanha 1991). This dismantling has involved the abolition of state services and the opening of the public sector to the market. It has also involved the transfer of state functions to ad hoc producer organizations. The abandonment of traditional functions of the Ministry of Agriculture, such as the provision of professional agricultural training and technical advice, has resulted in the establishment of private companies offering such services on a for profit basis. But other state policies less able to be adapted to commercialization, such as agricultural extension or land restructuring, are simply disappearing.

In evaluating the impact of these changes, it is necessary to discover whether the reduction of state functions represents a real loss of state regulatory capacity, or results in a different form of state regulation, operating through private organizations and being maintained through financial or technical dependence. The latter hypothesis seems to be supported by the Portuguese case. In many situations, the lack of producer organizations has led the state to promote associations having scant democratic representation in the sectors it was abandoning.

In certain circumstances, the policies of structural adjustment can be said to be more interventionist than traditional nation-state policies by virtue of the fact that they facilitate economic liberalization, privatization of the state industrial sector, and the dismantling of regulatory agencies. This is what occurred in Portugal after accession. Santos identifies seven new political configurations which represent the impact of globalization on the EU project, one of them applying particularly to Portugal as a semiperipheral member state: "the external sharing or pooling of sovereignty may go together with the increasing, rather than the decreasing, centrality of the nation-state in the internal, domestic processes of social and political regulation" (Santos 1995: 284). In this sense, the "corification" of the Portuguese state can be seen as a necessary condition of integration which means, at the same time, the peripheralization of the Portuguese economy.

### 3. The compulsion towards modernization

Two forces have affected the modernization of Portugal's productive capacities. The first was the need for structural adjustment imposed by European affiliation. The second was globalization, which suddenly threatened traditional sectors of production (textiles, clothing and shoe manufacture) by way of competition from the newly industrialized countries. Thus, the process of modernization in Portugal has been operating from the top to the bottom and at the margins of rural society.

Different approaches were utilized by the state to effect the modernization/globalization of the country. Some had to do with rationalizing methods of organizational management, others with the technical normalization of products, and still others with harmonizing the legal framework of economic activity. In agriculture and the rural areas, the modernizing impetus compelled the economic resizing of agricultural exploitation following the North European productivist and technological model. Despite the enormous support channeled towards this objective, the results were deceptive.

The rationalization of market organizations operated mainly through the concentration and the fusion of organizations, the reduction of employed personnel, and the shut-down of commercial cooperatives considered to be unprofitable. As regards agricultural products, rationalization required: (i) the normalization of product quality; (ii) specialization, along with a reduced number of varieties; and (iii) standardization of commercial processes. All of this was done in the name of consumer preference. As a consequence, small producers without resources to support the costs of these changes were no longer able to compete with external suppliers.

In regulating agricultural activity, the most visible manifestation of rationalization was the harmonization of laws and instruments of national policy with those of other countries. However, the most predictable effect of this process was the elimination of many high quality, regional products whose production did not conform with the more demanding requirements regarding, for example, sanitation conditions in factories. This is what happened to small-scale cottage production of cheese, sausages, and brandy.

Modernizing the support systems of agricultural producers involved an increase in the state bureaucracy. This was caused by the creation of new diffusion- and control-mediating agencies, which made investment slower and more expensive. In this process, the bureaucracy has become progressively more distanced from small producers.

Finally, a process of organizational consolidation and concentration took place. This involved a broad range of associations and cooperatives that were faced with conforming to the EU's CAP requirement that the common interests of farmers must be institutionally organized in order to be recognized (Henriques and Reis 1992). The result was the artificial creation of producer organizations under the initiative of, but economically and technically dependent on, the state.

In Portugal, the lateness in modernization relative to other European societies accentuated the dramatic, and in some cases unexpected, character which these changes assumed. It also helps to explain the enormous resistance which developed to oppose them. In agriculture, this accelerated process of modernization culminated in increased bureaucratization of the relationship between producers and the agencies of modernization, and in the institutionalization of the forms for representing the collective interests of the farmers

#### 4. The irrationality of EU policies applied to Portugal

Basically, European agricultural policies, including those in force at the time of Portugal's affiliation with the EC and those which have been developed since 1992, have been aimed at the diversification of land use and the partial abandonment of cultivated areas. These policies have represented a sudden and dramatic rupture with past national agricultural policies and the traditional uses of natural resources. In particular, the policy of setting-aside land from production is irrational for a country with a high level of dependence on foreign foodstuffs. It is illogical for Portugal to idle or reduce the use of its own land while importing food from abroad. That is why this policy has been neither understood nor accepted by Portuguese farmers.

In addition, the CAP philosophy has clashed with the practices, values and attitudes that are deeply rooted in Portuguese rural culture. These cultural elements include: (i) the management of land and natural resources to make full productive use of resources; (ii) a work ethic based on maximizing family labour; and (iii) the dignity of the worker, which presupposes that everyone should live by their own labour (Hespanha 1994).

Consequently, subsidizing farmers who uproot their vineyards, get rid of their cattle, or cover their pastures with forest, could hardly be more negative for a rural population. Such subsidies, seen as prizes for laziness, have become

a factor promoting depersonalization, aggravating the marginalization of rural producers while, at the same time, generating amoral attitudes and a clientele focused on procuring European assistance, a new phenomenon which has already been named the "subsidy culture." Through these mechanisms, globalization in the rural areas has accentuated "the tendency for Portugal to be transformed into a non productive area, economically and socially assisted by Brussels, increasingly dependent on foreign foodstuffs, carrying less and less weight in the European business world, and at the same time pushing part of the population towards the labour markets of other EC countries where they have only secondary civic and social status" (Baptista 1993: 39).

#### Discontent and protest in a globalized countryside

Modernization of Portugal's agriculture and rural areas has been marked by an excessively rapid transition from a strong system of state regulation to regulation governed almost solely by the market. Caught up in these changes, without knowing the rules of the game, farmers who had invested in modernization were unable to overcome the difficulties which surfaced later. Their situation has continuously worsened until, today, many have been completely ruined (Carvalho and Brito 1995: 254).

Nor did those who refused to risk great changes, not trusting the promises, fare any better. Their output decreased in value, and many could not find buyers for their products. Meanwhile, the various ways out of agricultural difficulty which often had usually been taken in the past, such as emigration, off-farm employment, and smuggling, were now closed off.

Discontent and protest thus have become generalized in Portuguese rural society. Expressed in popular demonstrations and rebellions, in obstruction of roads and railway lines, in symbolic destruction of agricultural products or in attacks on lorries carrying imported products, there have been successive

milk, pig, eucalyptus, wine, and other "wars". Conflict has become very visible.

Protest also assumes other, more untypical forms, from passive resistance to weak participation to blocking state action. Because the forms of demonstration of discontent and revolt often assume subtle and less visible expression, the negative impact of rural changes cannot be measured solely by the level of participation in demonstrations or by the numerous public conflicts mentioned in the media. Intensive ethnographic studies, farmer interviews, and document sources revealed the universality of the rural response.

The rural and agricultural crisis is not experienced in the same way by all producers, nor does it give rise to the same behaviour in all of them. A process of progressive dualization of agriculture has been initiated (Reis 1989). There is now a progressive distancing of entrepreneurial forms of agricultural production, integrated vertically into agro-industry and strongly dependent on credit and the markets, from small-scale family agricultural production, which is based on the value of their own resources (fundamentally land and labour), and is still oriented toward the reproduction of producers and their families. The crisis assumes distinct significance for each category of producer.

For the producers who have modernized and become integrated into the market, the crisis is manifested as an unfavourable competitive position. It is experienced mainly as a problem of (i) a lack of buyers, (ii) accumulation of debts, and (iii) the irreversibility of investment. For small family producers the crisis derives from (i) the readjustment of production toward market demand, (ii) the invasion of foreign products at unbeatable prices, (iii) the dismantling of policies and support structures for small farmers, and (iv) the lack of non-agricultural employment. Whereas for the modernizers the crisis is experienced as one of risking and losing businesses which involves enormous sums, for the traditional small farmers the crisis invokes a feeling



of impotence because of the inability to escape poverty, or by the drama of seeing oneself drifting further from the promised levels of prosperity.

Discontent with worsening living conditions is expressed through protest, frequently triggered by a dramatic local event such as the closure of a factory employing local labourers or the elimination of a public service. Forms of protest vary according to the mode of agriculture. Entrepreneurial farmers are more organized and oriented towards strategic objectives. Small family farmers are more spontaneous and disorganized.

Despite its generality, rural protest has been limited in character. This has been explained in sociological and anthropological literature as originating in the conditions of agricultural work, which tends to be isolated and dispersed, and by clientelistic submission and the lack of active citizenship characteristics in traditional rural areas (Melo 1992). Rural conflicts often originate with the interference by some external entity, such as one of the innumerable state agencies involved in agriculture, or private businesses installing the social relationships of capitalism, or the progressive domination of markets by agro-industry (Tavares dos Santos 1992). This invariably leads to the distancing of small land-owners from political decisions about the use of resources and the future of the land (Kayser 1990: 243).

Moral economists, concerned with explaining how rural protest is caused by the generalization of capitalist market relationships and the expansion of bureaucracies, attribute great importance to mechanisms of protection against risk through neighbourhood solidarity and clientele relationships in poor rural communities (Polanyi 1957; Hobsbawm 1965; Geertz 1966; Wolf 1969; Scott 1976; Meillassoux 1976; Popkin 1979). Even though Portuguese rural society is moving away from situations studied by these authors, the decline and weakening of community institutions contribute to the spread of basic insecurity and thus to an increase in protest demonstrations.

There are other questions to address that are of particular interest in socio-economic and political contexts such as that of Portugal, where agriculture not only serves the function of producing and providing food, but also the reproduction of the labour force. Multiple interdependencies are evident in which the small farmer and village society continue to play an important role in the maintenance of social equilibrium and in the legitimization of political power (Hespanha 1994). Among the problems requiring further study are the relationships between forms of protest and different groups within the rural population. In spite of the differences previously mentioned, the influence of the more spectacular forms of protest can become attractive for less-organized groups. Similarly, the radicalism of excluded groups may impose more radical strategies on leaders of organized groups.

Another issue that merits special investigation is the relationship between forms of protest and the levels of legitimization of the political institutions of representative democracy. Sometimes protests emerge in populations that feel abandoned and betrayed by political parties or when the forms of state conflict regulation do not work.

Finally, it is important to learn about the less visible ways in which discontent is expressed, particularly the way that collective states such as disorientation and discouragement, depression and anxiety, or shame and dishonor, which are generated by the worsening of living conditions, are diffused and amplified. That this has occurred elsewhere under very different conditions has been demonstrated in the literature (see, for example, the Winter 1986 issue of *Rural Sociology*, "The Farm Crisis in Rural America," Vol. 51, No. 4).

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