

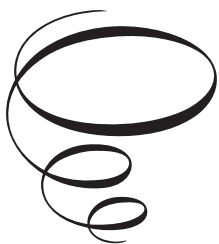
Peoples, Nature and Environments:

Learning to Live Together

Edited by

Ana Cristina Roque, Cristina Brito
and Cecilia Veracini

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CHAPTER TWELVE

ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS AND MAN-NATURE REPRESENTATIONS IN THE BUILDING OF THE PORTUGUESE EUROPEAN IDENTITY

PAULO E. GUIMARÃES¹

INTRODUCTION

In 1901, Eça de Queiroz's *A Cidade e as Serras* [*The Town and the Hills*]² was published. The novel presents the dilemma of one member of the Portuguese landed elite who rediscovers the beauty and capacity for physical and mental regeneration through the humanized nature of his country, which he contrasts with the comfort and pleasures that cities and technological progress offer the bourgeoisie. His experiences, split between Paris and his village, reflect the dilemmas facing a civilization based on the virtues of science and technology, material prosperity and industrialization as a means of achieving welfare and power. To him, Portugal is a country with a rustic beauty in which poverty is intertwined with the simplicity of people, where happiness is possible due to the ability to enjoy the simple things of rural life and the paternalism of local elites. Thus, the fruits of industrial civilization should be adopted selectively through policies ensuring health and well-being. The debate was marked at that time by a mood of nationalism, with the Portuguese elite divided over the path of economic growth the country should follow (Mendes, 1996). Faced with a choice, Queiroz's protagonist opted for agrarianism.

¹ This research was funded by the FCT (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia) as part of project UID/CPO/00758/2013.

² Eça de Queirós (1845-1900) was a career diplomat and acclaimed realist writer. *A Cidade e as Serras* is considered one of the “must read” 20th-century Portuguese novels and has been recommended by educational authorities for school students.

A book published to celebrate Portugal's participation in Brazil's National Fair in Rio de Janeiro (1908) reinforced that vision, with a description of the country's economic and social life. The chapter about the development of Portuguese industry begins as follows:

The Portuguese people, who history shows are dashing, adventurous and tenacious, fighting for each span of their kingdom, discovering and conquering new lands, distinguishing themselves as audacious navigators, laborious colonizers, strenuous warriors and unflagging farmers, had never shown a particularly industrial nature. (Simões, 1908, 359)

Portugal was defined as being essentially agrarian against those who considered the country to be mainly rural and who called for it to overcome its 'backwardness'. The debate, which had divided the political elite since the agrarian crisis of the 1880s, deepened during the First Republic (1910-1926) and extended until the end of Salazar's regime (Brito, 1989)³. Emerging regionalism and motorized tourism after the 1930s reinforced images of Portugal through stereotyped agrarian landscapes, celebrations of nature transformed by hard physical work by Portuguese peasants, their animals and simple tools. Landscapes intended to be essential, such as the vineyard terraces of the Douro Valley or Madeira, the cork tree forests in the south, or the fishing towns, were, in fact, the result of the close integration of Portuguese capitalism into the British world economy combined with protectionist agrarian policies. Those traditionalist images became iconic for regional identity building (see Queiroz, 2017).

The image of Portugal as agrarian and traditionalist Catholic was consolidated during the Estado Novo. It became part of the nationalist discourse on its peculiarity and was celebrated by decorating railway stations with images of past glories and humanized landscapes painted on tiles as part of a project that was promoted until the 1940s (Lourenço, 2004). This traditionalist corporatism was presented as an alternative to capitalism and communism and their shared belief in science and technology as tools for human progress. This peculiar path to modernity, which resided within Portugal's Catholic and imperial mission, was affirmed at Portugal's contribution to the 1939 New York World Fair. Neo-realist literature challenged the hegemonic narrative by offering counter images of everyday life that celebrated those worked and suffering

³ The 1940s were considered a turning point for the development of industrial projects (see Brito, 1989), while during the 1960s the growth of industrial exports to Western European countries somehow undermined the African imperial project after Salazar was replaced in 1968.

landscapes. It is unsurprising that it took until the late 1960s until the Marxist historian Armando Castro felt able to speak out about the “industrial revolution in 19th-century Portugal”, with his successors speaking of “islands of industrialization” in the country, recognizing Portugal was not completely separate from contemporary industrial growth trends.

Environmental problems affecting industrialized countries could not be farther from the lives and consciences of the Portuguese people. It seemed as if in a country of farmers, fishermen, sailors and picturesque villages that only the cities of Lisbon and Porto would experience the pollution and environmental degradation found in other European cities. Here we see that environmental conflicts both provide a view of competing visions on the appropriation and use of natural resources and the irreversible processes transforming the environment, and help question contemporary representations and nationalist identity constructions. Based on recent contributions and empirical research, this chapter identifies different types of conflict resulting from the expansion of industry in Portugal from the second half of the 19th century.

OTHER RURAL LANDSCAPES

It is often believed environmental awareness came to Portugal either in the late 1960s or in the wake of the Carnation Revolution, and that the environment was not an issue for common people (Soromenho-Marques, 2005). However, the historiography of environmental conflict in Portugal since the late 19th century – a period of liberalization, capital investment and external demand – is changing, or is at least challenging those assumptions. Different geographical case studies of the mining and metallurgical industries, commercial agriculture and industrial fishing offer a view of a country that was concerned with the environmental problems caused by opening up to world markets and agrarian capitalism (Vaquinas, 1990; Freire, 2000; Guimarães, 2016; Silva, 2013).

The appropriation of common land and the destruction of the ancient collective system of production, the extension of rice growing in the Mondego and Sado river valleys that caused an increase in malaria morbidity⁴, increased pressure on marine resources due to the growth of

⁴ Malaria was endemic in many regions of Portugal due to the marshes that appear during dry summers and affect rivers and streams; it became identified with “rural population” and rice production. State-sponsored initiatives to deal with this major health problem appeared during 1930s, but the disease remained uncontrolled up to the 1950s. See Carvalho (1899) and Saavedra (2013).

the export-oriented canning industry or the advent of large-scale mining and soil erosion and contamination, air and water pollution due to the transformation of pyrites, cassiterites (tungsten), Galena, tin and uranium all became causes of local contention. Violence and protests often erupted after periods of tension between the affected populations and often foreign business groups, caused by environmental disruption. Conflicts sometimes broke out long after the environmental damage occurred. In other cases, such as with uranium mining, conflicts over liabilities and reparations emerged many years after the mines had closed. In the 1950s, radioactive water caused by the extraction method used in the uranium mines was dumped directly into the Mondego river (Veiga, 2014, 57-58). Popular struggles for environmental justice challenge images of the recent rural environment. At the beginning of the 20th century, the three main rivers in the center and south of the country (Mondego, Sado and Guadiana) were contaminated by a modern mining industry promoted and encouraged by the state after the 1930s.

Environmental conflict offers a nuanced view of this bucolic image of a landscape populated by a hard-working people and crossed by railways – images often captured in photographs and paintings and shared in the press in celebration of this agrarian matrix of capitalist development. Simultaneously, conflicts reveal the unequal distribution of power in society and the clash of interests between dominant groups communicating an ideology that accepts progress but analyzes costs and options. This debate came to Parliament during the First Republic, when deputies stood up for the people against the interests of the mining companies or spoke in their own interest as farmers or landowners affected by the high levels of acid in watercourses. The environmental aspect was therefore recognized in the debate between agrarians and industrialists at the end of the 19th century.

These debates also reveal that early environmental concerns in liberal industrial legislation, created by an enlightened elite to deal with the problems of overfishing and pollution since the Regeneration (1852-1889), were not only motivated by a vague desire to adopt models prevailing in advanced industrial countries. In the case of mining, the elite followed the Spanish Mining Review (*Revista Minera*) and understood the rights that held back the mining industry. The mining laws of the 1850s gave companies the right to use common land and prevented local communities from interfering.



Figure 1. Map of Portugal (mainland) showing the locations of towns, villages and rivers that are mentioned in the text.

The institutional system limited the power of local landowners by creating a mining sector encouraged, managed and supervised by the mining administration and centralized by the government. By the time the conflict between landlords, farmers and miners and Rio Tinto led to the death of protestors in Huelva in 1889, Portugal had experienced several serious conflicts caused by mining and the roast-leaching of pyrites.

From the historical point of view, these conflicts are crossroads allowing us to document the interest groups, mediators and arguments accounting for social and environmental change. Following the destruction of their fields and rivers, farmers and fishermen found work in the mines or activities resulting from the expansion of mining.

MINING CONFLICTS AND NEW ACIDIC LANDSCAPES

The first environmental mining conflict in Portugal resulted from the interruption of environmental services generated by mining works in antiquity. One night in 1855, people entered the mines at São João do Deserto, near Aljustrel. By cutting off the waters used to treat skin problems, stomach ailments and malaria at the nearby spa, the mine had infuriated the crowd and offended the spa's management and employees. The origins of the waters date to pre-Roman mining operations. Such situations were not exceptional for modern miners in Portugal, who used their presence to identify potentially valuable deposits. The toponymy also suggested another area with potential – the Ribeira do Roxo, so named for its purple water. Visitors arrived during the summer, and tensions between local activities and foreign workers exploded when the mine was flooded by those acidic underground streams. Local authorities intervened only when placed under pressure by the civil governor, but the company (Lusitanian Mining Company) failed soon after. Nonetheless, by way of compensation, it was forced to supply the “sacred waters” to the spa by hand. A decade later, a new company (Companhia de Mineração Transtagana) was forced to build new thermal water facilities.

More serious were the events leading to the flooding of the Braçal mines in Sever do Vouga in 1862. The pattern of collective behavior followed those of earlier peasant rebellions: church bells called people to the churchyard from where they made their way to the mine where they challenged the troops stationed there, forcing them to withdraw, before destroying the blast furnaces and mining equipment. The mine closed for several months and took two years to recover. The locals claimed the burning of Galena and arsenical pyrites in furnaces released gases that

destroyed their vineyards and their land, but the government insisted the culprits acted out of superstition and malice. The mining company was using common lands and cutting down the pine trees for their exclusive use while pressing the authorities to privatize the land (Justino, 2016).

The mining operation at Braçal had been headed by a German merchant, Mathias Feuerherd, since 1845, who contracted the work to miners and metallurgists in the Hartz region of Germany. The project was considered a model and the metallurgical establishment was appointed to the Portuguese king Don Fernando. The affair came to Parliament, which decided to compensate Feuerherd for his losses with the construction of a mining road linking different deposits in the region that were being exploited then. Local tensions continued to intensify until 1866.

In the 1870s, similar tensions ended in violence at Feuerherd's mine at Telhadela in the same region. The army's presence at times of tension and the intervention of a local Member of Parliament drew attention to the miserable conditions of the people that brought no practical result other than an obligation on the concessionaries to provide farmers with free lime with which to fertilize their soil. While the mines occasionally employed farmers, tensions remained high, and there were acts of sabotage such as drilling the miners' canteens, preventing them from being lowered into the mine.

At the Algaes mine just outside Aljustrel, a Portuguese company installed a furnace that caused villagers to complain to the authorities, which forced the mining company to redesign its project. To achieve this, it had to increase its capital on two occasions, from 300,000 to 750,000 reis, as much capital as that owned by the Alentejo's two regional banks. Consequently, the company, Transtagana, focused its furnace operations in Pedras Brancas, about 7 kilometers away. As a result, it had to buy extensive farm properties (*herdades*) and build a railway to transport the raw ore, all of which increased costs. With the price of copper falling, the company eventually collapsed, and the mines closed in the 1880s.

Mason & Barry, a British family-owned company with a mine at São Domingos, had more success processing poorer grade pyrites when the price of copper minerals began its steady decline in global markets in the 1860s. By the early 1870s, it had altered its mining methods to combine income from the richer mineral exploitation with the poorest ore processing (with less than 2.5 percent of copper). James Mason then combined open-pit mining with the old system of galleries and wells and established a metallurgical plant in nearby Achada do Gamo. In the early 1870s, the company engaged in metallurgical experiments and abandoned the use of closed ovens because of their prohibitive cost in large-scale