

## *When the Horizon of Political Populism Looms Over Us*

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History has demonstrated that political populism is a challenger that can easily erode the institutional checks on executive power necessary for the durability of the democratic regime. Democracy is fragile, and we should be particularly attentive to the lessons of the past as various political populist leaders have popped up in the political arenas across the globe. Recent academic research on political populism has contended that populist political strategies prove particularly effective when they rely on the control of the emotional response of voters, especially at times of socio-economic constraints. Illustrative studies include Salmela and von Scheve's (2017), which argues that repressed shame is the critical emotion that gradually builds the widespread support for political populism, and Landowski's (2020), which establishes that esthesia, i.e., the exacerbated incitement of feelings to generate the audience's emotional responses, is the basis of the political populist rhetoric. In view of this, to what extent we can also learn about this matter from is the question we can all ask ourselves.

Various writers have instigated widespread discussion about totalitarianism by imagining the social implications of the far-reaching consequences of governments that have built up on populations' emotional responses in order to implement their political strategies. George Orwell's, Aldous Huxley's, and H.G. Wells's dystopian narratives show us that everything could indeed have gone wrong in the twentieth century and that glimpses of heaven actually anticipated nightmarish experiences. In addition, streaming service Hulu's television series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name, has proven that a dystopian narrative that imagines societies riddled with misogyny and other forms of oppression is a valuable starter to discuss present-day politics and societal issues. *Montanha Distante*, António Ladeira's latest novel, is a critical dystopia that fosters our thoughts about present-day politics, particularly when populist political rhetoric is combined with individual charisma.

A Portuguese diaspora writer and a professor of Portuguese language and literatures at Texas Tech University, António Ladeira is the author of a diverse literary production that ranges between poetry and narrative. The two short story volumes *Os Monociclistas e outras histórias do ano 2045* and *Seis drones: novas histórias do ano 2045* were published in Portugal in 2018 by On y va, the same publisher that also launched *Montanha Distante* at the end of 2020. Despite these narratives sharing a similar tone that mingles subtle irony with a dystopian perspective of life, *Montanha Distante* offers a significant difference: unlike Ladeira's short stories, this narrative is not set in a particular future. Dates are never specified, and this fact alone should be enough to startle us because the possibility of situating consequences of extreme situations in a chronological future is derailed. As a matter of fact, this narrative lacks any idea of future, although we can easily foresee that the future can be gloomy as the plot resembles the entanglements of present-day populist politics. This narrative shows that the way

we understand present-day politics has a profound impact on the societies we live in and how interpersonal relationships are developed.

*Montanha Distante* is a first-person narrative that tells the story of a talkative middle-aged taxi driver who takes a peculiarly quiet young man from Vila Ideal [Ideal Town] to Vila Real [Real Town], a six-hour ride used by the taxi driver to tell the story of his life as a man who, in his youth, moved from Vila Real to Vila Ideal. His life story emerges as a testimony of the experience of the past passed on to someone young enough to be his son. Vila Ideal and Vila Real have views over one specific mountain: whereas Vila Ideal has views to Montanha Próxima (Near Mountain), Vila Real has an awe-inspiring view to Montanha Distante (Distant Mountain), a majestic mountain whose cloud-perforating peak makes it a cinematic picture. It is hard not to associate these two antipode towns and their respective mountains, united by a winding road, to the dialectics between idealism and reality, and the narrative shows us that when we choose one, the other always looms over us.

*Montanha Distante* is a story that takes place in a country ruled by the charismatic Dear Leader, who together with his family heads an oligarchical elite that rules as iron law. Dear Leader's powerful rhetoric explores the nation's identitarian values so that the individuals recognize themselves as members of a community they must preserve. By attributing himself the role of supreme guardian of the nation's values, Dear Leader ensures the maintenance of his and his family's power. Every aspect of social and family life is organized to put the accepted values of the nation into practice and thus enhance Dear Leader's rule. Being an exemplary citizen is a duty imposed on every individual, and any gesture, attitude, or thought that does not explicitly resonate with those values is regarded as potentially unpatriotic and is punished. Consequently, there is no opposition to Dear Leader because citizens are systematically surveilled to prevent them from deviating from being exemplary citizens, and privacy and individuality are regarded as potentially subversive.

Community life contrasts with the feeling of solitude and incompleteness experienced in the first person. Citizens are exemplary members of the community, but they are also solitary individuals unable to make their most intimate and personal decisions autonomously. The fact that all characters do not have personal names strengthens the sense of incompleteness conveyed in the first person and enhances the allegorical dimension of the narrative. Solitude emerges from the government's overwhelming control that crushes individual spontaneity and self-determination in every dimension: the decision of a professional career or the decision to choose who to love and how to express love. The taxi driver is the fictional expression of the devastating effects of the fierce control of totalitarian rule wrapped in powerfully emotional rhetoric.

Does *Montanha Distante* convey a pessimistic view of contemporary life? As in so many other dystopias, its ending is open; nevertheless, we have glimpses of hope before we reach the end of this narrative. Despite the pessimistic foray, there is a possibility of horizon, though not as illusory as a cinematic mountain. As a plot twist, hope emerges from the possibility of a humane future if we express compassion. A gesture that refuses blind obedience but conveys care for the Other, be this Other the immigrant or the runaway, is the ultimate transgression that rescues the humanity in us that erodes the effect of the powerful populist political rhetoric. Political rhetoric built upon identitarian values enhances fear and subdues the capacity to experience empathy. *Montanha Distante* was published in Portugal in 2020, 46 years after the Carnation Revolution that overthrew a long fascist authoritarian dictatorship whose rhetoric was also grounded upon the preservation of the values of the family and the nation. For example, compulsory membership in the youth organization Mocidade Portuguesa was part of the government's ideological plan of national education and surveillance of the individual conduct often made solidarity subversive. António Ladeira's narrative is not about the Estado Novo—unspecified time and space make this narrative possible anywhere—but the memory of the dictatorship and its rhetoric resonates with much of the narrative and, in fact, with much of present-day populist political rhetorical experience that has emerged in several countries, ranging from the

U.S., Brazil, Hungary to India (and Portuguese democracy is not immune to this rhetoric). Hence, *Montanha Distante* is reading for these times and a reminder of the extent to which our core humanity can be the safeguard that democracy needs to protect itself from the exposure to seductive populist political rhetoric.

**References**

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