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New Ontologies: Exploring the Anthro-Sphere

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Humans in an otherwise perfect environment: the Natural Park of Ria Formosa

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Our first three weeks of ethnographical research in the Natural Park of Ria Formosa were spent at the interpretive centre. Visitors to this centre may walk along the pedestrian trail. While in the trail, that leads through one of the rare forests in Ria Formosa, they have the opportunity to appreciate some living examples – properly marked by interpretive signage – of the natural and cultural heritage of Park’s territory: the salines, the dunes, the beach, the marshes, the archaeological remains of Roman salting tanks, and the tide mill restored by the Park. Sometimes, a few natives may be seen catching shellfish. The interpretive centre offers a resumed visual experience of “Ria Formosa” to its visitors, in which nature coexists harmoniously with human presence.

In the presence of the ecological Eden displayed at the interpretive centre, metaphors of “assault,” “rape,” or “decaying” – abundantly invoked by the national press in order to describe natural resources and territory management policies in Ria Formosa – may sound unsuitable. However, those images react mainly to increasing urban development and human pressure on environmentally sensible areas in the region. Most of these anxieties are due to former episodes of oceanic flooding in Ria Formosa, and particularly to the vulnerability of barrier islands to these events evident in previous shoreline damages. Risks from oceanic flooding have been strongly amplified by

extensive illegal occupation of the islands and by subsequent disturbance of existing dune structures (Ramos and Dias 2000).

In the mid-eighties and early nineties, several illegal houses and shacks were pulled down on the order of the Park officials and the Secretary of State. By the time our research in Ria Formosa was conducted (from 1999 to 2001), the Park's efforts to promote alternatives to the earlier tested expensive and unpopular policy of demolitions were evident. This new approach attempted to win over local communities to the Park authority's perspective, which stressed the need to preserve the lagoon.

At an international scientific meeting, Luís Fonseca, a biologist teaching at the University of Algarve who was then (in 1999) director of the Park, declared his local fishing and shellfish-gathering populations direct heirs of [I'm quoting him now] "countless generations of men who knew how to use [this complex barrier-island system] and shape it without risking its productivity and biodiversity." [End of quotation.] (Cit. in Ramos *et al* 2000) This statement, in which the ex-director implicitly attributes to locals the status of "guardians" over the lagoon system, must not be assumed neither as a fortuitous characterization of Ria Formosa's inhabitants nor as a particularly original depiction of them. For instance, as our team recorded, a member of Almargem, a local preservationist association, asserted explicitly that – in words that Luís Fonseca would not despise for sure – "fishing traditions reveal a repository of ecological knowledge." (Praça *et al* 2001)

The quoted statements are revealing of a conception that values "traditional" activities as benign ways – at least in comparison to modern techniques – of exploring existing natural resources. These nostalgic evocations of a "Golden Age" prior to the implantation of tourism industry in the region – largely frequented by the local producers of preservationist discourse – take as their main source a well-known tradition of literary and iconographical representations of fishermen. Furthermore, in Ria Formosa, fishermen villages set in the islands are perceived as particularly "remote" (Ardener 1987), and therefore subject to the imagining of strongly homogeneous communities with weak linkage to the exterior.

In an exchange of letters with the president of the Tourist Board of Algarve, the Park's director depicts resentfully the processes of change experienced by the populations

of the lagoon in the last decades. As he puts it in the first of those letters, “the great majority of houses to be found ‘everywhere in the islands’ isn’t (unfortunately) neither ‘typical’ nor does it ‘belong to fishermen’.” In a second letter, alluding to transformations in the fishermen’s way of life, Fonseca notes that the “fact that a house is inhabited by a fisherman and his family doesn’t necessarily imply that it is a ‘fisherman’s typical house’.” (Cit. in Ramos *et al* 2000)

It may be worth considering these depictions in the presence of a paper presented by João Alveirinho Dias to an international conference. This geologist – who teaches Coastal Management at the University of Algarve in collaboration with Luís Fonseca – considers the “depreciation (or lost) of cultural values,” and the “decaying (or even the disappearing) of the majority of traditional activities” as “problems of coastal management,” along with the “destruction of important ecosystems,” and so on. Moreover, Fernando Veloso Gomes and Francisco Taveira Pinto, both engineers from University of Oporto, declared recently “rapid changes in habits and way of life of the local populations” to be “problems related to the growing human pressure” in coastal zones (Gomes and Pinto 2003: 25). Ultimately, it suggests that the physical degeneracy of a territory and the cultural degeneracy of its inhabitants can be thought correlatively. This assumption seems to be decisive to local preservationists’ (including the Park’s) interpretations of the territory known as Natural Park of Ria Formosa since 1987.

We may recognise in the Park’s expectations of involving locals in the active preservation of their own natural resources, of engaging them in the “sustainable management” of the lagoon, a desire to discipline through regulation both the landscape and the collective life of fishing and shellfish-gathering populations (Heatherington 2001). These expectations presuppose the transformation of the local population’s way of life – which is presumed to be “non-traditional”, corrupted by exogenous, environmentally harmful habits –, and the subsequent adoption of old customs through books and photographs. Moreover, since the role of documenting the past has been granted to them, we may also admit that a process of “monumentalization” of local fishing and shellfish-gathering populations is in progress in Ria Formosa (Herzfeld 1991). In collected views and discourses by the research team can we observe not only that the way coastal natural resources are managed with a view to preserve them as

examples of a pristine reality – an Eden unaffected by the eroding effect of time, as we may verify when visiting the above mentioned interpretive centre –, but also that the material culture and social organization of the local human populations are seen as part of that Arcadian picture.

More recently, the approval of the Plan for the Management of the Vilamoura-Vila Real de Santo António Coastal Zone by the Portuguese Council of Ministers testifies to the effectiveness of those representations of local culture as means of legitimising political decisions. In the final report of the Plan's public discussion, the villages of Ilha de Faro and Ilha da Culatra – according to the Plan, these populations are going to remain in the islands, a decision we may consider as “salvationist” – are considered to be “making integral part of Ria Formosa's life.” This judgement is justified by the fact that “in their essence” those populations “are composed of fishing communities with a large tradition and history in the barrier islands.” (2004: 113, 121-122). The request made to a Department of Anthropology to conduct extensive research on the Park's populations – that is, to experts in the production of discourse about “traditional cultures” – must be understood precisely in attention to these rhetorical and political interests in manipulating categories such as “tradition”.

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