

Portugal, postcolonial reconfigurations and the colour divide

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“Black” is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature.

HALL, “New Ethnicities”

Reflecting upon the 1985 *Critical Inquiry* volume on “Race”, *Writing and Difference*, Balibar (2008: 1630-31) recently drew attention to the fact that there are two reactions when racism is examined nowadays. On the one hand, there are discourses that state that the issue of racism has become obsolete. On the other hand, we have an array of discourses according to which racism is not only more alive and harmful than ever, but that we might also be entering an era in which racism will dominate societies. This discussion becomes particularly interesting when one of the effects of globalization is taken into account. The increasing and fast motions of people, and notably from former colonies to European “mother countries”, lead to an appraisal of the reconfiguration of social and political structures, therefore questioning, as Balibar pointed out, why and how racism has been subject to transformations. Balibar’s position is supported by Dirlik (2008: 1364) who associates the new phase of racialization to what he calls “global modernity”,

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which is very much a product of the colonial past it seeks to overcome, giving rise to novel conflicts between a modernity globalized and the legacies of colonialism, including racism, that have acquired additional vehemence from challenges to their global domination and hegemony.¹

Portugal constitutes an interesting case when the transformations of racism are examined. Since the mid-1970's, Portugal has experienced multiple changes as far as the constitution of its society is concerned. The political freedom brought about by the April 1974 Revolution set off the process of decolonization that put an end to the long and violent Colonial War, and opened the path to Portugal's reorganization in political, economic, social and cultural terms. If the April Revolution represented a crucial political moment of rupture with the colonial past, it did not produce radical effects on the reorganization of the Portuguese society, contrary to what might have been expected.

Two aspects should be considered to understand this fact. Firstly, the process of decolonization represented the return of thousands of Portuguese, who were former colonizers, of their descendants, and of many of their loyal indigenous servants to Portugal. This return was highly problematic as the country was not ready to absorb so many people arriving in such a short period of time, without financial means and/or employment. Moreover, their return enabled hidden social tensions to emerge since many of the Portuguese who had never moved to the colonies usually considered the former colonizers to be privileged, granted the opportunity to become rich when people in Portugal faced severe economic difficulties. In other words, despite the celebration of political freedom, the mass arrival of thousands did represent a kind of threat to all those who while never participating in the colonial "dream", had been led to believe in it, a fact that did not easily allow them to welcome the so-called "returnees". The loss of the historical empire was, thus, experienced in diverse ways by the Portuguese. To former colonizers, at the service of empire, it represented, on the one hand, an economic and social failure, bearing in mind their loss of properties and of a dream of superiority over the colonized and even over their fellows in Portugal, and, on the other, a forced return to a country where most of them had already faced difficulties prior to embarking on the colonial dream. To the Portuguese who remained in

Portugal during the empire, and who had believed that the latter transformed Portugal into a powerful nation, the return represented a loss of historical references and grandeur, especially when the extent of state propaganda related to the apparently successful colonial enterprise is taken into account. Furthermore, there was also the awareness of the potential social and economic disorganization the returnees represented to a country that was undeniably poor and underdeveloped, which explains why it had long exported labour in search of better standards of living in foreign countries.

The second aspect related to the reorganization of Portuguese society reflects the new geopolitical position of the country with Portugal's membership of the European Economic Community in 1986². More than a decade after the loss of empire, and with the progressive consolidation of democracy, Portuguese society was obliged to deal with a different representation of itself, both internally and externally. While it is true that emigration had not ceased, even though at a slower pace, the country, which had received many African workers from the ex-colonies after decolonization, began to be considered a favourable destination for people from other countries, and especially from Eastern Europe and from Brazil. In the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century, Portugal once more sees itself transformed into an "arrivals harbour" ("cais de chegada"; my translation)³, although in a very distinct context. If in the mid-1970s Portugal was forcibly transformed into an arrivals harbour due to the loss of empire, in the 1990s, the arrival of thousands of legal and illegal immigrants operated a considerable change on the way the Portuguese represent themselves. If the returnees' arrival epitomized the failure and fallacy of empire, on the contrary, in the 1990s, immigrants from all over the world made the Portuguese believe their country was a symbol of development and welfare otherwise it would not be sought out by people from other countries.

This belief corresponds to a misrepresentation of the imagined community of the nation given that, on the one hand, as has already been referred to, waves of emigration continue, and, despite the country's undeniable development since membership of the European Union, Portugal has not lost its semi-peripheral condition in the world context⁴. Moreover, the misrepresentation resulting from a historical time of social changes

has effects on the ways Portuguese people perceive themselves and the immigrants the country receives, for it is necessary to examine, as Feldman-Bianco et al. (2002: 12) point out, Portugal's social continuities or reconfigurations in order to decode the complexities underlying issues of "power, domination, subordination, inclusion and exclusion in colonial and postcolonial times".

The Portuguese anthropologist Miguel Vale de Almeida has dedicated part of his recent research (2007a, b, c, d) to the study of issues of race and ethnicity in Portugal. In his opinion (2007a) the contemporary social framework of Portugal is characterized by inequalities that disclose Portuguese people's difficulty in dealing with difference and in accepting it. According to Almeida, the difficulty rests in the belief that the Portuguese are not racist and it illustrates how the conflicting social relationships at the beginning of the 21st century configure a deep and repressed colonial narrative that deserves thorough discussion. In this essay, my aim is to analyse Jaime Rocha's *Homem Branco, Homem Negro*, a play that was awarded the "Grande Prémio do Teatro Português" (Portuguese Theatre Grand Prix; my translation) in 2004, in order to address how, in a postcolonial era, Portuguese society continues to be written in black and white, thus revealing how difficult it is for Portuguese people to get rid of racialized social categories inherited from colonial times when dealing with the Other.

Almeida (2007a) believes that immigration and the relationships the Portuguese and immigrants seem to reproduce, to a great extent, are the representations of social distinctions common to colonialism⁵. Currently, immigrants are considered subaltern, as colonized people were in colonial times. To Almeida (2007d), social relationships with immigrants in Portugal nowadays seem to reproduce the principles of the Colonial Constitution, according to which there were (i) citizens (Portuguese metropolitans who are white); (ii) natives (who are African and black, whose culture would be preserved through separation); and (iii) "assimilados" ("assimilated"; representing a small category of people who would have to demonstrate themselves as deserving access to a mitigated citizenship resting on mimicking the colonizers).

Rocha's *Homem Branco, Homem Negro* (2006) depicts the relationship of two Portuguese male citizens: one black and one white. Divided into ten

sections (that the author calls “quadros” or frameworks), the play addresses how memories from colonialism and colonial racial distinctions continue to inform contemporary Portugal’s social hierarchy. The story portrays various dialogues and interactions between a white man, who occupies his spare time by sticking up posters around the town after finishing his regular job, and a black man. The former does not receive any financial compensation for his work and believes that it corresponds to some kind of civic intervention for the construction of a fairer society. At the beginning of the play, the reader/spectator does not have much information on the men except for the colour of their skin. The posters disseminate slogans against various types of prejudice and, in particular, against racial stereotypes. The white man is characterized as someone who firmly believes he does not hold any kind of prejudice while demanding the black man play the part of all those he thinks are treated unequally and, in particular, black people. Despite the fact that the white man considers his posters as a kind of struggle that embodies mankind’s history, the content of the posters is not really important to the play. It mainly serves as a pretext to set off discussion on various issues, with a special focus on racism and colonial memories. Nonetheless, the posters, considered a privileged means of representation in defence of a cause, are subtly used by the playwright to unveil how the apparent support for a political and ideological struggle might serve to naturalize and even hide stereotypes and prejudices that end up stressing differences among peoples who should, in principle, be considered equal. Through a selection of representative excerpts, my aim is to show how the white man associates the black man with foreignness, with immigrants occupying lowly positions in Portuguese society and how this association echoes old social distinctions based on racial criteria, reinforcing Almeida’s working hypothesis.

Racial concerns pervade the whole play and the initial dialogue between the white and black man illustrates how white people represent blacks as being socially inferior and without access to education. Observe how in the following passage, the black man is first addressed by “você”, and then suddenly by “tu”, and how the grammar distinction is related to the white man’s assumption as to the black man’s lack of literacy skills⁶:

HB – *Você* sabe ler, presumo... [my italics]

HN – Claro que sei ler, não percebo a pergunta.

HB – Estou a perguntar, porque como não *fizeste* comentários ao assunto do cartaz! [my italics]

HN – Não, não fiz.

HB – Achas que eu fiz a pergunta por seres negro? Eu fá-la-ia a qualquer pessoa.

HN – Não achei nada, apenas me surpreendeu a pergunta.

HB – Há muita gente que não sabe ler.

HN – É evidente.

HB – Mas pensaste que eu não faria a pergunta por seres negro, o que poderia significar que é um tique racista.

HN – Não pensei em nada.

HB – Se eu fosse racista, diria: se soubesses ler, verias que é aqui junto à discoteca que se deve colar o cartaz, e não ao lado do contentor onde as pessoas vão mijar. Não há uma relação entre as duas coisas. Isso sim, é um pensamento racista. As coisas dos negros devem ser colocadas junto aos mijatórios. [...]

HN – Também sei. Não trabalho só com cimento e água. À noite oriento um bar. É um biscate.

[...]

HB – Tu és negro, presumo!

HN – É o que parece.

HB – És negro, pronto, podias ser mulato, cabrito, preto mesmo, dos mais escuros. Mas vamos lá, és negro, tanto faz que sejas da África do Sul como do Norte, como da América, tanto faz...

HN – Sou português.

HB – Sim, mas descendente de africanos.

HN – Os meus pais já nasceram cá, são portugueses.

HB – Mas os teus avós...

HN – Não sei, um veio de França, nasceu lá.

HB – Está bem, mas os teus bisavós...

HN – Não sei.

HB – Okey, correcto, mas o que eu quero dizer é que tu és negro, tens a pele dessa cor.

HN – Cor preta.

[...]

HB – Pronto, és negro. Agora olha para o cartaz. O que é que lá diz?

HN – “Pelas minorias, contra o racismo.”

[...]

HB – Vais-te embora?

HN – Vou.

HB – Assim, sem mais nem menos, sem falares sobre o cartaz?

HN – É um tema que não me diz nada.

(Rocha, 2006, pp. 11-15)

The fact that in the first interaction between the two men, the white man uses the black man's skin to associate him with Africa is not gratuitous as it obliges him to assert that he is Portuguese (and he will continually remind the white man of his citizenship throughout the play). In this context, race prevails over nationality as if black skin prevented the black man from pertaining to the Portuguese, forever connected with Africans and, indirectly, with memories of slavery and, consequently, to a subaltern position from a Eurocentric perspective. The white man insists on reminding the black man of his African ancestry. It is curious to observe how the white man's reference to gradations of black skin in reference to the issue of miscegenation does not grant acknowledgement of the black man's Portuguese citizenship from the white man's perspective ("mulato"; "cabrito"; "preto mesmo, dos mais escuros"). The black man, on the other hand, insists on referring to the European birthplace of his ancestors, as if this aspect could somehow erase his African ascendancy. The black man's reaction to the poster's slogan also shows how he tries not to engage in racial discussions, as if, by adopting this attitude, he were trying to peacefully exist in a racist Portugal. The black man's position of non-commitment reminds me of Almeida's hypothesis related to the reproduction of the Colonial Constitution in contemporary Portugal, since the black man's attitude could place him among the "assimilated", that is, among those who access a mitigated citizenship. In fact, the black man could continue insisting on his citizenship, which would not prevent him from engaging in the cultural acknowledgment of his African ancestry.

As I do not have space to examine all the relevant passages of Rocha's play, I have selected an episode that addresses the problematic postcolonial reconfigurations of Portuguese society in two distinct moments. The episode relates to the African maid that the white man's wife hired, and is initially commented on in "Quadro VI". The white man does not want to be boss of a black woman but does not mind having a Ukrainian or a Rumanian maid, even if the latter turns out to be more expen-

sive, an aspect that illustrates how immigrant nationality and colour may determine wages and wage expectations. The discussion about the African maid reveals how the white man is becoming progressively more mentally disturbed as he makes references to rabbits he saw in the street and that reminded him of rabbits he had killed while in Africa. Despite referring to his participation in the Colonial War, the white man has never actually been to Africa. His father was the one to fight in the Colonial War and to make detailed reports of the violence of military campaigns. The white man starts talking about rabbits, but it soon becomes clear to the reader/spectator that he is referring to African people in the Colonial War, stressing how derogatively they were treated by the whites and how black people continue to be similarly imagined in contemporary Portugal. The discussion on the African maid issue and the way immigrants in general are perceived resumes in “Quadro X” when the relationship between the white and the black men reaches its climax and the black man eventually takes a position on the white man’s comments, calling him a “bloody racist” (“cabrão racista”; my translation). Observe how the discussion on immigrants from Eastern Europe and from Africa addresses, on the one hand, the gradation of the subaltern position they occupy in the social hierarchy from the white and black men’s points of view and how both men, while they fight, use racial arguments that perpetuate colonial racial distinctions:

HN – Já sei. A preta saiu lá de casa.

HB – Ora vês como és esperto. Foi-se embora ontem. A mulher pô-la na rua. Ou era eu ou era ela.

HN – Despedida.

HB – A mulher explicou-lhe que eu não queria fazer dela uma escrava.

[...]

HN – E foi para o desemprego.

HB – Arranja qualquer coisa noutra lado.

HN – Vai fazer de *escrava* para outra casa de brancos. [my italics]

HB – Isso não sei. Em minha casa não.

HN – Compreendo. És um tipo avançado no tempo. Não queres pretos a trabalhar para ti.

HB – Não. Isso era no tempo das Colónias.

HN – Devias mudar de vocabulário, já passaram muitos anos. Sabias que há brancos a trabalhar em casa de pretos?

HB – Só se forem eslavos, portugueses duvido. Moldavas, eslovenas, ucranianas, mais para aí.

HN – Estou a falar de brancos.

HB – Sim, mas vêm lá de cima, do Leste.

HN – Mas são brancos ou não são?

HB – *Mais ou menos.* [my italics]

HN – Mais ou menos!

[...]

HB – Estás muito calado. Disse alguma coisa de mal?

Silêncio.

HB – Foi aquilo dos teus filhos e da tua mulher. Eu não devia ter dito aquela coisa do avião e das doenças. Eu sei que os negros trazem doenças de África, mas não me referia aos teus. É mais os do Mali e do Quênia. Aliás, os negros não são todos iguais. Acho até que os melhores são os moçambicanos e os cabo-verdianos. Não tenho nada contra os angolanos, nem contra os guineenses, mas são diferentes, olham-me assim de lado, desconfiados.

HN – *Eu sou guineense, português guineense.* [my italics]

HB – A preta que ia lá a casa até que era angolana, mas não roubou nada.

HN – Então não era cabo-verdiana?

HB – É a mesma coisa. Eu disse à mulher: Olha, Graça, parece-me que as camisas têm cheiro. Não era por causa da preta, acho que era do detergente. [...] Mas eu senti aquele odor do mato, das palhotas. E disse-lhe, olha Graça, há qualquer coisa nesta casa que me faz lembrar a guerra. Mas tu nunca estiveste na guerra, respondeu-me ela. E eu disse-lhe: mas estive o meu pai, não te lembras quando ele contava aquelas investidas pelas aldeias, a maneira como violavam as mulheres e matavam as crianças? Não é todos os dias que se ouve alguém a contar que jogava à bola com as cabeças dos pretinhos. É de um homem ficar chateado. O meu pai dizia que ele só viu, não matou ninguém. E agora lembrava-me destas cenas sempre que a preta entrava lá em casa para passar a ferro. Mas isso acabou.

[...]

HB – Não te percebo.

HN – Podias dizer antes: não me percebo. (*Aproxima-se de HB.*) Podias dizer assim: o que eu sou é um cabrão racista! Um grande cabrão racista! Dizer assim: o que me apetece é enfiar-te esta navalha pela barriga adentro e tirar-te as tripas. Pô-las ao sol a secar como se fossem peixe.

HB – Ei, ei, eu sou teu amigo.

HN – Não me fales de amizade porque eu não sou teu amigo. Eu é que não sou de certeza teu amigo. E não é por ser preto. É porque tu és um cabrão de branco racista!

This long quote exemplifies how contemporary Portugal continues representing and writing the imagined community of the nation in black and white and through intermediate artificial categories between both colours. The discussion on the African maid's job in the white man's house finely illustrates how the Portuguese cultural imaginary remains haunted by imperial spectres and fantasies that prevent Portuguese society from becoming truly multicultural⁷. The application of colonial categorizations to the Portuguese social hierarchy nowadays is highlighted when the black man states that there are many white people working as maids in black people's houses, an assertion that disrupts the usual association of black people with subordinate jobs. The white man's exclusion of Portuguese people occupying such positions reveals how immigrants, in his point of view, are inferior people, for only female Eastern European women, curiously identified as "more or less white", could have these jobs. The white man's category of "not quite white" (that could also be considered "not quite black"...) ends by transcending racial criteria, since it is the condition of being a foreigner and of having, in this case, Eastern European citizenship that marks the social difference between the white Portuguese, and the Other, even if the black person were born in Portugal. At the end of the dialogue, the black man reacts by calling the white man a racist, thus acknowledging his black condition and the racial prejudices that constitute obstacles to the construction of a true friendship and of a fair and multicultural Portuguese society.

Despite focusing on a very specific context, that of contemporary Portugal, Rocha's play confirms Balibar's and Dirlik's assumptions as far as the transformations racism has undergone in the decades following the humanitarian disaster of World War II. The text not only openly addresses how racism can be reconfigured, and how racial categories are disguised behind national, class and ethnic distinctions, but also reveals how present manifestations of racism stem from the European colonial legacy. The problem lies in the fact that, as Dirlik aptly states, "[t]he reconfiguration of racism is still racism" (2008: 1370), a fact that stresses the urgent need to identify, analyse and discuss new types of racism, particularly when racism ceased to be considered as such by many people nowadays⁸. Without this analytical exercise, the spectres from the past will continue to haunt humankind and place its future in jeopardy.

NOTAS

- ¹ Dirlik (2008) is here making reference to his book on global modernity published in 2007.
- ² On this issue, see Almeida (2007a).
- ³ I borrow the expression “cais de chegada” from Magalhães (2001).
- ⁴ On Portugal’s semi-peripheral status in the capitalist world system, see Santos (1994, 2001) and Ribeiro (2004). By analysing the episode of the “arrastão” that did not happen in Portugal in 2005, Almeida (2007d) examines the Portuguese people’s perception of emigration and immigration in the transformation of Portugal in terms of “greatness” and “smallness” in colonial and postcolonial times.
- ⁵ It is interesting to observe how Almeida’s position is similar to Balibar’s. Dirlik (2008: 1371) retrieves Balibar’s description of immigration “as a substitute for the notion of race and a solvent of ‘class consciousness’” (Balibar, 1991), which seems to somehow correspond to the Portuguese people’s experience of immigration from the 1990s onwards as Almeida describes and characterizes it.
- ⁶ In European Portuguese, the difference between “você” and “tu” may indicate a more intimate relationship or suggest some sort of paternalism, which seems to be the case here as the white man does not know the black man well enough to address him by “tu”.
- ⁷ On the influence of imperial spectres and fantasies on the contemporary Portuguese imaginary, see Ribeiro and Ferreira (2003).
- ⁸ On new types of racism (flagrant and subtle) in Portugal and from a comparative perspective, see Vala (1999).

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