

Deadly fires in Portugal: the eucalyptus business and European austerity stand accused

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After the serious fire in Pedrógão Grande, which caused 64 deaths on the weekend of 17-18 June in Portugal, the population is trying to understand what happened. For João Camargo, a climate change specialist in Lisbon, we must put a stop to policies that have led to austerity and to the dismantling and liberalization of public forest.

The images of the violent fire that devastated central Portugal for several days this week, following a dry storm, have raised many questions. The unprecedented human drama - 64 dead, more than 200 injured - constitutes a challenge, in the midst of the ashes, burnt-out cars and charred bodies along National Highway 236, to the public policies carried out in recent years in a country regularly confronted with forest fires.

After the crisis of 2008 and with the blessing of the Troika which arrived in 2011, politicians accelerated the “liberalization and dismantling” of forest management and protection services, in favour of a very profitable monoculture launched in the 1980s: the cultivation of eucalyptus trees, sharply criticized in the pages of the daily *Público* by João Camargo, researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences of Lisbon (ICS-UL).

This specialist in climate change explains for *Marianne* the obsession with “deficits” and the pressures of the magnates of the paper industry who flourish on the banks of the Tagus.

Patricia Neves - What climatic factors were involved in the fire of Pedrógão Grande?

João Camargo: There was a combination of the above-average temperatures (5 to 7 degrees more) recorded on Saturday 17 June when the fire started, the very strong winds and the ground affected by the drought.

Pedrógão Grande is also located in a thinly inhabited area, marked by the rural exodus, where the cultivation of eucalyptus is dominant... It is a kind of perfect cocktail that led to the worst outcome. The phenomenon is not new: in 2003-2005, Portugal had two apocalyptic years, very hot. At that time huge areas were on fire [in 2016, the country was also hard hit, especially the island of Madeira]. Compared to its neighbours with a similar climate (Spain, Greece, Italy and even France), Portugal is the country whose territory has burned the most. The affected areas were then quickly replanted, essentially with eucalyptus, the specificity of which is to grow again fairly quickly, without needing much looking after. So the fires are part of a cycle: the trees burn, new ones are planted, they grow... and if nothing is done, they are ready to burn again...

You rightly denounced in the daily *Público*, on Monday, the scale of the cultivation of eucalyptus in Portugal, an industry that counts for a great deal in the economy of the country. Explain it to us.

João Camargo: In my opinion, there is a correlation between the increase in the number of fires and the expansion of eucalyptus cultivation in Portugal [an expansion of 13 per cent between 1995 and 2010]. Agricultural land has gradually given way to a forested area, dominated first by pines and then by eucalyptus. It was precisely during this transition that there was an increase in the number of fires, whose intensity also increased [the leaves, the bark and especially eucalyptus oil are highly inflammable]. Today, eucalyptus represents nearly 30 per cent of tree species in Portugal. As a result, according to the latest official figures, released in 2010, 9 per cent of the territory (more than 800.000 hectares) was then covered with eucalyptus. Only Brazil, India, Australia and China exceed this figure. In proportion, however, if we take into account the area covered, Portugal is undoubtedly the country in the world with the most eucalyptus per square metre. This is partly due to the importance of the paper and pulp industry [mainly fueled by eucalyptus wood.], which represents one per cent of Portuguese GDP, despite the few direct jobs created.

According to you this industry has been lobbying and trying to influence legislators. How?

João Camargo: Take the controversial law decree n°96/2013, which liberalized considerably, in 2013 under the previous (right-wing) government, eucalyptus plantations. For example, for land of less than two hectares, a simple declaration is now sufficient for landowners wishing to invest in eucalyptus. However, this kind of land represents more than 80 per cent of the Portuguese forest area. All the environmental associations and other stakeholders, such as firefighters, denounced at the time this law, which also contributed to lifting some of the remaining restrictions. However, the present (left) government is now considering revoking the decree.

Nevertheless, the discussions that began almost a year ago were faced with huge opposition from the industrialists; who threatened to put an end to their investment in the country. The giant Navigator Company (formerly Portucel), the former public company that was privatized, is present in many countries [The Navigator Company recorded a turnover of 5.6 per cent in 2015, amounting to 1.6 billion euros]. Since then, the government, under pressure, has gradually softened its position on the subject.

Another element is the proposal to establish a “cadastro florestal”, a centralized public register, in order to identify and list all the owners. This register does not exist today in Portugal. It is a scandal. It has been at least twenty years since governments promised to establish it, but the idea provokes a lot of resistance. Perhaps because we will discover that the number of owners who are unidentified, who have died, emigrated, etc., leaving their land abandoned, is even higher than expected; or that the land is exploited by third parties or even companies without authorization. [The owners of one third of the Portuguese forest areas have not been identified so far. The register being proposed would cost 700 million euros].

What impact has the crisis, especially the injunction from Brussels on deficits, had on forest management and protection?

João Camargo: Portugal has stopped having a public forestry policy worthy of the name. One example is the successive cuts, first of all in the number of people employed [The number of forest rangers, for example, which had already begun to decline, fell from 1,200 under the previous left government to 317 last year, according to Francisco Louçã, from the Left Bloc]. The intervention of the Troika only accelerated this disengagement of the state; in addition it encouraged the liberalization of the sector. The forest guard corps, which is very active on the ground, was therefore dismantled, just like the old “Serviços florestais”, a major entity responsible for the management and protection of the forest, which no longer existed as such before the arrival of the creditors but which was subsequently, under the pressure of the Troika, severely restructured.

The Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture have in reality merged, and the “Serviços florestais”, now called “Autoridade florestal nacional”, have in turn been merged with the “Instituto da Conservação da Natureza. As a result, the number of people employed has decreased, the services are less specialized and less operational, especially in their capacity to carry out field operations. At the same time, in addition to these restructurings, the Troika has encouraged the government to liberalize not only labour and finance, but also the resources of the soil.

João Camargo was interviewed by Patricia Neves.

P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5064>

* This interview was published in the French magazine *Marianne* on 22 June 2017 and is available in French on ESSF also.