

Portugal (1974-1975): Remembering the Carnation revolution

Saturday 27 April 2024, by [FERNANDEZ Brais](#), [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2024).

This week sees the 50th anniversary of the Portuguese “Carnation” Revolution that erupted in 1974 and was finally tamed in 1976 with the election of a government led by Soares from the Socialist Party(SP). The moderate SP consolidated many reforms won in the previous two years but also restored the capitalist order.

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For those of us of a certain age the Portuguese events represented a hope that the revolutionary mobilisations we had witnessed in France, Italy and Prague in 1968/9 would be sustained and continued in a successful break with capitalism. I remember many comrades from the radical left went over to Portugal to observe first-hand the collapse of the old fascist regime and the inspiring examples of self-organisation in all sectors of society, from the peasants of the Alentejo, to the industrial areas of Lisbon and Porto and including the rank and file soldiers. In Britain and elsewhere in Europe the level of self-organisation through shop stewards and workplace committees was still very high compared to today. We had seen the miners defeat Heath's Tory government and the neo-liberal counter offensive led by Margaret Thatcher and Reagan was still to come.

Fifty years already... but the story is still worth re-telling and learning from. Revolutions are possible in Europe, they can emerge in ways we cannot always predict, the military officers played a key role in Portugal. The state is not all powerful. International processes always play a role - here it was the rise of the anti-colonial revolution against the Portuguese regime. Self-organisation always develops in these situations, deepening and politicising them is key to a left victory. The capitalists will contest hegemony with the insurgent masses not only through violence but by making concessions. They will build and use political parties like the social democrats to win support for a continuity of their system in different clothes.

The left can also fail in its strategy to unite the insurgency and provide an alternative political outcome. Correct slogans and programmes on their own are insufficient. The complex task of building a mass base and forming alliances requires a level of political leadership that has to be constructed patiently in the periods before a pre-revolutionary crisis breaks out.

The following is a slightly edited, translated version of Brais Fernandez's prologue to the book *The (pen)ultimate revolution in Europe - From the Carnation revolution to the neo-liberal counter revolution* by Francisco Louçã and Fernando Rosas published in Spanish by Critica & Alternativa (2024) - **Dave Kellaway**

The concept of "revolution" is undoubtedly one of the most controversial. Often it is trivialized by the ideology of "common sense", which associates it with superficial changes. The media proclaims "revolutions" in many aspects of our lives. A new commodity is advertised as revolutionary for example. Beyond these conceptions, the term revolution is also associated with structural, long-lasting changes that irreversibly modify history. This is the most common meaning in sociology.

However, from a political point of view, it is more useful to associate revolution with a juncture in which social contradictions are concentrated, in which hitherto absent actors burst into history. We can think of revolution as an opera or play staged in a theatre.

At any given moment, the actors perform the piece calmly, in a routine manner, while the audience, passively enjoys it. In that scene, only the audience and the actors exist. But suddenly, and unexpectedly, the theatre workers (back stage, front of house) get up on stage and begin to demand attention. They call for their share of the credit for the play: "Without us, this play can't happen!" Nobody pays them any attention, the actors/esses look at them with disdain, part of the audience boos. The workers open the theatre doors. Many more people come in than ever before to see a play. At a certain point, the audience and the actors have to (temporarily) leave the stage and the workers begin to perform their own version of the play.

However, in a revolution, as in the premiere of a play, no one knows the ending.

Thus, revolution is the entry into politics of those who make history on a daily basis, with their effort and their work, but who do not enjoy the wealth (economic, cultural, social) that they themselves generate. This is the idea of revolution as a fork in the road, a crucial choice, as "concentrated politics", in which history can go one way or the other.

Many historians of the ruling classes, see history from a positivist prism, that is, as an inevitable, linear development towards progress. However, when 1989 marked the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, bourgeois historiography was forced to respond to the phenomenon: what had happened, why was Louis XVI overthrown, how do we explain the guillotines, Sans-Culottes, the subsequent wars, the masses taking centre stage, the Jacobin leadership?

The dominant ideology, which as soon as it has become dominant ceases to be revolutionary, is thus forced to deny its own origins. In order to remain in power, it forgets its revolutionary origins, the barricades and mass uprisings. Revolutions are uncomfortable times for the ruling classes. Even when they use or ride them to conserve or reformulate their own power, they are felt as anomalies, full of barbarism that interrupt the "normal" course of history. A history characterized by a "natural" economic inequality but compensated by a corresponding tendency towards a political-representative equality embodied by liberal democracy.

The Carnation Revolution that broke out on April 25 1974 is not free from paradoxical judgments. It was experienced by the Portuguese bourgeoisie with fear, but at the same time it needed to intervene in it to derail it. All the parties or fractions made reference to "socialism". Social

democracy and the parties linked to the elites saw in the revolution a way to get rid of the old dictatorship. It was anachronistic and dysfunctional for the new forms of domination that Capital needed. On the other hand, a very important sector of the population, among whom a significant percentage of the working class and the army, adopted forms of democracy and popular power that put at risk, not only the political apparatus of the Salazarist dictatorship ("the regime"), but also the relations of exploitation and oppression on which the power of the oligarchy was based.

The Portuguese Revolution had no pre-ordained endgame: both the seizure of power by the working class and the neoliberal counterrevolution with democratic forms were both potential options. The revolution opened a confrontation that was not only present in "the political", understood as the sphere of representation, in the form of struggle between parties and personalities. It was also a conflict in the whole of society, in the form of struggle in the spaces of civil society that govern daily life. It took place in the living communities crossed by class contradictions in which social relations are generated: in the factories, the neighbourhoods and in sectors of the State apparatuses such as the military.

This force of the revolution, of the irruption of the people onto the political scene, has had consequences in the configuration of Portuguese politics after April 25. Not only in the Constitution of the regime, which in its origin, in its formal aspect, partially reflected the condensation of forces produced by the mobilization from below, although without touching the fundamental nodes of capitalist power.

Also, for example, it has affected the make-up of the political parties, with a strong pro-Soviet Portuguese Communist Party. It draws its strength and its capacity to resist the decline of "Marxist-Leninist" parties as a result of the fall of the Berlin wall through its generationally transmitted identification with the Carnations revolution. The same applies to the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc), one of the most important radical formations in Europe, which comes from Maoist and Trotskyist groups that began their journey in the heat of the revolutionary wave. Finally, Portuguese politics is defined by this revolution. Nobody denies it, because it is the founding event of modern Portugal, but each one gives it a different meaning: some, the radical or revolutionary left, see it as an unfinished work, which we have to take up again and conclude. Others, those at the top, see it as an uncomfortable moment in which they finally won and which they can now assimilate.

This book is about this tension between revolution and counterrevolution. Before commenting on it, let us recall a few facts.

Europe's (pen)ultimate revolution

On April 25, 1974, a military uprising put an end to the right-wing dictatorship that had ruled Portugal for 48 years under the name of "Estado novo". The government of Marcello Caetano (who would go into exile in Brazil, where he would die in 1980 without being tried), successor to the veteran Salazar, was ousted from power to the rhythm of the now famous "[Grandola Vila Morena](#)" [a popular song used on the radio as a signal for the military uprising]. [1] Thus began the period known as the "Carnation Revolution".

It may be useful to place the Portuguese Revolution in the international political context in which it took place. All over the world there was "a great disorder under heaven". The crisis of 1973 hit the process of capitalist accumulation. Colonial revolutions were culminating in processes of independence. In Europe, the long wave of anti-systemic agitation that began in 1968 called into question the prevailing model of development, seeking new ways of understanding and building socialism. While the most conscious supporters of capitalism presented themselves with more

homogeneous features (the famous triad of religion, family and property), socialism was divided among families, very poorly aligned with each other, with a common “ideological” objective but with many strategic differences: Maoists, pro-Soviets,, Guevarists, Trotskyists, left-wing socialists, anarchists...

All these issues had a decisive influence in Portugal, although the centre-periphery inequalities, were not only expressed in economic development, but also politically. In the countries of northern Europe a democratic model based on the integration of broad sectors of the subaltern classes but incapable of satisfying many of the needs of workers, women and youth was questioned. Whereas in the countries of the south (Greece, Spain, Portugal) the thread of resistance was strongly conditioned by the struggle against dictatorships that represented the interests of a minority military, religious and business caste but which dominated the entire structure of the State.

This meant that, from the outset, the struggle for the overthrow of the regime gave rise to frontal confrontations with and within the State apparatus, with elements of dual. The State appeared “naked” in the eyes of the population, not as the representative of the nation as a whole, but of a rich, parasitic, corrupt and incapable minority. Portugal experienced during the 1960s and 1970s a relatively powerful process of economic development, similar to that of Spain, although less explosive. For a sector of the bourgeoisie it was necessary to accelerate the economic and political connection with Europe, a process that would link Portugal to the European market and at the same time update the forms of political power. This sector sought ways of integrating of the working classes that would not alter the property structure, but would allow certain freedoms and spaces to organize dissent. However, another sector clung to the mechanisms of domination of the corporate state, with a posture very marked by its dependence on colonial markets and its fear of being absorbed by foreign capital.

From below, an incipient mobilization of the labour and student sectors appeared in the life of the country in parallel with economic development. Since the end of the 1960s, a new workers’ movement was formed through mobilization, with the founding of Intersindical, the embryo of what would become the future CGTP, Portugal’s main trade union. In 1973, more than one hundred thousand workers took part in strikes. The occupation of universities and the struggles of high school students followed one after the other. The Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), during the years of resistance to the dictatorship, was the hegemonic organization at the level of popular implantation, although progressively a radical left emerged which introduced new themes and perspectives. While not reaching the levels of the PCP, this new left was capable of dialoguing with, and implanting itself in, workers’ and students’ milieus.

However, we cannot forget that all social life in Portugal was marked by a harsh armed conflict aimed at maintaining the African colonies (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe), directly involving 10% of the active population. A conflict suffered by the popular classes and by the colonized countries, but which also eroded the dominant role of the ruling caste. The latter was bent on resolving the colonial conflict from a military point of view, an option that was beyond the reach of a country of Portugal’s size and resources and, undoubtedly, out of time in a context in which decolonization was an irreversible process at the global level.

This precarious balance between antagonistic social forces established in the years prior to the revolution would generate a sense of “end of cycle” in Portuguese society. Since the early seventies, the ruling class could no longer govern as it had done until then and, at the same time, the dominated classes did not accept to continue to be governed in the same way. The accumulation of internal contradictions opened the way to a regime crisis, which only needed a trigger to explode and open the way for the popular masses to actively intervene in national politics.

On April 25, 1974, a significant sector of the Portuguese army carried out the removal of the dictatorial government of Marcello Caetano. These officers, organized in the MFA (Movement of the Armed Forces), thus opened a crisis in the state apparatus, but their action unleashed all the energy and the yearning for freedom present in the Portuguese people. The situation became complex. The so-called "ongoing revolutionary process" began, in which classes, political tendencies and different conceptions of society struggled to convert their particular project into a national project for society as a whole. This confusion and these conflicting interests also cut across the MFA, divided between moderate sectors linked to Spínola (first head of government after the fall of the regime) and others more linked to the popular movements and the left that sought to organize a transition to socialism, such as the mythical Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho.

Despite the importance of the MFA, its role was conditioned by its nexus with the revolutionary masses, but also by the pressures it suffered from the bourgeoisie: only 400 of the 4000 officers that the Portuguese army had at that time belonged organically to the MFA. The military were the vanguard that initiated the Portuguese revolution, but they were undoubtedly responding to a much deeper movement of change in society. Undoubtedly the most fascinating thing that April 25th opens up is the process of popular self-organization that followed. The movement of "moradores" (neighbors who occupy dwellings and manage life in the neighbourhoods) appears. The workers' commissions (CT) arose, which were organized autonomously, involving different productive sectors, and which were configured as a unitary space for the workers beyond the different political tendencies. They carried out experiments in self-management against private property. The banks were nationalized by the workers themselves and the government has no choice but to sanction such action. Soldiers were not immune to this process of collective empowerment and form their own bodies, Soldados Unidos Vencerán (Soldiers United will Win -SUV), which led multiple popular demonstrations in uniform.

This report in the book by Daniel Bensaïd, Carlos Rossi (pseudonym of Michael Löwy) and Charles André Udry[[*Portugal: la révolution en marche*, Paris, C. Bourgois, 1975)], highlights the dynamics that marked the daily life of popular power, when the mass meeting was the basic form of social relations. It is worth quoting despite its length:

In a popular neighborhood of Lisbon, a mansion was occupied by the population. Immediately the furniture and objects were grouped together to return them respectfully to the owner: they only needed the walls and the garden. In the cellar they even found, and burned, some Nazi magazines from the 1930s [...] On Saturday the population of the neighbourhood was summoned for a general assembly in order to organize the occupation and elect the occupation commission. There were many women, serious with children asleep in their arms. There was a veteran of the Communist Party, imprisoned during the dictatorship and also a PCP militant with a very comical look who wanted to bring order to the debates. The chairing group on the platform was submerged by the assembly that gathered, questioned, discussed in groups [...]

First interruption: the arrival of the military police from the nearest barracks was announced. The soldiers in their leopard uniforms were on their way to clear the garden, where the children would play.. Second interruption: The arrival of the owner was announced! What a nerve! People crowded at the door and jostled to get him out. An argument ensued between two groups of women, the first pacifist and the other who wanted to lynch him. The owner was thrown out. Third interruption: a while ago a fat man had arrived, dressed in a yellow polo shirt, covered with PCP badges. And he started attacking everyone. Then they asked him: - Are you from the neighbourhood? - No. - In that case, go away or shut up.

In the meantime, there were two disputes. First of all, the question of whether the occupation should be aimed at creating a day-care centre or whether it should play a role of a political hub by publishing a newsletter and making contact with businesses in the neighbourhood. Those who defended the first position were in the minority. Next, on the status of the elected committee, the representative of the tenants' commission wanted the occupation to be placed under municipal authority. Another member of the PCP, supported by militant from the Internationalist Communist League, defended self-organization.

A motion was voted that ratified the expropriation of the building. Then the election of the commission took place. And it began by taking a census of the professions of the persons present in order to assign them tasks in fitting out the nursery.

I wanted to quote this long paragraph in order, through a concrete example, to describe the underlying logic, characteristic of every revolutionary process: the recovery of social relations by those at the bottom. The proposal of an alternative model of society to the capitalist one, liberating the collective and cooperation as opposed to competition. Of course, this process is neither irreversible nor free of contradictions, debates and disputes. Ideological differences, tactics, different factions of the same class, all are present but are unified in common experiences and spaces. The Carnation Revolution leaves us many examples of how popular power is constructed, which can be the basis of a socialist democracy. In this type of experience we also find an outline of administration, management and control arising from the base, which tries to embrace the whole of the social life of the country.

It is an outline of an alternative state project, built by the workers, incompatible with capitalist institutions, what in Leninist language has been called "dual power". The struggle between two legitimacies and two ways of managing collective life was, let us say it clearly, a struggle between two incompatible models. The revolution could only triumph if it staked everything on these embryos of a new state, on a new constitution, in its deepest sense, for the country. The counterrevolution could only triumph if it could win hegemony for its representative institutional model. It had to eliminate the active exercise of power from the citizenry and restored order in the workplaces and economy through which the power of capital is materially based. Here there is another fundamental question: the hegemony of the capitalist class must have a strong consensual foundation. It has to be accepted to a large extent by all parties, since its particular form of hegemonic articulation needs to present the interests of a social minority as the interests of the population as a whole.

Proletarian hegemony, on the contrary, needs to "decode" that fiction, building a broad, political, historical bloc, in alliance with other layers, that breaks the fiction of the "general interest", generating a new consensus that excludes the elites and composes through conflict what Gramsci would call a new moral direction for the country. The great battle of the Portuguese Revolution was to define who was "the motor" of the nation, its moral leadership, the "indispensable" class. While the ruling class accused the popular movement of sowing economic chaos (the Times went so far as to say that capitalism was dead forever in Portugal) there was an immediate and accurate response from the streets that "the greatest wealth of a people is its population".

These conflicts generated great concern throughout society. While for the ruling class these were times of great disturbance, for the oppressed they were times of happiness. Gabriel García Márquez wrote in those days that in Lisbon "all the people talk and nobody sleeps. There are meetings until late at night, the desks have the lights on until the wee hours of the morning. If anything, this revolution is going to increase the electricity bill". The revolution certainly achieved much more than that: social rights, freedoms, strengthening of a public sector that guaranteed a minimum wage in

kind for workers; but perhaps much less than it might have.

The Socialist Party (SP) led by Soares headed the reconstruction of capitalist stability and the Communist Party, without legitimizing the subsequent regime, never clearly supported the forms of new power promoted by the people. In 1975, in its newspaper *Avante* it described as “idealistic illusions” all that “which leads some sectors to see in the forms of popular organization the future organs of State power”. The extreme left and the most radicalized sectors of the popular movement made a final show of force through the candidacy of Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho in the 1976 presidential elections, who won 16% of the votes, but was unable to institutionalize the embryos of popular power emerging from below. This struggle for the leadership of the popular movement was a constant throughout the revolutionary process.

The SP, a party that barely existed before the fall of the dictatorship, was capable of gathering the democratic yearnings of broad sectors of the popular classes who saw it as a “European” alternative to the model proposed by the PCP, incapable of leaving behind its pro-Soviet schemas. The extreme left was hegemonized by Maoism (UDP, MRPP), grouping thousands of young students and workers, with delirious levels of pro-Chinese fanaticism and sectarianism towards the communist world, which they saw as the “main enemy”, all this combined with opportunist alliances with the SP. The MRPP, the main Maoist party, in which Durão Barroso was a militant, did not hesitate to support a conservative military man like Eanes and the SP in the 1976 presidential elections.

In spite of the fact that at certain moments the revolutionary left had influence in a decisive sector of the vanguard, relying on the radicalism of certain sectors of the working class and on very advanced experiences of struggle, it was not capable of articulating a strategy for taking power. Meanwhile, the SP built its hegemony on two social realities: a) the desire for social improvements within a democratic system shared by broad sectors of the population and b) the understanding by a sector of the elites that the counterrevolution would not be carried out “Chilean style”. Given the relationship of forces existing during the “Ongoing Revolutionary Process” (to use the expression of those years), a process of integration of the demands from below was necessary, making concessions that did not fundamentally touch the structure of capitalist reproduction.

And then... the neo-liberal counter-revolution

This book, also deals with what happened after the “ongoing revolutionary process” was unable to consolidate the anti-capitalist dynamic. The neoliberalism implanted in the West through the conservative counterrevolution led by Reagan and Thatcher has had devastating consequences in Portugal. It is not by chance that all the parties in Portugal claim ownership of the Carnation Revolution: for the parties of the elites it is an uncomfortable moment that must be reclaimed. For the PS it is a disorderly moment, a price to pay to get rid of the anachronistic dictatorship of Salazarism and to be able to build a model of capitalist domination integrated in Europe, with its liberal democracy and its structure of exploitation intact. For a certain left, the PCP, it is a memory that helps it survive, but which it is incapable of returning to in a self-critical manner. For the radical left, it is an incomplete event, a point from which to resume the struggle.

Thus, much of the dispute over the meaning of Portugal revolves around what the Revolution symbolizes. The writings of Fernando Rosas and Francisco Louçã, both leaders of the Bloco de Esquerda and Marxist intellectuals, analyse the meaning of the Portuguese Revolution, the powers it unleashed and the moments of rupture it generated. They also outline what have been the political and economic mechanisms on which the neoliberal counterrevolution was founded, such as austerity policies or attacks on wages, as well as the process of underdevelopment of Portugal. A book which

composes a complex picture of the dialectic between the attempts of the working classes to change the world at the base and the attempts of the elites to prevent it.

BRAIS FERNANDEZ, DAVE KELLAWAY

P.S.

- IVP. WEDNESDAY 24 APRIL 2024:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8499>
 - *Translated by Dave Kellaway from [vientosur](#).*
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Footnotes

[1] There were in fact two songs, see *The Guardian*, 21 April 2024 [How Portugal's 1974 Eurovision entry toppled the country's fascist regime](#). Editor's note