

Democracy and its Discontents in the Portuguese and Spanish Scenarios

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Even before last week's "Brexit", the "age of uncertainty" could be the title that best defines the unfolding 21st century, ever since the international crisis globalized economic and political tensions supposedly overcome by western democratic and capitalist evolution. It is undeniable that, after two centuries of political openness, civil rights conquest and liberty widening, there never was, globally, so many democracies; but it is also obvious that, aside the interwar period, there never has been such a widespread dissatisfaction towards democracy. That's why the debate is now centred on its new enemies and threats, eluding the wide possibilities of individual and collective improvement democratic systems offer and how, in the end, the worst democracy is still preferable to any utopian and/or authoritarian alternative.

In our post-European world, the EU still seems an oasis of peace and development. And inside the Iberian Peninsula, despite the lesser reputation held by the Latin south according to the European Weber-like division, there are two countries where democracy is an undisputed reality. Both Portuguese and Spanish live today a freer existence, with more abundance and security than their previous generations: paraphrasing Voltaire, Iberia may be not the best existing world but it certainly is, compared with its past, a very acceptable one.

International indicators are a testimony of this. In the World Economic Forum's Index, Portugal ranks 38 and Spain 33 in almost 150 countries. Within the five levels from the top best to the lower worst countries, both peninsular States are in the second cohort, after a first one featuring Northern Europe, USA, Canada, China, Singapore, Japan and Australia. In the Democracy's Index built by the British Economic Intelligence Unit, which lists 167 nations, Spain ranks

17, inside the top 20 “Full Democratic” countries; while Portugal occupies the 33rd place, in the cohort of the so-called “Weak Democracies”, but far above the “Hybrid” and the “Authoritarian Regimes”. This means that – quoting the American Freedom House – Portuguese and Spanish are amidst the 40% of world population living in democracy. And economically, according to the IMF, Portugal’s and Spain’s *per capita* GDP is higher than 80% of the world countries encompassing 85% of world population.

These figures are flattering if one recalls how a country’s place and ranking in the world are the outcome of an historical evolution. And what history reveals is that, contrasting with nations such as England or the USA, that have never lived under any other environment *but* democracy and capitalism for the last two or three centuries, Portugal and Spain are latecomers to both. Iberia went on a liberalising path all along the 19th century, attaining democratic stages in the final decades of their constitutional monarchies. But unfortunately, freedom and democracy did disappear from the Peninsula, subverted first, in Portugal, by the republican radicalism, the post-WWI crisis and the Military Dictatorship, and in Spain by the exhaustion of monarchic liberalism and the dictatorial rehearsal of the 1920s, and then lengthily eliminated, in Portugal by the coming to power of Salazar’s New State, and in Spain through the domestic quarrelling of the II Republic and the Francoist triumph, climaxing the dark 1930s. Absent from the so-called second wave of world democratization – the post-1945 one – Portugal and Spain would nevertheless pioneer the third wave, begun in Lisbon and followed by Athens and Madrid, in the mid 1970s, igniting a renewed democratic momentum on Europe and the West that Samuel Huntington has heralded as the driving dynamo leading to the collapse of Eastern Europe Communist dictatorships at the end of the 1980s.

A glimpse at the Portuguese and Spanish histories since their respective liberal revolutions in the early 19th century underlines how much present day Peninsular democracies are almost miracles and recent exceptions to an old rule – i.e., the difficulty to root a democratic paradigm of social and economic

progress in both countries, which were always poorer, more peripheral, more illiterate and more unstable than their Northern European peers. Indeed, Portuguese and Spanish contemporary histories have always oscillated between advances and defeats in liberty, at the pace of numerous cycles of revolutionary turmoil, civil war, coups and conspiracies, governmental and institutional instability, social violence and economic stagnation. For decades, the Iberian environment was never favourable to the blossoming and consolidation of mature democracies – and in this, the 20th century was even a backlash compared with the 19th century, during which, for quite some years, liberty and progress were the living pattern of the existing liberalisms.

Some historical numbers are elucidatory. From April 1974 until today Portugal had 27 provisional and constitutional governments. In Spain there were 47 governments since the Constituent Assembly back in 1977 until our days, although the total of Prime-Ministers there is less than in the Portuguese case (6 names from Adolfo Suárez to Mariano Rajoy against 13 names from Mário Soares to António Costa). These figures don't fall far from what can be observed in other European democracies in recent decades. What is worth stressing here is the Iberian *improvement* regarding its own past. Not counting the half a century of dictatorial immobility at the hands of Salazar and Franco, Portugal registered 135 governments all through the 112 years spanning from its Liberal Revolution in 1820 to Salazar's ascent to power in 1932 – an average of one government every 10 months – whereas from the Spanish Liberal Revolution of 1812 to the end of the Second Republic, in 1939, there were 178 governments in 127 years, averaging one government for each 8.5 months. What especially turns the last 40 years of Iberian history into a truly new era, different from those past times of anarchy and authoritarianism, is thus the political and institutional ambiance, since the agenda of post-Salazarist and post-Francoist democratic normalization, followed by the disciplinary challenges of European newly acquired membership, tamed the threat of endemic constitutional struggle, military 'putschism' and violent disagreement opposing irreconcilable political forces.

In a compared study of European revolutions, Charles Tilly has signalled that, between the end of the 18th century and the mid-20th century, the Iberian Peninsula registered 94 years of revolutionary episodes, above the 71 years of the Balkans/Hungary, and far above the 14 years of France, the 13 years of Russia, the 12 years of the British Isles (and not only England), and the 8 years of the Low Countries/Germany. This Iberian pattern of ‘an extraordinary succession of revolutionary situations’, since the wars against France till the 1930s, had, as Charles Tilly sums up, a macro consequence, namely the ‘slow development of liberal institutions’, that is, the frailty and superficiality of democracy. And this was as much a cause as a consequence of other structural characteristics of Iberian life, such as the chronic public financial deficit, the social backwardness, the ideological conflicts and the ongoing factionalism of political agents, all seemingly incapable of any constructive dialogue.

Such a vicious historical circle was only superseded by the European democracy in which we have been living for the past generation. And because it has existed just over the last generation, it’s understandable how Iberian democracies may be more defenceless than others when economic crisis and an unstable global environment are ever present coordinates. In January 1981, on leaving office a few weeks before the neo-Francoist attempted coup d’état, Spanish Prime-Minister Adolfo Suárez declared that he did not wish the newly won democracy to be just ‘*un paréntesis en la historia de España*’. Can this gloomy perspective become real in Portugal or Spain? Facing the catalogue of threats overshadowing everyday life in free countries – crisis, middle class impoverishment, social tension, political instability, corruption, civic anomie or protest, the ascent of extremism and terrorism – are Iberian democracies, younger and weaker than others, on the verge of collapsing?

I would say that the best answer could be a ‘No, but...’ For both countries, EU membership is a powerful stabilizer, and despite the electoral growth of anti-establishment political forces, Portugal and Spain are still immune to various tensions surfacing elsewhere. And what the two peoples have attained in terms

of progress, well-being and security in the last 40 years should indeed immunize them against any antidemocratic adventure. That said, though, there are signs of how much the Iberian mood has been showing less enthusiasm towards the possibilities of democracy. The last Euro barometer sets a scale rating the democratic satisfaction from level 1 (totally dissatisfied) to level 4 (very satisfied). Portuguese public opinion surveyed sets on 2.4 and the Spanish on 2.3 of that scale. The growth of abstention in all electoral acts is another evidence of the distance gapping societies from their political institutions: actually, only 11% of the Portuguese and a meagre 7% of the Spanish state their confidence in the ruling institutions. To add up, in Portugal, a recent survey by the Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos explored the feelings of the 18-29 age group towards democracy: accordingly, 56% of the young adults stated 'disillusion', 53% 'suspicion', 48% 'hope', 34% 'dissatisfaction', 31% 'incomprehension', 26% 'indifference', and only 15% 'pride' or 'satisfaction'.

In a world that seems sometimes at war, and inside a EU undoubtedly in the midst of thick uncertainty, how can the elder be convinced that the present is still better than the past, and the younger (who have no recollection of the dictatorial periods) that the present can be the antechamber of a better future? What can and should, focusing the Iberian case, Portuguese and Spanish political deciders do?

National sovereignties are intertwined within the EU membership and with a global insertion in the world. After centuries of distances and rivalries, broken by occasional proximities and friendship, in their very temperamental relationship, Portugal and Spain have consolidated their democracies, side by side, in the 1970s and 80s, and joined together, in 1986, the then EEC, inaugurating what former Spanish Ambassador to Lisbon, Alberto Navarro, defined in 2010 as '*la mejor etapa de nuestra historia común*'. The cycle of economic boom and fast convergence of the peninsular 'good students' towards their European peers has slowed and even reversed at times since the beginning of our century. But side by side, the two countries changed manifold and at a

fast pace for the better under the European influx – in the various domains of politics, institutions, economy, culture, mentalities, etc.

In a Europe re-centred and reoriented towards the East and in the context of the global crisis begun in 2008, the call should therefore be for a closer collaboration between the two states and societies, through which geographical contiguity, common resources and political similarities could strengthen shared positions, valorising the Peninsula in Europe and as a hub of the European relation with the former historical extensions of Lisbon and Madrid – that is, Africa and Latin America. This is *not* a question of defending Iberianism in that old unionist sense of border erasing or the absorption of one country by the other; but rather of upholding – like the Portuguese hispanophile intelligentsia did in the past – an Iberianism made of complementarities, a peninsular alliancism, that through ‘coopetition’ could reinforce Portuguese and Spanish positions, avoiding isolation, building scale gains and assuring a larger competitiveness to a united – though not and never unified – Peninsula.

Portugal needs some urgent reforms – mainly the State reform and the rewiring of politics and society – and to cut short its most serious problems – chiefly the chronic public debt, historical legacy of an all-too centralized State. And the country also needs a new international outlook, more urgent since the “Brexit”, because the British departure from the EU will push Portugal to look for closer friends while maintaining its Atlantic nature. That outlook could perhaps start towards neighbouring Spain, which I think is not a threat to national sovereignty but rather an escape way from periphery and crisis. Seen from Lisbon, Spain can certainly be is a useful rival, a benchmark encouraging the Portuguese to do better, and an ally, in a new context of Iberianism. Whatever the future Spanish governmental solution may be, it is also important for the neighbouring country to have a lusophile power in Madrid, nurturing mature interrelations with Lisbon, and thus empowering the Peninsula in Europe, where leading voices and destiny-setting will now be tested to the limit.

In the Iberian Peninsula, as in any other part of the free world, the problem of democracy is as much political or economic as it is sentimental. People demand everything from democracy and only praise it when it works – the grand majority considering that it only works as long as democracy provides liberty to all and a large portion of Heaven on Earth. Because humanity is healthily imperfect, we're asking the impossible. In the end, what is important is to emphasise, every time and everywhere, that one should cherish democracy, fight for it and stand by it *even* when it appears to be malfunctioning. Because, as the Spanish statesman who gives his name to our session once recalled, echoing Sir Winston Churchill's aphorism, "*el mejor sistema de todos los posibles, con todas las imperfecciones que existen, es un sistema democrático*".