Patrick Lawrence

Notes on the Revolução dos Capitâes.

I quite surprised myself this past week. Thursday, 25 April, came and went and I failed to notice until a friend reminded me: This was the 50th anniversary of the democratic revolution in Portugal, known variously as the Captains' Coup for those who led it or the Revolution of Carnations for the flowers people placed in the barrels of soldiers' guns as they guarded the streets of Lisbon.

The Portuguese revolution meant a great deal to me at the time, and it still does. How could I have forgotten its Golden anniversary?

There is a personal aspect to this. When I flew from New York to Lisbon in the spring of 1975, the fate of the revolution still unsettled, it was my first outing as a correspondent. Portugal was instantly a very young journalist's 24–hour classroom. Now it is something more, something not so personal merely to me. To look back after 50 years on the fall of Europe's longest surviving dictatorship is to note how drastically Europe's political culture, and the West's altogether, has changed—and not, I will say immediately, for the better.

The Revolution of Carnations brought the regime of António de Oliveira Salazar and his successor, Marcelo Caetano, to an end after 42 years—48 if we count the presidency of Salazar's predecessor, an army general named Óscar Carmona. This was an obvious triumph for the Portuguese. Salazar had fashioned a corporatist dictatorship, the Estado Novo, that was in no respect *novo*. *Deus, Pátria e Família* was its national motto. Salazar was heavily dependent on his secret police, the PIDE, to sustain a regime of repression that was, if short on *novo*, very long on repression. Although he had no use for either Fascism or the Reich, Salazar supported Franco as the *generalissimo* subverted the Spanish Republic a few years after he, Salazar, took office in 1932.

How well I recall my arrival in Lisbon. I had traveled from the French border across Spain during what turned out to be Franco's final months, and a more downcast people I had never seen as my train, a cheap local, stopped in more stations than I could count. But as I crossed into Portugal at Vilar Formoso and trained through Coimbra, the celebrated university town, I was suddenly a stranger arriving at a boisterous party. The *Revolução dos Capitâes* was so-called after a group of army officers serving in the failing African colonies, fed up with settler-colonial violence, retuned to bring down Caetano. And the Portuguese instantly and vigorously embraced the project.

The Salazar–Caetano decades had left Lisbon looking like something out of a García Márquez novel—a *fin de siècle* backwater smothered in *saudade* and Iberian Catholicism. But dozens of political parties and *movimentos* had sprouted like spring flowers in the year since the revolution. A collective embrace of unfamiliar freedoms gave the effect of Jack springing out of his box. I could count neither the new political parties nor the vast variety of well– and badly done newspapers fighting their political corners on each *página um*. At the Rossio, beating heart of the capital, the political chatter began at sunrise and went on well into the evening.

What I recall most vividly now was the state of near-total uncertainty that was everywhere evident as I made my way around the country. This seemed to me a rare and salutary interim. So fundamental a condition rendered people acutely alive. It reflected, above all, an embrace of risk. A kind of power falls to those courageous enough to accept that their future remains to be determined and lies in their hands. I, too, found a vitality in the life around me I have seldom known since.

There was no doubting or debating the influence of the Portuguese Communist Party and its stoic secretary-general, Álvaro Cunhal, who had spent many years underground and many more in prison during the Salazar–Caetano years. The

PCP's popularity created considerable anxiety among the surviving reactionary circles in Lisbon and, far from least, in Washington.

But the thought of a Soviet proxy in southwestern Europe was a monumental misread, in my view then and now—typical of the prevalent Cold War paranoia. Cunhal's loyalty to Moscow was obvious, but it was a remnant of his younger years, as I understood him, and the sentiment of a figure who had never held power. Eurocommunist leaders were then emerging in Spain, France, and Italy—three Latin nations, or in France's case partly Latin. In my estimation, Cunhal would have taken his place among them had the formidable apparatus behind him carried the PCP to power.

The Portugal I saw and reported was struggling to become a nation of its own making—neither Moscow's nor Washington's. Its people had come through the revolution with uplifted eyes, their legible preferences running to nonalignment and one or another kind of social democracy. But this was not to be. During what the Portuguese called the *verão quente*, the hot summer of 1975, the Central Intelligence Agency engineered a covert operation that gave the premiership to Mário Soares, a right-wing Socialist perfectly happy to collaborate with the CIA, maintain the nation's place in NATO, and altogether preserve Portugal's Western tilt.

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Who could possibly argue that the Portugal of Soares and his successors is not vastly, entirely preferable to the dictatorship the Captains brought down 50 years ago? Any such thought is inconceivable. But there are other matters to consider now that the Revolution of Carnations has marked its 50th birthday.

The events of 1974 and 1975 in Portugal seem to me an early case—early in our present era—of what we might call political containment. In American terms, the Portuguese aspired to a popular democracy but got, courtesy of the

Americans and their local collaborators, an elite democracy. I may risk misinterpretation here in consequence of having witnessed many of the events I describe in brief, but it seems to me … How to put it? … we are all Portuguese now in that those who purport to govern us are no longer dedicated to honoring popular preferences so much as containing them—and in too many cases to count, subverting them, as Soares and the CIA did in Lisbon a half-century ago.

As I look back this week on the revolution and its aftermath, I must also mourn the mood of quietism that has since overcome most of us in the West. We, most of us, seem supine as those in high office presume no longer to govern us so much as to rule us. The bracing political tumult I saw in Portugal is unimaginable now—in Portugal or anywhere else in the West. What has become of our political culture? And the salutary embrace of uncertainty that I saw, understood as essential to any meaningful advance or transformation: How and when did we Westerners become so paranoically averse to risk?

In a commentary marking the revolution, published on 25 April in *The Guardian*, a political scientist named Vicente Valentim remarks, "As collective memory of the dictatorship becomes increasingly distant, the mobilising force of democracy as an ideal is also starting to fade." This is a good phrase, I must say: The Portuguese I knew were indeed mobilized by an ideal. But from this point on in his commentary Valentim, who was born in the 1990s, reveals himself to be frightened to death of ideals of any kind.

His concern is the appearance in Portugal of a party called Chega, which seems to be a perfectly predictable Portuguese variant of Le Pen's Rassemblement National or Alternative für Deutschland. Noting that Chega's popular support has grown from less than 2 percent five years ago to 18 percent in a general election last month, Valentim sees this as a fretful challenge to the post–April 25 "two-party model," meaning a centre-left party, the Socialists, and a centre-right party, the Social Democrats. This is a Portuguese version of what we call in

America the politics of “Tweddle-dee or Tweedle-dum,” wherein the needle measuring the spectrum of acceptable opinion can move a couple of degrees either side of zero and no more.

If I had a chance to do so I would advise Professor Valentim to stand on his head so that his thinking might turn upside-down, too. If Portuguese democracy cannot manage the minority presence of a right-wing populist party, it seems to me not much of a democracy. Equally, the thought that the revolution was fought for the “two-party model” Valentim favors is simply preposterous.

What has happened to our political culture? What has happened to our fear-filled, risk-averse souls? My reply to both questions is the same: Vicente Valentim is what has happened. He is not what *os capitães* had in mind when they returned from Africa to bring down a dictatorshiip—of this I am quite certain. But he walks the same earth and breathes the same air as anyone reading this comment. He is what we have become, our public selves, a half-century on from that admirable time.

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