



REGIONAL AND LOCAL RESPONSES IN PORTUGAL

**IN THE CONTEXT OF
MARGINALIZATION
AND GLOBALIZATION**

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**THE IBERIAN PENINSULA AS A MARGINAL TERRITORY.
A READING AFTER THE BOOK “A JANGADA DE PEDRA”⁸
(BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO)**

1. This book, this title, this assignment ... in this Commission⁹

In Portugal, one still talks little about Europe. There are political and intellectual elites that are concerned about this subject and discuss it (especially at election time) essentially over the implications of belonging to a Union where everyone works towards common goals. However, and the high abstention demonstrated in the last European elections, Portuguese people show a disbelief in politics and, perhaps, in the exciting “Europeistic” ideas that mediated the accession process to the former EEC (European Economic Community). Plunged, or maybe more and more submerged in a severe economic crisis with social blemishes, the country wonders more and more about its position in the continent and in a union that has just been reborn with the entrance of ten new Eastern European countries.

Between the possible theorization about Portugal’s marginality and the feeling that we already are marginal there is a thin line. Saramago transmits, in this book, two pertinent ideas: the first is about considering Portugal a marginal territory, especially because it is bonded to latent inaction in Europe and in the Union and, because of that, Portugal should ally itself with Spain, its geographical and historical partner. The second is concerned with the

⁸ Saramago, José (1996) – *The Stone Raft* – Harvest Books, USA.

⁹ IGU C08.27 Commission on Marginalization, Globalization, and Regional and Local Responses. Stirling Meeting, August 2004.

“absorption” of an active and self-sufficient role of this marginal territory, from a defensive position contrary to the “Europeistic” ideas. It is a critique and a “re-representation” of the Iberia’s position in Europe and in the world. Intentionally or not, the truth is that this is not a new idea: the metaphor of the stone raft (*Jangada de Pedra*), applied to the geographical space of the Iberian Peninsula has a long tradition dating back to Strabo’s time.

SEIXO (1999) mentions that the re-peopling of the “new world”, formerly considered the “marginal world”, is constituted from a geographical construction of that uncommon space which, by utopic demand, has to be an island. An island means isolation, removal from the Other, not only from what it has that is good, but mainly from what it has of the ominous.

The Raft (*Jangada*) will be not only the vehicle of separation, but also a bridge to a possible new reality geographically removed from the connotation of marginality. Stone (*Pedra*) is the symbol of robustness, but a robustness meaning the ability to start all over again, perhaps using the roots; it is the symbol of solidity of character, of the solidity of knowing what you want and what you do not want.

Jangada de Pedra is a political tale about the role of the Iberian Peninsula in the world through the “condemnation” of Portugal and Spain to sharing the same fate. It questions what is established, from law and customs to geographical coordinates themselves! It is a book by an author that ranges himself against an entity, in this case Europe, which imposed more and more on a Peninsula “torn away” from the continent. We say Europe because the author puts two concepts together: “Europe” as such, and “Europe” as the EEC. If this phenomenon was deliberate we do not know. One can read it as an attitude of indifference, revenge towards a continent that all too often sees Portugal as a province of Spain... But, does Saramago believe in Europe or is it the other way around?

2. Brief presentation of the book: contextualizing a time, writing a story

When this book was written, times were difficult, which could have influenced the construction of its plot. The death of Sá Carneiro, the military

actions of some political groups, the successive governments, and the dissolution of parliament in 1982 created a climate of political instability, which, allied to a serious financial and economic crisis, left Portugal structurally weakened. In the rest of the world the Cold War left suspicion, creating a schizophrenic attitude in the western world in relation to the eastern bloc (and vice versa) based on tension, suspicion of the Other and the fear of a(n) visible/invisible enemy.

MATOS (2001) says that as far as Portugal is concerned the “light at the end of the tunnel”, or, rather, the escape to a peripheral condition, comes with the possibility of joining the EEC, since this institution was giving more and more proof of credibility and balance. To the national governments it became an amazing icon if we wanted to get out of the multi-sectoral crisis that the country was going through. The preparation for accession to the EEC was made with great enthusiasm and mainly with hope of a more stable future. But not everyone was confident and optimistic about the future: the fear of submitting to the “powerful” and “stronger”, the fear of compromising identity, the fear of perpetuating/increasing the marginal character of the territory seem to have been enough motives for Saramago to write this work.

We have Portuguese and Spanish peoples that are separated from Europe from a physical/geographical point of view. Themes like the marginal character of the Peninsula, the introspection of its actual identity, its reformulation, the fear of being dependent on the continent, the geographical location/positioning of the Peninsula, the relation between the two Iberian peoples, the vision of Europe are all dealt with in the book, while the drifting goes on.

The book starts with the activation of a fault in the Pyrenees, which slowly leads to the separation of the Iberian and continental blocs, that is, the detachment of the two Iberian countries: the Peninsula turned into an island (geographically speaking), tracing an autonomous route in the eyes of science. Saramago describes this route through the eyes of six characters (three men, two women and a dog), Portuguese and Spanish, from different parts of the Peninsula, outlining a common goal, which is to see where the separation took place. From south to north, they start a common journey

in which they reflect on their personal, intimate stories, with systematic stories of what goes on around them, especially the reactions from the Peninsula, Europe, America and rest of the world.

3. The Iberian Peninsula as marginal territory

3.1 The course of the displacement

The author uses the geographical argument (Wegener's plate theory) to free the Iberian Peninsula. The isostatic balance is expressed in both vertical and horizontal movements. The continental drift proposed by Wegener in 1912 acknowledged only one immense continent (Pangaea) that split up to produce the continental arrangement we know today (DERRAU, 1965). What happens in the book is the continuation, by natural (human?!) will of this evolution, which results in the drift of the Iberian Peninsula, where we can see several stages:

(1st stage) – Separation from the continent

According to SEIXO (1999), the story begins like a parabola due to a fracture that is responsible for the beginning of the journey on open sea searching for a freeing identification. There is a right place and a right time, according to this author, and it arrived without anyone noticing, so that the fact of the Iberian Peninsula breaking away from the continent caught everyone by surprise. Maybe this reaction was triggered by the violent separation through the Pyrenees, as well as the strict refusal of the “mighty” European Union.

In addition it led to panic situations, which made all the tourists as well as the inhabitants of the Peninsula, run away. This displacement does not seem to happen by chance: the perfection of the cracks confuses the observer, who tries to find explanations as to its cause and who was responsible for it... nature or human engineering? However the regular use of popular proverbs throughout the story, trying to explain the situation, suggests that the Peninsula's population, not consciously, was expecting something like this to happen.

There is also a certain fear that the Peninsula could drown, so much so that studies about its structure are undertaken. Will there be the shadow of a new Atlantis? Or is it the fear of living without its “umbilical cord”? These doubts and fears are cleared away as long as the Peninsula floats away from the continent and the notion of drift sets in. After all, a nation of seafarers should not fear the sea.

(2nd stage) – Colliding with the Azores

The drift goes on, now towards west. The preoccupation becomes evident, soon as everybody realizes that a collision with the Azores is inevitable. However, this is an ambiguous situation because on the one hand the collision could be a disaster, but on the other it would stop the drift. In this stage the EEC and the USA offer help and support to the Peninsula, which is, according the author, nothing more than defending their interests, since when the Peninsula changes course and does not hit the archipelago the positions change. Anyway, the Portuguese archipelagos are seen as misguided areas of the Iberian “mother” (LLOPIS, 1999), maybe influenced by the fact that they are autonomous regions. In this case, the notion of marginality is not that evident because by their very insular nature they are in an advanced stage of evolution, that is, they are geographically independent of any territory where this comparison would be possible.

(3rd stage) – Towards the USA

The Peninsula takes a new course towards USA. Given this the author makes a few comments about the orientation of the Peninsula, presenting some theses:

1st Thesis: There could be a random course, which would mean drifting;

2nd Thesis: There could be a course of small passages culminating in direct angles, what means that the Peninsula would sooner or later be back in its space, which would support the idea that the Peninsula was “feeling like” a marginal territory;

3rd Thesis: There could be a magnetic repulsion device... Europe could be repudiating a territory that it did not want;

4th Thesis: There could be an “own will” device, that is, the people want the Peninsula to break away from the continent, which corresponds to the lines of thinking expressed above.

Whether it was by the people’s will, by nature or by Europe’s will, the truth is that the Peninsula, albeit considered as a marginal territory, never stopped being the target of some interests, because it represents strategic power and this raises the question of the relativity of the marginal issue: what is a marginal territory? What are the criteria that make it one? SEIXO (1987) says that “A Jangada de Pedra” shows us a mode of “rupture power”. When the raft is heading towards the USA, Europeans and Americans enter into a game of advantages and safeguards that do not please the “raft”. Maybe because of that, showing its refusal to be subjugated, the “raft” spins around in a way that causes the USA to start feeling threatened, changing its previously expressed position.

The Peninsula starts its journey south until it stops. We do not know the exact coordinates where it stops. However, it seems to stop somewhere east of Central America... perhaps near Cuba? We cannot help thinking, perversely, that the author (according to his political affinity) would think that this was the right place for the Peninsula to stay. Today, due to his world convictions and global theory, maybe he would not stick to his choice. It is good that it is an “open ended” story. This way the Peninsula can change its course. This separation and the actual geography of the displacement is like calling, or drawing attention to the south, more specifically to the overseas role of the Iberian people (LLOPIS, 1999). But let us call it “Peninsula” or “Island”; the first for speaking purposes, the second if we want to be scientifically correct. The truth is that the space questions itself, as well as its relation to the continent, improving its standards of geographical localization. Anyway, the ending, as mentioned, is open... is there a place in the world for this “Peninsula”? And where is it?

3.2 The critical overview of Europe

An entity suffers due to the separation: the actual “physical” Europe, that is, the territory. What seems sure is that the human part of both continent and peninsula do not seem uncomfortable with the situation generated by this phenomenon, neither the “continental Europeans”, nor the “peninsular Iberians”. The EEC shows interest only in safeguarding its economic interests, without looking at the true consequences of this dismembering. And the Peninsula seems to be solitary given that not only the EEC but NATO, too, and later the USA and Canada, reveal themselves to be defenders of their own advantages, showing willingness to help (in the case of the last two countries) when they could benefit from this situation. REIS (1998) explains some of the author’s motivations for this resignation by revealing some of the conversations that he had with Saramago: the author of this book believes that “Europe” is a big mistake, it is something that will cost us and that he cannot take it. A “tendency to facilitism” is highly ominous, and the truth is that there was the perception that “Europe” was going to “carry us whenever we had difficulties”. Retracing the course of story of this book, in which, before the physical dismembering, we are “abandoned” by the continent, there seems to be some kind of “lesson” or “moral” from which we should learn to warn us in the future about the attitude that Europe might adopt towards the Peninsula as marginal territory.

But the inhabitants of the Peninsula seem to wish for this separation. Destined to suffer, this seems the ultimate chance for freedom, an attempt to be reborn, to restart, or, in the “Portuguese fatalistic style”, to drift unstopably around the world. The truth is that the Peninsula has always felt far removed from Europe, in a marginal position, so much so that not even with the drift they feel further from the continent... Physical proximity would not mean, in this case, cultural affinity, a common identity. That is why this phenomenon of breaking away confirms the split. The Peninsula seems to have an independence. Assuming that no island or continent floats, this situation reveals the independence and the marginal identity of the Peninsula and its inhabitants. Could it have stayed united with a continent that intended to subjugate it? This separation may be unconscious in character

since it could be the materialization of the innermost desires of a people that is not satisfied with the union with continental Europe.

However, to what point did Europe miss, is it missing or will it miss the Iberian Peninsula? There is a rather interesting episode in the story that incorporates the nature of the perverse need in urgency cases: at certain time we stand before a Dutchman and a Swede who, escaping from a territory that is literally adrift, see in a small boat and a Portuguese boatman the only way to safely reach land. After a “game of strength”, it is the Portuguese who wins, saving the two foreigners from the “insular Peninsula”. They are citizens of two of the most developed countries in Europe and who saved them was an insignificant country, in which there is little to believe... This Peninsula might have a role in the great European project after all. But throughout the book the author gives the idea of a game of interests and power, dominated by a permanent subservience that won't let the “small countries” arise.

If, at first sight, the Peninsula needed Europe, in truth, Europe needed Iberia. We do not understand what kind of dependency would mediate this relationship: an historical argument seems too thin to validate the relationship, at a time when other motives seem stronger and more valid to consummating connections. Interests related to the geostrategic situation seem to be worth much more, even calling into question the reversibility of the value given to the Peninsula. Is the Iberian Peninsula necessary to Europe? The answer seems difficult, and when given, has a disparaging meaning, that it only has importance when it is convenient.

But the truth is that from the beginning of the story the dividing designation “Europeans” and “People of the Peninsula” is noticeable. The second can be the first, but the first cannot be the second, whether they like it or not. It is interesting to consider that inside the peninsular inhabitant's group there are two distinct subgroups: those who ran away and chose to live in Europe, and those who stayed faithful to the Peninsula. However, the idea to bear in mind is that a physical and human separation is assumed from the beginning, as though there was an incompatibility in terms of culture, identity and way of life. The Iberians believe that they are the targets of the first “amputation”, since the Italian Peninsula may be the next

to “disconnect” from the continent. In the end, the obsession with making a “pure Europe” may mean that it will be confined to one only country, Switzerland... This affirmation has a sarcastic character, looking like a warning, foretelling that those who someday “let” this happen to the Peninsula will also suffer that situation... In the book there is a clear distinction between northern and southern peoples: although the latter is comprised of Portugal and Spain, Italy starts to be included. However, this attempt to obtain a “pure Europe” from geographic scissions seems to be “poison in the remedy”, since there will be a “self-elimination” process with Switzerland remaining at the top.

What about the future? There seems to be no fear about the separation (at least for those who stayed): the identity remains intact and the language issue comes to prove it. This argument that was raised by the situation reveals a great notion of linguistic unity: not wanting to use English (a more and more universal language) seems to symbolize an “anti-cultural-absorption”, that is, there is a rejection of the Other. If the European spirit is characterized by multiculturalism, by diversity of influences, by multiplicity of origins, in the Peninsula seems to be a rejection of that same spirit! A situation of “cultural isolationism” looks like the desired goal in this story.

And how could we live in a context of this kind? For no matter how “insignificant” and “marginal” we are, is there not a need to give and receive? If such osmosis were to happen, the future could be compromised since stagnation and “intellectual paralysis” could take root. But, the Iberian people do not fear that will happen because, according to Saramago, we never felt like Europeans. In the final analysis the fact that there was a “rupture” has led to a situation of living in a new world, on a new continent. The world that is told is a minimal and reduced world, once that it is considered as being the own space of the “peninsular island”. The “Iberocentric” feeling assumes alarming proportions, probably leading to an “Iberian ghetto”. It is right that the escape from subjugation is a noble sentiment, but in its extreme it could assume undesirable proportions. To Saramago, it all seems to be worthwhile, given the marginal Peninsula’s situation.

3.3 The conceptual debate

3.3.1 The border

Defining this concept is a rather complex task: RIBEIRO (2001) says that when we talk about “border” we are looking at a significance whose “floating” is source of ambiguities that can only be solved with a redoubled effort at contextualization. In this case Saramago uses the word to exacerbate the division.

An unusual situation is recounted in the book, it is the formation of the “Permanent Commission for the Border’s Limits” to solve each country’s issues (Portugal and Spain) about the crack(s) that caused the separation of Peninsula from the continent. Two aspects emerge: if we think about the words “Permanent” and “Limit” from a temporal point of view they mean “lasting” and “continuous”, while from a spatial point of view they mean “confining” and “hermetic”. Is not this a portrait of a Europe whose values defend multiculturalism, free movement of goods, people and information, but where, deep down, these are confined to a group of regions closed in themselves?

This situation seems to please to the inhabitants of the Peninsula, since it goes beyond the notion that “border” presents as a “limit” that defines the “house of each person”. It thus gives its inhabitants a feeling of (relative!) comfort and safety. However, where is there the need of a “border”? It is the characters themselves who, throughout the book, abolish the reference border/borders marked on the map which guides them. The border they mean is the Portuguese/Spanish border. CARAMELO (2003) says this “abolition” is thanks to a collective memory fact. According to the author we have one of the most ancient borders in the world! In the context of this book it seems clear that as far as the Iberian countries are concerned a border does not make sense because they have more in common with one another than with the rest of the European countries (Iberism!). RIBEIRO (2001) says the abolition of borders is concomitant with the displacement and its redefinition. So, by reading this story we realize that this “transfrontier mutation” transforms the Peninsula in a common home, in a fortress of

safety and communion, unlike Europe that seems to have no such capacity, according to the author (Euroscepticism!), maybe because people tend to alter the frontiers that Nature delineated. Is this separation a lesson from Nature against this situation? Building the Other, means building a border that separates us from it. A border is an imaginary line across which a notion of difference is projected and over which an affirmation of identity is possible. Even if the political border disappears, in the Peninsula there will always be a One and an Other, unless the two entities can merge into a single one. But when there is a notion of past so strong and well defined, it only seems possible in Saramago's "real utopia".

3.3.2 Population mobility

It is useful to briefly consider the population movements observed in the Peninsula, from the separation up to when the drift seems to stop. We will observe more than one "exodus":

1st exodus – tourists who ran away from the Peninsula, frightened by the separation phenomenon;

2nd exodus – by a group of rich and powerful indigenes who ran away, frightened by the drift;

3rd exodus – can be divided into two stages:

1st stage: escape of the poorer segment of the population to the interior of the Peninsula, afraid of the collision with the Azores;

2nd stage: escape of the middle/high class segments of the population from the Peninsula, for the same reason.

The slow evacuation leads to a social homogenization of the Peninsula, or, rather, it seems to be an "ideological purification" of the slogan "do the same as us, choose Europe".

They have, absolutely without any question, contempt for the condition of peninsular Europeans. So the escape of these members leads to a community with patriotic love for its country and identity. But did those who stayed do so of their own free will? There seem to be three distinct groups:

- Those who accepted the fatality of fate;
- Those who decided to stay (the group that occupied hotels as a home, the thieves);
- Those who are willing for a restart and reject Europe.

In any case, the author cannot deny (and since he wants to blend fantasy with reality) those who stayed had no other choice. If it is a population who does not know Europe, the truth is that there will be no possibility of it having critics or “ideological” choice. On the other hand, those that are considered the “literate” classes are those who chose continental Europe...

4. Final reflection: and now... where are we, where are we going?

4.1 Between Iberism and Euroscepticism

After reading this book, we can see that the author is divided between two concepts, or, rather, that he believes that the future of the Peninsula is based on two principles: Iberism and Euroscepticism. If the first case is justified by the construction of an identity founded on the connections of the Portuguese and the Spanish people, the second case can be explained by the aversion to a Europe that treats with indifference the phenomenon of drift.

“Iberism” is not a new dream: SERRÃO (1981) explains that this concept has today lost a little bit of its ethnographic and anthropologic content, meaning only the tendency to integrate Portugal in the Peninsula. RIBEIRO and PRADA (1989) and CATROGA (1985) say that throughout history Iberian forays can be found, always connected to the search for material progress,

which is what, to some extent, emerges in the book: a quest for progress and improvement of living conditions, a revolt against the marginal status of the territory. However, this contradicts itself somewhat, for there are some who defend that national independence was put at risk for the sake of economic interests.

Maybe “Euro-scepticism” is brand new. The author rejects the designation “marginality”, inclined to be built on European bases, and plunges into an opposing current, against optimism over Portuguese membership of the EEC, stating his disbelief in a European project that seems to him full of parallel interests and worthless values. This concept is materialized in the book on two fundamental occasions: first when the physical separation of territories takes place, and second when the attitude of indifference/opportunism showed by Europe to the Iberian Peninsula’s fate.

5. The end of the story or the beginning of the struggle?

Almada Negreiros defended the spiritual “Iberian civilization” but never the “Iberian union”, saying that the same happens in Saramago’s book. But his book seems to go further, strengthening political bonds, for with joint effort alone (allied to the identity similarities) we would achieve peninsular survival at all levels and remove it from the chronic role of marginal region. The narrator, as voice and conscience of this “involuntary conscious revolution” has a paramount role. Curiously, Saramago has never returned to the subject that he treated so incisively.

It may even be that Saramago had given up on this struggle, however, and intelligently, he is finding an effective and subtle way of continuing the story... at any rate, the tale ends with all fertile females of the Peninsula pregnant. Birth symbolizes, in this case, continuity, but a “purified continuity”, without the disastrous influences of a Peninsula that was once bonded to a continent which was of no concern to them. Universal fertility is seen as a sign of hope in the future. Just as one day the Peninsula woke up to find itself torn apart of the continent, also one day it will wake up with the crying of the children that will revitalize Iberia and change its marginal position.

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