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A cidade democrática. Habitação e participação política no pós-25 de Abril, Ana Drago (2024)

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Portuguese urban studies have had a revival in the last decade. New generations of scholars have not only brought the present dynamics of urban change into the international limelight, but they have also engaged critically with the genealogies of those very dynamics. *A cidade democrática. Habitação e participação política no pós-25 de Abril* [*The Democratic city. Housing and democratic participation after April 25*] is a bold contribution to this second thread, and to scholarship on the intersection between the urban question and trajectories of politicization in the country in particular. It is a timely and important book, which provides a fresh outlook on a crucial decade in the making of contemporary Portugal, using the urban issue as a powerful lens for understanding democratization and politics more broadly.

After the explosive urban social movements of the *Processo Revolucionário Em Curso* (PREC; Revolutionary Process Under Way; April 25 1974 to November 25, 1975), the usual story goes, social and urban conflict in Portugal receded to the point of practically disappearing. This fact is generally attributed, without much investigation, to cultural reasons, which include Portugal's 'mild mannered' nature, as a *país de brandos costumes*; weak political participation as a long-lasting effect of several decades of dictatorship; and the pacifying role of economic growth and mass participation in Western consumption patterns. Drago does not unquestioningly accept this narrative and sets out to enquire the reasons for the decline in urban social conflict in late 1970s and 1980s. Her work is driven by the will to overcome those approaches that have engaged with Portuguese trajectories by pitting them in contrast to idealized versions of urbanism, social conflict and democratization (cf. Baptista 2012).

Specifically, the book undertakes a careful historical reconstruction of some key aspects of the urban/democracy nexus in 1970s and 1980s Portugal. The first two chapters are dedicated, respectively, to outlining the theoretical framework – through an overview of literature on the politicization and depoliticization of the urban realm – and framing the urban issue in 1970s Portugal. The book then engages with topics including the policies of the

revolutionary period, and particularly the *Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local* (SAAL), launched by Nuno Portas in 1974 (chapter 3); the constitutional debates on the right to housing and local democracy (chapter 4); post-revolutionary party politics in Lisbon's suburban 'red belt' (chapter 5); and the trajectory of spatial and urban planning (chapter 6). Subsequently, in chapter 7, the author discusses how urban policies and discourses have evolved, from prioritizing the resolution of inequalities to challenging the 'unplanned' nature of most urban development (*desordenamento*); and how the redistributive purposes of planning and land use policy have been progressively abandoned. The last two chapters illustrate this shift through a series of case studies of urban policy and planning in Lisbon's suburban municipalities.

In so doing, Drago describes 'a country becoming urban and democratic' (*um país a tornar-se urbano e democrático*; 359) at the same time as the urban question was being de-politicized. In so doing, she traces a historical shift in two steps: first, how the political participation led by left-wing movements during PREC was institutionalized through the promises of redistribution inscribed in the constitution; and then the processes of liberalization that displaced those very promises. As core actors, Drago identifies the *Partido Comunista Português* (PCP), crucial for the institutionalization of post-revolutionary politics; and the *Partido Socialista* (PS) – and a number of planning and urban experts close to it – pivotal in pushing away from the redistributive agenda.

There is, however, a conspicuous absence in the book. As the historical reconstruction advances, Drago's writing itself becomes increasingly institutional, moving farther from the (potential) subjects of conflict. Social movements, which are at the core of the theoretical chapter 1, receive empirical and historical attention only in chapter 3, where they act in cooperation with/opposition to practitioners and politicians. After that, social movements fundamentally disappear from the text, as the focus moves to parties, and then the state and its policies. From being the actual actors of PREC, citizens become mere beneficiaries of policies. While partially the result of the process of de-politicization Drago powerfully portrays, this shift, and the space it takes in the book, also ends up obscuring the concrete forms through which social and political organization were restructured in those decades.

The very approach chosen by Drago would have called for also problematizing the argument that 'the urban question ended up remaining characterized by inequalities, but *without political conflict*' (96; emphasis added). The next step would be to search for *the forms political conflict did take* in late 1970s and 1980s Portugal. For one, the absence of large urban political conflict in the late 1970s is historiographic and not historical, as housing

struggles – led by tenants’ unions – remained powerful until late 1979 (Santos 2014; Tulumello 2024). While no explicit urban conflict characterized the 1980s, that was also the decade of the explosion of land occupations and construction of informal settlements, mostly by migrants from former colonies – another key topic for the understanding of urban space in contemporary Portugal.

In short, the absence of any reference to the post-colonial shift in urban change in 1980s Lisbon is surprising, especially since ‘Whiter’ forms of illegal urbanization (*clandestinos*, unauthorized allotments) play an important role in Drago’s reconstruction. Slums should be conceptualized as a means through which certain populations – a powerful, if disorganized, social movement – achieved their right to housing (albeit with difficulties) in democratic Portugal. This is a crucial research and political agenda, which a book like *A cidade democrática* fails to fully address, but, in a very important contribution to the field, opens and gestures toward.

References

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