Race, culture and language in the Making of Modern Portuguese National Identity

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Abstract: In this paper I will show how the republican movement in Portugal created a new narrative of national identity at the end of the XIX century. The aim of this project was to provide a solid stance to destroy monarchy. With the triumph of Republicanism in 1910 this new identity become official and the Portuguese people was socialized in it. In this paper I will show why and how this narration is appropriated, adopted and adapted by authoritarianism during the XX century. In sum, I will show, from the stance of political theory, that identity narrations are flexible and can be mobilized for radically different political purposes.

Keywords: national identity; Portugal; Republicanism; Authoritarianism; Revolution.

In order to develop my argument I will follow four steps. First I will pinpoint briefly to the predicament of national identity. Contrary to essentialist visions of national identity, I will state that identities in modern societies are not fixed but flexible. Thus they are open to definition and redefinition, appropriation and choice. Then I will point the sources of modern Portuguese nation in the failed project of the dynasty of Bragança of a nationalization of the monarchy. Contrary to the will of the last Portuguese kings of the constitutional monarchy, the nationalization of

monarchy failed and the national identity building process was developed by the modernist Republican Party. The great achievement of this party was the proclamation of the Republic in 1910 and its great failure the demise of the 1st Republic in 1926 after a military coup. Interestingly the coup didn’t restore monarchy but created a new political creature, the New State whose main ideological foundation was nationalism. In performing this move, the authoritarian New State was able to employ the national identity created by the Republican Party to protect the Old Catholic Portugal. Thus national identity was used by the monarchy to preserve itself; by the Republican Party to achieve political legitimacy and hegemony; and by Salazar and his New State to perpetuate his conservative dictatorship.

National identity as narration

National identity is according to authors like Anthony D. Smith the most important source of identity in modern societies. In his view many conflicts of our societies can be explained in relation to this type of identity and also, in the foreseeable future, many more will be framed in terms of national identity. True or false, national identity is important. But certain qualifications must be made. First, that identity refers to permanence. Second, that identity cannot be understood without addressing difference. In relation to the former, national identity has nothing to do with permanence in the sense of immutability, but with change because it is only through change that permanence can be achieved in modern societies. Thus, to accommodate identity to a changing world, national identities adopt typically the form of narrations were personal identity is incardinated in a collective story. But, as said, this story can by narrated in many different ways. Thus, national identities can be accounted in many different ways in order to achieve a single goal: identification. And modern states, in order to achieve legitimacy need precisely identification. This is why national identity achieved a so prominent role in modern societies.

But, as mentioned, identity cannot be understood without difference. Thus race, culture and language, understood as markers of objective differences play a very important role in the definition of national identity. By employing them we can get a somewhat permanent and not subjective condition in our identity and, above all, in our national identity. Certainly, culture and language and open to change and choice, and race is
problematic from our present conscience, but the point is that the three are presented as objective and beyond choice.

Along the XIX century the identification with monarchy weakened in Portugal for two main reasons: a) the influence of the revolutions and ideas of the Atlantic world and the subservient position of Portugal in relation to Britain; b) the dynastic conflict and the civil war triggered by the house of Bragança. In a nutshell, monarchy was under threat by the expansion of modernity and in need of a new principle of political legitimization congruent with the liberal understanding of the nation. But, at the same time, given the uneven nature of Portuguese society, traditional monarchy was preferred by the Portuguese countryside. The conflict between modernization and tradition, between city, Lisbon, and province, destroyed the monarchy by alienating from her both the forces of progress and the defenders of tradition. Given that monarchy no longer worked as a principle of social cohesion, national identity occupied that position. But the definition of the Portuguese national identity was also open to conflicting visions. Modernist Republicans defended a racial understanding of the nation because by doing this the Nation was removable from monarchy. Portugal, in their view, was an effect of the house the Braganza but a people with its own features that can be traced by a long history. On the other hand, traditionalist spoke also of the nation as a raça with is idiosyncratic language and culture, but stressing at the same time the essential role of the Catholic religion as one of the main attributes of the nation. How to define the nation? Who defines the nation?

The making of modern Portuguese national identity and the demise of monarchy

In order to face the challenge of modernity, the house of Bragaça devised a program of nationalization of the monarchy by making ample use of the proto-national tracts of Portuguese identity. In this view, the nation was the creation of the monarchy and an essential link between king and nation was stressed in terms of historical narration (see Rivero 2011). The project was put into motion in the 1860’s and achieved a great success in mobilizing the Portuguese people against its neighbors when they were trying to dethrone their own monarchy. But the success was limited. Some year later, in the wake of the scramble of Africa, the weak position of Portugal versus the African ambitions of Imperial Great Britain weakened the national stance
of the monarchy and the Republican Party raised the flag nationalism for the first time against monarchy. The year 1890 witnessed the creation of the present Portuguese Anthem as an anti-British song but also the conversion of Camões in the national poet. Since then, monarchy and nation went apart. In 1908 King Carlos and his heir were killed and the people treated the regicides as heroes. Two years later the monarchy collapsed in Portugal.

The Republican mythopoiesis and the Portuguese nation

The great ideologue of the Portuguese National identity along the lines of the Republican Party was Teófilo Braga (1843-1924). He was also the first president of the Portuguese Republic. Interestingly, Braga focused on the creation of political identity as weapon in order to combat both church and monarchy. Thus the concept of race is instrumental form him in order to break the connection between monarchy and nation. Thus, in his view, the Portuguese nation has an ethnic origin much older that the kingdom of Portugal: the origin of the Portuguese nation is found in the Portuguese race. For him, monarchist historians maintained that Spaniards and Portuguese constituted a single people in order to flatter the Braganças by making them the founders, in a sense, of Portugal. But for Braga this statement is a lie intended to defend monarchy. According to him Spaniards and Portuguese are radically (and racially) different in the sense that the formers are the heirs of the Iberian race, who inhabited the eastern part of Spain and characterized by their will to annex. Whereas the latter, the Portuguese are the heirs of the Luso race that was never assimilated. This was a race of sailors who inhabited the western part of the peninsula.

After the proclamation of the Portuguese Republic the 5th October 1910 the nationalist project of the Republican Party become compulsory: new national flag (the Republican Party flag); new national anthem (the anti-British song A Portuguesa); new national coin and, of course, new national history with new heroes and the main characters attributed to the Portuguese people and its great men. Thus, the proclamation of the Republic was accompanied by a revolution in national identity, a revolution that began in 1890’s and that achieved a hegemonic position in the years 1910’s.

The revolution as a tool to preserve an Old Catholic nation
In conservative settings were modernization is in the making but incomplete or uneven, the political opportunity for the defenders of the old society, traditional society, impelled them to speak the modern language of revolution and nationalism. Thus the already existing political symbols (like flags and anthems) and the new political language of revolution, redemption and nation as the main political actor can be appropriated, and transformed in an unexpected sense. These devices were created to the radical transformation of society under the teleology of modernity. Their aim was to reach a newly integrated society but this time under the values of freedom and equality. But they were reinterpreted easily under the main values of the old world before modernity: authority and tradition. That’s precisely what happened in Portugal.

The Republic was created in 1910 by the Lisbon elites as a form of State congruent with their modern values and interests. But the country, beyond Lisbon, remained deeply ingrained in the old world. After the demise of the monarchy by a military coup, the Republic arrived to the countryside by the most modern media, the telegraph. In revenge, sixteen years later, the provinces send back to Lisbon the restoration of the old order not by telegraph but through the more assertive way of sheer military force. The 28th of May 1926 began a military coup in the northern Portuguese city of Braga, the stronghold of Portuguese Catholicism. The coup quickly spread to other cities and soon the military arrived in Lisbon were a multitude greeted them. The government of Antonio Maria da Silva resigned, the First Republic collapsed, and a military dictatorship followed (1926-1933) only to give way to Antonio de Oliveira Salazar’s New State (1933-1974).

António de Oliveira Salazar (1889-1970) ruled Portugal as a dictator during almost half a century. Part of the explanation of his success, in terms of political stability can be attributed to his capacity to redefine the new symbols and institutions of the new republic that the military coup destroyed to maintain and preserve the traditional society of old Portugal. In a paradoxical way, the new was put to the service of the old. Thus, he named his regime the New State. What was new? Just the State, an artificial device, according to Salazar, needed to preserve a natural being, the nation. It is necessary a new State because modernity created new conditions for the live of nations that should be addressed in order to permit traditional nations survive. As said his regime started as a result of a nationalist military coup against the Portuguese 1st Republic in 1926 and the coup was also named according to the language of modern politics: the movement of the national revolution. Two years later, Salazar who was a prominent militant of the Catholic party, was called to make part of the military cabinet. By 1932 he was appointed prime minister (de facto dictator) and he occupied the post till 1968, when he had an accident from which he never recovered. Strikingly, his regime survived him, the New State
collapsed with a revolutionary military coup in 1974, four years after his death. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the coup, Salazar wrote in French a text entitled Comment on relève un État (How to rebuild a State, 1936). In this text Salazar gives the clues of his ideology by explaining in four chapters the meaning of National Revolution; the principles of a New Order; his project of a New State; and finally, his corporatist vision of the economy. This radical redefinition of the concepts of modern politics is used in a very eloquent way by Salazar. Thus revolution in his use of the concept was no longer equated with disorder but equated with order. Thus, for him, a National Revolution was needed to the purpose of restore order to society. The National Revolution is the cure to the illness of political disorder; economic disorder; and social disorder. As he states along the text, the explanation of the success of the revolution lies in two main factors: it is expression of the popular will, it is the people the leader of the revolution; and it is physical strength that permits the will of the people to be affirmed. He contrast the success of the revolution with what he terms the political lie of liberalism: the political institutions of liberalism, parliamentary democracy, are fake because they are not expression of the nation but, instead, the domain of affirmation of particular interests that serve private aims and that by fighting each other give way to social disorder and the weakening of the nation. As I have already shown, Salazar was able to put to the service of his dictatorship the political language created by the Portuguese First Republic. In this sense Salazar no longer can be seen as a reactionary that acts against modernity but as a modern political leader and, in fact, as part of the malaises of modernity. But in addition to this extremely important ideological document he also delivered a speech the very 26th May 1936 in Braga and iconographic coins and stamps were produced. He was playing by the rules of modernity by using the mass media and by creating all types of memorabilia aimed at national identity creation. In this sense the Braga discourse is extraordinary. It is in this piece of rhetoric where Salazar created his self-image as a man that voiced the aims of the nation:

“It is a great sacrifice for me to have to speak here today. I thought you would have allowed me the privilege to be just an ordinary pilgrim to your town - the holy city of our national revolution- so that resting from the hardships of my work I could meditate on the past, and breathe this pure air which vibrates with the sound of hymns and canticles- and, in the crowded marketplace, enjoy the laughter and happiness of the people”
But this is no longer possible because modernity disrupted society: “the political and social disorder common almost everywhere resulted in a lack of co-operation and a stifling of the national conscience, which is after all the soul and the mind of the nation”. According to him, to put an end to this unrest political parties and parliaments are useless because they in fact caused the demolition of the foundations of social institutions. What is needed is authority, an authority congruent with the wishes and will of the nation, an authority incarnated in his person: “thus it was possible to lay the foundations of the New State, and to establish peace, order and Portuguese unity: to organize a government which commands respect, to bring about honest administration and to promote an economic revival, to evoke a sense of patriotism among the people and to create the corporative organization and the colonial empire”.

Salazar was able to reach legitimacy for his political domination not by addressing traditional authority but by using the much modern legitimation technic of charisma. Although Max Weber defines charismatic authority as a form of authority derived from the extraordinary qualities of an individual to mobilize political support, the “gift of grace” (charisma) has a slightly different political and religious meaning in the Catholic world to which Salazar belonged.

In the case of Salazar, charisma cannot be linked with a capacity to messianic mobilization but with his self presentation as a receiver of Divine Grace to perform God’s will. Salazar was endowed, in his view, with the mission of developing an authoritarian State, a New State, whose ideology, Catholicism and nationalism, should be congruent with the traditional religious values of rural Portugal, by that time shared by the greatest part of the Portuguese population. But, at the same time, he should be able to satisfy the new demands of modern society: “the material improvements we have achieved are, in themselves, a sufficient answer (…) roads, bridges, schools, the telegraph and the telephone, harbours, the restoration of palaces and monuments, irrigation, the Navy…”.

Charisma is what makes Salazar the saviour of an old nation, the most loyal Catholic Nation, created by Divine Providence, under the sign of the Cross and the Sword, against the infidels, the Moors. But Salazar as a saviour is modern and his promise of deliverance is a modern one: an integrated society that enjoys the material fruits of the modern world. The best of the old world, social cohesion, and the best of the modern one, material comfort: “we assert with confidence that Portuguese nationalism is the indestructible bedrock of the New State”.

This means that Salazar’s charisma has not to be seen as an instrument of political creation but of social restoration. In this case, the restoration of the Portuguese catholic nation threatened by Modernity (individualism, capitalism, socialism and secularism). But, as the same time, the response to the threat that modernity puts to social cohesion is distinctly modern.

Conclusion

In this paper I wanted to highlight the paradoxical character of modern national identities. These identities were created to give way to a new form of sovereign, the people, that followed the demise of monarchy as the hegemonic political principle in the west. Thus national identity was a creature of the modern political understanding. But given its narrative character, national identity is open to definition and redefinition; appropriation and re-appropriation; and can be adopted by political projects and doctrines radically different. In this sense, the creation, appropriation and evolution of modern Portuguese national identity along the XXth century shows the essential flexibility of national identity and, at the same time, the power of identity in modern societies.
References:


