

May Day Supermarket: Crisis, Impasse, Medium

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The theory and practice of anarchism meet in me, yes, in me—banker, financier, tycoon if you like—and there’s no conflict between them.

— Fernando Pessoa, “The Anarchist Banker”¹

A few minutes before ten on the morning of 1 May 2012, Dorinda Constantino was surprised to find an unusual gathering of people at the main entrance of the Pingo Doce Supermarket in Amadora in northwest Lisbon. In the windows of the large store, glossy posters announced: “TODAY: 50% DISCOUNT ON ALL ITEMS FOR PURCHASE EQUAL TO OR EXCEEDING 100 EUROS!” Like the other people gathered in front of the supermarket, Dorinda reached for her mobile phone to call her sister and tell her about the sale. Her sister called their parents, their brother, and two other friends. The brother called his father-in-law, who called his other son, who texted and tweeted a message to all his colleagues at work. One of his fellow workers already knew about the sale via a different circuit. From mouth to mouth, medium to medium, news of the sale spread

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1. Fernando Pessoa, “The Anarchist Banker,” trans. Margaret Jull Costa, in *The Anarchist Banker and Other Portuguese Stories*, trans. Costa et al., ed. Eugenio Lisboa, 2 vols. (Manchester, 1997), 1:89.

to all corners of Portugal and beyond to neighboring Spain. Thousands of individuals and families all across the nation hurried to the nearest Pingo Doce by motorcycle, car, truck, public transport, or on foot. Those who were unable to summon one hundred euros on the spot teamed up as family units to share costs and benefits. The scenes that followed left many in shock: jammed roads, endless lines of people, and a desire to consume that led to speedy replenishment, bursts of violence, police interventions, and damaged merchandise. TV networks that had originally planned to cover nationwide protests by labor unions and activists quickly shifted their attention to the supermarket. “The revolution many expected,” one buyer said into a journalist’s microphone on live TV, “is now happening not on the plaza, not on the streets, but right here in the supermarkets.”

Dona Dorinda’s plan was to join her son, José Constantino, in the afternoon at the May Day parade against austerity in downtown Lisbon. Days before, José had reproached her for planning to shop on the day when activists and unions had asked all major commercial companies not to open—a request with which Portugal’s largest supermarket, Pingo Doce, had refused to comply. In response, the unions had launched a strike calling on consumers nationwide to boycott the chain. “Yes, but how will I be able to serve us supper tonight?” she had asked, adding, “The time of the restaurant is no longer.” Juggling three different part-time jobs, Dorinda, the widow of a die-hard unionist, had been struggling to meet monthly expenses and to keep her son and daughter in college. Aged twenty-five and twenty-two respectively, both youngsters emphasized their identification with the activist movement *Geração À Rasca* (The Desperate Generation), but each displayed their adherence in different ways. In coordination with the globally circulated May Day slogan, “Interrupt the Flow of Capital,” José was actively involved in spreading the call for nationwide demonstrations via social media. The unions, whose preparations for the rallies had long been under way, criticized the activists, seeing them as trespassing on what is traditionally considered the unions’ day. Activists, in response, asserted that the choice of day was not meant to be provocative. They contended that the call to stop the flow of capital was global in scope, that it

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transcended local rivalries and, furthermore, that they were willing to have the two marches converge later in the day.

Crisis was the term on every person's lips as scenes of the "rush" (*corrida aos supermercados*) began to circulate. Images relayed on social and mainstream media of thousands of shoppers running to the megastores and quickly amassing goods, in a country where such hyperbolic discounts have no tradition, seemed to provide the Portuguese with the ultimate referent of what the crisis was all about. However, *crisis* had also become a common term. First used during the financial meltdown of 2008, the term had accrued familiarity, even intimacy, in Portugal. Evoked time and again, *crisis* had become part of the infrastructure of the ordinary and had lost its capacity to shock or produce a consequence. Far from generating a lasting effect, the torrent of images circulating, blow after blow, each more grotesque and apocalyptic than the prior, only highlighted the dialectical reverse of overstimulation and numbness associated with Walter Benjamin's modernity.² Just as the experience of shock became a norm in modern life, crisis today serves an overpowering conformity in Portugal and elsewhere.

The chief purpose of this article is not to present an account of the contours of Portugal's May Day events in 2012. Neither is it to articulate the historical circumstances that led to those events, though some context that contributed to the potentialization of a moment will be provided. Rather, the aim here is to interrupt the crisis narrative, to reveal the conservative nature of crisis discourse by introducing what Joseph Masco calls an effective "crisis in crisis."³ While it is true that the term *crisis* does important work on the ground, in this essay I emphasize how the fluency of the notion has also made it into a stumbling block, preventing an understanding of what is going on—indeed, of the goings-on of crisis itself. Such an endeavor involves making an analytic distinction between the crisis lexicon and what Lauren Berlant calls an "impasse."⁴ An impasse, I suggest, is not a crisis. It is rather what Janet Roitman calls "anti-crisis": the aporias of decision-making rendered explicit.⁵ As Roitman explains in her study of the term, the use of crisis as a diagnosis entails a form of judgment. The ultimate purpose of such a judgment is to restore, or indeed maintain, a par-

2. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999). Marshall McLuhan famously referred to the desensitizing caused by the "extensions of man" as self-amputation; see Marshall McLuhan, "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), pp. 41–47.

3. See Joseph Masco, "The Crisis in Crisis," supplement 15 to *Current Anthropology* 58 (Feb. 2017): S65–S76.

4. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), p. 199.

5. See Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, N.C., 2014).

ticular social order. Given how crisis itself has attained a kind of normative force such that it has become part of governmental structures of exception, how might one interrupt this generative idiom if not by highlighting the failure of crisis to occur in—and, therefore, its failure to allow us to figure out—a moment?

What follows is an attempt to present a field, a scene, and to reflect on its untowardness. My argument proceeds by exposing the joints and thresholds that at once cleave and hold together a world—an individual, a family, a nation—afloat in a highly fractured and potentialized present. Following Berlant, in such a world of potentialities in action, impasse is not just a context but an active gesture of inquiry. Such a gesture, she suggests, does not pursue a coherently unified plot but renders visible the articulations and concealed elements buried underneath. Insofar as the revelation of articulations and latencies defines the quality of impasse, the latter is to be conceived not as an end—a dead end—but as a medium.⁶ Here medium is not meant in the instrumental sense of “a means to,” because that would bring us back to the logic of causal necessity or teleology. Rather, thinking of impasse as a medium is to dwell in the singularity of possibility itself, that is, the highlighted perception of the contradictions and partialities of observation on the basis of which normative judgments of crisis are made. In a world where rapidly shifting horizons and interrupted expectations affect individuals’ ability to order and discern what is going on, it is important to reflect upon the epistemic and political values that such frustrations bring forth.

Given the national scale and simultaneity of occurrences that repeatedly emerged during and immediately after May Day 2012, I choose to anchor my analysis in the Constantino family, a set of key protagonists marking and circulating in a highly fractured field: the shopping mother, the activist son, the deceased unionist father, and the homebound, skeptical daughter. My focus on the family microstructure is not directed at how an impasse manifests itself through the idiom of the private, that is, by situating it exclusively within the realm of the *oikos*. On the contrary, my approach aims to disclose the transversal links between the home and the city, as the threshold between *oikos* and *polis* where Agamben situates *stasis* or “civil war” as a new political paradigm. Agamben proposes a zone that would render inoperative the opposition between the depoliticized family and the politicized *polis* and so redefine the political as a field of potentiality.⁷

6. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

7. See Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* (Stanford, Calif., 2015). This zone or stasis connects to the idea of a general space of knowledge whereupon the blank

Thus, while it is important to describe the formation of a scene that constitutes an impasse synchronically as well as diachronically, my ultimate concern is in the impasse of a formation as such. Recognizing that so much of what is happening nowadays leads reality to a precarious border between neither/nor and both/and, one may ask: do impasses hold, if nothing else, a systematic value in suspending our rush to judgment?

The Scene

Traditionally, since the Carnation Revolution on 25 April 1974, which brought an end to a long-ruling right-wing dictatorship, the weeks prior to May Day are a period of intense political agitation in Portugal. This is especially the case if the ruling party is right-wing, as it was in 2012 under the coalition of Partido Social Democrata (PSD) and Partido Popular (PP). In 2012, the weeks prior to May Day had been particularly nerve-wracking for government leaders, the political opposition, and the average citizen, partly due to a thriving new field of political action. Since 2011, a number of platforms, social movements, and global networks, like the 15-O Platform (itself formed out of smaller groups such as Indignados Lisboa, Democracia Verdadeira Já, Portugal Uncut, and ATTAC Portugal), the M12 M Platforma or, later, the QSLT-Que se Lixe a Troika! (Fuck Troika!) appeared and unsettled the main ideological pillars of a young Portuguese parliamentary democracy. Discussions in the media reproduced a multiplicity of voices and opinions to an audience ready to move outside of itself, to meet such opinions halfway, to jog in one or another direction. A surge of dissenting antiausterity voices rose in reaction to the resignation in March 2011 of the Portuguese prime minister, who reentered the debate as a candidate in the elections he precipitated by his resignation. The prime minister's resignation was followed by the arrival in Portugal of the Troika (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) as part of an agreement for a seventy-eight-billion-euro bailout in May of that year, which led to salary cuts and the strangling

spaces of the grid render themselves visible in the sense of the Foucauldian archaeology of science; see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972). A deeper analysis of the idea of stasis as a space between *oikos* and *polis* would lead us to a genealogy of the concept of apparatus, which, for Foucault, is associated with a strategic manipulation of forces and which, as Agamben notes elsewhere, connects to the notion of *oikonomia* (household law); see Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus?* and *Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, Calif., 2009). If pursued further, this analysis could reveal the political potentials of the *oikos/oikonomia* in the history of a (visual) Western episteme; see Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary* (Stanford, Calif., 2005), and Susan Buck-Morss, "Visual Empire," *Diacritics* 37 (Summer–Fall 2007): 171–98.

of consumption. The arrival of the Troika inspired the creation of a voluble antiausterity New Left. But by early 2012, the antiausterity alliance was itself highly fractured due to developing tensions between the traditional Partido Comunista (PC)—which was largely supported by the CGTP Union (Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses)—and the younger and multifaceted Bloco de Esquerda (BE), with which many of the new activist groups identified.⁸

In a highly fractured scenario, each group called upon the resources of logic to try to make sense of where things stood. But each attempt at delimitation across the political spectrum only seemed to further divide the social field. By early 2012, Portugal was reaching a state which Niklas Luhmann would identify as borderline paradox, a point of the implosion of the operations of logic, that is, when orientations to reality begin to unfold under a highlighted perception that things will go other than expected.⁹ The largest paradox of all, from which others derived, is how the state spent millions in 2011 and 2012 in proausterity campaigns in order to deflect from the fact that it was in the same condition of insolvency as many of its citizens.¹⁰ Similarly, it was when state-imposed austerity measures were in full force that the likelihood of Greece's impending departure from the European Union in the spring of 2012 triggered a wave of hysterical cash withdrawals throughout southern Europe. After months of economic drought as many kept their money captive in deposit accounts, people's wallets were suddenly soaked in liquid assets ready to be used. As it was near the end of the month, most families had just received their monthly income. But the inconsistent nature of events in Portugal and abroad kept people uncertain. On the one hand, many were hopeful about François Hollande's antiauster-

8. For a comprehensive study on the complex and short-circuiting dynamics of the mobilization of new forms of activism since the outbreak of the financial crisis, see Guya Accornero and Pedro Ramos Pinto, "Mild Mannered? Protest and Mobilisation in Portugal under Austerity, 2010–2013," *West European Politics* 38, no. 3 (2015): 491–515. On the mobilizations that started with Geração à Rasca, see Maria da Paz Campos Lima and Antonio Martín Ariles, "Youth Voice(s) in EU Countries and Social Movements in Southern Europe," *Transfer* 19 (Aug. 2013): 345–64.

9. See Niklas Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity*, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford, Calif., 1998). In recent years there has been a rich scholarship on scenarios of what Luhmann calls "'provisional' foresight," a future that can always go otherwise (p. 70). See Hirokazu Miyazaki, "The Temporalities of the Market," *American Anthropologist* 105 (Jun. 2003): 255–65; Carlo Caduff, "Pandemic Prophecy, or How to Have Faith in Reason," *Current Anthropology* 55 (June 2014): 296–305; Andrew Lakoff, "The Generic Biothreat, or, How We Became Unprepared," *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (Aug. 2008): 399–428; and Maria José A. De Abreu, "Technological Indeterminacy: Medium, Threat, Temporality," *Anthropological Theory* 13 (Sept. 2013): 267–84.

10. See Berlant, "Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness," *Supervalent Thought*, supervalentthought.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/berlant-aaa-2011final.pdf

ity presidential campaign. On the other, there was the pressure that the Troika was placing upon indebted states like Portugal, Spain, and Greece to “pay back” what they owed, forecasting new cuts in state salaries and benefits. That same year, official numbers revealed a youth unemployment rate hovering near 30 percent, a number that, towards the end of the year, escalated to a record 38.3 percent, contributing to an overall national unemployment rate of 17.5 percent. It was also the year that hundreds of youngsters across the nation, seeing no other alternative besides migrating to either northern Europe or Angola, decided to move in with their parents, leading to a situation in which three generations became one and the same household unit. The idiom “existing on the edge,” so often evoked in relation to Portugal’s geographic location, had acquired ominous temporal significance.

Being on the edge, nobody knew for sure what the state’s pleas that “to take steps ahead” (*dar passos em frente*) actually meant.¹¹ On the eve of May Day 2012, two paradoxical slogans “against austerity” (spending is necessary for the economy) and “stop the flow of capital” (spending is enriching the rich) were being advanced by the very same political groups—largely opponents to the ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD)—leaving many in doubt as to whether to treat their cash as money to spend or stored energy. As 1 May drew closer, calls for protests continued to polarize people. Unions and activists of various stripes were set to occupy different physical spaces across the nation’s main cities. The general sentiment was that things were about to take a major turn. And they did.

The Shopper

By nine in the morning, Pingo Doce’s stores all across the nation had opened their doors to hundreds of customers. Shelves were filled to the brim with goods: a dazzling, larger than life, pulp-fiction reign of color, smell, and light. Customers stormed in, grabbing shopping carts to hold their goods. As shelves emptied out and anxiety over scarcity grew, buyers were seized by a frenzy-stricken incapacity to make their choices. The situation’s excess began to ooze the euphoria of civil looting. As the hours went by, some items began to melt and degrade, and these were chucked around by shoppers. Children were seen urinating in the aisles. In some establishments, like the one in the northern city of Senhora da Hora, vio-

11. The noun *passos*, which means steps, is a popular pun on the middle name of the Social Democrat prime minister Pedro Passos Coelho, who held the office between 2011 and 2015. Watching Prime Minister “Steps” (Passos) became part of the local proprioceptive archive in relation to a general milieu where everything seemed to be out of balance and focus.

lence broke out, forcing the police to intervene and ambulances to rescue the wounded. Almost instantly the entire social media sphere was inundated with real-time visual and textual evidence uploaded from the stores from the four corners of the nation: buyers frantically in action, emptied shelves, goods vandalized, people fainting, rescuing agents on the way. Television broadcasts delivered the thunderbolt news: "It's chaos!" "A revolution!" Forty establishments had to close their doors, some due to skirmishes or accidents, with the intervention of the fire brigade. Other stores closed only temporarily, so stocks could be replenished and floors and shelves washed. Outside, the moneyless set up businesses renting out shopping carts they grabbed in the confusion to incoming fervent shoppers, charging five to ten euros apiece. The more catastrophic the images and texts that proliferated, the more people rushed to shop. It was as though the information they received had the power to absorb them into the very phenomenon it mediated. As the media tapped into the bodies of consumers as spaces of flow, so it tapped into the capital of the commons, the people's money circulating in ways Portugal had not experienced under the shadow of austerity.

By arriving like a bombshell on the date that one would least expect, May Day, when thousands were being called to the streets to demonstrate, the campaign was able to suppress all distance between target and opportunity.¹² Whatever had to be seized was *already* in the ever-intensifying present.¹³ It is only ironic that the sale forecast the possibility to buy now for the future (fill your cupboards!), as the potency of that promise drew momentum precisely from the latter's demise (buy as though there is no tomorrow!). Pressed to seize the occasion, buyers ran primarily on affect, both energizing and being energized by the extraordinary forces connecting private cell phones to social networks to television to bodies to cash. Panic had turned into value.¹⁴ The links between the supermarket's 398 branches across the nation became one with the communication of messages. Television news reaped the benefits of the network effect under way. This allowed the old medium to tap into social networks, affectively attuning to the shoppers' movement. The shopping campaign fed on retroactive effects. As an employee at one of Lisbon's many branches put it, "We were as surprised as the clients arriving at the store." A female employee de-

12. See Samuel Weber, *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking* (New York, 2005).

13. See Brian Massumi, "Fear (The Spectrum Said)," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 13 (Spring 2005): 31–48.

14. See Rosalind C. Morris, "Rush/Panic/Rush: Speculations on the Value of Life and Death in South Africa's Age of AIDS," *Public Culture* 20 (May 2008): 199–231.

scribed it thus, "I was coming to get some provisions for the holiday and was asked to put on the uniform." More extraordinarily, Soares dos Santos, the chief executive officer of the franchiser, appeared that night on prime-time news to say that he too had been ignorant that the campaign would take place. "It was a direct initiative by the supermarket's administration," he alleged. "I am as surprised . . . as any ordinary citizen. In our firm we defend free initiative."¹⁵

In catching its clients by surprise, Pingo Doce not only promoted the sale of goods. It also promoted time to the status of an opportunity, a gap in time, a portal that highlighted the eventfulness of the event while affecting the consumer's capacity to make reasonable choices. Ironically—but not that surprisingly—the relationship between what people bought and what they actually needed was far from direct. The whole event unfolded according to a buy first, think later impulse. Need would come after, as future need. There were those who bought large quantities of whisky, which they resold at a profit; those who acquired industrial quantities of yogurt and milk, but overlooked expiration dates; those who bought nappies, but had no children (though they might in future); those who purchased huge amounts of frozen shrimp and went out selling their bounty to restaurants (their own freezers had long been deactivated to save money). Neighbors, colleagues, and community centers exchanged oversupplies. Blogs and Facebook were used as platforms for trading goods: "washing powder for olive oil" or "coffee beans for port wine + 1 codfish or 2." In other venues, extras incited charitable acts for the homeless and the unwaged persons next door. As an anthropologist friend (who went to Pingo Doce!) would say on a trip I made to Oporto two weeks later, "Charity was a way people found to restore the moral balance of the outcomes of the promotion." It allowed shoppers to throw off indictments that they were alienated consumers, lured by selfish greed rather than by collective good.¹⁶

The Activist

"Why demonstrate?" my middle-class friends moaned the day before the crisis, quoting the late José Saramago's allegorical novel *The Stone Raft*, in which southern Europe drifts away from the rest of the continent. Sitting around a table on an esplanade in one of Lisbon's cafés, we revisited

15. See, for example, "Alexandre Soares dos Santos: 'Não sabia da campanha do Pingo Doce,'" *Dinheiro Vivo*, 4 May 2012, www.dinheirovivo.pt/economia/alexandre-soares-dos-santos-nao-sabia-da-campanha-do-pingo-doce/

16. The May Day events of 2012 provoked a surge of reactions across the Left sector. These reactions oscillated between calling the shoppers victims or active agents of capitalism.

old, lighthearted arguments: how the Portuguese are prone to wait (“wait in the fog,” goes a local proverb) rather than to act, a claim credited to the messianic school of thought known locally as Sebastianism. We all granted that this waiting was the reason Salazar’s dictatorship ended up being one of the longest in world history, which in turn led us to another proverb that speaks of the Portuguese as *povo de brandos costumes* (“people of mild manners”). More outlandish even, but connected, is the myth of Lusotropicalism that describes Portuguese soft colonialism, or, viewed from a positive perspective, how *fado*, heteronomy, and counterfactual literature, all landmarks of the subjunctive mood, represent Portugal’s greatest cultural productions. But the familiarity of these cultural tropes also generated anxiety, as though these things needed to be spoken aloud in order to be contradicted the next moment; a thinking or sublation of sorts that preserved the thing it wished to overcome.

We agreed that we would meet the following day at nine a.m. at Praça Luís de Camões in Bairro Alto. The demonstrators would gather there and start marching in coordination with activists in the country’s other main cities. Calling itself the May Day Parade, the group made graphically explicit its links to global movements such as Occupy Los Angeles, Occupy London, and the continent’s Euro May Day. The handwritten signboards were diverse, indexing graduate students, the unemployed, the intermittently employed, call center workers, supermarket checkout clerks, eco-activists, and artists. The heterogeneity of groups was unified by a long strip of cloth bearing the words “contra a precaridade” (against precarity) as the parade’s leading slogan. The air was cooler than normal for that time of the year, but the raw, luminous egg of Lisbon’s springtime was cracking open. Shortly after ten, the crowd began marching towards the neighborhood of Chiado, to make room for new arrivals. Speeches were made. Among the voices were a member of Inflexible Precarious (a new association fighting for workers’ rights), a Precarious Generation student, a representative of the Portuguese Women on Waves (UMAR), and a speaker from the Integration of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities. Up in the sky a helicopter surveilled the movements below. The parade was under way down at Rossio Square, the Pombaline center of Lisbon, when news of the supermarket campaign rippled through the gathering: families and individuals were rushing by the thousands to shop at Pingo Doce. Looking at his cell phone in utter amazement my friend cried, “I cannot believe this is happening!” Others were equally dumbstruck. The mood of the event altered and so did its dynamism. The parade stopped. Demonstrators, including me, began texting and calling, reaching out for confirmation. Through our devices we learned that the mainstream media was already reporting the story from

various parts of the country, interviewing shoppers, asking them to send in their photos for public broadcasting.

“Did you hear about the Pingo Doce campaign?” my friend asked four newly arrived demonstrators. “We heard! We just passed by one of the stores . . . and saw the big pandemonium with our own eyes!” “Where?” I asked. “In Graça by Mercado dos Sapadores. But it’s everywhere!” “What now?” he asked. One of the newcomers, who introduced himself as José Constantino, informed us that the news of the campaign was already travelling to other parts of Europe; that the entire sphere of social media was circulating real-time footage and textual impressions uploaded by people in stores all over the nation. José described for us the tumbling chaos: depleted shelves, damaged goods, a few wounded. “Nem Alcácer Quibir!” (Not even Alcácer Quibir) he exclaimed, invoking the famous battle the Portuguese lost, the king disappearing in the combat.¹⁷ Silence followed the news as a testament to the question on everybody’s mind. “Have we failed ourselves again?” “What will other activist groups around the world think?” Someone in the square standing right next to the statue of Pedro IV, the first emperor of Brazil, shouted while looking upwards, “What rustics we are, Pedro!” Self-deprecating jokes followed. This was fueled by the time-worn sense that the Portuguese lack the drive for political action, unlike our Spanish brothers or Greek cousins, who had long been protesting against unemployment and the shrinking social welfare state. “All those countries,” said one young woman, folding her banner, “are on CNN except Portugal,” adding through the smoke of her cigarette, “We are just not the type who make breaking news! Well, I guess we will be on the news, as a crowd of zombies running to a supermarket.” “On May Day!!” the others rejoined. “Now we know what the unions felt!” José Constantino added somberly.

The Unionist

Not far from Rossio Square, at the multicultural Martim Moniz, the unions went on demonstrating under the call of the CGTP. Reports that the unions were planning to stop in front of Banco de Portugal and Pingo Doce to stage a protest attracted activists. José was the first in our group to suggest we join the unions, whose march was scheduled to culminate at

17. Alcácer Quibir refers to the crusade fought in northern Morocco on 4 August 1578 under Sebastian, king of Portugal. The defeat resulted in an enormous loss of people and economic resources and the ending of the Aviz dynasty, which would lead to the integration of Portugal under Spain. After Portugal’s defeat, the body of King Sebastian mysteriously disappeared; legend claims that he will return through the fog in a moment of crisis.

Alameda Metro Station. By 3 p.m., unions and activists were marching together by the hundreds. Following José, I spoke to an environmental engineering university student walking beside us. “What do you think of all this?” I asked journalistically. “Not sure.” He moved his head left and right, searching for words, before continuing. “Imagine the utter embarrassment we feel that millions are rushing to shop today on a national scale, when protest organizers, like the unions and us, were out there calling for a national strike, which, as we declared, would ‘shut down the flow of capital,’ when arenas, initiatives, and calls for ‘direct action’ through speeches, plays, and even food give-aways were being prepared for the sake of the oppressed majority (the 99 percent!). And here we are.”

Walking beside him, I sensed José’s disgust about how things were turning out. I was drawn to him partly because of nostalgia for such moments of improvised solidarity, partly because of how helplessly uncertain he was about how to think and feel. Later in the day, he would tell me how vexing it all felt, how May Day forced upon him the realization that he and his family are a crisis cliché. He used his mobile phone to check the whereabouts of his mother and to let her know that he was no longer marching with the activists (by afternoon the main assembly had dissolved, with some joining the unions and others going to supermarkets to protest in “*ação direta*” against the shoppers) but with the unions. José was now in front of Banco de Portugal in downtown Lisbon. But his mother would no longer join the street protests as she had at first intended to do. It had taken her three hours to pass through the checkout line and finally return home to the municipality of Amadora. His sister, he gathered from his mother, was at home following the May Day events on television. TV reporters located in different strategic nodes of the supermarket network kept adding new elements to the nature of the sale. In some stores, reporters had been told of hyperbolic benefits given to workers who volunteered to work that day. Those on duty would, first, benefit from the 50 percent discount for seven days; second, they would receive not double (as required by law on a holiday) but triple the worker’s salary; third, they would get an extra day off and, fourth, be gifted a dinner with the staff. But none of these things could be firmly established due to the enigmatic absence of Soares dos Santos, Pingo Doce’s administrative president, who was also the person who could clarify who had ordered the sale.

He was not there, which is not to say that his governance had been undermined. In his absence, the supermarket network was able to displace authorial subjectivity into the spaces of circulation via rumor and social media. If the factor of surprise invested the sale with the quality of an emergency, it did so in operational solidarity with the dislocation of authority

into adjacent spaces for relaying information among the commoners. In this way, the sale's caller (the origin) was able to embody the very qualities of the calling (the medium of relay). Furthermore, the surprise that goaded the field into action was not its immediate cause. Rather, the cause was its infinite processing. Having no subject (to begin with), there could be no predictable ending either, only a middle; only the relaying of a process into plural bifurcations in tune with the flows of rumor, people, goods, and capital. All that governance needed was an effective way to regulate the relation between supply and demand in an attempt to match the movement of the staff and the shoppers according to variables such as neighborhoods, infrastructures of accessibility, social class, size of particular supermarkets, and the geographical distribution of the Pingo Doce network. The faceless Departamento Funcional do Pingo Doce worked to obtain information about the forces that shaped the relation between buying and selling across the superstore network, rotating stock as well as recruits, ordering the temporary closure of stores to replenish goods. Like the yield curve in the stock market, Pingo Doce's own personal website informed and regulated the relation between potential buyers and the availability of goods in real time.¹⁸ The website indicated which stores had to be provisionally closed due to shortages (or to aggression or overcrowding) and which were being restocked.

As information about offers and demands kept appearing, so new critical moments arose as shoppers shifted gears into other arenas in order to maximize benefits. And as the march moved forward, heading towards Avenida Almirante Reis, buyers carrying full Pingo Doce sacks and protesters carrying their banners intersected, insulting one another. "Have you no shame?" asked one side. "I do, but my belly doesn't!" replied the other. A family at the bus stop had placed a huge bunch of Pingo Doce plastic sacks filled with products on the road against the dark pavement. For an instant, the sight of the superabundant goods on the margin of the road looked like litter. People swarmed through the streets and parking lots, some unsure to which crowd they belonged; perhaps some were only spectators. One man crossed the road with an empty supermarket cart from Pingo Doce's rival Supermercados Continente. "They ran out of carts at Pingo Doce," a demonstrator joked, unleashing laughter. A young female activist incited demonstrators (both activists and unionists) over a loudspeaker, claiming that the sale did not weaken their undertaking, but made it all the more indispensable. Renewed calls to protest against Pingo Doce

18. See Caitlin Zaloom, "How to Read the Future: The Yield Curve, Affect, and Financial Prediction," *Public Culture* 21 (May 2009): 245–68.

and the “flow of capital” were broadcast across social media networks. Even more than before, it was important for the business to keep the networks afloat and relay the call. For the demonstrators, though, the emerging question was not how to return to the initial purpose of the protests but how to reconfigure it? How to regulate the causes for action in light of such emerging effects? Caught up in the very logic of the direct and spontaneous action that the activists defended (and Pingo Doce had taken that logic even further), two main possibilities presented themselves to us: either detachment through resignification or occupation of the structure they opposed via the negative. The latter was exemplified by the man at the demonstration whose sign, improvised on cardboard on the spot, read, “Eu não fui às compras!” (I am not shopping!). Or another still, “Nós não somos os 99%!” (We are not the 99 percent!).

As the hours advanced, the nature of the messages relayed via social networks and traditional media outlets became more graphic than textual. Photos depicted the chaos of people and merchandise outside supermarkets: beggars taking ownership of the supermarket cart trolleys to rent out carts to frenzied shoppers, or conflicts between police and activists in different locations. All the while, according to updates offered by shoppers and then relayed on mass media (including the radio), the supermarket chain went on coordinating the redistribution of its stock, especially with regards to much desired goods like meat, cod, and olive oil. In the midst of it all, nobody could say who started it. Even as groups, activists, and unionists emerged sequentially in time and space, they all operated relationally towards a multilayered dynamic; each piggybacked on others’ calls, carrying along the intensities of others’ temporalities. From the unions’ programmed arrangements, to the activists who intercepted it to the stores that fulfilled the ultimate ideal of direct action, time intensified to the point of enveloping May Day 2012 in a big haze.

The Family

That evening José refused to go home and eat at the table with his mother and sister. He did not bother to call and state that he would be absent from supper. He would not play into the Faustian bargain so his mother would feel better about her decision to go shopping. Instead, he went to meet with fellow protestors—and me—in a café in Bairro Alto, not far from where he had been demonstrating a few hours before. *Acção Directa* demonstrations went on through the night hours at a few Pingo Doce stores in the city, involving graffiti and the stopping up of keyholes with glue. José told his fellow activists that he would join them later in the night. At the café we ordered *tremoços* and two Super Bocks and both, al-

most simultaneously, joked about whether the café's owner too had been to Pingo Doce.¹⁹ José talked about home, and the shame and embarrassment of not being able to bring his academic potential to fruition. He talked about how irritated he felt towards his sister's silences and skepticism, about how for her, being Geração à Rasca was not irony in the service of activism but a literal description of her lost, desperate generation. When earlier in the day he criticized her for her nihilistic attachment to the couch, she fired back that if he thought he had the possibility to choose, it was only because their mother did not. She said his sense of integrity depended upon the submission of others to ignoble levels of bare need, others who were, on top of everything else, being called "greedy" or "alienated," just as the shoppers were tagged by activists like him. At least she was not pretending that things were otherwise, she had said. He had told her these same words one time, consoling her when she felt bad that she was not useful because, after all, the only work out there was at *recibos verdes*, a system of temporary labor that denied workers full rights.²⁰ It was a system according to which time became organized around impulses, when transient apertures—the spatial counterpart of temporal opportunities—suddenly opened, and to which one had to remain hypervigilant in order to act before they were gone.

José Constantino was good to talk to because of his attempts to fill a life, more than a self. He constantly allowed his narrative to be crossed by other narratives, other perspectives. He was a *person* in the Pessoa sense of the term: a network of many. And this was particularly apparent when he talked about the other members of his family as though the fact that they were not present to defend themselves required of him a high sense of the responsibility to express their viewpoints. Overall, in a culture that invests so much in voicing intergenerational forfeiture through narratives of how parents sacrifice themselves for the future of their children, it was not at all easy to handle the entanglements of love and guilt. José confessed that he felt like a burden on his mother, and yet he was conscious that the burden of a son actually kept her going. Migrating to Angola—Portugal's new El Dorado—for work, as many were doing, might be a temporary solution,

19. *Tremoços* are lupin beans famously eaten in Portugal. Eaten in small bites so as to undress the outer transparent layer from its inner corpus, their ingestion has less to do with a particular taste than the lack of one. The main function is to gather people around a table and bring rhythm to a conversation.

20. First introduced in the mid-1980s, the system of *recibos verdes* consisted of a parallel, and now vastly widespread, state tax benefit that encourages short-term working contracts. It offered the opportunity to businesses to treat an employee as a *recibo verde* when the person in question was not a temporary but rather a permanent worker.

but he felt extremely uneasy about leaving the country, the house, the space left vacant by his father.

José Constantino the elder, after whom the son was named, passed away in 2002, the year Portugal embraced the European Monetary System. A devoted union member and a former combatant in the Guinea-Bissau War of Independence, José senior was pessimistic about the political future of Portugal. His reservations were directed less at the benefits that fed the country's economy under EU developmental policies than at the question of whether Portugal was capable of converting such an opportunity into sustainable results. José described his father's criticism of his former comrades and how they smoothed over the tensions between capitalism and free democracy by "all too conveniently equating fascism with austerity," as he put it. Admitting to never having had an affable relationship with his father, José described him admiringly as a "hard worker and authoritarian man from the south," who "loved the unions" and assiduously attended meetings and rallies. He used to say, "We cannot allow the carnations to wither," referring to a floral symbol of the 1974 revolution. Back on the continent in 1975 following a period in Madeira, José's father became the owner of an engine remanufacturing business. He was able to raise a family, build a house in one of the capital's emerging suburbs, and provide his children with higher education. In 1995, he joined the fire brigade. He liked to say that the fires would help him quit smoking. After his death, both his children moved out to go to college. Unable to cover their rent, both suspended their studies (though José's sister later resumed hers) and returned home to live with their widowed mother in suburbia, where cell phones and the internet became even more indispensable to staying connected.

Nearly two weeks after May Day, I met with mother, son, and daughter at their home in Amadora, one of the largest Lisbon suburbs to emerge in the seventies. I wanted to learn more about how May Day affected their thoughts on the crisis and their relationship as a family. Noticing how the air between them was still charged, I turned to José. "You are still disappointed that your mother went to Pingo Doce?" I asked.

"I was already upset that she planned to go there anyway. But then with what happened I became even more troubled. My own mother inside that capitalist trap." I looked at the mother waiting for a reply and added, "But she did not know how it would turn out." "That is why I am calling it a trap," José responded. I again turned to his mother, who lowered her shoulders, but said nothing. "Your mother seems to be well aware of what she was doing . . . finding ways to provide for her family." "I know, I know. Of course, she meant well but I am sure you're familiar with the saying 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions.'" His mother said, "I meant

well, José, and you should be thankful! I wish I could go protest too, but somebody has to look after our things. And as we can see from the situation in this country, politics and demagogy do not fill your and your sister's bellies. Nor do they pay for the carnations I bring to your father's grave!" "Now, mother, don't make a scene!" José returned. "That's precisely the kind of attitude we don't need right now." A long silence ensued.

As with the family, the city and the nation were torn between those who went to the supermarkets and those who did not. Primetime TV news showed activists calling shoppers "opportunists." Buyers responded with "gauche caviar!" In parliament, the opposition used Pingo Doce vignettes to attack the ruling party. The unions accused Pingo Doce of "ideological perversion," while the supermarket executives dismissed such allegations as "ridiculous," since their actions were "not motivated by ideology!" News channels looped various scenes of "the big rush." Oodles of comic improvisations on the theme of looking for Santos, Pingo Doce's CEO, began to circulate in cafe conversations. Every item bought at Pingo Doce, sardine cans or clothes detergent, became a potential jack-in-the-box out of which Santos might appear and yap a potent "Surprise!" He was portrayed as being in Amsterdam's red light district because, as it turns out, Pingo Doce chafes at paying taxes in Holland; he was depicted as the banker character in Fernando Pessoa's play, "The Anarchist Banker"; he was imagined as King Sebastian, the one whose body disappeared in combat at Alcácer Quibir in 1578.

In the Constantino household, television became the sister's prime horizon, the beige corduroy couch the place where she housed her airs of resignation. Journalists, politicians, mothers, students, and businessmen were invited to roundtable discussions to comment on the May Day occurrences. "How did we come to this point?" one journalist asked. But the more opinions circulated in an effort to explain what had happened, the greater were the number of complexities brought to light. Elements that seemed logical in isolation were confusing when considered together. Arguments that seemed to follow a particular trajectory backfired and ended up implying their inverse. What is it to be in a situation in which a worker's right to eat can no longer be dissociated from a worker's right to work? Each new question exposed other worlds of truth. Words rebelled against their intended referents. What is striking, one TV analyst noted, is that this type of hyperbolic discount has no tradition in Portuguese sales history. No such thing as a Black Friday exists in this mild-tempered nation, as the local old saying goes. And there again the question arose, "How did we come to this point?" A well-known columnist for *Jornal Público*, Portugal's leading newspaper, tried answering it. He suggested, in rather resonating terms, that one take

one step at a time. What had begun as a predicament in the credit market in 2008, he said, ended up infiltrating the entire socioeconomic sphere. By 2010, discredit had no specific referent but moved in all directions. It was no longer simply a credit crisis but a credibility crisis. Pressure to comply with the Troika had prompted an exponential rise in taxes and cuts in wages, subsidies, and services; pensions, scholarships, and subventions were frozen, while thousands defaulted on their mortgages. The bankruptcy of small and large businesses throughout the country led to devastating psychological and economic consequences. Austerity measures clashed with commitments to liquidate and amortize debt. University students whose parents were indebted to the state were deprived of financial aid. With the rise in the number of defaults, banks stopped providing credit, inhibiting debtors from performing debt consolidation on other investment fronts. National banks began to deny loans because they no longer thought customers could repay them; the media disclosed plots of corruption on a daily basis; tactics for tax evasion became anecdotal. The pervasiveness of these themes led to a chain reaction whereby workers did not trust their bosses; the bosses did not trust the labor unions; and the labor unions did not trust the banks, the media, or the government. And then, there was the self-inflicted discredit. Without work, young professionals saw no alternative other than to lie about their qualifications in order to get a job that was in no way commensurate with their credentials. Shareholders and employers, the so-called job givers, took advantage of the situation by hiring qualified young adults without remuneration, merely for work experience (so the expression still runs, even though no one really knows what future lies ahead.) The crisis, the journalist concluded, has affected each and every one of us.

Conclusion: Medium

In his book *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt highlights the significance of the “extreme case” or what he also calls “the exception,” as that which can be more important than the rule. For Schmitt, the extreme is that which interrupts the familiar, the reproducible, the classifiable and, for that very reason, defines sovereignty. As he puts it, “sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”²¹ To decide on the exception is to operate by exclusion through an encounter with singularity. It is to think in terms of that which is not; it is to move in the sphere of the either/or. Schmitt classically employed the example of bureaucratic gridlock in Weimar Germany to em-

21. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, 2005), p. 5.

phasize the sovereign power of the executive. Calling on the exception provided a way out of that gridlock. What happens, however, when the exceptionality of an event becomes identical to decrying its normative power? When a crisis becomes an opportunity for calling on the very conditions that produce a new crisis? One wonders, in tune with the situation described in this essay, where sovereignty has gone.

Who ordered the exception of the May Day sale? Whose decision was it? With the chief executive officer of the supermarket chain avowing his absence from the decision-making, citizens and political groups appealed to the state to come to terms with what looked like a violation of the constitution through dumping, the illegal selling of products below cost. In response, the state called on the *Autoridade de Segurança Alimentar e Económica* (Authority for Alimentary and Economic Safety, or ASAE) to open up an investigation against the Jerónimo Martins Group, which runs the supermarket chain. Via the *Tribunal da Concorrência*, the state court decided upon a fine of nearly thirty thousand euros, a mere speck in the larger profit of twenty-eight million euros made by the corporation in a single day. But the state court reduced by more than half the fine stipulated by law for the magnitude of the infractions identified by ASAE. In doing so, it created a precedent for future violations by big corporations, including repeated violations by Pingo Doce, in exchange for symbolic monetary punishment.²² The state thus showed its head briefly, like an old-style sovereign, only to reenter the adjacent spaces of technological relay where on May Day corporate power governed indistinguishably.

If it is indistinguishable, it is so because of the professional resemblances activated between sovereign subject and environment. The sovereign as medium is the one who manages to empty his or her transcendent status of all possible representable content, so transcendence becomes endowed with the powers of that very emptying; that is, “out there” is no longer localizable as “beyond” or as “extreme.”²³ Deprived of any representable content, the sovereign silences the possibility of exception. He is not there and since he is not there he is incapable of making a decision. So often conceived in terms of origins and positionality, the status of sovereign subjectivity must rather be illuminated against the background of medium theory—not in the instrumental sense of a mediation, for the point here has

22. Since the first sale in 2012, Pingo Doce continued to launch hyperbolic sales and to incur judicial penalization in the form of fines for illegal dumping. The most recent sum, from a sale in 2014, was half a million euros, but these fines have not seemed to deter the corporation from further promotional sales.

23. Quoted in Samuel Weber, “Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt,” *Diacritics* 22 (Autumn–Winter 1992): 14, 6.

been precisely the vacuity of the mediator, but in the sense of a force that pounds and batters sovereign power from one extreme to another, in operational immanence with those very imparting forces.

At the same time, however, the identification between sovereignty and medium highlights a paradox, one that lies at the core of a definition of medium. To become one with the medium, to mimic it, is not to seek total fusion. Rather, it is to take at face value the idea of medium as that which stands between two entities but also between itself qua medium.²⁴ It is to find in the very conditions of merging with a world the possibility of also separating from it; of taking leave of it at the moment of uniting with it; it involves a parting with, as much as a parting from. Defining medium through such a paradox allows one to recover its status as an operational term with which to render visible the grid of thinkable things.

Calls for logic in moments of crisis nowadays consistently miscarry efforts at finding a solution. This is because they fail to see the subterranean structures wherein the emergencies of our time are becoming ever more deeply buried under the very sign of their persistent evocation. This space of latency presumes what Roitman calls the “anti-crisis,” a space of learning beyond opposites—crisis and noncrisis, *oikos* and *polis*, passivity and activity, necessity and politics, micro and macro—that allows us to focus on the labor of opposition itself as the condition of consciousness. It is with a view to entering the gap between crisis and emergency that I have chosen to think of *impasse* as a methodology by which to expose the thresholds of articulation that together have composed a moment without circumscribing it, so as to prevent it from becoming appropriable by crisis.

While not reducible to it, the rapid, stochastic nature of electronic communication today has contributed to the intensification of the discontinuous nature of exception. As intimated above, part of the challenge posed by the displacement of sovereign decisions to the middle spaces of technomediatic relay is a difficulty in demarcating the locus from within which they are articulated; and so edges between constituent and constituted power are dissolving. The sovereign speaks, ever more, in the middle voice. It speaks in the voice of the medium itself. Being a subject inside the process in which it is an agent, the sovereign is halfway between what it is and what it is not. And this both/and paradoxical inclusiveness moves across groups and messages. When the activist improvises a slogan with the words “I am

24. W. J. T. Mitchell elaborates on this idea when arguing that race is not content to be mediated but is rather a time-based, space-based site of articulation. It is not about race in the medium but race itself as medium; see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012).

not shopping,” the point is not merely to communicate that he is *not* at the supermarket. This should be clear from his physical situatedness at the moment of inscription. The fact that he needs to state this shows that he is not entirely where he is either. Rather, what is being communicated is the caesura or impasse of communication itself. Such a caesura or internal contradiction reveals the discrepancy that defines the subject around the logic of the medium. It tells the viewer that even as he is not there, he could be. And that even though he could be, he is not.