

Brief notes on migrations

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Migrations have for long been part of Portuguese reproductive strategies and they inherently constitute an active element, although not without conflicts, of the mechanisms of reproduction which the national social formation is subjected to¹. Throughout the twentieth century and taking many different forms – rural exodus and successive migratory waves to the seaside towns of the country, out to Brazil, or Africa, out to Europe – work migration, and the change of life that comes with it, became a condition of existence for many millions of Portuguese. Without completely letting go this configuration, in the last decades of the twentieth century many Portuguese, again for work-related reasons, have integrated migrations with more defensive strategies, since their development is done in commuting terms, with migrants maintaining their residence and broadening out their job search at a national level². In more recent stages, it was also possible to observe the development of more composite migration strategies. These included not only enhancing mobility but also job demands and job execution in international contexts, under more or less temporary strategies, taking advantage of the changes meanwhile occurred in the areas of information flow and of land transport (infrastructure improvements) and air transport (broadening low-cost supply)³. On the other hand, everything seems to indicate that the impasse around the model for the development of the country, as well as the new issues of the reproduction mechanism crisis that have come to characterize it (massive unemployment and the new framework for the regulation of labor relations), following the funding problems the Portuguese State has been subjected to, are reinforcing national citizens' movements of departure from the country, thus complexifying even more the nature of their respective migratory movements.

Due to features that, in the opinion of many social scientists, define migration processes as a “total social phenomenon”, to resume Marcel Mauss's classical description⁴, these processes are precisely structured today according to multidimensional oriented frameworks. There are different perspectives that may help to understand them, and the implications that arise for explanatory purposes are rather dense. Even if a project like Virgílio Ferreira's *Being and Becoming* shows a clear artistic direction, and this is how we should see it, the work presented involves, by the nature of the questions it raises and by the methodological strategy it develops, the probing possibility of offering some brief coordinates for sociological interpretation, which are worth taking note for debating purposes.

1 On the relationship between strategies and mechanisms of reproduction, cf. Pierre Bourdieu, «Stratégies de reproduction et modes de domination », *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 105, pp. 3-12.

2 On this process, see José Madureira Pinto, *Estruturas Sociais e Práticas Simbólico-Ideológicas nos Campos: elementos de teoria e de pesquisa empírica*, Porto, Afrontamento, 1985. João Ferreira de Almeida, *Classes Sociais nos Campos*, Lisboa, ICS, 1986.

3 Bruno Monteiro; João Queirós, “Pela estrada fora. Apontamentos sobre a génese social da migração pendular de trabalhadores da construção civil portugueses para Espanha”, in José Madureira Pinto; João Queirós (orgs.), *Ir e Voltar: sociologia de uma colectividade local do Noroeste português (1977-2007)*, Porto, Afrontamento, 2010, pp. 261-271.

4 On this concept, see Marcel Mauss, “Essai sur le don. Formes et raisons de l'échange dans les sociétés primitives”, electronic edition by Jean-Marie Tremblay, available at <http://bibliotheque.uqac.quebec.ca/index.htm>, p. 102.

Keeping in mind the practical importance of the experience of physical mobility, the first interpretive coordinate should not fail to emphasize the socially constructed nature of migration. This does not happen by chance or as the result of a spontaneous accumulation of isolated acts. It may be seen in light of regularities that, despite the importance of cooperative oriented frameworks in defining specific international migratory practices, are the product of a domination process⁵ that not only involves relationships of inequality between spaces economic and political spaces, of which national states are the most significant framework, but also involves different social groups. These groups are generically characterized by holding reduced volumes of capital, having in particular a weak economic capital, although this does not necessarily mean their cultural capital is also weak (as the migration of skilled agents in recent years has proven it). States and social groups are defined, at this level, by the positions they hold in the international and social division of labor. This definition is highly sensitive to the political regulation that subdues the relationships between States, turning migrations into an objective field for the questioning of citizenship.

Together with this interpretative coordinate, a second one highlights the contradictory social nature of migratory phenomena. Such contradictions, when seen in light of the transnational migratory movements of the Portuguese (even if their horizon is the European Union), as is the case here, feed on the dual character of every migration. Indeed, the emigrant of a certain society becomes the immigrant of another, and the practical reality of migration experiences is structured around a trajectory that involves the past, the present and the likely future of those who migrate. One should not forget what these times represent in terms of the absence from native society, the potential temporary presence and inclusion in the host society, and the uncertainty about the future (in situations that will take unavoidable alternative configurations in terms of resources and power, depending on the social trajectory every migrant might perform). Therefore, it is not uncommon that the consequent social recompositions may be created from controversial situations, in particular by public authorities and by power disputes in many national states, thereby contributing to inscribe emigration and, especially, immigration in the political framework of major social problems⁶.

The force of things shapes the practical and symbolic reality of migration processes in such a way that it takes us, finally, to a third interpretive coordinate: it highlights the importance of the experience of difference and otherness in understanding the relationship established by the emigrants with the host society, on the one hand, and by the host society with those who have become immigrants, on the other. The experience of otherness is profoundly material, as shown by the very space of immigration (where and how one lives), as well as by the jobs taken (where and how one works). This experience is also extended to immaterial aspects, which are structured in the (re)construction of social and cultural belongings, neither of which free from the possibility of reproducing paradoxical existences, and likely to generate not only great creativity but also inevitable setbacks.

⁵ See Abdelmalek Sayad, "Le phénomène migratoire, une relation de domination", *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, XX, CNRS, 1981, pp. 365-406.

⁶ For a further sociological analysis of the processes here mentioned, see Abdelmalek Sayad, *L'Immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité*, 1. *L'Illusion du provisoire*, Paris, Raisons d'Agir, 2006.

It is also up to social science to identify the conditions of reproduction of creativity and setbacks in which migrations are inscribed. Only an adequate objectification of such conditions will allow for the overcoming of the analysis of migration processes informed by recurrent and resurrected ethnocentric barriers, as well as for a more precise definition of the possibilities of building migrations as a space for the affirmation of citizenship. It is also in this light that we can understand *Being and Becoming*.