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## Familial Persons in Dark Times<sup>i</sup>

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*“Often an era most clearly marks with its seal those who have been least influenced by it, who have been most remote from it, and who therefore have suffered most.”*

Hanna Arendt (1968b: 29)

A whole generation of Europeans that came to adult life in the 2000s, in particular those born in the peripheral countries of the Eurozone, have had to construct their adult lives within a recessive financial regime that is now widely known as ‘austerity’ (cf. Knight and Stewart 2016 or Jones 2014). In relation to earlier generations, they have been subjected to a high rate of permanent unemployment, to recurrent situations of working poverty, to a significant reduction in citizenship rights, and ultimately to the tragic fate of having to emigrate to perform underpaid jobs in richer European countries (cf. Narotsky 2013, 2014).

This paper is based on fieldwork carried out in Southern Portugal<sup>ii</sup> among the members of the millennial generation<sup>iii</sup> who stayed behind. The paper proposes that persons are intrinsically familial since personhood is an emergent property that develops within dwelling environments where more than one familial history is normally present (see Pina-Cabral 2017). Persons, therefore, are indissociable from the participations out of which arises the process of self-creation, their personal ontogeny (see Pina-Cabral n.d., Lévy-Bruhl 1949).<sup>iv</sup> These young folk are familial persons in the sense that family and locality converge in the constitution of who they are; as Heidegger would have put it, for

them, being-in-place is being-with-others. While familial care is what makes possible and ultimately worthwhile the lives of the Portuguese millennial generation, the drastic injunction imposed on them not to contemplate the future constitutes the truly diabolic gamble of our dark times.

### **Dark Times**

'Dark times' is a notion theorised by Hanna Arendt who picks it from Brecht's wartime poem 'To Posterity.' (Arendt 1968a: 3-32; Brecht 1959: 173) There, the poet asks himself how he can go on eating and living normally even although all around him terrible horrors are being perpetrated. On reading it today, we ask ourselves whether we still share Brecht's millenarian notion that, in the midst of the storm, one must be as ruthless as one's enemies. After the war, when Arendt revisits the notion, that later implication was no longer really valid. Inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of Lessing (esp. *Laocoon*, Lessing 1988), Arendt redefines Brecht's dark times in more contemporary tones. In truth, was there ever in Europe a less dark time than 1959, when Arendt comes to Hamburg to deliver her lecture on the topic upon receiving the city's highest accolade?<sup>v</sup> Yet, even then, her post-traumatic Jewish self cannot but be weary of what is in the air. Indeed, are there times that are not dark at all, she asks herself?

Arendt turns darkness around. She tells us that dark times are not rare occurrences in history and that they are not the product of exceptionally horrible deeds. For her, darkness is not a form of silence, but of noise. It is a darkness produced not by lack of light, but by the wrong lighting. It is a scarcity of illumination right in the middle of the day. For Arendt, darkness is produced by acts of communication that, instead of informing, des-inform; by "speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality." (1968a: viii) Ours, once again, as proposed in this paper, are dark times, when our very love for our family, our town, and our nation is so debased by mindless communication that it rouses suspicion even (or perhaps most of all) to those who manipulate it. This paper attempts to think about the darkness of our times.

In her famous introduction to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Arendt

observed that her theoretical inspiration was Heidegger's analysis of publicness (1968b). And it is relevant to look at it, as it clarifies why darkness must not be seen as an exception but rather as a permanent condition of personal existence that, at some moments in history, gets to be exacerbated.

We all live in 'public': that is, in a condition where we face other people in general, as opposed to significant Others. *Das Man* (in the neutral gender) was what Heidegger called this vague 'they' by which we constantly measure our movements in the world. We are constantly caring about the way we differ from 'they', because we cannot exist without them. Moreover, since 'they' presents itself as a general other (*das Man*, not 'him' or 'her', but 'it'), it tends to average out differences and to level them down. In this way, publicness is insensitive to differences of level and genuineness. The agency behind the decisions taken by 'they' disappears: "it was always the 'they' who did it, and yet it can be said that it has been 'no one'." (Heidegger 1962: 165)

Because in the constitution of the person alterity is anterior to selfhood (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 9), this 'they' of the public is not erasable. And what is at stake is not the presence of a specific other person whose meaning we would have to approach, but a kind of "inconspicuous domination by Others" (Heidegger 1962: 164). As 'they' (*das Man*)—that is, in publicness—Others vanish as distinguishable from myself, which implies a form of domination, because this "inconspicuousness and unascertainability" promotes a dictatorship of the 'they'. Publicness obscures one's experiential world in such a way that "what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone." (ibid.: 165). In this sense, being in public means inhabiting a world which is constituted as an interspace between ourselves and Others, where one's sense of uniqueness is in jeopardy. As Arendt puts it, what is at stake in publicness is "a common sense with which we orient ourselves and others and going on to the sense of beauty, or taste, with which we love the world." (Arendt 1968a: 11)

Heidegger's original quote that inspired Arendt was, "the light of the public darkens everything" (Arendt 1968b: 35). To the Heideggerian notion of publicness as a process of shadowing, Arendt adds Brecht's anxiety about the injustice in our world. In this way, she moves its insight from the realm of

metaphysics to the realm of a political philosophy—and that is how the notion becomes especially relevant to us, contemporary social anthropologists. Choosing as her example the case of ‘pariah groups’, she claims that it is possible for “an atrophy of all the organs with which we respond [to the world]” (ibid) to occur. This, she calls, a “real worldlessness”.

World, in her words, is “the thing that arises between people and in which everything that individuals carry with them innately can become visible and audible.” (1968a: 10) This means that, to the extent that it is public, no one can go without it, on the one hand, and that it must involve more than one generation, on the other hand: “it must transcend the life-space of mortal men.” (1958: 54). So, when she speaks of worldlessness, Arendt does not mean the absence of world but rather *a darkening of world*; a more tenuous, distant condition of world; a necessary alienation from world that comes with the fact that that world is ‘public’.

We all experience this alienation to a point, as Heidegger's original insight made clear. But there are historical moments, sociotemporal conditions, in which people’s world becomes increasingly tenuous, increasingly lacking in substance, increasingly mediated by modes of semantic distancing, which mean that the world that reflects one’s personal actions seems to have little to do with how the world appears in public. At such times, “people’s mistrust of the world and all aspects of the public realm [...] grows steadily.” (1968a: 10)

For some, whose sense of entitlement is very strong, this darkness manifests itself as a fear of lack of control. The world that they manipulate is increasingly unconnected to the world as it shines back at them; a darkness is installed in their world; a mediatedness; a sense of being abandoned by world. A condition of worldlessness installs itself. This is the condition of the contemporary neo-Nazi whites in North America or of the neoliberal ‘ruralist’ politicians who took over Brazil’s government after the recent parliamentary coup.

These people’s past was transmitted as tradition; thus, it possesses authority. They are pressed to fight ingloriously for a world that would reflect an authority that they no longer possess and, the more they fight for it, the less it reflects back that authority. The ruralist members of Congress in Brasília, for

example, who are presently struggling to abolish all legislation protecting indigenous peoples and their rights to land, know fully well that the land they own was acquired through murderous, dirty means (*grilagem*) and that they are members of Congress not because they protect the voters' interests but due to a deeply corrupt undemocratic manipulation of voting rights. Their world becomes increasingly equivocal and that generates frustration and fear.

At the other extreme, for those whose sense of entitlement is lesser; whose world was never infused with authority, this worldlessness presents itself as an unbridgeable silence, as a failure of the world to reflect back their gestures. This is the kind of alienation, the type of worldlessness that assaults the so-called 'precariat' of today's European peripheries: whether in the post-industrial environments of northern Britain, in the post-socialist wastelands of Eastern Europe, or in the peripheral countries of 'austerity' in Southern Europe. For such people too, publicness manifests itself equivocally—by means of a disjunction between their lived experience and the 'they' that colonizes their public world; a disjunction which calls for 'repair' (see Martine and Agu 2016). They too live in a world that is dark, and growingly darker and darker. They principally suffer from what Arendt qualified as "the ignominy of poorly paid work" (1968b: 29). Their condition as 'working poor'—that is, as people who earn from their work less than they need to survive in our contemporary consumer society—is weirdly dark. They continue alive even although they do not earn their living; they work hard and well even although their work is worth nothing; their bosses fire them with clockwork regularity even although there is no evidence that they failed to accomplish the tasks that they were entrusted with.

In face of this, however, for today's working poor in Europe, there is always some 'hidden hand' somewhere that prevents ultimate collapse: they continue to dress comfortably; they live in sordid but sufficient environments; their children are born somehow; and they somehow get to bury their parents. Average living standards, with the possible exception of Greece, have not plummeted throughout Europe (see Bregman 2017). Public life continues in spite of their apparent 'failure'—there is some disgraceful but ultimately efficient national health service; someone is visibly paying the taxes that they are, apparently, not managing to pay.

Much like the neo-Nazis in North America or the 'ruralist' congressmen in Brazil, their world has a weird reflex within it, it is equivocal (see Pina-Cabral 2002: 105-126 and 2010); it reflects conjointly different pictures (marked by different spaces and different times). It is like when I take a photograph of a fifteenth-century object in a display case at a museum, but when I look at it later on at home, I discover that I also photographed at the same time the contemporary people that were walking in the museum behind me. In dark times, as Arendt puts it, "the public order is based on people holding as self-evident precisely those 'best known truths' which secretly scarcely anyone still believes in." (1968a: 11)

Yet it is important to realize that this is not a matter of hypocrisy or, alternatively, weakness of the will. However strongly I might believe something, there is no such thing as absolute belief, because there is no such thing as absolute truth. All human truth is part of human communication in history. So, the North American neo-Nazi strongly suspects that others may have a good reason for not adhering to his racist views, and the European working poor strongly suspects that he is fired regularly from his underpaid jobs for no reason that has anything to do with his actions. They experience an equivocal form of publicness.

Furthermore, it is not hypocrisy or weakness of the will, in either case, because there was neither evil intent nor real option, respectively. The 'they' (*das Man*) presents a world to them that does not match their actions and experiences—a constant disjunction arises in their world between the meaning of experience and public meaning. There is no lie in their sentiments, there is only a vague sentiment of unfounded uncertainty. What happens is that a constant discomfort of distance arises between themselves and the averaging public world from which they cannot afford to distance themselves. Their world 'darkens' or 'retracts' (according to the image of wordlessness), thus producing a kind of fear of differentiation of the self from the relevant other selves. A desperate need arises to shore up one's own self in the world of Others; 'their' world, the neutral vague world of publicness is dark to the extent that it makes less and less sense—not because people lack reason but because different senses of the world compete.

Arendt tells us, “History knows many periods of dark times in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than that it show due consideration for their vital interests and personal liberty.” (1968a: 11) When we look around us, we realise that this condition of worldlessness broadly characterises our epoch. We live in a world where noise obscures meaning, where too much light blurs our vision. Ours is a time when a deeply ambivalent word such as ‘austerity’ is all that we are left with as a means to describe how the greed of international finance has managed to destroy the right of a whole generation to an ‘active life’—and again, we encounter here another of Arendt’s favourite terms (1958: 7-16). The right to the active life is what austerity has stolen from the European generation of millenials.

We live in *dark times* when our political choices are not made as a result of positive desires, but as desperate attempts to prevent the worst outcome. As Katesambekis and Stavrakakis put it: “In fact, what the European periphery has experienced is an EU acting against its very defining values and principles, while local/national ‘moderate centrist’ political actors, claiming to be fundamentally ‘Europeanist’, incarnating the supreme rationality of the European spirit, are becoming more and more anti-democratic in their radical implementation of draconian austerity and neoliberal adjustment policies.” (2016—see also Narotsky 2012). Public truth and personal experience do not seem to match.

Faced by growing worldlessness, humans experience a proneness to bracket the equivocality of the public realm; they adopt a virtualist disposition that grants precedence to meaning over experience. Arendt again, “Those who have lived in such times and been formed by them have probably always been inclined to despise the world and the public realm, to ignore them as far as possible, or even to overleap them and, as it were, reach behind them—as if the world were only a façade behind which people could conceal themselves—in order to arrive at mutual understandings with their fellow men without regard for the world that lies between them.” (1968a: 11-12) I feel that this sentence constitutes an important lesson in anthropological theory.

### **Jorge’s earlier travails**



What is the darkness of our times? Let me provide you with a lived exemplar: the life story of a 45-year-old resident of a small town in the interior of southern Portugal. Jorge dresses in an elegant but discreet manner, he sports a polite demeanour, and his educated accent gives no evidence of regional belonging. In fact, like so many people of his generation that I met there, Jorge's presentation is practically unmarked by class belonging. He wears glasses and dialogues with facility, constantly situating the events of his life against the broader historical timeline that, as a trained historian, he assumes implicitly. When we get to the painful points in his trajectory of self-constitution, I can detect in the video recording of our conversation that his carefully shaved cheeks go slightly reddish and his eyes, behind the lenses of his glasses, become just a little more liquid. There is in him a profound resilience and a certainty of his worth, accompanied by a resigned contemplation of his objective misfortune (see Narotsky 2016).

In the mid 1960s, at the time of the economic boom that accompanied the onset of the African colonial war, Jorge's father went to live in the big city (Lisbon). He was a trained boilermaker, being the son of a carpenter, and grandson of an ironsmith from a small town in southern Portugal. As it happens, Jorge's final year dissertation for his History degree was about the impact of the 1930s Colonial Act across the Portuguese Empire. His father's army times were spent working in an armament factory in Angola and, on returning to Lisbon, he married a woman from another town of the same region. These were days of prosperity such as the family never experienced again. Their first son, Jorge, was born in a nice new rented apartment in Amadora, a recently built working class suburb of Lisbon.

One fateful morning, however, the father was going to work but the tram stopped halfway in the middle of a crowd and never moved again. This was the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 1974. On that day, the populace of Lisbon occupied the streets of the capital, thus preventing the suppression of the military coup organized by a small band of young army officers against the colonialist and dictatorial regime of nearly half a century's duration. These were heady days of freedom, but not for Jorge's family. A few months after, the father's firm, occupied by the workers, declared bankruptcy. He was left jobless in the middle of a topsy-turvy world, where all his prosperity and all his life plans had suddenly vanished.

Together with his wife, with whatever earnings they had, he bought a small van and started selling electrical appliances in the small country fairs throughout Portugal's southern region. Selling in markets is a despised profession, associated to travelling people such as Gypsies, but it allowed the family to raise Jorge and his two siblings in the midst of the hard days of the IMF intervention in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

At the same time, people started coming back from Africa. At first, came hoards of bitter dispossessed colons but soon also, as the civil wars became established in the African ex-colonies, black people of rural extraction started arriving, occupying Amadora and surrounding it with vast slums. All of these people lived mostly from the informal sector of the economy and there was a lot of criminality and drug trading going around. Jorge's parents were increasingly horrified by what they saw, particularly as they had to leave their children in the care of relatives for long periods, because they spent their lives going from market to market. One day, in a small town of the interior, which I will call Vila Nova, Jorge's father was told that there were some social houses that no one had wanted to move into. He applied for one of them and the municipality gave it to him. The family has lived there ever since.

Jorge was thirteen. When I ask him—as I ask all of the young adults that I have been working with in Vila Nova—what was the decisive moment in his life, he tells me with no hesitation that it was this moment. At the time, he was probably only half aware of the anger that he would come to feel, of the feeling of deep resentment that he associates to that change in his life. But today he has no doubts about the fact that this was his darkest hour. Moving to a small town in the interior was bad enough for someone like him that had his future life as an urban dweller marked out in front of him. He was a good student who liked sports and, as his parents were away often, he had learnt from very young to move around the city freely.

Worse still, instead of being taken to one of the parents' towns of origin, he went to a third town, where no one knew them and where, to this day, thirty two years later, they are treated as foreigners. I have to admit that I did not immediately accept Jorge's statement at face value. How can the son of a person from a nearby town, who was raised and lived for over three decades in Vila

Nova be treated as a stranger? So, in the evening of the day of the interview, I asked the local family that gives me shelter if they knew So-and-So, Jorge's name. This is a small town of c. 11000 inhabitants where everyone is supposed to know each other. They claimed not to know him. Surprised, I explained that his father had had a small electrical shop in one of the main streets. After some effort, they finally came to identify him: 'Oh, you mean the son of the man at that shop below where Auntie Rosa (another neighbour) used to live?' In fact, the shop had been already largely Jorge's own doing.

During the last year at school, Jorge had an infatuation with a local girl. As he tells it, it was the one and only true love affair in their lives and it lasted for quite a few years. But her parents were so opposed to their friendship that, eventually, she was forced to break with him. Whilst for a while after arriving in Vila Nova Jorge had been a bad student, by the time they finished School he was one of the best. Still, depressed by that rejection, and seeing that his parents were aging and had the heavy duty of raising his two younger siblings, Jorge decided not to go on to University and rather stay and help his parents in the business. The mid 1990s were days of rapid modernization and speedy growth in Portugal. Country fairs stopped being the sort of place where people bought electrical appliances, so Jorge and his parents mounted the little shop. At first, it yielded a decent income.

But then came the Euro. Jorge has no doubts about the fact that 2002 was the true beginning of "the crisis." Inflation shot through the roof and the shop became economically unprofitable. As his parents run it, he went to work for seventeen years in the only respectable hotel in town. He did everything there. At the end, he practically ran the hotel singlehandedly. The bosses were associated to building interests. So, in the mid 2000s, for so long as the building industry kept having credit, they kept paying the workers. Although Jorge was paid very little, it was enough to allow him to finally study for a degree in History, his true vocation.

As he explains correctly, since the onset of the Euro there has been no growth in the Portuguese economy. The state stopped being able to print money, so it could no longer borrow in its own terms in order to promote growth. From 2002 onwards, GDP was negative up to 2004 and then very low until 2009 when

it became negative again until the end of 2010. The worse period, however, was from 2011 to 2014, with a low of -4.50 in 2012.<sup>vi</sup> The state found itself handcuffed, boxed-in by the so-called 'market' (*encastré* as the French economists call it—Lemoine 2016: 23). I say 'market', but in inverted commas, announcing that this is yet another of those 'dark' words much like 'austerity'. We now know that there is no practical correspondence whatsoever between the circulation and negotiation of the sovereign bonds of the peripheral countries of Europe and a formal model of what a financial market may look like. This is not only because of the corrupt manipulation of the rates of interest (suffice to remember the Libor scandal, or the doubling of the Greek debt in one day in 2005, managed by Mario Draghi working for Goldman Sachs<sup>vii</sup>). But principally because the agencies that attribute the rates are in the service of the same people that benefit from this manipulation (cf. Lemoine 2016: 273). From Presidents of the European Union to Presidents of the European Central Bank, people associated to the international financial elite (in particular, to Goldman Sachs) have acquired the capacity to determine the financial constraints that mould the lives of the population in the peripheral countries of Europe. The resulting effect has been that the Portuguese economy has practically stopped growing and only recently did it manage to perk up again minimally. This was due to the fact that the new centre-left government decided to be just a very little bit less servile to the repressive and authoritarian regulations through which the financial interests that dominate the European Union impose their recessive and exploitative policies in the name of 'austerity'. Debts to international creditors are treated as written in stone, but social debts to one's electors and pensioners are treated as semi-serious agreements.

Working at night and studying during daytime, Jorge only managed to finish his degree because he possesses a genuine fascination for the study of History. He was the best student in his graduation year. He went daily without lunch, in order to be able to afford the petrol to go to the capital city, around 40 kilometres away from Vila Nova. With the professor's encouragement, he went on to register for an MA degree. But, in order to continue, he had to pay a fee and that involved taking credit. He went as far as negotiating the loan with the bank, and it was quite a generous one, he tells me, but this was 2007. His hotel had

folded in and, although the owners did pay him the salaries in arrears, Jorge never managed to get the courts to oblige them to pay for the unemployment compensation of around €5000 that he was owed and which would have allowed him to actually start his MA degree.

He looked around and he could see that, realistically, he would never get a job as a historian or a teacher. Therefore, having eaten the loan, he would be settled with a major debt that he would have no means to repay. He run the risk of losing whatever savings his parents had made to provide for their old age, and even the house that they had been given so long ago by the municipality. This was a time when a party that was utterly servile to the interests represented in the Troika held the government. People were being evicted from their homes for the execution of even insignificant debts to the Tax Office. Once their houses were expropriated, the houses were sold in state auctions where they were valued at next to nothing. So people were being left without a home but still incapable of paying off their debts. Fortunately, on coming to power, the new government finally cancelled this disgusting anti-constitutional situation. But, while it lasted, it left hoards of people living in highly precarious conditions.

During the financial crisis of 2008-2012 Portuguese tax-payers were forced to pay off vast amounts of money in taxes, in salary reductions, and in decrease in state services. This suppressed the lower middle-class that had developed in the 1990s, decreased the quality of the services provided by the State to the citizens, and led to a breach of the Constitution. Portugal had not experienced any economic growth for many years by the time the 2008 crisis exploded, but it also did not have high levels of sovereign debt compared to the other European countries. The higher levels of private debt to GDP recorded for the 2008-2012 period can be interpreted as a response to the decrease in income of the families resulting from prolonged negative growth. There was in Portugal no real estate bubble, as in Spain, and the banking crisis that the Portuguese tax-payers are now being obliged to pay for was caused by the policy responses to the 2008 crisis, not by the crisis itself. The main factor leading Portugal to have an unsustainable sovereign debt was the sudden and brutal rise in the interest of that debt. In 2006, Portugal government ten-year bonds were at around 4.00%; by January 2012 they were at 17.36%, and it was not until 2014 that they

returned back to 2006 levels.<sup>viii</sup> This totally suppressed employment expectations and led to a haemorrhagic emigration among the more trained sectors of the population of young adults. About half of the cohort of millennials in Vila Nova is today permanently lost to their town of origin (see Pena Pires 2014).

### **Jorge's later travails**

For two years, Jorge lived off the unemployment subsidy without hardly leaving his home. He tells me: 'The things that touch us are close to our skin. I felt the crisis in my body.' While he prefers not to elaborate on it, as he narrates his story, it becomes clear that Jorge underwent a two-year long period of severe clinical depression. As he emerged from these months of darkness, in which he could hardly even bring himself to read his beloved history books, Jorge decided to look for work, any work. The problem is there were no longer any 'jobs' to be had, in the sense of regular employment. That had become a thing of the past.

The so-called 'structural changes' that were imposed by the multinational financial interests using the Troika as the principal mode of suppressing previously existing civil and trade union rights, have resulted in a severe reduction of workers' condition, a situation of insecure employment, and the transformation of a whole generation into 'working poor,' that is, people whose income from work does not cover the costs of social reproduction (in the sense of the basic needs required to survive and have children in a consumer society). Whilst Portugal experienced a meteoric rise in the level of education of the general population during the 1990s and 2000s, it still lives with the dictatorship's historic legacy of very low levels of education and underperforming secondary schools. This means that large sectors of the population continue to depend on manual labour for income, although it has to be admitted that this continues to be reduced every year that passes. The fact is that the automation of production, namely in the area of agriculture, has led to a severe reduction in work offers, particularly in rural regions such as Vila Nova. Agriculture was relaunched using highly sophisticated techniques associated to irrigation permitted by the construction of the vast Alqueva Dam with European Union funding.

The traditional forms of employment that provided seasonal salaries to most people in small towns simply vanished. The proceeds of the modern, technologically intensive agriculture that one sees flourishing all around one in Alentejo today do not percolate at all to the local economy. The only 'jobs' that are locally available are mediated by the authorities and they are related to forms of social security support.

As he came out of his dark days, and as his unemployment payment finished, Jorge decided to take on whatever work he could get. He asked to be received by the President of the Municipality and told him that he needed to eat and feed his parents and that he was ready to do anything, even clean public toilets or sweep streets. The party bureaucrat that received him detected Jorge's education from his manner of expressing himself and decided to give him some temporary work. The lowly job description apparently had nothing to do with what Jorge was actually asked to do. In practical terms he was placed at the disposal of the local Historical Archives. Sometime in the early 2000s, at a time when the system of post-university apprenticeships was launched and subsidised, there had been a change of generation in the municipality's leadership. The new President (2013 elections, a young economist) decided to modernise the services the municipality provided. So he used the subsidised apprenticeship system to hire a set of local young officers with university degrees to whom eventually he managed to give permanent employment. All the ones that came after them, however, like Jorge, have been hired under temporary apprenticeship contracts and laid-off on a yearly basis, as the 'structural reforms' of the Troika oblige.

Jorge found a kindred soul in the historian in charge of the Library and Archives. He worked for a year; then worked for another six months without pay; then managed to get an apprenticeship for 18 months; then he got employed once again under a false description to work for another year. He will be unemployed again in September 2017. In the meantime, he has been incredibly active doing what he is really good at. They are busy writing a history of the local wine-growing industry, which is the local strong earner and they managed to launch a Museum of Jewish Heritage in the second urban nucleus of the municipality (Vila Velha, a beautiful hill-top medieval town).<sup>ix</sup> This was an

utter success, calling many tourists from abroad to visit. Indeed, there is nothing especially Jewish about this town, only that it lays close to the Spanish border. So, when the Spanish Kings in 1492 expelled the Jews, they moved in hoards across the border and many settled in towns like Vila Velha, forming Jewries there. Five years later, the same Spanish Queen finally managed to force the hand of the Portuguese king. All of those Jews were forcefully converted to Christianity. Their lack of faith, however, soon became apparent and the Inquisition busily plied its dirty work from 1536 to the late 1700s. Is it not a factor of darkness that the museum Jorge and his colleagues mounted to glorify the Jewish memory is placed in the only house in Vila Velha that can be historically identified with the Jewish presence in town—the local headquarters of the Inquisition?

For Jorge, however, this was a profound experience. He says: ‘The one project that I did that I really loved was that of the Jewry. Unfortunately, when we had to finish it, it had only barely started.’ The fact is that the unexpected appeal of this enterprise to Jewish visitors has helped relaunch Vila Velha’s long dead economic life. Jorge meets and talks to these tourists and he is puzzled by their fascination with this land of origin. What are they looking for here, he asks himself? He lives here, and he knows what it is to be a stranger in one’s own town; what are these Jewish tourists looking for? Have they not laid roots wherever they went, he wonders? Or are they, five centuries later, still strangers, like he is in this town? I was struck by Jorge’s sense of genuine puzzlement with this—his feeling that, somehow, he partakes of their condition.

As it happens, some years ago, his old girlfriend suffered a severe professional accident and was pensioned off. Everyone in her family remains opposed to their being together, but her parents have now died and she lives alone in their family home in the centre of town. They got together again, having decided that, either they make a go of it now, or they will both land up dying alone. So he moved in with her, not far from the place where he works at the moment. The first morning that he slept there, he had to take the rubbish to the bins at the bottom of the street. As he came out of the door, the neighbours in front were staring at him angrily from their side of the road. He greeted them with a head gesture but did not want a confrontation, so he went to deposit his



bag silently. On the way back, the women called to him aggressively, shouting that the decent people that live in this street normally greet each other with a “Good day!” and that they could see what sort of person he was and that they did not welcome him here at all. He failed to reply and went back in. Over time, he supposes, they will come to get used to having him there. His principal worry, however, is that, come September, he will again be jobless. Will he then be forced to actually clean streets? Will he have to live at home sharing his girlfriend’s meagre pension? He does not feel capable of moving back in with his parents; they can now no longer afford to keep him.

Jorge’s problem, like that of practically all of the young people I have been interviewing in Vila Nova, is that he lacks a future. He has no pathway to a future and, much as he might exercise himself, he sees no way to get one. He struggles for the active life. Mind you, he is active, but that is only during the small windows of opportunity in which activity is permitted to him. Before him expands a space of darkness; or, better still, as Arendt put it, a blinding light that lets him see nothing, that affords no handle where he might take a grip.

### **The smartphone generation**

If one considers the members of the millennial generation in Vila Nova as a group, the first thing to note is that they are fully part of consumer society. Now, this may seem an obvious thing to say, as there is probably nowhere on earth today where consumer society has not spread its tentacles. But it is important to remember that this is perhaps only the first or second generation in Portugal that has been fully cut off from the previous modes of peasant economic survival. What I mean here is not that there is an absence of informal work and informal commerce, for indeed one of the most striking effects of the imposition of the so-called ‘structural reforms’ has been the renewed buoyancy of the black market that the Portuguese state had largely managed to bring under control in the 1990s. It is rather that, once one has entered into consumer patterns of living, one cannot move out of them without experiencing extreme hardship, because they impose themselves by manipulating desire.

It is not a matter of my liking this way of doing something over another way of doing it. Rather, it is that my experience of myself as a human being is

radically reshaped by consumer needs; I desire these things because, by drastically reducing my level of pain and increasing my level of personal comfort, they become part of what it is to live in a properly human way. One learns how to use the technical wonders that consumer society provides and one cannot move back to a life without cars, without bicycles, without modern medicine, without modern clothing, without modern food, without Dettol, you name it. Note, you must not read what I say as amounting to an argument against technological improvement—I fully take on Rutger Bregman’s argument that everyone’s quality of life has objectively improved with the onset of consumer society (2017). Rather, I am only noting that, once one enters into it, consumption becomes a strong force in one’s experience from which one cannot move away. As we all know through overeating, there is probably nothing harder to do than reduce one’s level of consumption.

Now, it seems important to stress that this so-called austerity regime prevents people from having income security, from earning a decent salary, from making savings on their earnings, but it *does not* prevent them from remaining marginally within consumer society. The four large commercial outlets of Vila Nova are the busy hubs of today’s local life. Austerity is not only about curbing people’s access to the things that make life comfortable and fun, it is also about preventing them from inventing new modes of moving out of the consumer regime. This is done by the state, supported by the Troika that controls it. They provide the means to remain within consumer society in the form of hunger-level minimal salaries, small and insecure unemployment benefits, regular short-term work mediated by ‘projects’, etc., etc.: the sort of things that have kept Jorge alive for the past decade and promise to keep him and his partner living for the rest of their lives. In short, the young people I study are thoroughly and irremediably members of the international society of consumption, but they are so in a peripheral and, as it were, wounded condition.

The second aspect to be highlighted is people’s adherence to forms of sociality that are digitally mediated and that, therefore, overreach significantly the local world (see Kuan and Lu 2011). No one of this generation that I met in Vila Nova failed to have one or more email accounts, Facebook accounts, Twitter accounts, etc. This is a smartphone generation, who from the moment they wake

up to the moment they go to sleep pace their rhythms by the conversations and information that their smartphones provide (cf. Aschoff 2015). They all speak simple English, possessing a kind of informal literacy that allows them not only to express themselves in writing, but also to manipulate images. The days in which the anthropologist was expected to function as photographer or video maker have gone. Everyone around photographs and films at least as well as I do, and shares their visual and textual products in networks that, beyond local sociality, reach to the whole world.

There is a positive and a negative side to this digital mastery. The positive side is the way in which the smartphone generation can exercise their condition as familial persons beyond their geographic location. They are constantly in contact with their friends and family who are not immediately present. This changes significantly their forms of socialising and opens them to networks of friendship that reach significantly beyond the confines of local society. In turn, that means that differences in class and income become less impeditive of social intercourse. They have the manners required to perform most forms of socializing, so that I have witnessed that they find themselves genuinely at ease in the midst of the truly wealthy (e.g. the extremely rich foreign people who acquire smart ranches in the Portuguese countryside or elegant apartments in the newly renewed buildings of historical Lisbon).

The negative side is the way in which virtualism empties out the public sphere. To return to the words of Hanna Arendt, the media encourage people to reach behind the public realm 'as if the world were only a façade behind which people could conceal themselves—in order to arrive at mutual understandings with their fellow men without regard for the world that lies between them.' (1968a: 11-12) This means that my respondents in Vila Nova are likely to know more about Melania Trump or Marie Le Penn than about the President of their own Municipality. They can discuss elections in the US or France better than in Portugal. They follow in detail the technically sophisticated world of competition football, discoursing with facility about St. Petersburg's Dynamo or Manchester United: a meaningless world of blinding darkness, as Arendt would note. The virtualist proclivities of the millennial generation are a way of managing the relative worldlessness of the public space they live in.

Finally, a third aspect is that Portugal's millennials are the result of a long and sustained period of population decrease. They live longer than their parents and grandparents, but they also have less collaterals, as the fertility rate diminished significantly in the 1970s and 1980s. This means that very few of them find themselves in the position of not having where to live. In Vila Nova itself, the houses of their parents are permanently open to them, but they also inherit from grandparents, aunts and even godparents. This residential security is one of the reasons why the ones that do remain are bound to local chains of sociality and why many, after having had long and painful experiences abroad or in the big city, end up returning to a life that is penurious and insecure but not necessarily humiliating or sordid. I have found among my respondents a large number of women who, due to the high occurrence of separation and divorce among young adults, end up staying behind so as to be able to raise on their own in safety their much-loved children.

## **Conclusion**

In order to be able to have an active life and to remain afloat, the members of the millennial generation in Vila Nova have had to give up on a future. Asked what are their plans for the future, most of them look at me with puzzlement and explain that the future is unknowable. Asked about how they will live when they come to retirement age, they smile in a resigned manner, as if the question were stupid.<sup>x</sup> Their future is uncertain not because they are uncertain of themselves, but because they do not know where and how they will find the means to sustain themselves in the consumer society to which they belong. But, worse of all, they are thrown into a troubling dilemma: they know they rely on their families and local communities to survive but they do not know how they will contribute towards ensuring the future sustainability of those very same families and local communities.

It might seem at first hand that 'work' in the form of 'jobs'—that is, decently paid, reasonably secure employment with support for social reproduction needs, such as sickness, pregnancy, leisure and old age—is what is lacking in Alentejo today. Interestingly, however, this is not how my respondents explain it to me. They emphatically refuse to carry out the

conjunction between ‘work’ and ‘job’ that Gorz identified so long ago as a major analytical problem: “‘Work’ nowadays refers almost exclusively to activities carried out for a wage. The terms ‘work’ and ‘job’ have become interchangeable: work is no longer something that one *does* but something that one *has*. One ‘looks for work’ and ‘finds work’ just as one ‘looks for’ and ‘finds’ a job.” (1997: 1)

To the contrary, my respondents in Vila Nova make a point of explaining that there is a major epistemic difference between ‘work’ (*trabalho*), which they value and all claim to be good at, and ‘jobs’ (*emprego*), about which mostly they have despaired. They know that, for them, a ‘job’ is not a likely future prospect—they will never be ‘salarymen’, to use the old Japanese formula. Thus, they know that they have to find alternative sources of income but, most of all, they know that they have to find alternative sources of self-validation, much as they are being constantly pressed to perform ‘jobs’ by the very same state apparatus that does not mobilise these very same ‘jobs’. So the ‘training schools’, the ‘unpaid internships’, etc., that the social security apparatus organizes are rarely seen locally as more than what they truly are: hurdles in the way of their access to the social security payments that prevent them from falling out of consumer society.

The neoliberal, conservative logic of hard work that the European Union promotes engages a rhetoric of ‘labour’ that is no longer adequate to describe the living conditions of these people or the way capital works in Europe today. It does function, however, as a form of systematic moral oppression of the poorer classes of Europe’s peripheral regions. We must return to Hanna Arendt’s words that we quoted at the beginning of this essay: talk of ‘employment’ is “speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, (...) exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality.”

In Alentejo, the incongruity between a present surge in agricultural development that is accompanied by a steady reduction in employment only appears incongruous if one fails to grasp that, as James Livingston put it, “If growth no longer requires net additions to the labor force, work itself can’t be justified by the invocation of economic necessity, and income must be decoupled from work—full employment becomes a fool’s errand.// And if growth requires

neither more capital nor more labor, less work and more leisure become the key not just to the good life (...) but to life as such.” (2016: xiv) Freedom from this Tory-type stranglehold is one of the reasons why, in Portugal, the recent left-of-centre government has been so successful at getting the economy once again to move and people to leave the gloom imposed by ‘austerity’. This is a condition that is not specific to Alentejo or even to Europe’s rural peripheries. This is, in many ways, the same idea that Rutgers Bregman presents in his influential book *Utopia for Realists* (2017), where he argues in favour of alternative modes of mobilising people’s creative potential in a world where ‘labour’ and ‘jobs’ are probably not a realistic expectation ever again.

Another consequence of this process is that, much in the same perverse way in which this austerity regime has promoted the black economy, so has it also encouraged the promotion of a deep sense of localism. Throughout Europe, populist forms of nationalism, xenophobia, and localist community-support schemes have emerged over the past decade. Whilst some of these responses are constructive, most of them are deeply counterproductive, for they fail to address the real problems of those who fall in for them. They play into the hands of populist politicians who vaunt a future of ‘job’ promotion, which they fully know to be unrealistic given the nature of the present international finance system. For people like Jorge there is little relation between, on the one hand, their need for income in order to survive as a consumer, which he manages to obtain sporadically through the performance of state-subsidised ‘jobs’ or ‘internships’ that often are not in substance what they formally claim to be, and, on the other hand, their need for validation as worthwhile human beings, which in his case he finds through his engagement in the study and promotion of local and European history. He does not revolt because he does not feel entitled.

The one certainty that sustains the Alentejo millennials I met in Vila Nova is their belonging to a family and to a community where their relatives and their friends get together to support them in the inevitable moments of personal crisis. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why the neighbours are loath to accept Jorge as one of theirs, even after he lived there for so long. Community and family support are precious goods but they are also an open door to discrimination. Jorge’s life is a test case of the boundary condition.

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<sup>i</sup> Paper delivered as Keynote Plenary Conference, SIEF Conference "Ways of Dwelling: Crisis–Craft–Creativity", Göttingen, March 27, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> Fieldwork in Alentejo (Southern Portugal) has been carried out from August 2016 and is still ongoing, as part of the project "Household survival in crisis: austerity and relatedness in Greece and Portugal" with support from the ESRC, UK (ES/L005883/1) and the School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent. The town studied is very close to the town that J. Cutileiro studied in his classic monograph *A Portuguese Rural Society* (1971).

<sup>iii</sup> For the purposes of this research, I defined 'millennial' as members of the generation that came to adult life at the onset of the Euro. My primary group of respondents were people born (or raised) in Vila Nova between 1972 and 1992 and their parents.

<sup>iv</sup> For personal ontology, see Toren 1993.

<sup>v</sup> The Lessing Prize of the Free City of Hamburg in 1959.

<sup>vi</sup> Cf. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/portugal/gdp-growth-annual> - 30/05/2017.

<sup>vii</sup> See Robert B. Reich "How Goldman Sachs Profited from the Greek Debt Crisis", *The Nation*, 3-10 August 2015—<https://www.thenation.com/article/goldmans-greek-gambit> - 30/05/2017

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/portugal/government-bond-yield> - 30/05/2017.

<sup>ix</sup> For the continued significance of a Jewish identity in Portugal and its apories, see Naomi Leite 2016.

<sup>x</sup> Even during the worse periods of the Passos Coelho government, the level of public anger in Portugal was never comparable to that in Greece. This is a matter that raises issues concerning Portuguese society and the Portuguese state in light of the country's long-term history, but the matter deserves separate treatment (see Theodossopoulos 2014).