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Samuel Weeks

Marxian Crisis, Maussian Gift: The mutual-help practices of Lisbon's Cape Verdean labor immigrants in an age of austerity

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- 1 Since 2010, the escalation of the Eurozone crisis in Portugal has radically altered the country's socio-economic landscape. In April of 2011, the Socialist-led Portuguese government was forced to accept an EU-IMF-ECB bailout due to pressure from the German and French governments and a relentless assault from the bond market, which had priced up the country's debt to levels deemed unsustainable. Since this time, Portugal has been on the receiving end of an unrelenting austerity program, the likes of which has not been seen in post-WWII Europe. This period has resulted in a dramatic drop in the living standards of many Portuguese, as both workers and pensioners have lost about a third of their incomes. The actual unemployment rate is said to be around 20 per cent (the 'official' rate is 15.5 percent), with the figure twice as high among 25-to-34-year-olds, while GDP has declined by at least eight per cent since the start of the crisis, a drop comparable to the downturn in the 1930s (Gray, 2012, p. 104). This punishing regime of austerity has produced a series of mass mobilizations since November of 2010, with large demonstrations, three general strikes, and a brief 'Occupy' encampment in front of the Parliament Building. Central to the protesters' demands is that the Portuguese government renegotiate its debt to French and German creditors, in an attempt to save the EU from resembling the 1830-48 July Monarchy in France as described by Marx (2003): "a [mere] joint-stock company for the exploitation of national wealth", run by and for "the financial aristocracy" (p. 38).
- 2 The post-2008 crisis has been particularly severe on the Lisbon periphery, where the middle and working classes have witnessed their buying power diminish, as wages and salaries drop and the prices for basic necessities increase. In the capital region, unprecedented economic hardship has engendered striking new distinctions between wealth and impoverishment, as spiraling class disparities have affected a majority of the population. While similar consequences are being felt in much of the 'developed' world, the crisis has altered, perhaps permanently, the topography of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, which the national media portrays as being increasingly dangerous (Carvalho, 2008, pp. 284-288). In this narrative, private security guards and gated communities provide Lisbon its few perceived zones of 'safety' (Raposo, 2006, p. 50), outside of which teem youth gangs, drug dealers, and other delinquents (*marginais*).
- 3 Certain parishes in the suburban municipalities of Amadora, Oeiras, Loures, Almada, and Seixal have been exceptionally hard hit by the crisis, compounding already existing social problems due to poor schooling, few job opportunities, inadequate government services, and stigmatization on the part of 'mainstream' Portuguese society (Barbosa & Ramos, 2008, p. 175; Horta, 2008, p. 165; Vale de Almeida, 2002, p. 68). In these neighborhoods lives much of the country's sizeable population of Cape Verdean¹ labor immigrants, the majority of whom toil in the most poorly remunerated professions under precarious working conditions (Batalha, 2004, p. 11; Batalha, 2008, p. 33; Åkesson, 2011a, p. 155). They are adrift within a social and economic system that is largely indifferent to their wellbeing² (Weeks, 2011, pp. 610-611).
- 4 In this article, I will attempt to show how this population has conceptualized the current downturn, as well as how they have used 'gifts' of mutual help (*djuda*) to cope with, or even overcome, the profound challenges of living on a Lisbon periphery in crisis. I employ the ideas of Marx and Mauss to assist my analysis of these phenomena, for the methods of these two thinkers are simultaneously dialectical, evolutionary, comparative, and political (Gregory, 2003, p. 920). This literature provides a creative framework for exploring what mutual-help

gifts mean to immigrants from the islands during a time of unprecedented crisis. That the close personal relations and economic activities of Cape Verdean labor migrants are so strongly interlinked makes such an approach essential (Åkesson, 2011b, p. 341).

- 5 In general terms, I hope to demonstrate why Cape Verdean immigrants 'answer' in a particular way the 'questions' they have about the post-2008 crisis. I also attempt to explore the meanings they ascribe to the mutual-help gifts they offer to one another. From academic sources to the news media, we hear daily about the horrors of this current crisis, but seldom are we told what people do to survive in, or perhaps even prevail over, situations of great hardship. What is the role of the Maussian gift in a Marxian crisis of erratic labor demand and whimsical capital trajectories?

Marxian crisis

- 6 Living in a state of crisis (*krizi*) is not new to non-elite Cape Verdeans in Portugal. To this day, labor immigrants from the islands continue to suffer from institutional discrimination and economic vulnerability that severely inhibit their social mobility within Portuguese society (Batalha, 2004, pp. 178-179). Many live on the fringes of legality and are socially segregated vis-à-vis the poor housing, education, and healthcare available to them. They are able to ensure survival largely due to the inexpensive goods and services and opportunities for low-wage employment that their peers provide in the 'informal sector' (cf. Narotzky, 1997, p. 83; cf. Grassi, 2007, pp. 130-133; Horta, 2008, p. 200).
- 7 While our current situation would have come as no surprise to Marx (1992, pp. 24-25), for whom capitalism inherently tended towards crisis, what has happened to Lisbon's Cape Verdean labor migrants in recent years is of a wholly different and more desperate quality that must give one pause. Among my informants, there is a palpable sense that 'what was' has now been undone. Postmodern pessimism has run up against the 'promises' of late capitalism, with everything appearing at once unfeasible, unstable, and irreversible (cf. Pina-Cabral, 1987, p. 715). The crisis economy of the Lisbon periphery fuses promise with desperation, usefulness with pointlessness, and hope with fatalism. The current situation is one of rapid social transformation, marked by "an ambiguous mix of possibility and powerlessness, of desire and despair, of mass joblessness and hunger amidst the accumulation, by [the few], of great amounts of wealth" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999, p. 283).
- 8 Among migrants from Cape Verde, there is an acute sense of confusion (*konfusão*) about the not-quite-fathomable mechanisms of the crisis. The 'downturn' has undermined old subjectivities and established a new order whose social coordinates are still in the process of being defined. With 'normality' seemingly in flux, and without stabilizing structures in place, deep unease over how to make a 'living' now colors how Cape Verdean immigrants in Lisbon interpret the radical shift in crisis-era political and economic values (Sylvanus, 2012, p. 244). This anxiety over the profundity of the crisis has generated various degrees of panic among my informants, who are adamant that they lack the 'knowledge' necessary to make sense of it. The perceived complexity of the crisis has brought about a growing feeling of powerlessness among those who do not possess the resources to negotiate its rhizomatic power. In this light, 'crisis' serves as a floating signifier for Cape Verdean immigrants (cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1987, p. 63); its meaning is masked and consensus about what constitutes this dire situation becomes impossible to establish. As the downturn deepens in 2012 and assumes an air of permanency, it has become difficult, if not impossible, for Cape Verdean labor immigrants to believe that this crisis will ever end.
- 9 Whereas for bourgeois Portuguese, financial crisis is more of an imbalance that requires the intervention of 'experts', for Cape Verdean labor migrants, crisis remains imminent and omnipresent, accounting for and explaining most economic misfortune (cf. Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 235). When my chronically unemployed mother-of-four informant told me that she was leaving Portugal for Angola, where her husband was born, she used a drowning metaphor to describe her predicament: "Before (*antis*), the water was at knee level. Now (*gosi*), it has reached our mouths and we must flee". This 'crisis' discourse speaks to the instability of my

informants' social and economic order and invites apprehensive Cape Verdean immigrants to express and register their anxiety and discontent. Like Talcott Parsons' 'sick role' (1974), the idiom of crisis provides thwarted Cape Verdean agents a 'cover' in which their individual hardship is overshadowed by incomprehensible 'global' developments over which they have no control.

- 10 In this crisis economy, the access of many of my informants to the capitalist mode of production has been severely restricted, with capital excluding the unemployed from the cycle of production, circulation, and consumption (Marx, 2011, p. 691). Thus, the labor-power of the unemployed has been 'removed' from any means of production. The crisis has made 'redundant' the labor of two of my construction-worker informants, as sites of production and capital have moved elsewhere. Tragically, these long stretches of unemployment have thwarted their life ambitions.

Material instability

- 11 Not limited to wage labor, the crisis trope extends to housing and commodities. Municipal officials order homes demolished in 'problematic' neighborhoods (*bairros problemáticos*) if they 'believe' that the home has been 'abandoned'. If no one answers the door on their weekly rounds, the authorities post a demolition order on the dwelling. If the 'owners' do not respond to this warning within a certain time, the municipality razes the home and charges a fee for storing the owner's belongings. My musician informant spoke to this aggression in no ambiguous terms: "it is crisis from all sides".
- 12 Likewise, the crisis is perceived as having even subverted the 'stability' of certain commodities, such as foodstuffs, clothes, shoes, and perfume. According to my informants, post-crisis packaged croquettes have less meat; clothes and perfume bought from Romani (*siganu*) merchants are 'inauthentic' (*é ka di marka*); surreptitious supermarket employees slip bad apples into the bottom of the bag; tablecloths do not fully cover tables; and retail merchants are always trying to bilk the cash-strapped of their change.
- 13 Feeling duped out of their hard-earned money, my informants accuse these dishonest purveyors of deceiving them into buying inadequate or deficient products. Thus, a Lisbon periphery flush with crisis has caused my informants to doubt the 'real' equivalence value of their material purchases (cf. Narotzky, 1997, p. 45). "Everything is Mafia in Portugal", summed up a domestic-worker informant of mine.
- 14 I heard this distressing quotation in the cramped room of a boarding house (*residencial*) in a working- and middle-class neighborhood of Lisbon during the spring of 2012. This period saw an acceleration of the multiyear crisis caused by a biting regime of austerity, deepening unemployment, macroeconomic contraction, and falling incomes. My domestic-worker informant's sense of betrayal is obviously profound. Not only had she perceived numerous instances of financial deception, she had also seen violated her sacrosanct 'rights' to stable material forms. By invoking a 'Mafia' that technically does not exist in Portugal, my domestic-worker informant found a 'culprit' whom she accuses of disrupting her sense of 'normalcy'.
- 15 Later in the conversation, she added another critical detail to her overall indictment of the 'crisis' economy. When discussing the purported increase of cashiers failing to give customers proper change, she said that since 2008 she has needed to "count the money with her hands" after receiving it. Her suspicion of post-sale deception is noteworthy in that it has become not simply enough to 'see' the change; one must now count it 'by hand' in front of the cashier to ensure its accuracy.
- 16 In the above examples, attention should be given to the ways in which my informants experience the newfound fluid nature of items whose status they no longer perceive to be fixed. Their anxiety over material possessions, whose 'real' value only comes to light after the moment of transaction, has become one of the more pronounced ways in which my informants have come to experience Portugal in the throes of a severe multiyear recession (cf. Sylvanus, 2012, p. 244). As shown, my informants believe these changes to be the local manifestations of a large-scale crisis that has left them with increasingly less economic autonomy. When

attempting to reconcile the global crisis with their individual loss of income, my informants are driven to reinterpret the meanings attached to people and things around them. In doing so, they sense acutely their powerlessness due to the confusion about the material world they inhabit.

Maussian gift

*“As you receive with the one hand,
so should you give with the other.” – a Cape Verdean proverb*

- 17 Although not under circumstances freely chosen by themselves (Marx & Engels, 1992, p. 30), Cape Verdean labor immigrants have in part been able to ‘create’ a particular social world on the Lisbon periphery (Batalha, 2004, p. 144). As I (2012, p. 27) have shown elsewhere, the idea of kinship among islanders in Lisbon is largely one of providing, or ‘gifting’, mutual help (*djuda*) to family and friends. As such, the social relations between Cape Verdean migrants are expressed in the bonding that ensues from giving of mutual-help ‘gifts’ (cf. Narotzky, 1997, p. 44). My informants’ gifts of mutual help have the power to create, transfer, and manifest a multiplicity of sentiments among different people, reproducing concurrently many of the social and moral forces that bring together a group of individuals. In Maussian parlance, the gift is a “total social phenomenon” (Mauss, 2002, p. 3; Sahlins, 1972, p. 169), with the power to enmesh material items, relations, values, and contracts.
- 18 Among my informants, ‘gifts’ can be material goods (e.g., clothes, food, consumer products, building materials, etc.) or services (a ride, childcare, use of appliances, etc.). Providing a ‘gift’ good can return a favor that was done in the form of a service, and vice-versa. For instance, an afternoon ‘gift’ of childcare can be ‘exchanged’ for hand-me-down baby clothes or a bag of cement. By means of their circulation, these ‘gift’ goods and services not only help to fulfill participants’ daily needs in a context of scarce resources, but also serve to regenerate the social fabric between participants. Even though Mauss (2002, p. 101) wrote about the role of the gift in ‘primitive’ societies, one finds that many aspects of gift circulation are strongly embedded within Cape Verdean communities amidst a backdrop of commodity exchange on the Lisbon periphery (cf. Martin, 2012, p. 133).
- 19 My informants often see mutual-help gifts as the result of voluntary, even spontaneous, action, though they seldom acknowledge that in giving gifts, givers (re)create ties that tacitly oblige receivers into returning the favor at a later date (cf. Stack, 1974, p. 34; Narotzky, 1997, pp. 43-44). A gift circulated between my informants does not become the total ‘possession’ of its receiver, for the giver can often lay claim to a subsequent instance of the practice. Similar to the classic descriptions of Mauss (2002, p. 4), these gifts should be seen in a context of circulating favors that engages the honor of both the giver and receiver. The lapse in time between the giving of a gift and its ‘repayment’³ is indicative of the durability of the social bond between the two parties (Bloch, 1973, p. 77). A delay lets my gift-giving informants believe that their exchange was simply an act of generosity. In this regard, not expecting an immediate ‘pay back’ serves to stabilize and prolong the relationship between the collaborators. If a gift of mutual help is not ‘returned’ with another, the receiver can expect social consequences, constraints, and sanctions: “To refuse to give, or to fail to invite, is like refusing to accept – the equivalent of a declaration of war; it is a refusal of friendship” (Mauss, 2002, p. 17; cf. Malinowski, 1920, p. 100).
- 20 Akin to the interpretation of Mauss (2002), the tendency of Cape Verdean labor migrants to circulate goods and services within mutual-help networks obliges them to give, receive, and repay these ‘gifts’. Notably, the donor often needs whatever is given as desperately as does the receiver. In this sense, a mutual-help gift is never entirely alienated from its giver and does not become the sole ‘property’ of its receiver. When a network participant offers a gift that a friend or family member wants or needs, she gives under a voluntary guise in the spirit of mutuality. However, the offering is in effect obligatory, and failure to do so results in the recipient being labeled *ingratu*, or ungrateful (Åkesson, 2011b, p. 337).
- 21 Gifts of mutual help between Cape Verdean immigrants in Lisbon mostly take the form of generalized reciprocity, in accordance with the scheme of Sahlins (1972, p. 206). Unlike relationships of balanced reciprocity, in which giving and returning takes place within a

specific time frame, my informants offer gifts of help not expecting an immediate counter-gift in return. The movement of mutual-help gifts between close friends and family are “implicit, non-quantified, long-term, and often very long-term, indeed frequently never consummated” (Narotzky, 1997, p. 130). This giving of help is likely to foster a degree of satisfaction in the giver, while serving to fortify the bond between participants.

22 Close friends and family do not need to specify a time limit or manner in which the gift must be returned (Bloch, 1973, pp. 79-82). The giver can sense the inherent advantage in providing mutual help, for in doing so her standing will inevitably rise within the gift-giving network. Such was the case with my schoolteacher informant, who came to Lisbon to receive medical treatment. She repeatedly voiced her gratitude in being able to stay near, and share meals with, her family's former live-in domestic worker, whose eldest daughter was brought up as ‘foster child’ (*fidju di kriason*) by my informant's mother. Likewise, my mother-of-two informant allowed her sister and cousin to stay in her flat for long periods of time after they arrived from Cape Verde and before they were able to arrange work and find their own housing. Though these gifts of mutual help have brought much goodwill towards my mother-of-two informant, it is unlikely that they will be honored in full for some time, if at all.

23 In accordance with the approach of Mauss (2002), mutual help carries the essence of the giver, whose identity is closely bound to the gift and entails a commitment on the part of the receiver to give back. He states, “The [gift] given is not inert. It is alive and often personified” (p. 66). Thus, the receiver makes a tacit agreement to return what ‘belongs’ to the giver vis-à-vis a generalized ‘spirit’ of mutuality. These norms of gift circulation delineate to the involved parties a general idea of what constitutes ‘repayment’. Narotzky (1997) summarizes this sentiment: “That the [gift] embodies in such a way its previous holder(s), it pulls back toward the giver and creates a return-gift field of force” (p. 44).

24 However, scholars such as Åkesson (2011b, pp. 341-345) cite caution in viewing Cape Verdean mutual-help practices through the lens of Mauss's interpretation of the gift. Specifically, they question whether or not the identity of the giver can be transferred by means of giving gifts of mutual help. In my observations, the mutual help my informants circulate among themselves is sometimes, but not necessarily, imbued with the identity of the giver. When mutual help serves to accomplish a pressing or particularly formidable task, it assumes the giver's identity and engages her honor with that of the receiver.

25 Most times, however, mutual help is not imbued with a specific person's essence; in contrast to Mauss's definition of the gift, these are ‘inert’ favors, free of any personified spirit. This is especially the case for everyday occurrences, such as sharing meals, providing short-term childcare, or offering kin or friends a place to spend the night. In this light, while my informants generally take mutual-help gifts to be an essential part of their everyday lives, they do not ascribe a special status to a majority of its iterations.

26 While recipients usually acknowledge such generosity, many do not find the giver's identity imbued in every instance of mutual help. For example, my university-student informant mentioned how ‘indebted’ he is to his aunt, who let him stay in her house on weekends while he completed a university degree. However, he does not associate his scholastic achievement with the kindness of his aunt, whose identity has not been symbolically attached to his university degree. This aspect means that mutual help among Cape Verdeans can often diverge from Mauss's classic definition of the gift.

27 In either case, my informants who received both Maussian and non-Maussian mutual help became obliged to re-circulate these ‘gifts’ at a latter time. As a result, it is not the mutual help in itself that prompts the receiver's desire to give something back but the acknowledgement that the giver has been generous with her time, recourses, or money (cf. Åkesson, 2011b, pp. 344-345).

The gift in crisis

28 A palpable subtext in the discourse of my informants is an awareness that the giving of mutual help is becoming an increasingly less-common activity. Years of economic expansion on the Lisbon periphery have given way to marked discrepancies in wealth and privilege. They are

adamant that they are no longer able to rely on aid from others to help them 'get by'. Fewer people seem to be embedded in the webs of mutual-help circulation that can enable a person on the margins to subsist (Fikes, 2010, p. 65). Worse, they say, friends and family continue to express empathy for those in need, especially in the current time of crisis, but are hesitant to take action to help the less fortunate among them. More and more Cape Verdeans fear putting themselves in a situation in which they might be the only person who steps in to provide the proverbial mutual-help 'gift'. They believe that this situation is caused by less and less cooperation, that Cape Verdeans in Lisbon now "only care about themselves" (cf. Åkesson, 2008, pp. 104-105). "They are cold" (*a-es é friu*) or "they don't have time" (*a-es ka teni tempu*) are common appraisals.

29 This is certainly the case with some of my informants' better-off family members and friends (*kopu di leti*, literally 'cup of milk'), who are not as likely to be active participants in mutual-help networks. The childless, gainfully employed sister of one of my informants seemed resistant to participating in the daily exchanges taking place between her relatives in Lisbon, as if such activity would create too many commitments and oblige her unduly. In this sense, gift relationships are subject to a process of 'self-selection', with individuals only entering into ones from which they can expect a positive outcome.

30 As a phenomenon in which ties dictate the resources one can access, those without the 'right' gift connections are not afforded the benefits. As such, people's expectations of the practice are frequently not met. My informants described to me numerous failed, unsuccessful, or incomplete mutual-help attempts with bitterness and frustration. Men, in particular, are loath to lose a day's wages by taking part in the practice, finding it 'less expensive' to pay someone to do work that would otherwise be a 'gift'. My mother-of-two informant implied that most men she knows do not want to be burdened by the negotiations and obligations that come with gift relationships.

31 It is obvious that Cape Verdeans with financial difficulty in Lisbon operate within two different systems: the folk system of mutual-help gifts and a system of social assistance funded by the state. One of the more accessible forms of aid is childcare in a state-supported crèche, where mothers pay a monthly fee that is adjusted to their income. While 'official' forms of social support, such as state and church assistance, reduce to a certain extent less-fortunate Cape Verdeans needing the mutual-help gifts of others, I believe that this change in attitude is due to their encountering neoliberal notions of "self-accountability" (Fikes, 2010, p. 64). Sadly, there is a disconnect between Cape Verdeans perceiving that their mutual-help practices are in decline and simultaneously needing the material support that they provide. What is the influence of these dynamics on the gift-giving practices that Cape Verdean immigrants currently employ on the Lisbon periphery?

32 While the current crisis and longer-term economic trends (e.g., neoliberalism, the hegemony of bourgeois norms, etc.) have had an effect on Cape Verdeans' giving of mutual-help gifts, I did not sense as dramatic a reduction in their occurrence as my informants would have me believe. While it would seem that the current crisis would have hastened the longer-term decline in the giving of mutual help, I did not find this parallel to be the case. While my informants' 'crisis' discourse is no doubt indicative of some reduction in the frequency of mutual-help iterations, I believe that the giving of mutual help persists largely as before. Thus, as I see it, any 'decline' of mutual-help gift giving brought about by long-term social and economic changes (e.g., increased individualism) has been 'offset' due to the severity of the post-2008 crisis.

The cost of change

33 The predatory effects of this 'crisis' have had drastic consequences on the daily lives of many of my informants, such as exhausted workers being recast as 'lazy' (*prigisozu*) or 'dependents' (cf. Åkesson, 2008, p. 106). Fikes (2010) laments that "[the] separation of familial economic exchanges from [these stereotyped portrayals of the unemployed as 'lazy'] has the effect of diverting attention from the complete restructuring of social relationships and the new routes and subjects through which [income] now derives and circulates" (p. 65). Under an indifferent gaze on the Lisbon periphery, Cape Verdean migrants often find fault with

individuals in their midst, blame particular social groups (e.g., ‘*Tugas*’⁴, Chinese, Romani, ‘Ukrainians’, et al.), or focus their ire exclusively on local corruption for their precarious conditions, as opposed to the abstract capital trajectories that can make their labor ‘redundant’ at a moment’s notice (Fikes, 2010, pp. 66-67).

34 Furthermore, Cape Verdean labor immigrants realize that mutual help diverges from the bourgeois ideals of ‘self-sufficiency’, ‘merit’, and individual ‘achievement’ propagated by the media and hegemonic economic discourse. Accordingly, my informants have to ‘stretch’ their values in order to cope with their lives as poor workers. They are likely to share the bourgeois worldviews of the Portuguese middle and upper-middle classes, but they must adapt these ideals and align them with their own marginal circumstances. For example, my female informants uniformly value monogamy and marriage, though only one of them has a stable, long-term union recognized by the church (cf. Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 323). Similarly, in a working-poor U.S. context, Stack (1974) mentions the “double consciousness” (p. 27) of African-American men, who continue to hold ‘mainstream’ values (e.g., a nuclear family provided for by the male ‘breadwinner’) even as they are structurally denied opportunities for educational success and meaningful employment.

35 Thus, the worldviews of the Lisbon bourgeoisie and the city’s immigrant working poor are not as mutually exclusive as generally assumed (cf. Crehan, 2002, p. 116). Resorting to bourgeois discourses should not be seen as an abandonment of the ideology of mutual help, but is instead a tacit acknowledgement among Cape Verdean migrants that ‘advancement’ comes from adhering to bourgeois ideals. Because these values are increasingly present in all areas of society, alternative systems such as the giving of mutual-help gifts are perceived to be in decline, though as mentioned above these practices frequently continue due to the need(s) of their participants.

36 In this sense, Cape Verdean labor migrants’ acceptance of the relative superiority of bourgeois values is indicative of their ‘incorporating’ a position of socioeconomic inferiority. Sahlin (2005) calls this moment “humiliation” (p. 37), when subaltern peoples finally acknowledge that their own cultural value systems are inferior to those of Western(ized) elites. When confronted with this prejudice, immigrants from the islands often minimize the extent to which they depend on the mutual-help gifts of others, so as not to draw attention to their marginality that could elicit disapproval from those practicing the bourgeois ‘norm’.

37 This collective sense of crisis is in part due to a particular notion of time that is shared by my informants. The link between the remembered past and a changed present is complex and takes place at many levels. As shown, years of crisis have weakened Cape Verdean migrants’ ability to offer mutual-help gifts, such that they are unable to counteract the unavoidable perception of the present (*gosi*) as one of discord and aberration.

38 In the current crisis, ‘before’ (*antis*) is idealized as a time in which Cape Verdeans had more control over everyday life by being able to provide mutual-help gifts (cf. Pina-Cabral, 1987, p. 730). That they no longer believe that they are able to achieve this state reflects the polarization between ‘before’ and the present crisis. Unfortunately, the act of giving mutual-help gifts is understood to have lost importance, lessening my informants’ commitment to reinforcing social bonds through the practice. As a result, ‘crisis’ has become a starting point towards a future that will be marked by instability, irreversibility, and fragmentation.

Conclusion?

39 In examining the effects of crisis, as well as my informants’ response to its ensuing hardship, I have tried to avoid simplistic binary explanations. On the one hand, too much descriptive authority can be given to social and economic marginalization, which can turn the dynamic individuality and agency of individuals into a sterile discourse on victimization. “We might be small, but we are not baby chicks” (*a-nos é pikinoti, ma nos é ka pinton*), Cape Verdeans are fond of saying. Equally as troubling is trying to turn the giving of mutual-help gifts into collectively organized ‘strategies’ that help oppressed persons resist everyday forms of domination. Intellectually lacking, this line of thinking can inadvertently sentimentalize situations of scarcity, dependency, and suffering.

- 40 To this end, I have attempted to synthesize descriptions of the destructiveness of the post-2008 crisis on the Lisbon periphery with those of the lively, but threatened gift-giving practices of Cape Verdean immigrants. I hope that this description neither portrays my protagonists as mere pawns in a cruel world nor understates the extent to which the Lisbon periphery encumbers their strength, endurance, and will. I have tried to bring together these two extremes, an approach that pays heed to the structural vulnerability facing Cape Verdean workers on the Lisbon periphery, while acknowledging the resilience, generosity, and creativity of my individual informants and their family and friends. Cape Verdean immigrants' mutual gift giving is not act of subversion, but is one they do to guarantee their material survival, even though the practice runs counter to the bourgeois 'ethic' of self-propelled achievement. They give gifts of mutual help in part due to the lack of alternatives, for living 'mainstream' lifestyles is not an option for most of my informants (cf. Stack, 1974, p. 129). That these practices seem to be occurring with less frequency makes life for my informants much more difficult.
- 41 Even in crisis, the giving of mutual-help gifts remains an integral part of the experience of being a Cape Verdean labor migrant on the Lisbon periphery. The act speaks to a wider social community, draws from a similar cultural tradition, and communicates a message of hope (Lobo, 2008, p. 143). In this light, gifts of mutual help seek to stabilize a world whose 'order' is both elusive and estranging. Though hardly able to reverse the structural challenges that Cape Verdeans encounter, the giving of Maussian gifts continues, albeit in a tentative manner (cf. Comaroff, 1985, pp. 253-254). In short, the 'kindness' of the gift should be seen as a foil to the cruelty of the crisis. It carries the unseemingly contradiction of providing the human relations not found in an otherwise inhumane world (Gottlieb, 1992, p. 135). When allowed to happen, gift giving can assuage the exploitation of the workplace and society and let 'invisible' Cape Verdean laborers be at once altruistic and selfless. It is in these situations that I find the famed Cape Verdean resilience (*forsa*), which I enjoy in their company admiringly and affectionately, if always a bit concerned for their future.

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Notas

1 I am aware that a generalized and global 'Cape Verdean' identity is insufficient in unifying the diversity of life experiences among people who self-identify as being Cape Verdean.

2 In response to questions along the lines of "which is the least inhospitable country in the diaspora with the least indifferent gaze?" my informants' near unanimous answer was the Netherlands.

3 Repayment is in quotation marks because the distinction between the initial and counter acts of gift giving is usually blurred, as both are likely to be intertwined in an exchange system that is of long standing (cf. Pina-Cabral, 1986, p. 159).

4 *Tuga* is a derogatory term used by Lusophone Africans to refer to a white Portuguese. It is analogous to Spanish-speaking Central and South Americans calling white U.S. citizens *gringos*.

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Resumos

The post-2008 economic crisis in Portugal has been particularly severe in the neighborhoods in which many of the country's Cape Verdean labor immigrants live. In this article, I will attempt to examine how my informants have conceptualized the current downturn, as well as how they have used 'gifts' of mutual help (*djuda*) to cope with, or even overcome, the profound challenges of living on a Lisbon periphery in crisis. An additional factor I will explore is the perception among my informants that the giving of mutual-help gifts has lost importance. I will argue that there is a disconnect between Cape Verdeans perceiving that their mutual-help practices are in decline and simultaneously needing the material support that they provide.

Crise marxiana, dádiva maussiana: as práticas de entreaajuda dos imigrantes laborais cabo-verdianos em tempo de austeridade

A crise económica que começou em Portugal a partir de 2008 tem sido particularmente grave nos bairros em que vivem a maior parte dos imigrantes cabo-verdianos do país. Neste artigo, tentarei analisar a maneira em que os meus informantes têm conceitualizado a actual crise, bem como a forma como têm usado "dádivas" de ajuda mútua (*djuda*) para aguentarem, ou mesmo ultrapassarem, os desafios de viver numa periferia de Lisboa em crise. Um outro fator

que irei explorar é a percepção dos meus informantes de que a troca de dádivas de ajuda mútua tem perdido importância. Vou argumentar que há uma desconexão entre a percepção dos cabo-verdianos de que as suas práticas de ajuda mútua acontecem com cada vez menos frequência e, simultaneamente, a necessidade do apoio material que elas fornecem.

Entradas no índice

Keywords : Cape Verdeans, Lisbon, crisis, mutual-help practices, gift economy

Palavras-chave : cabo-verdianos, Lisboa, crise, práticas de ajuda mútua, economia da dádiva

Notas do autor

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