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## Perspectives

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Margarida Queirós

## **Environmental Knowledge and Politics in Portugal: From Resistance to Incorporation**

In this paper I examine the rise and development of the Portuguese environmental movement. Portugal, once an “insular” country, has become entwined in the processes of globalization. While many such global processes (e.g., neoliberalism) have been characterized as adverse for the environmental movement, the Portuguese environmentalist community has been able to use these as opportunities to enhance their actions and influence, bringing the environment into the public and private policy arenas. Having an impact on environmental politics in this way does not require action within the political system itself. Rather, Portugal’s environmental movement has come about through a mixture of push and pull factors, including its integration into the broader European community, where such politics are important and carry weight with democratically elected bodies.

Scientific environmental knowledge in Portugal throughout much of the twentieth century consisted of isolated academic voices that had little impact on policy or society. Portugal’s integration into the European Union (EU) in 1986, however, changed the direction of national environmental policies and stimulated the rise of environmental groups over the next decade. Together, these developments sought to simultaneously change the political system and alter the dominant environmental discourse in the country. In the years that followed, this process deepened. Today, members of Portuguese society and environmentalists discuss environmental policies by drawing on scientific knowledge, though the policies themselves are controlled by the state in congruence with other European state policies. This shift demonstrates that individual actions, though collectively meaningful, are not as important as pressuring the government to make environmentally friendly decisions and democratizing the political system as a whole to further the incorporation of environmental knowledge into decision making.

The environment was a marginal concern in Portugal prior to the 1970s. Environmental problems that the country faced were minimized in the popular discourse, localized, and hidden, revealing a divergent path compared to other environmentally conscious European countries. Soromenho-Marques identifies four main character-

istics to explain the weaknesses of Portuguese environmental protection ideology: a bureaucratic centralized state, lack of a competitive culture, scarce literacy associated with a weak civil society, and rurality (which, in my opinion, is also connected to poverty).<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Portugal could not easily establish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as the Estado Novo (New State) regime, the military dictatorship in power from 1928 to 1974, strictly controlled any organized groups.

Nonetheless, in 1948 the first NGO focusing on environmental protection, Liga para a Proteção da Natureza (League for Nature Protection, LPN), was born in Portugal. One of its founders was Professor Carlos Baeta Neves from the Agronomic Institute (1989 recipient of the Johann Wolfgang von Goethe prize, awarded to those who most distinguished themselves in the protection of nature and landscape in Europe).<sup>2</sup> LPN's founding was a reaction to the destruction of the Mata do Solitário forest for wood for use in a limekiln in Arrábida Mountain (Arrábida itself became a Natural Park in 1976). But the creation of LPN in the political context of the time was audacious since any association, especially of academics, was regarded by the state as extremely suspicious and potentially subversive. Consequently, until the 1970s, LPN's members limited their activity to publications in scientific journals, field trips, or classes at the university, and therefore had little public presence.<sup>3</sup> As part of the global conservation movement, LPN was an example of "militant environmentalism" since, as Jamison argued, its ideology and actions were close to a moral and even spiritual concern with species protection—and at that time, it signified a disruption of the system.<sup>4</sup> LPN was at that time closely linked with the university, its headquarters were located in Lisbon, and it expressed itself mainly through the publication of scientific articles. LPN was responsible for the creation of the main protected areas in Portugal (notably Peneda-Gerês National Park in 1971, Arrábida Natural Park in 1976, and some nature reserves) and also for their conservation and management through its active participation in their Technical Commissions and Advisory Boards. Today, along with other international organizations, LPN is a member of the World Conservation Union and of the European Environmental Bureau.

1 Viriato Soromenho-Marques, "Raízes do ambientalismo em Portugal." *Metamorfoses. Entre o colapso e o desenvolvimento sustentável* (Mem Martins: Publicações Europa América, 2005).

2 Margarida Queirós, "Natural Parks in Portugal: A Way to Become More Ecologically Responsible?" *Environment and History* 18, no. 4 (2012): 585–611.

3 Paulo Pereira, *A mundivisão ambiental, partidos políticos e leis em Portugal*. ISCSIP (Lisboa: Universidade de Lisboa, 2014). <http://www.repository.utl.pt/handle/10400.5/7145>.

4 Andrew Jamison, "The Making of Green Knowledge: The Contribution from Activism," *Futures* 35 (2003): 703–16.

The year 1984 saw the rise of another important national NGO, Quercus. It was named after the Latin term for the oaks that characterized the most advanced forest ecosystems covering Portugal; these were, and still are, degraded relics. Quercus was composed of environmentalists concerned with the protection of the country's primitive vegetation and the conservation of wildlife. Thereafter, the environmental movement in Portugal would rise in the form of what Jamison labelled "professional environmentalism," focusing its activity on results, as well as on changing policies and political decisions, rather than changing beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Quercus's environmentalists were academics and professionals who kept up pressure in the public sphere, becoming agenda-setters and taking on the responsibility of representing the broader social and political interest in the environment.<sup>6</sup> Operating at a national level, through its regional delegations, Quercus produced knowledge that was subject to scientific scrutiny, and their green experts collected scientific information to back up their environmental claims. Quercus thus became an NGO very well connected to national policy bodies and public environmental authorities. Two years later, another NGO, Geota (Environmental and Land Use Planning Study Group / Grupo de Estudos de Ordenamento do Território e Ambiente), was legally constituted as a think tank dedicated to environmental education. This expansion of the environmental movement in Portugal was possible because of the fall of the authoritarian regime in the 1970s, the development of the education and training sector, and the national expectations of joining the European Community.

Perhaps most importantly, in 1986 Portugal joined what was at the time called the European Economic Community. This was a crucial milestone in strengthening the country's environmental policies, as it offered financial support for the building of basic infrastructure (e.g., solid waste, water, and sanitation), pollution control, and introducing new measures, such as legislation, to intensify ecological protection (e.g., natural reserves, national parks, etc.). The late 1980s and the 1990s thus saw a huge effort by Portugal's public administration to comply with European Directives and Regulations. This helped to realize the escalation of command and control environmental policies—the direct regulation of economic activities by law, which states what is permitted or illegal regarding the environment. Political parties in parliament soon recognized the importance of being green and could not help joining in with this new trend.

5 Ibid., 704.

6 Ibid., 707.

Within this political and economic climate—one conducive to the tenets of environmentalism—Portugal’s environmental organizations began to mirror those elsewhere, notably Greenpeace, which became more professional. Such professionalization proved operationally effective. From the 1990s onwards, Portuguese NGOs—notably LPN, Quercus, and Geota—managed to markedly influence the country’s national environmental agenda owing largely to the level of training and preparedness of its members, most of whom were recruited at universities and trained by the urban elite, on whose support they also relied. Legal expertise, a network for knowledge dissemination through the media, and autonomy from economic interests are some of the factors that help to explain this trend.<sup>7</sup> The politicized character of Portuguese environmental movements has thus transformed into a technocratic pragmatism. NGOs have shifted from “contestation” to “official acceptability” thanks to the increasing power of the middle class within Portuguese society, and now make stronger claims based on scientific facts rather than simply calls for support based upon morality.<sup>8</sup> Their prominence derives from their ability to collect scientific knowledge and information on the environmental impact of economic activities, and to bring this knowledge to bear on state negotiations.<sup>9</sup> So, as Epstein states, science, knowledge, and power are linked to green activism; science became a key resource for environmental activism. Of course, the media helped to spread the message by articulating the environment as a problem for public and political concern.<sup>10</sup>

Despite their impact on politics and policy, however, environmentalists have not had much impact via being elected specifically as “greens” or as part of a formalized Green party. As neoliberal ideology spread in Portugal and abroad beginning in the 1980s, the possible economic responses to the environmental challenge seemed to be “green” (with reduced impacts on the environment) or “brown” (with strong negative environmental impacts). Portugal’s economy was mostly brown. Thus, on the one hand, greening the economy should have been the best way to respond to the environmental protection measures required by political programs; on the other hand, green parties as a weapon to protect nature were not a viable option in Portugal. They never managed to

7 Soromenho-Marques, *Raízes do ambientalismo em Portugal*, 144.

8 Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, *Diagnóstico das ONG em Portugal*. Universidade Católica Portuguesa (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2015). [http://www.gulbenkian.pt/mediaRep/gulbenkian/files/institucional/actividades/programas\\_projectos/EEAgrants\\_CidAtiva/Docs/Diagnostico\\_das\\_ONG\\_em\\_Portugal.pdf](http://www.gulbenkian.pt/mediaRep/gulbenkian/files/institucional/actividades/programas_projectos/EEAgrants_CidAtiva/Docs/Diagnostico_das_ONG_em_Portugal.pdf).

9 Charlotte Epstein, “Knowledge and Power in Global Environmental Activism,” *Journal of Peace Studies* 10, no. 1 (2005): 47–67.

10 Anders Hansen, “The Media and the Social Construction of the Environment,” *Media, Culture and Society* 13 (1991): 443–58.

assert themselves in the Portuguese political system, always gaining electorally insignificant results; only in alliances with established political parties (such as the Portuguese Communist Party) could they survive. Such alliances did not please the environmentalist movement.<sup>11</sup> Environmental NGOs operating at a national level, like LPN, Quercus, and Geota, thus chose to professionalize, rather than formalize as political parties, in order to influence policy making. This explains the emergence in Portugal of a mainstream professional environmentalism, guided by NGOs and supporting the policy guidelines of the state.

Despite remaining out of the running for political office, environmentalist organizations became less radical in both thought and action. Environmental NGOs (ENGOS), it seems, could not help becoming part of the establishment, and they used knowledge produced in academia (scientific and technical) to support their claims and help guide alternative solutions. ENGOS and government institutions became allied, and private and public companies had to improve their environmental performance. This discourse combining environmentalism with economics was ultimately labelled ecological modernization or green business.

In the 2000s, the incorporation of the environmental agenda into the Portuguese political framework and economic development goals was well established. As has happened all over the world, environmental discourse has not only become institutionalized, but also corporatized. Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and Walmart have partnerships with Conservation International, while the Environmental Defense Fund cooperates with McDonald's and so on. In Portugal the major national electricity company (Elevtricidade de Portugal, EDP) and the largest agro-livestock and forestry company (Companhia das Lezírias) cooperate with ENGOS. The new century has witnessed many green economic alternatives that are advocated on the grounds of their positive environmental contributions. Among these are the recycling of urban and industrial materials and waste, ecotourism, organic agriculture, and renewable energies. Behind the academic scrutiny, ENGOS and their green experts became prominent actors in environmental policy as they increased their audiences and started to participate in studies, reports, and negotiations on environmental agreements.

11 Pereira, *A mundivisão ambiental*.

Thus, the agenda for sustainable change was set. But the Eurozone crisis introduced imbalances into this framework. During the course of 2010–12, it became evident that Portugal was incapable of repaying its debt without the assistance of bailout support from the Troika.<sup>12</sup> The crisis had significant adverse economic effects, with damaging labour market outcomes and subdued economic growth.<sup>13</sup>

In a context of economic and political uncertainty where harsh austerity measures were being applied, resulting in a cycle of financial hardship, unemployment, and street protests calling for jobs and a better life, environmental policies could easily fade into the background. And despite the long-standing opposition between economic and environmental values, forced economic contraction imposed by the Troika is not necessarily environmentally friendly. On the economic policy agenda, the binary that sets austerity against economic growth preoccupies state politicians today. Apparently, there is now a dilemma: is a time of crisis appropriate for environmental tax reform? The introduction of green taxes may have a negative impact on GDP and employment, simply because they reduce household purchasing power and increase business costs. Businesses either have to pay higher prices for the most polluting energy sources or divert resources for investment in cleaner technology.<sup>14</sup> But, after all, the current global financial crisis is a result of the lack of regulation by successive governments, which has placed too much pressure on future resources for the benefit of the present.

Although the European countries most affected by the economic crisis have diverse environmental policies, Portugal is actually an example of a country dealing with the economic crisis via addressing energy use and climate change. Portugal has reduced its dependence on non-renewable resources and profited from investments made by previous governments in key areas such as the expansion of renewable energy (e.g., wind power, hydro-power). In fact, the country has recently modernized its electricity grid to accommodate the conversion to alternative and renewable forms of energy, which already affects about 25% of production. According to Green Savers, Portugal was ranked sixth out of 58 coun-

12 A group of international lenders comprising the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, which imposed austerity measures on indebted European states when providing bailouts.

13 "Crisa da dívida ameaça futuro do euro e provoca queda de governos," *Diário de Notícias*, 1 January 2012, <http://www.dn.pt/gente/perfis/interior/crise-da-divida-ameaca-futuro-do-euro-e-provoca-queda-de-governos-2181419.html>.

14 Ricardo Garcia, "Reforma dos impostos ambientais poderá ter reflexos já em 2015," *Público*, 29 January 2015, <https://www.publico.pt/economia/noticia/reforma-dos-impostos-ambientais-podera-ter-reflexos-ja-em-2015-1621607>.

tries in an assessment of the performance of climate change policies, placing Portugal higher than Germany, Sweden, or Canada.<sup>15</sup> Supporting public policies, Portuguese NGOs have developed awareness raising, projects, and partnerships for reducing the country's carbon footprint and promoting greater sustainability in energy consumption.

Despite being a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of Portuguese environmental awareness, NGOs have demonstrated an increasing capacity to redefine issues, focus, strategies, coalitions, and networks to influence the greening of public policies. Meanwhile, civil society is more aware and empowered when it comes to national environmental issues. This is a gain for democracy and for society in general. Nevertheless, the environmental dilemma facing the country in the years to come will not fade away; as a society we will constantly have to negotiate what behaviour is and is not acceptable with the support of the environmental movement. It would be a great improvement if environmental knowledge continues to inform the environmental policy agenda, with open structures of governance to determine what sort of environment we really want, even in times of economic austerity. However, due to the increase of the environment-globalization interactions, to which Portugal is increasingly exposed, it is clear that there are limits to the state's and NGOs' ability to control key environmental issues affecting the country. We need to be aware of the domestic capacity constraints. These are some of the most relevant matters related to environmental policies that Portuguese society needs to start thinking about.

### Suggested Further Reading

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15 Green Savers, "Alterações Climáticas: Portugal surpreende e é o 3º país com melhor desempenho entre os 58 mais industrializados," <http://greensavers.sapo.pt/2013/11/18/alteracoes-climaticas-portugal-surpreende-e-o-3o-pais-com-melhor-desempenho-entre-os-58-mais-industrializados/>.



