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Interview

# Portugal: Today, We Celebrate the 1974 Carnation Revolution

Monday 26 April 2021, by [BRODER David](#), [VARELA Raquel](#) (Date first published: 25 April 2021).

**On April 25, 1974, a mutiny in the Portuguese army put an end to five decades of dictatorship. The revolution that followed showed how working people can take a modern economy into their own hands. David Broder spoke to historian Raquel Varela about its legacy for Portugal today.**

Today, marks the anniversary of Portugal's liberation from dictatorship. On April 25, 1974, soldiers from the dissident Armed Forces Movement (MFA) removed dictator Marcelo Caetano, demanding that Portugal abandon its failed colonial wars in Africa. A regime dating back to the age of Mussolini and Hitler had finally met its end, along with Europe's last old-style empire.

The revolt within the army was the immediate trigger for the regime's downfall, and the images of joyous citizens handing carnations to troops would come to symbolize the birth of Portuguese democracy itself. Yet the Carnation Revolution that continued until November 1975 was more than just a coup d'état, or even a transition to a new parliamentary order.

Rather, the breaking of the old regime opened the way to a far wider questioning of how society was to be run. With the organs of dictatorship immediately swept away, new organs of mass democracy flowered, involving millions of people. Workers imposed their control over their workplaces and residents' councils took control of the problems of everyday life.

This democracy — not a vote every few years, but a continuous and direct popular power — showed how working people could run a modern economy. It imposed the right to a job, a rent freeze that lasted almost forty years later, and free public services. Yet ultimately the mass mobilization withered, and Portugal became more like other liberal-democratic European countries.

On the anniversary of the revolution [2019], *Jacobin's* David Broder spoke to historian Raquel Varela about its legacy for Portugal today. They discussed the role of dissident soldiers in splitting the old state, the lasting changes it managed to impose, and what this experience tells us about what socialist transformation would mean today.

**David Broder (DB): The anticolonial revolt was a key trigger for the revolution, as dissent within the Portuguese army — expressed in the creation of the MFA — forced a split within the regime. But even after the MFA unseated the dictatorship on April 25, 1974, it enjoyed ongoing popular identification, and left-wing parties also aligned themselves with army figures. But how come this soldiers' movement enjoyed such a wide base of support? And why was it unable to maintain control of the revolutionary process?**

**Raquel Varela (RV):** The MFA's formation owed not to left-wing ideology but rather to Portugal's

colonial war between 1961 and 1974. The country spent thirteen years fighting against the anticolonial revolutions in Guinea, Mozambique, and Angola, with more than one million troops mobilized, over eight thousand dead on the Portuguese side and one hundred thousand dead on the African side.

It is often said that there was a bloodless revolution, since on April 25, 1974 almost no one died in metropolitan Portugal. Yet the Carnation Revolution had really begun with the anticolonial revolutions thirteen years earlier, which are indeed part of the same process.

Revolution means conflict: and the MFA overthrew the dictatorship with troops and tanks in the streets. But its members were mostly from the petty bourgeoisie, and little politicized, their aims being limited to ending the war. That was their achievement on April 25, 1974, as middle-ranking officers mounted a coup d'état. This however also launched a wider revolutionary process, as the working and popular masses entered the stage. This also altered the balance of forces between the social classes.

Portugal had been pitched into a national crisis, and the breach that had opened up within the ruling class was not resolved by the coup. What began on April 25 — a classic coup d'état — led to a democratic revolution, as within a few days or weeks the replacement of the dictatorship with a democratic political system was practically assured. This was also the seed of a social revolution, implying changes in the wider relations of production.

The bases of this revolution were launched by workers and the popular and student sectors. They had joined the process behind the army, and they could thus act without fear. Yet as they entered the stage en masse, these layers soon moved ahead of the MFA itself, which was instead trying to restore order in the very state which it had helped set into crisis.

The Communist Party (PCP), the largest clandestine opposition during the dictatorship, advocated a popular-frontist approach. It advocated an "MFA-people alliance" — which amounted to maintaining the leadership of part of the army over the people. This was very similar to its French sister party's line in France in 1945 to 1947, when it followed a policy of national unity for the sake of "national reconstruction" in the immediate aftermath of the Resistance.

Yet the conflict between different sources of power persisted. From the start of the Portuguese revolution, new forms of popular power emerged that went far beyond the PCP's institutional project, thanks to the self-organization of the working class in committees of workers, residents, and later soldiers. These were forms of dual power outside the central state, and even part of the MFA separated off in order to join them.

But while parallel forms of power emerged during the revolution, they did not develop and coordinate themselves nationally, as a viable alternative to the power of the central state. Indeed, if the state entered an enormous crisis, it did not collapse. This lack of alternative was one of the reasons why on November 25, 1975 the right wing was so easily able to restore "order" at the expense of these forms of dual power.

**DB: Your work emphasizes history from below — the unexpected role the masses played, even after decades without formal political organization. But in what sense was the Portuguese revolution a deeper process of change than the Spanish transition to democracy in this same period? There, it was ruling-class elements who led the process, even if their bid to shake off a backward regime also brought a wider democratization of public life.**

**RV:** It is telling that while Francisco Franco's archive is in his family's hands, Portuguese dictator António Salazar's papers are available to the public. What began on April 25 as a coup d'état led immediately to the complete dismantling of the dictatorship's political regime, but more than that, it was also the seed of a social revolution.

What happened in Portugal in 1974-5 was the last revolution in Europe to call into question the private ownership of the means of production. According to official data, it resulted in a considerable shift in the balance of class forces — some 18 percent of national income was transferred from capital to labor. It achieved gains like the guarantee of the right to a job, living wages (above the level of subsistence or biological reproduction alone), and equal and universal access to education, health, and social security.

What differentiates Portugal's revolutionary period from a democratic transition process like Spain's was not the staging of elections or their results, but rather the overall dynamic visible in this period. The holding of elections was, obviously, a major achievement, after forty-eight years of dictatorship: the first contest saw 95 percent of the people turn out to vote! But what sets a revolution apart from other processes is the way the population got stuck in, and directly take their lives into their own hands.

Paul Valéry used to say that politics is the art of turning the citizens away from their own lives. A revolution is precisely the opposite, a unique moment in history. We enacted one of the twentieth century's most important revolutions. The right to vote was one of its elements, but its most crucial feature was that for nineteen months, three million people directly took part in workers', residents', and soldiers' councils, which decided what to do on a daily basis. People voted and discussed what to do for hours and hours. All of this made it possible for our revolution to accomplish wonderful things. To take just one example, look at the women organized in the residents' councils, who together with Carris (Lisbon public transport) drivers rerouted the buses so that social housing districts distant from the city center would finally be served by public transit.

The banks were nationalized and expropriated with no compensation whatsoever. And the right to free time was absolutely pivotal. Take the case of the demonstration by bakers working long hours, whose slogan was "we want to sleep with our wives." As a slogan, it is very interesting, because nowadays we take it for granted that at eleven at night there are people selling socks in supermarkets or working on Volkswagen assembly lines. People won not just price freezes so that they could have decent meals, but the right to leisure and culture. They also won the right to housing, indeed by occupying vacant houses that were destined for speculation. Even judges sometimes backed them, as in the city of Setúbal. I'll remind you that today in Portugal there are seven hundred thousand vacant houses, owned by real-estate funds, which do not pay taxes.

As well as four thousand workers' councils there were 360 companies managed by their own workers. Dryland farming areas tripled, as peasants occupied the land. These occupations are obviously in contrast with what we have today: the stalling of production during the crisis. Amid mass unemployment, people are instead paid to stop producing.

1979 would also see the creation of a National Health Service. However, the unification of a universal health system was introduced on the aftermath of April 25. The first person in charge of that was an absolutely wonderful figure within the Armed Forces Movement, Cruz Oliveira. He took the hospitals out of the charities' hands and turned them into a single service, and banned the selling of blood — since then, the blood used in hospitals has been donated. All of this happened with the people on the streets, demanding that health access should not be a commodified good, but rather a universal right.

**DB: You describe the revolution as relevant to the twenty-first century as much as the twentieth, and also note a flowering of consciousness of class interests during this upheaval. But it could also be argued that the Portuguese experience was tied to an older history and model of class organization rooted in large Fordist workplaces, coming toward the end of the wave of struggles that had opened up in 1968. Indeed, ideas like self-managed factories were widespread in the international left of this period. In what sense was this a movement that points to the future rather than the last gasp of the workers' revolution in Europe, before an onslaught that dismantled its historic social base?**

**RV:** One of my main arguments in my book is to distinguish workers' control from self-management. There is a long history of experiences of workers' control, from Petrograd in 1917 to Italy in 1919-20, where workers impose their standards on company management. This phenomenon — little-studied in the Portuguese case — was however one of the most interesting elements of the Portuguese revolution, developing in nationalized firms, the major engineering companies, and beyond from February 1975 onward. This was different from companies which workers took directly into their own hands (self-management), which was more common in firms in real financial difficulties and smaller businesses.

The Portuguese revolution was based on the working class, not peasants or a militarized party. It is the most modern revolution to have taken place in Europe. Out of Portugal's ten-million-strong population, three million belonged to the sectors involved in the revolution, including a massive proportion of women (representing some 40 percent of the labor force, due to the war as well as emigration) and a service sector which had seen great expansion in recent years. In this revolution, factory workers controlled hospitals and doctors.

Portugal's revolution thus combined great backwardness — the crumbling of the most anachronistic (indeed, the last) colonial empire — with modernity, in a revolution in the heart of Europe in the midst of the Cold War.

Today this revolutionary past — when the poorest, the most precarious, indeed often illiterate people, dared to take life in their hands — is a kind of historical nightmare for today's Portuguese ruling classes. Most of the people were jubilant. One of the characteristics of the photos of the Portuguese revolution, as illustrated in the cover of the book, is that people are almost always smiling at the camera. Not by chance, Chico Buarque sang: "I know you're having a party, man." Yet on the fortieth anniversary, it was insisted that only the soldiers' actions on April 25 be celebrated, forgetting that this was but the first day of the most surprising nineteen months in Portugal's history.

**DB: Social-democratic parties in other countries, but also the US government, feared contagion from Portugal to other countries. How far was this realistic, and what pressure was used to stifle the energy of the revolution from the outside?**

**RV:** We can see what happened in the American archives which have now been opened. Portugal was, alongside Vietnam, the country most closely monitored by the State Department. In Gerald Ford's words, Washington feared a "red Mediterranean" spreading out from Portugal. What he feared was often something neglected in the history of revolutions — the force of example. The images of the people of the shantytowns smiling with open arms alongside the soldiers filled the people of Spain, Greece, Brazil with hope.

The global left, from social democracy to the Communist Parties, groups to the left of these, trade unions, human-rights groups, progressive sectors of the Church, and democrats and republicans saw in Portugal an alternative to the bloodbaths carried out under the boots of the Latin American and

Asian military dictatorships. Only seven months after the bloody events in Chile on September 11, 1973, one people in Europe was actually winning.

On the other hand, today we know that the greatest sum of money dished out by the German Social Democracy (SPD) in its history was dedicated to building a Socialist Party in Portugal in 1974-75. This, not to further the revolution, but to create a party that could serve as the civilian heads of its derailing. The American and German states realized that there was no way to stop the revolution by repeating Chilean-style repression — Portugal was in Europe. The strategy of the “democratic counterrevolution” was implemented under the leadership of a Socialist Party, pacifying the masses with welfare concessions while undermining the popular forms of power by insisting that only parliamentary politics were legitimate.

**DB: You reproduce João Abel Manta’s famous cartoon showing Portugal being studied by history’s great revolutionaries and convey how far it was a focus for the international left. Yet as you also note, it has not entered history in the same way as the Chilean experience as an example of the problems of state power.**

Why do you think that is? Was it that the far-left groups of the time simply proposed a 1917 style revolution in Portugal and therefore added nothing new? Or is it that other large parties (e.g. the Italian Communists) saw the Chilean experience as more in line with the dangers they themselves faced?

**RV:** The Portuguese Communist Party, even more than the Maoists, created the idea that there was a danger that fascism would return. They used this as a means of pressure to defend the popular-front strategy (i.e. a broad alliance against fascism stretching across class divides) and thus constrain the conflictual dimension of the social revolution. Some of the far left aligned with this approach, but others did not. Not just the Maoists and Trotskyists, but also the Communist Party and the MFA were very divided between supporting popular power against the central state and supporting the official Communist-MFA line defending this state against the “fascist” threat.

The claim that fascism was a real threat was, frankly, ridiculous: within a few days of April 25 the population had entirely destroyed the old regime, from the censor’s office to the political police, the fascist newspapers, the old trade unions, and so on. The mass meetings — the “plenarios” — had rapidly moved to purge regime officials. Meanwhile the army not only refused to repress the people, but elements of it split, in favor of the popular power. So, there was no Chilean-style threat to the Portuguese revolution.

But it seems that a large part of the revolutionary left finds it easier to trust in the success of popular-front politics — the defensive front against fascism — than in the self-emancipation of the workers. It is not easy to explain this, but doubtless it involves a kind of subjective fragility.

When we compare our own era, or indeed the 1974-75 period, with what international solidarity represented among the workers’ parties at the twentieth century, we see how in more recent times revolutionary leaderships have in fact become less bold and even more precarious and isolated “in their own countries.” Of course, it is one thing to say there was no Bolshevik Party in Portugal (or elsewhere) in 1974-5, but that itself poses the key question of how come a revolutionary situation with so much potential did not give rise to any such strong party.

**DB: You mention some gains of the revolutionary period that survived deep into the present, like a rent freeze that lasted until 2012. Even the constitution preserved formally socialist language. How far are the tasks of the Portuguese left today a matter of defending or reviving the demands of 1974-75? What lasting changes in class and gender relations**

## did it impose?

**RV:** The call for the beginning of the revolution on April 25, 1974 was the radio playing the song Grandola Vila Morena. When, after the 2008 financial crisis, popular demonstrations rose up against the European troika imposing austerity on Portugal, the crowds sang this same song. In a time of social crisis, the music of 1974-75 becomes like a national anthem. This reveals something of the deep legacy of the revolution in Portuguese society.

History has different temporalities. The revolution lasts in culture, in music, in the name of bridges and streets, in the defense of the welfare state won in the battles of that time. Yet from the economic point of view, we can see the great setbacks we have suffered since its demobilization. Today, the Gini index of social inequality is the same as it was in 1973 — as bad as before the revolution.



*Crowds in Lisbon, Portugal in April 1974. Wikimedia Commons*

There was to be no “Red Mediterranean” as Gerald Ford had feared. Portugal’s revolution gave everything, but it was alone. Despite the enthusiasms of leftist militants across Europe’s wealthier countries, the same dynamic did not take hold elsewhere.

But the outcome of a process is not the same thing as the process itself. The defeat of the revolution does not detract from the grandeur of what the colonial and Portuguese peoples showed in those two years. They provide an example of what we can hope for in the future.

Never in Portuguese history have as many people spoken for themselves as they did in those months. Politics ceased to be separated between elites and people, and there was a close connection between manual and intellectual work, between Africa and Europe, between doctors and nurses, men and women, students and teachers.

I have written more than ten books on the revolution in a decade of research, and I always hear people saying the same thing, they say: “These were the happiest days of my life.” In these two years, human beings were reunited with their humanity. This legacy still lasts today. And it is the only one that can save us from the abyss of the present.

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• *Jacobin*. 04.25.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/04/portugal-carnation-revolution-national-liberation-april>