

# **THE JUNTA DE COLONIZAÇÃO INTERNA AND THE SHAPING OF THE ESTADO NOVO'S PEASANTRY: Newness and stagnation of the rural society**

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## **Abstract**

*Considerations on the Portuguese architecture during the New State are usually set apart cultural, societal and economic developments. Appreciating, in particular, the modifications of the constructive techniques, Portuguese architectural historians place the Estado Novo architecture within the 'Modern Movement' or Modernism. However, Modernism, far beyond a mere aesthetic phenomenon, has been conceptualise - either by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists or historians - as a radical response to the abrupt economic and societal challenges brought by the modernity, such as the working class proletarianisation, laicisation of the society, transport revolution, and so forth. Having said that, this paper aims to scrutinise the societal model reproduced by the Junta de Colonização Interna, one of the Estado Novo institutions in charge of studying and shaping the Portuguese rural landscape therefore materialising the regime's political views. The aim is to discuss its modernist character. Is it the case that the Estado Novo institution has ever aimed the creation of a new way of living plainly adjusted to modernity or did it reproduced the conservative, traditionalist and catholic values, with all its the rigid stratification they advocate? To enlighten this question, sketches, internal reports and other documents of the Junta de Colonização Interna will be explored through the lens of the allegedly dialogue between tradition and modernity that others identified in relation to architecture and urban planning discourses of the Estado Novo regime thus contributing to the debate on the regime's nature.*

**Keywords:** Salazarism, Fascism Modernism.

## **1 – The ideology conveyed by the Portuguese Inner Colonisation plans**

In this paper I am specifically interested in exploring the ways Portuguese inner colonisation somehow mirrors the New State's ideology. The New State [Estado Novo] was the dictatorship which ruled the country since 1933 until 1974 and Inner Colonisation was implemented by the Board of Inner Colonisation [Junta de Colonização Interna, JCI], an organism created in 1937.

Considerations on Portuguese architecture during the New State usually set apart cultural, societal and economic developments. But a building has to be studied

more broadly than through its planning and initial design. Such scrutiny must encompass material legacies, policies, and social practices. All these things considered, and a sense of its meaning, including its ideological expression can be successfully carried on.

With this complexity in mind, I will analyse the theme of the Portuguese inner colonisation.

## **2 – The New State societal model**

Some discourses of Salazar on the society that the New State intend to create are self-explanatory. According to the chief of government, small independent houses would prompt silence, tranquillity and love, the sense of ownership, therefore the sense of family would be enhanced (Salazar, 2003 [1938]). Salazar considered misery as “a secrecy of progress, of civilization”. According to him, it was not in the agrarian environment, “where life [was] simple and without ambition, that misery becomes distressing, dramatic”. It was a tragedy that rather developed in the cities, in the great capitals, “all the more insensitive and harsher, the more civilized”, he claimed (Salazar, 2003 [1938]). For him it was “mechanization, the automatism of progress” that turned men into machines, “isolates him brutally by replacing his gestures and affective impulses with complicated and cold cogs” (Salazar, 2003 [1938]).

His aim was not to turn Portugal in a rich country. He said once that he did not wish to feed “the poor with illusions”, but rather to preserve “the simplicity of life, the purity of customs, the sweetness of feelings, the balance of social relations, this familial atmosphere, modest but the noble of Portuguese life.” According to Salazar, these achievements would awake the Portuguese traditions and enable the country social peace (Salazar,1945).

### **3 – What placed inner colonisation into the political agenda?**

Those statements do not mean the political elites and technicians involved in the Junta de Colonização Interna were trying to solve problems resulting from Portuguese industrialisation – which was rather incipient at the time –, but rather to establish a strategy to prevent its future rising and, above all, to hamper the rural exodus that was growing due to the lack of work in rural areas. This would demand guaranteeing the minimal conditions for the farmers to keep living in the countryside. Only in that sense the improvement of living conditions was among the state's objectives. To attract industrial proletariat to rural areas was never an objective.

### **4 – The Portuguese “new farmer”**

Salazarism considered family as the centre of all social organisation, the primary guarantee of social order. Therefore, the ways it conceived the program of inner colonisation should shed light on the concept of family as the regime imagined it.

Not all farmers were considered apt to get the agricultural units that would be distributed by the Board. According to 1938 law, those who deserve to receive agrarian units from the state would have to match the the following requirements: to be Portuguese, less than 45 years and a non-alcoholic, to be robust, healthy and serious. The settler should also be prepared to be a hard worker and could neither a rowdy person nor communist. He must be also devoted to the New State constitution and integrated in the regime's social order. Previous five years practice in agriculture was required unless the farmer possessed a certificate from an agriculture school. In 1948, new law lowered the appropriate age to 30 years old and additional requirements were added. The settler should be male, head of the family and someone with guarantees in terms of moral probity. Preferentially, the good settler should also be someone with at least rudimentary notions of the Catholic Church Social Doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *I Curso de Monitores de Mecanização Agrícola, Relatório, 1963-1964*. Lisbon: Junta de Colonização Interna, 1964.

## **5 – New houses for the new settlers**

How were the ideal house for the settler and his - idealised - family? In terms of building policy, the question is if the rural houses to host the settlers in the new colonies were somehow proposing a modern way of living, something more adequate to the societal progress of the humanity, and thus suitable capable of boosting a new kind of Portuguese man, a modern rural man.

In ideological terms, the regime saw the house within a plot as a central aspect in process of cementing familiar relationships and therefore, the house would work as an instrument to keep man far from politics and its pernicious actions and conspiracies. This idea is illustrated by a statement of an agronomist working for the Ministry of Agriculture at the time. Mário Botelho de Macedo published a guide explaining how rural houses should be. In this publication he would state:

“If the house plays such a significant role in the life of any man, in the case of the peasant, his influence is even more pronounced, because he does not have the coffee shop, the club or the cinema to spare his free time. After finishing his work, he only has the house, his home is the only thing left to attract him” (Macedo, 1942).

But was the house so attractive as it was meant to be?

In the 1930s, another agronomist José Pereira Caldas that, unlike the former, worked to the after a travelling worked from JCI mission to study inner colonisation in Europe reported that, the houses promoted by Suisse inner colonisation programme were built with the certain commodities: hot water, electricity, and bathroom. However, rarely were these assets mentioned in the plans of JCI and even more rare were its effective design and construction in the settlers' houses.

It is true that JCI thought that rural housing should have, at least, a kitchen – functioning also as a dining and a living-room –, a room for the parents, one for the boys, another for the daughters, and a toilet (Macedo, 1942). But these were almost the single advancements one can find.

Indeed, JCI annual reports offers no significant innovations to be introduced in the rural housing. JCI planned for a "house with as few divisions as possible"<sup>2</sup>; no architects were involved in the technical decision-making process,<sup>3</sup> the department was exclusively ruled by agronomists, and only from 1948 onwards they were included in the permanent staff of the Board.

In the end, Portuguese inner colonisation plans didn't even include piped water at least until 1945. More or less the same happened with the electricity and its supply. Even afterwards only 4 out of the 7 colonies were built with such infrastructure. Even within those more progressive colonies, one wonders what real impact these infrastructures have had in the process of creating modern and suitable homes for agricultural families... Health care assistance and free education also seem not to have been a great success.

No doubt that agricultural plots were thought to be managed in a more professionalised and progressist way but still...The general idea one gets is that the Board was not very successful in the implementation of its policies.

Indeed, of the 1533 agricultural units planned in the early days of JCI, each one including land, housing and agriculture infrastructures, only 471 (31%) were built, and several of them were never occupied. This in a country that had two and a half million households in 1960. The numbers of households seem quite irrelevant and even more so if one thinks of the extensive works of the Italian or the Spanish inner colonisation.

## **6 – Revolution or evolution**

Returning to my main question, was JCI putting into practice a revolutionary social project, something that would be in line with a social and cultural form of modernism in terms of proposing an alternative to the society and the culture inherited from the vicious modernity?

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<sup>2</sup> "Report [of the Corporatist Chamber]", p. 111.

<sup>3</sup> See the Decreto-Lei n. 27.207, November, 1936.

The Portuguese roots of an idea of inner colonisation date back to the end of the 19th Century and some efforts were in fact carried out during the 1st Republic to launch this kind of initiative.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Colony Milagres (1925) was a creation of the First Portuguese Republic (1910-1926), the demo-liberal regime that preceded Salazar's Estado Novo (1932-1974) even if there is no doubt that it was the Estado Novo that designed a more consistent policy of inner colonization with the creation of an organism fully dedicated to the study and implementation of the colonies plans, design plans, and development management. But the question is: in what way did it impact peasantry lives?

## **7 – The transitory nature of the Junta de Colonização Interna**

At this time of my research, I argue that the inner colonisation was never a priority for the dictatorial regime. Firstly, because these services would always have transitional nature. In 1938, some of the regime's hierarchs would claim:

"The recognition of the vacant lands is done. Some will be wooded, others will serve as peoples' common land and others can and should be availed for colonisation. How many thousands of hectares? Not as many as it seems, if one wants to make a lasting contribution. It will not solve the problem that has been brought by the increase of the population. However, [...] we have to take advantage of what remains and guide the population flow to the colonies with more intense impetus, developing the settlers' general conditions of life. And why a Board? They last as long as they there is an advantage in maintaining them."<sup>5</sup>

Another quotation taken from a decree-law of 1962 goes along in the same line: "The inventory of the common land of the Continent, which the Junta de Colonização Interna carried out, revealed how much the illusion was that there was still in Portugal appreciable areas susceptible of agricultural exploitation. The

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<sup>4</sup> Decrees n. 4.812, de 1918, e n° 7.127, de 1920.

<sup>5</sup> "Report [of the Corporatist Chamber] on two internal colonisation projects", *Diários da Assembleia Nacional* (Minutes of the National Assembly), n. 192, 29 October 1938.

reduced possibilities of colonisation, then carefully defined, are now entirely exhausted."<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, from 1932 to 1943, there was an energetic Public Works minister – Duarte Pacheco – that took upon himself the responsibility of conducting all the meaningful buildings and infrastructures plans the regime had considered crucial for the country's development. Why didn't he bring inner colonisation – at least housing and social buildings – under his ministry responsibility or even create a specific organism to deal with it exactly as he had done within other contexts from justice to education spheres, from public banking to post offices. The inexistence of an Agriculture Ministry from 1940 onwards circumstance that had put JCI under the authority of the Ministry of Economy is another situation can rise the doubt of how significant the inner colonisation was for the regime.

## **8 – The danger of over simplistic arguments: fascist v. non-fascist architecture**

As regards the external influences that would have allegedly been absorbed by the Board and its realisations, it is worth to mention some facts described by two technicians from JCI. In 1937, the agronomist José Luís Calheiros e Meneses (1906-?) and José Pereira Caldas (1895-1958), were sent to the International Institute of Agriculture – the predecessor of FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations – that at that time was located in Rome. This journey gave origin to two reports. One on the Bonifica Integral in Italy, that I could not find so far, and a second one with which we have learned that after that visiting Italy, the initial plan was going directly to Czechoslovak to visit a colonization experience that the international institution had recommended. Notwithstanding, the Portuguese considered that, in face of the available information, Czechoslovak, at the time ruled by a parliamentary republic, was not a good example to follow because the agrarian reform carried out in that country was no more than a "coup d'état against latifundia" grounded in demagoguery rather

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<sup>6</sup> Decree-Law n. 44720, 23 November 1962.

than in economic realities, and therefore far from the Portuguese concerns (Meneses and Caldas, 1937).

Alternatively, the agronomist chose to go to Switzerland. According to them, Suisse inner colonisation was more suitable to the Portuguese case. On the one hand, it aimed the improvement of crops conditions and the re-parcelling of the land. On the other hand, and more importantly, it also intended to provide a solution for the growing unemployment and the progressive emptiness of the countryside due to the country's industrialization. And, last but not the least, Suisse was following the path of economic autarchy. That is to say, Suisse inner colonisation demonstrated economic but also social concerns and, in that sense, it matched entirely with the "national movement for social promotion of the Portuguese countryside" that was considered as the main aim of the works of JCI (Meneses and Caldas, 1937).

These considerations illustrate that influences from other countries other than the fascist ones. But more research and thought should be given to the topic, which I intend to further explore in the following months.

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