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Portuguese Diary 2:

1976

April 19, 1976, a Radio Televisao Portugues crew, in a van, is doing a programme on "the vision of socialism". It is stopping in the street, at factory gates, in markets, talking to people and recording their replies. It's a tight fit inside: seven people and lots of equipment.

We make for Barreiro, an industrial town across the river from Lisbon. Once there, there is no problem getting to the giant CUF chemical works. The sky is grey, part cloud, part smoke. The walls are grey too, but bespattered with the red of posters. The plant, the stacks, the water towers hovering above us look as if built in the last century. Long streets of hangers, stores, sheds, many with broken windows. There is noise, and rust and the plaster is peeling off the front of many buildings. Heavy smells hang in the air. The road is in poor repair. An old-fashioned capitalism dearly cohabits with the new.

We pace through mean little streets of minute, decrepit terraced housing. "Sulphuric Acid Street". "Candle Grease Street". Capitalism even murders the imagination. The houses were built six, seven decades ago, possibly more. People still live there - sort of.

This is the heartland of the PCP, its ideological and physical domain. Its posters are everywhere. A gigantic PCP balloon is tied to a rope between two rooftops. "Unity with the MFA". "Vote PCP". The van stops and the crew take up their positions near 10 a group of women of indeterminate age, going in. They are not in the least shy and talk readily. "Socialism?" - "A steady job!" - "Like this?" - No answer. A steady drizzle is falling. "Like

this?", the producer repeats. The women, sensing something strange, turn on him, abuse the television, and march off, their fists raised, shouting "PCP! PCP!"

There are joyful moments, too. Walking along the Tagus waterfront, between the Station and the Praca do Comercio we stop in front of a particularly fine example of mural art. Enormous. Unforgettable. "Socialist realism" at its hideous best.

The reds and yellows are gaudy as usual - caricatures of real colour. The oppressed have very square jaws, very short hair, enormous arms, a very determined look. The proletariat, as seen by the Maoists is clearly more brawn than brain: the sort of animal any skilful Leninist could easily ride to the revolution! But the "anarcho-cynicalists" have been at work. Modern capitalism requires modern transport. The MRPP leader is calling for a cab.

Another story about taxis. In Elvas, in the East, some of the estates belonging to big landlords have been taken over by those who work them. The usual pattern - for the agricultural workers to occupy first and seek authority later - from the local centre of the IRA.

One recently expropriated latifundiario (latifundista in Spanish) also happened to own the biggest taxi business in town. His

drivers disliked him heartily and were much impressed with the new goings on in the co-operative. So they took over the taxis.

But the cult of authority dies hard. The act had to be "legitimized", entered "into the books". So the cab drivers all turn up one morning at the IRA Headquarters for an "official" sanction. The Ministry of Agriculture has files on tenants, trees, touros ... and technical aid - but nothing on how legally to appropriate a fleet of taxis. The Revolution creates its own surrealist precedents.

May Day, 1976. Top of the Avenida Almirante Reis in Lisbon. The demonstration called by Intersindical is marching past. Municipal workers in their Sunday best Railway workers in serried ranks, decorated lorries packed with agricultural workers carrying pitchforks. Occasional singing. Very occasional laughter. Sellers do a roaring trade in political stickers, selling to those watching the procession: stickers for the Association of Collectivized Farms, for the Housing Fund, for student or women's groups. Schoolteachers, building workers, hospital workers chant "Intersindical, Intersindical" as they pass, ten or twelve abreast. Twenty thousand people march by _ apparently far fewer than last year. The traffic has prudently been stopped, although Portuguese motorists have learnt patience - the hard way.

It is a fine warm day. Banners, unbelievably, still demand "Unity with the MFA" - the very MFA which is now the main brake on

the revolution. They also demand the right to full employment and vigilance against fascists.

Do I sense a certain weariness? There is none of the exaltation, of the euphoria of even a few months ago - as if people realized that it would take more than mural graffiti to bring down the walls of capital. The Party is everywhere, though nowhere in its true garb. In the Association of University Professors. In the Association of Municipal Associations. The bank employees march by shouting "No to Reaction!" One or two Tenants' Committees carry colourful banners ... demanding government loans. The two groups march next to each other. Someone should introduce them to one another!

At the end of the procession a mass of red flags and a few hundred very young people shouting raucously: "Unidad sindical unidad sindical". One might be dreaming. They want the PCP and PS (Socialist Party) to take power, in order to expose them. And Intersindical too. To form a government "without generals or capitalists". Yes, the Trots. In their rightful place. At the tailend of a Stalinist demonstration.

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