

A Psychoanalytical Perspective of the Crisis in Southern Europe: Dependency With Portugal as a Case in Point¹

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The recession crisis like the one we have been living through, since 2008, has various human origins. The fact is that economics and psychology are more closely connected than most people believe. I suggest one could analyse the crisis in Southern Europe, namely in Portugal, working from a psychoanalytical perspective, using the concept of dependency. In particular, psychological dependency on mother/family/state.

I would also like to point out that the Portuguese crisis is structural and has roots different from those of the European crisis, with which it is convergent. Nevertheless, certain similarities in the collective behaviour in Southern countries (collectively known under the acronym of PIGS) are worth reflecting upon, since they are also linked to dependency.

First, let me outline briefly how the global crisis developed from a subprime bubble in the USA to a global recession in Europe. The crisis has become financial, economic, social and political and is seriously affecting the minds and lives of people in many countries. How has this terrible state of affairs come about?

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THE GLOBAL CRISIS

Between 2004 and 2006 and after, a period of particularly low interest rates, the Federal Reserve increased significantly the Fed fund's rate. As a consequence, the mortgage sector started giving clear signs that it was in trouble. It became obvious that much credit had been granted with an optimistic view in mind: that house prices would keep escalating. That, however, did not happen. Being unable to pay their mortgages, families had to return the houses and apartments to the banks and real estate prices sank brutally. It may seem strange to some that the difficulties of American families could have such an impact on all the developed world, but the fact is that we live in a globalized age and in times when the various players depend on each other very heavily.

Banking is perhaps the sector where this is most visible. Imparities in balance sheets started to make themselves obvious rather quickly. Lehman Brothers was liquidated. Other big financial institutions, such as Merrill Lynch, were sold at fire-sale prices. The banking crisis brought another crisis which has also to do with trust. I am referring to sovereign debts and country risk. Rating agencies started lowering their evaluation of the capability of countries to pay their debt: Ireland, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Cyprus are examples.

With distrust came fear. Global recession was on its way. Credit crunched, international trade decreased, investment sank, unemployment soared quickly. In Portugal, for instance, we went from a rate of unemployment which was 7.6% to 19% in 5 years (2008-2013). In Spain, the problem is twice as big. Greece has been in a deep recession for 6 years; Portugal now for 3. Italy and Spain are struggling not to fall into the hands of creditors.

The crisis, like a plague, propagated very quickly in our globalised economy. Beginning as a financial crisis, the situation has developed to become an economic, social and political one as well. And it is far from being over. The population of Europe has become old and devitalised. Factories have been closed. Trade among countries is falling. Germany has been called 'the engine of Europe', but the anaemic growth of the German product in 2013 is not helping at all. As if all this were not enough, the messy way the Cyprus banking crisis was dealt with by European officials was another nail in the coffin of the Eurozone – if not the European Union itself.

IN PONT: PORTUGAL

In Portugal, the external debt had been piling up for decades, especially for the last 15 years. The revolution and the change of regime that took place in 1974 brought democracy and with it the hope for a better future for everybody. Barely acquainted with the democratic system, the Portuguese people fell into a dangerous illusion: that all the benefits of a welfare state would be available to everybody. Ignorant as we were of the rules of international economy, after 48 years of an over-protective dictatorship, we equated democracy with access to riches and well-being. Where would the money come from? Nobody worried about that. Our industrial sector was weak and based on traditional products: textile, shoes, canned food. We hurriedly left our previous colonies in Africa (both our source of raw materials and our main market), managed to integrate one million refugees quite peacefully and proceeded with our shared illusion of protection in disease and old age for everybody, including those who had never paid for any social security system and who were the majority.

With the blessing and even the stimulus of the European Community, which we joined in 1986 (or rather, the EEC, as it was called in those days), we proceeded to destroy our traditional productive sectors: agriculture and fishing. People and firms, by means of European funds, started actually being paid not to work. As a country, we had always depended strongly on imports. That tendency has been accentuated. More than half the food we eat now is imported or depends on imported goods.

After the 1974 revolution, the public sector quickly became our main employer. Today, more than half the population depend on the state: teachers, doctors, nurses and other civil servants, pensioners and recipients of social subsidies, as well as state suppliers. In fact, the great majority of big business has the state as a client or as a partner. As had happened before, in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, political parties and their clienteles have taken over the state and whatever resources were available. Corruption, as in most southern countries, is endemic and there is no transparency at all. Justice seems often to be blocked and many law suits, specially those about corruption, never come to an end.

The assault on the state was carried out with impunity, since the priority was to make the promises the electors wanted to hear. The illusion and collusion were massive, except for a few isolated voices. What had seemed a legitimate dream – our country becoming modern – turned into a nightmare.

In 2011, on the verge of bankruptcy, the previous government had to ask for help elsewhere, the crisis having brought a severe credit crunch. An agreement was then signed with the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the IMF (the so-called troika). Not that we are not used to being in the grip of creditors. Bankruptcy has been part of our history. We always had this tendency to spend, as if there was no tomorrow and politicians are quick to entice the people with ambitious building projects – and promises.

We are the oldest country in Europe, but we never managed, as a people, to deal with our expenditures. Although we had particularly good periods before (just think about India and Brazil), we usually put consumption before saving. Short-sighted and lacking in well-prepared elites, the country rulers always preferred spending to investing. Gold had come from Brazil since its discovery in 1500, but the profits it brought were rarely invested. Profits went straight away to manufacturing countries in Europe to pay for luxury goods.

What could be the reasons for such an irresponsible behavior? I want to propose the following hypothesis.

Portugal, as most Southern countries, is a matriarchal society. The relationship of the people with the state could be described as a childish and dependent one, like an infant's to its mother. We are, as a people, heavily dependent on the state: As I had said, more than a half the population depend on the state. This Mother-State has been there for centuries. Like children, we complain about the state, but we depend on it. And now, that there is a general lack of resources, people have become aware that there is no money available for hospitals, schools and pensions. When, two years ago, we had to ask for money, the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the IMF came to our rescue, imposing no doubt very hard rules – which were necessary – but also interest rates which we won't be ever able to pay.

Like misbehaving children, we protest against the austerity measures. It seems that we had this childish illusion that our creditors would behave like a good mother, attentive and forthcoming towards our needs and demands. Portuguese society, on the whole, is now a disappointed and downbeat bunch. We cannot see any solution. We are in the grips of fear. We are starting to lose hope. Social cohesion is in danger.

A PSYCHOANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Now, the psycho-analytical question: what made us so dependent on Mother-State? Dependency, when excessive, is a psychological disorder, both at the individual and

the collective level. A pathological dependency creates a type of object-relation structure that reinforces the dependence of the subject on the objects, in an endless feedback process. It can be a rather unhealthy pattern that keeps repeating itself.

This tendency to lean on Mother is quite old. In fact, there are in Southern Europe, especially in Spain, Portugal and some parts of Italy, quite a few archaeological remains of religious rituals in honour of the Mother-Goddess. Whereas in some regions of the world God was male, here there has been, for centuries, the cult of a female divinity. The Virgin Mary cult, which is part of the Catholic Church and so strong in the South, is a remnant of that. In spite of the widespread existence of misogyny and a macho attitude in Southern Europe, mothers are powerful in our societies. These two aspects seem paradoxical, but they can and do coexist.

What is dependency? Be it on drugs, gambling, alcohol or people, dependency is a way of being in which the ego feeds on the gratification that comes from the object. Like the baby who cannot stand the frustration of not having the mother's breast within its immediate reach, the dependent personality cannot delay gratification and depends heavily on the object. This behavior originates in childhood, when the small baby is totally dependent on the maternal object. The way the baby and the mother live this dependency will structure object relations in the future. With the help of the mother, children can learn to tolerate frustration and delay gratification. As Wilfred Bion wrote, this is the way thinking develops, with the mother as what he called the 'container' of anxiety and painful feelings.

It is not dependence per se that is pathological; its being excessive and taking place beyond a certain age is. The baby, being immature, even premature, is naturally dependent on maternal care for some time. In human species, this period is much longer: We pay for intelligence with dependency.

As the child grows, he or she acquires more and more autonomy. This autonomy progresses as follows:

Being able to move on his own.

Being able to talk and communicate.

Being able to fulfill his basic needs (food, hygiene, and so on).

Being able to think by and for himself, and be accountable for his acts.

Being able to earn his living.

Being able to build a social network, and his own family.

Unfortunately, what we see around us is not always this kind of development. Society, in general, has been regressing to an infantile state. Grownups behave like adolescents

and adolescents behave like children. The access to adult life takes place much later than before. It is not infrequent to know of thirty-somethings, even forty-somethings, who still live with their parents, some even after a divorce. Either because they cannot find a job, or because they never really meant to cut off the links with childhood.

As psychotherapists, we listen to parents complaining about the immaturity of their children, but digging deeper, we find that everybody colluded in the prolongation of dependence. We live in a society that encourages dependent behavior, and then we complain about the lack of initiative and self-motivation many people exhibit.

HOW DID WE COME TO THIS?

The Background

Being a civil servant was until recently the most a Portuguese man or woman could wish for; it meant job safety and career progression by seniority.

If we look back at the two previous centuries, we can see that this tendency to lean on the state is quite old. Governments always used jobs in the state sector, as a way of feeding clientele. Oliveira Salazar, who came to power in 1926, took advantage of the typical Portuguese aversion to risk and made sure civil servants would be on his side. He curtailed private initiative, both in industry and commerce, so that very little could escape his control. As he used to say, the Portuguese should live semi-poor but honest lives.

In 1974, the political revolution brought democracy but not independence from the control of the Mother-State, which grew obscenely. State and political parties became so interwoven that we cannot tell one from the other. The dependence of people on political parties turned into dependence on the state and vice-versa. Each new government brought a new influx of civil servants. In 2005, they accounted for 15% of all jobs.

The matriarchal family, still the nucleus of our society, does not facilitate autonomy or risk-taking. The dyadic relationship between baby and mother allows for the illusion that everything is possible and can be taken for granted. Theoretically, the Oedipal phase paves the way for the child to acknowledge the existence of the father, his rule and the way he mediates between external reality and the dyadic mother/baby bubble. With the father come norms and socialisation. It may be that in Portugal this paternal function has also been lacking for centuries, as we have always been a country of emigrants and absentee fathers.

The harsh reality is that, dependent or autonomous, the world outside does not care about us. Facing this fact of life is so painful that some of us prefer to stay close to mother and her protection in an apparent, but delusional safety.

A job in the civil service was, for many, a way of sustaining this illusion. That someone would take care of me for ever and ever. However, reality is more powerful. There is no safeguard from life. The Mother-State is disintegrating.

Paradoxically, in the face of this disintegration, the collective body – society – clings desperately to any promise of safety. The British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion elaborated on this mental mechanism in groups. In the irrational basic assumption of dependence, the members of the group turn anxiously to anybody, an ideology or another group, that they believe can save them from a terrible situation. This is, of course, fertile ground for a populist leader or parties.

The Disorder of Dependency

Dependent personalities feed upon immediate gratification and, when the object disappoints them, they quickly attach themselves to another object (in psychoanalysis, we call them ‘suppletive’ objects). They cling to the object in a narcissistic way and, when they are refused gratification, rage and hate can build up very quickly. With these personalities, another object will soon follow, in the never-ending search for the maternal object which had not been ‘containing’ enough.

As far as groups are concerned, Bion also described a mode of group functioning, in which the acritical belief in the object as the saviour, when disappointed, gives way to this anger and rage. Crowds may turn into mobs by the same process.

To contain, according to Bion, is to help the child to think the anxiety and mental pain he or she is feeling. It also means allowing risk, and learning from experience for some. Over-protective parents do not allow for trial and error, for making mistakes and learning from them.

A maternalist government condemns the citizens to a state of pathological infantilisation. But where does the problem start? Who elects our governments? Who demands accountability? This is one of the most serious problems in Portugal. Ex-government officials who should be in prison parade on TV, teach at university and preside over companies that are also state suppliers. It is by means of this irresponsible collusion between rulers and the ruled, which mimics the fantasies of the baby, that our society strives to survive.

This terrible crisis is making us confront reality as a people, and as individuals.

Unemployment is rife, the elderly have their pensions reduced, young people cannot find jobs, cohabit or have children. Aggression and resentment build up. People get depressed. There is apparently no hope.

Not being able to hope is very bad for mental health. Without hope, there are no projects for the future. It is like having no future at all. For it is part of human nature to envision the future as better than the present. Otherwise, one cannot speak about a future, but only of a continuation of the present.

The Role of Psychotherapists

What shall we do then? I do not have 'the' solution. However, as a psychoanalyst and as a citizen, I believe it is urgent to invest more in ourselves and the way we relate to others and to our collective institutions.

What do I mean by this? We have to learn to tolerate frustration and to be stronger, more resilient, more capable, more accountable. More able to take initiative, even if it carries with it more responsibility. We have to demand more of the people whom we voted for and who represent us.

Donald Meltzer, another British psychoanalyst, wrote that the functions of the family were to create love, promote hope, contain depressive pain and allow for independent thinking. It is highly probable that many parents are unable to provide these functions. Nonetheless, they are the ones who should be doing that, not the schools.

Many of our patients do not seem to have built into themselves that basic trust Erik Eriksson referred to as part of our process of growing up. I believe that those of us who are psychotherapists have to help people to build a stronger self, so they can create better affective bonds and manage to self-motivate and work with more enthusiasm and initiative. It is easy to fall in the counter-transferential trap of dependence. It is for us to be aware of this trap and manage to foster autonomy in our clients.

I believe it is very important that we convey the message that psychotherapy is a powerful tool for self-knowledge and may bring more autonomy and an improved quality of life. For that purpose, we have to be with our patients in a full therapeutic relationship, where doubt and questions are allowed to come to the surface. To sum up, a relationship of nurtured growth, not clinging dependency.

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Resumo / Abstract

Uma Perspetiva Psicanalítica da Crise na Europa do Sul: Dependência, Tendo Portugal como o Caso em Questão

A crise económica e política que tem afetado os chamados países desenvolvidos, desde 2007, atingiu, com particular severidade, a Europa do Sul. Embora bastante diferentes uns dos outros, os países que têm sido designados sob o acrónimo PIGS (Portugal, Irlanda, Grécia, Itália e Espanha) partilham uma grande dependência económica e financeira, em relação ao estado. Utilizando teorias de S. Freud, W. Bion, E. Eriksson e D. Meltzer, analiso, especificamente, o caso português, entre os países da Europa do Sul, e proponho uma interpretação psicanalítica da situação, baseada no conceito de dependência, em ambos os sentidos, individual e coletivo. Assim, argumento que a dependência do estado reflete uma dependência psicológica mais profunda da figura maternal, que é típica de sociedades matriarcais, com consequências políticas e individuais. No que se refere ao nível individual, defendo que nós psicoterapeutas devemos ter em consideração a forma como a dependência pode atrapalhar o processo terapêutico e a posição que devemos tomar, como profissionais, a fim de fomentar mais autonomia nos pacientes.

Palavras-Chave: Crise económica, dependência, autonomia, sociedade matriarcal, família, Estado.

A Psychoanalytical Perspective of the Crisis in Southern Europe: Dependency With Portugal as a Case in Point

The economic and political crisis that has been affecting the so-called developed countries, since 2007, struck with particular severity in Southern Europe. Although quite different from one another, the countries who have been designated under the acronym of PIGS share a great economic and financial dependence on the state. Drawing on the theories of S. Freud, W. Bion, E. Eriksson and D. Meltzer, I analyze specifically the Portuguese case among these Southern European countries and propose a psychoanalytical interpretation of the situation based on the concept of dependency, both at the individual level and the collective one. I argue that the dependence on the state mirrors a deeper psychological dependence on the maternal figure, typical of matriarchal societies, with political and individual consequences. As far as the individual level is concerned, I defend that we psychotherapists should take into consideration the way dependence may hinder the therapeutic process and the stance we should take as professionals in order to foster more autonomy in our clients.

Keywords: Economic Crisis, dependence, autonomy, matriarchal society, family, State.