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Older Learners in the Community? Provocative Reflections on the Situation of Older Adults in Portugal

Abstract: Today, there is a trend to stress intergenerational solidarity as a main goal towards the well-being of older citizens in Europe. Official and research discourses point to the theoretical and practical advantages of such an approach as a way to build bridges between people, fighting loneliness and promoting social development. However, the focus on intergenerational solidarity seems too narrow to achieve these goals; there is a long history of community development and education that seems better tailored to guide our actions. After presenting a general picture of the situation of older learners in Portugal, we defend the importance of keeping older learners in the community, which should be the unit of life that would guide our actions as adult educators. Community development and education can provide an adequate way to improve the quality of life among the older adults, fighting back against the general trends that dispossess older learners from the community.

Keywords: older adults, community, community development, learning

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The invisible older learners: a general Portuguese picture

It has been stated over and over that Europe is in a situation of structural aging, diverting policy attention to the huge economic impacts this will bring to our common future, namely over public expenses, social security, and health system costs – and which becomes far more serious when we witness the gradual but firm destruction of what was once a providing state. Portugal does not escape this general scenario, having a worrying demographic scenario. The phenomenon of demographic aging is based on the theory of demographic transition, from a model in which mortality and fertility had high values to a model in which both have very low numbers. Demographic aging begins from the moment when the proportion of the older population in the total population increases, and, as a result, the relative importance of the younger or the active population decreases, a situation that is occurring in Portugal.

In the 1960s, the proportion of the younger population in Portugal was 29% and the older population was 8%. In 2005, we witnessed an inversion of these tendencies with a younger population of 17% and 15% older. The projections for 2050 point to a younger population of 13%, and an older population of 32% of the total population. In other words, the proportion of people age 65 years or older has doubled in the last 45 years. Today, in a population of about 10 million inhabitants, there are 2.023 million people who are 65 or older, representing about 19% of the total population. In the last decade, the number of older citizens has increased about 19%. Among the elderly, the age group that has been increasing most noticeably are people over 80 years old. The majority of the elderly are women. The aging index reached its maximum value ever in 2010 (Anuário Estatístico ... 2011): in 1990, the aging index was 68.1%; in 2000, 102.2%; and in 2010, it reached 120.1%. This national average gains new contours when we understand that Portugal is a country with big differences between the north and the south, but especially with huge differences between the urban coastal zones (where most of Portugal’s population is concentrated) and the rural inland zones (which have experienced constant migration, and are becoming deserts in terms of population). In the latter
there are even higher aging indexes, for example, in the area of Alcoutim (in the south, a region of Algarve) the aging index has surpassed 500%.

The projections made so far about the future are even more surprising. As Gonçalves and Carrilho (2006, p. 29) synthesize, in 2050¹:

- The resident population will decrease to 9.302 million (10.626 million in 2010);
- The number of children up to 14 years old will continue to decrease, representing a loss of 418,000 children;
- The active population (15–64 years old) will maintain a negative variation in this period, representing a loss of about 2 million people in 40 years.
- The number of people 65 years old or older will grow 1.1 million, reaching 31.8% of the population by 2050.
- The older adult dependency index will increase from 26 to 58 older citizens for each 100 persons in the active population.
- The aging index will reach a national average of 243%.

Returning to our present situation, the data that depict the magnitude of loneliness among the elderly are especially worrying. Today, more than 1.2 million older people live alone or in the exclusive company of other older adults (Censos … 2012). This is to say that about 12% of Portugal’s total inhabitants and 60% of the elderly live alone (400,964) or in the exclusive company of older citizens (804,577), reflecting a phenomenon that has increased 28% in the last decade. The factors that explain these numbers are pointed out as primarily due to the increasing average life expectancy, the desertification of rural areas, and changes in family roles. It is important to stress that the majority of the older adults who live alone are women. In 2006, the National Institute of Statistics conducted a survey on the transition from active life to retirement (see Dia internacional do idoso 2007). The survey showed that nearly one-fourth (24.3%) of the citizens who left their last job or business and were 50 years old or older had worked between 40 to 44 years in exchange for a salary or any other type of financial compensation, and about one-fifth (20.6%) had worked between 35 to 39 years – this distribution applies to both men and women. Sixty-two percent declared that they would keep working despite retirement, because of the need to have a sufficient family income.

Considering the older adults who are institutionalized is equally important. By institutional family, we mean the set of individuals residing in a collective place in which they, independently of any family relationships between them, observe a common discipline, and are governed by an entity external to the group. These institutional families include mainly (but not only) social support, religious and health institutions (57% of the population who live in institutional families are in social support institutions). According to the numbers that Gonçalves (2003) collected, in 2001 about 1% of the total population lived in institutional families, which is not a relatively big number. Even so, the number of institutional

¹ This projection is based on the hypotheses of a gradual increase in fertility, a moderate increase in life expectancy, and a positive migration ratio, slightly decreasing.
families has been steadily increasing in the last decades. In 1991, there were 2,339 institutional families; in 2001, there were 3,876, an increase of two thirds. And in 2011, we have 4,832 institutional families, another significant increase of nearly a quarter when compared to the figure ten years before. However, it is more important to know the absolute number of the elderly living in institutions than to know who these citizens are. More than half of the elderly living in social support institutions are 80 years old or older, and are widows or widowers. Their educational qualification levels are very low (Gonçalves 2003): the majority are illiterate (67.1%), and the remaining have only 4 years of schooling (30%). Less than 3% have attended more than primary school. The elderly with an economic activity are almost nonexistent. Other dimensions – such as having special needs or economic situation – only reinforce a very crude statement: our institutional families are, generally speaking, warehouses for the poor.

To finish our brief portrait, it is important to consider the situation of learning and older learners, according to the data from the last national survey on the education and training of adults (Aprendizagem ... 2009). The general results show high participation in diverse kinds of education, training or learning, among individuals who are younger, economically active, have higher academic qualifications, and have competencies in foreign languages and ICT. In looking deeply at these dimensions, the proportion of participation in formal education, non-formal education and informal learning, or even lifelong learning activities, is strongly determined by age. The group between 55–64 years old (sadly, the survey does not consider learning after 65 years old) has the lowest proportion of participation in every category (10.8% in lifelong learning activities, 1.2% in formal education, 10.1% in non-formal education and 25.8% in informal learning). In our opinion, we should stress that the highest proportion of participation is achieved in informal learning, and a quarter of the adults seems to be a very promising figure to us. The survey shows that participation in learning varies in the direct ratio of the academic level. Languages and ICT showed interesting results: individuals who know at least one foreign language have a higher probability (about 9% more) of being involved in lifelong learning activities. Similarly, when compared to those who cannot use a computer, those who have mastered ICT have a higher probability in participating in lifelong learning activities (38% more), non-formal education (29% more) and informal learning (27% more). There is also a strong correlation between participation in learning and income level, as we can see in Table 1: the bigger the monthly income, the higher the percentage of participation in lifelong learning and non-formal learning. This table also shows very clearly that women’s participation is higher, a usual pattern in Portuguese society regarding education in general. Finally, the survey also clearly shows that there is an intergenerational transmission of education, in the sense that there is a strong association between the parents’ education and the child’s education. In short, educating adults provides benefits in the future.
In short, the factors that determine adult participation in education are the following: age; educational background; income; social and economic status; and languages and ICT skills. But more important than this summary, when we look at the factors that determine adult participation in adult education and training, we come to the conclusion that older citizens are indeed invisible. And if we want to fight this obvious invisibility, then we must look closely at community.

### Why focus on community?

The numbers we have just presented show the extent to which older learners are excluded from learning in Portugal. But we can also point out with significant precision the typical profile of the non-participant in learning: people who are more than 45 years old, have less than 9 years of schooling, and inhabit isolated or low density population areas. These adults are mostly inactive, have low academic qualifications, and earn less than 750 € per month; they do not use computers or the Internet, and they do not read books or even newspapers. In order to deal with this scenario, adult educators will have to take a stand. Who exactly are we trying to provide learning opportunities to? If the adults who are excluded from learning are the ones to be targeted, then a new problem arises: we will not be able to find these older citizens in educational formal structures, or even in the majority of the civil society organizations which provide adult learning. Therefore, the primary reason behind focusing on the community is both important and simple: it is in the community where we will find the citizens who need our most urgent attention. With this in mind, we need to comment on the concept of community.

There is a long history of community that too often builds a mainstream version based on its concept as an essential virtue, made up of transversal common features, and, also, bearing meanings that are too scattered. Shanahan (1996), for example, points out that community has been seen as locality, social activity, and social structure, not to mention views that stress feelings of belonging, solidarity and meaning, while focusing on particularistic notions of value. Community has been used throughout time as an instrument (sometimes as an intentional, non-naive political instrument), and with so many different meanings, that there

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**Table 1: Individuals between 18-64 years who participated in lifelong learning and non-formal education (%), according to gender and monthly income (Aprendizagem ... 2009)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly income</th>
<th>Lifelong learning</th>
<th>Non-formal education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 500 €</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 500 and 750 €</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 750 and 1000 €</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 1000 and 1500 €</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 1500 and 2000 €</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 2000 and 3000 €</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 3000 €</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is the risk of being pointless in the end. The implicit or explicit appeal toward homogeneity seems particularly dangerous, as it can deny cultural diversity in every sense and erase conflict from its natural existence in human relations. In this sense, community is a problematic and ambivalent concept, which “has always accommodated a range of related but contradictory meanings” (Shaw 2010, p. 19). At this stage, therefore, it seems necessary to add additional analytic dimensions to understand community more deeply.

Addressing community adequately entails, in the first place, taking the ambivalent character of community into account. We can consider community as a space of conflict more than a space of consensus. For an increasing number of people in communities, the world is divided into “us” and “them” (Hoggart 1966; Wildemeersch and Vandenabeele 2007). This carries a notion of community as the space where conflicts take place and, simultaneously, depicts it in its diversity and symbolic meaning. To understand community, it is therefore fundamental to consider it a symbolic space in which people have a sense of belonging (Kurantowicz 2008) – contradictory senses of belonging. As we have pointed out in Gualda et al. (2011), an example of this can be found in the cultural meaning of the border. The notion of the frontier as a space of communication and interaction can assume a critical, emancipatory value. However, the frontier can also be seen as producing separation and difference (Ribeiro 2001). These apparently opposing tendencies (union/separation) can be incorporated into community identities as an element of both conflict and creation. This same mechanism can be found literally in every dimension that concerns community. Although it is more complex, it also seems at the same time to be more adequate in representing social reality in community life.

Community development and education can be an important tool for social development, especially when we are facing deprived communities. Hence, the next section of this article presents a general description that sets forth our own positions in this context, followed by a description of some main Portuguese trends in the field.

**Community development and education in Portugal**

Community development does not have a unified definition, concepts, practices, or even intentions. It has been used both as a radical process through participation and as a conservative process in which local conditions are maintained in their usual patterns of power distribution. Historically, it emerged during the 1950s, basically following two major trends. First, community development was a part of the management of colonial regimes, or, during the former colonies process of transition to independence, it was a way to achieve social control and prevent the disruptive effects of the huge changes towards newly gained independence, promoting social cohesion. Further details of this trend can be found, for instance, in Mayo (1994). The second main trend can be understood if we think that community development emerges during the modernization theories period, and is therefore integrated in its main aims: not only towards social integration, but also
towards development, as seen in its reductionism to economic growth. Community development was then a learning process that established relationships, forms of intervention, and values that stood in the base of the transition from community to individual rights and a growing labor division (McClenaghan 1999). In most occidental countries, community development represented a normalizing instrument that promised the unification of the community while promoting its opposite through the main modernization ideals and the alleged similarity between the processes of the evolution of all societies – a simple presumption created by Rostow (2000) stages of economic growth, which however gained wider expansion. From the 1950s up to the 1970s, therefore, community development was criticized by a number of authors (see Fragoso 2005) for its dependency on the state, vertical methodologies that did not include people’s participation, and the strictly technical and scientific attempts to steer development. These critiques made it possible that, from the 1970s on, several alternatives to community development arose. One of these alternatives was community action (or community participation), which refuses the leadership and state control of the development processes by asking people to fight local elites and promote empowerment through politics and local control (Midgley 1995). As to community organization, it was formerly an element of community development that became a separate alternative. It was considered a trend per se, especially in the UK or USA; it emerged with a clear focus to fight and protest against powerful entities and social actors, making confrontation into a powerful tool² (Gittell and Vidal 1998).

In southern Europe (France, Spain, and Portugal) the label of local development³ that emerged during the 1980s meant that not only did some researchers, but mostly militants, believe in the critiques of community development, but that they also had a desire to create something different. In Portugal, local approaches to development benefitted from a revolution that took place in April 1974, which triggered a huge social movement towards democratizing education in general and adult education in particular. Popular education groups were boosted, taking literacy, social, and cultural projects into their hands (Melo and Benavente 1978). In 1979, a law was enacted that made the government accountable for implementing a national plan to eliminate illiteracy. The plan was also intended to develop several areas of adult education, including territorial approaches to development and the establishment of integrated regional plans of development. The generally unstable political and social conditions back then explain why, among other factors, this plan generally failed. But the experiments with territorial approaches allowed the establishment of participatory and endogenous development practices (Fragoso and Lucio-Villegas 2002) in Portugal. Several regional integrated plans of development (PRIs) were launched, which had the aims of renewing the economic, social, and cultural local fabric, especially in isolated areas, and promoting local development projects by using “bottom-up” methods, which allowed communities

² Actually, community organization has two major different trends: confrontational and consensual. See Gittell and Vidal 1998 for further details.
³ Although local development is more accurate regarding the Portuguese context, the expression community development is used in this text for clarity.
to be central actors in a number of processes (Trigo 1986). PRIAs were welcomed by the local power structures and decentralized public services, and they received close attention from international organizations, such as UNESCO, OECD, and EEC, in general, and the European Council, in particular, which financed some of these action plans. The new approaches to micro-development also gave local popular groups new impulses, created new field methodologies and new forms of intervention for development (see Lima 1990), and a new critical mass of social actors for development appeared in Portugal. Finally, the fact that Portugal joined the EEC in 1986 gave new possibilities of surviving to civil society organizations in Portugal, as several European funding programs became available to support their actions, sometimes even with little intervention from the national central government.

The factors discussed above explain – without being exhaustive – the very significant number of community development projects and the diversity of such experiences in Portugal from the 1980s until roughly the first years of the new century. These experiences sometimes included the use of action research (Silva, 1996), while other evidence stresses the use of participatory research⁴ (Lima 1990). But in order to carry on with our reasoning, it is important to understand the main principles and characteristics of community development intervention that happened during that period (Fragoso 2004, 2009; Fragoso and Lucio-Villegas 2004, 2007).

Community development processes began in relatively small territories, quite often initiated by civil society organizations (CSO). The interventions were not timely. Rather, they occurred over considerable periods of time, under the idea that the structures and processes would gradually be built so as to generate large structural changes that would prevail. There was, therefore, a clear intention to work with the people in the communities, in a way gradually transforming local social actors into agents of development, especially in cases in which the initial intervention had to be made by an external CSO because the ability to produce the natural dynamics of social change was reduced. In these cases, external intervention was supposed to be gradually reduced, until the local population had full control and autonomy regarding the future they desired for their territory. There was a strong ideology of militancy, implying that all of the social actors that were involved had clear views on the political dimensions of their educational actions (Freire 1987, 1997), but also that the personal and collective investments were significant.

This character of militancy produced discourses and practices that were intended to fight back against global tendencies. In the Portuguese case, inland rural zones that were characterized by the global trends of emigration, desertification, and aging were elected as the targets for action (for an example of a

⁴ A significant number of community education processes used participatory research (PR) as an inspiration (other authors use the label PAR, participatory action research). By participatory research we mean a specific community “school” of action research that focuses on community problems, and uses a clear, collective, and participatory methodology to tackle these problems. For a description of the origins of PR and the role of the International Council for Adult Education in organizing PR networks, please see Hall (1981).
community development process that arose spontaneously without any kind of external intervention, and thus happening in a natural laboratory, see Fragoso (2004). The idea of utopia or, according to some perspectives, a certain naivety, led people to say that community development could stop these global trends; the development processes targeted mainly young adults, trying to find ways for them to stay in their villages, which would stop the migration process to urban centers, and create employment.

The processes of community development we investigated were “bottom-up” activities rooted in popular sectors. There was an explicit intention to depart from local interests, community problems, and perspectives (Reszohazy 1988) and, especially, local traditional culture. But, traditional culture was used as an element to innovate technically or to produce aesthetically modern elements that were more adequate for social transformation. That is to say that there was a more or less explicit intention to help people make transitions from the traditional to the modern (a very important issue in societies that are experiencing fast transitions). The tensions between the traditional and modernization were therefore very visible.

Social change as defined by Luque (1995) was central in community interventions. Under this perspective, community development focused on change in different dimensions (economic, social, and cultural), and its “success” was measured by the quantitative, but mainly qualitative, changes triggered in the communities. This point is crucial, because to achieve any type of change three other important factors should be considered. First, the collective nature of the processes should involve the community members. In cases where a rich social fabric exists (organized groups, CSOs, etc.), the task could be relatively simple. Of course, a way to foster cooperation between the existing groups, using dialogue and mediation as tools, is needed. This is essential; our research shows that failures in such processes are often explained by the fragmentation of social networks and by conflicts that block the modes of cooperation between the local entities or social actors (Fragoso 2009). But the task of promoting collective processes is even more difficult in communities where organization is vestigial. In these situations, one has to work with informal groups of people interested in some issue or particular project, and through the action itself make it clear that collective organization is the best way for the local actors to continue their changing dynamics.

The second fundamental factor in achieving change is education, offered in multiple forms: formal, non-formal, and informal. No one questions that the community should have a say regarding formal education, but it is a different matter to articulate formal educational processes with local interests and other types of educational action. Non-formal education can have a major role in helping people to get the necessary training to improve their quality of life; and finally, when

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5 Time, but mainly research, would show that community development processes are not the best way to fight global tendencies. At the local level, for example, the effects of unemployment can be attenuated; but community jobs creation cannot match the destruction of jobs caused by the impacts of the new economy and policies that promote unemployment – no matter what the official discourses are on that issue.
people are involved in local dynamics of some kind, there are important gains to be considered: organization itself is an important learning process; to learn how to cooperate, to learn how to organize resources and people to create new structures or community services; to learn that women can have a different, better, and fairer social role in the community... these are all rich, deep, and essential informal learning processes that can occur. And this points towards the importance of the third factor: participation (Fragoso 2005). People’s participation has to be built and provided along all of the phases of the processes (such as the shared identification of problems and needs construction; planning and management; and control over the processes), no matter how (dis)organized the communities are. That is to say that the community controls the processes and makes decisions about the processes – not the field workers, social workers, or researchers.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The first point we want to discuss is the meaning of the incredibly high number of older people who are isolated or live in the exclusive company of other older people (being institutionalized or not) – 1.2 million out of 2 million older adults. These people are, literally, dispossessed of community. These are the ones who have no chance of establishing social relationships with other people of various ages; the ones who are outside of the normal social networks that guarantee social support, and outside of the normal patterns of production and reproduction of community life. It seems very hard to conduct any type of community action to bring improvements in their quality of life to them. In these conditions, these older citizens are pushed to benefit from the services eventually provided by institutions, or informal care. In general, isolated and lonely older citizens are invisible people (especially when they are not institutionalized), sometimes even to the eyes of those who engage in community action. But this general trend can be tackled if field workers and researchers are capable enough to invent creative solutions that keep older learners in the community. Making community their focus of action can have a number of advantages. Instead of thinking first about joining (isolating) older citizens in institutions, day-care centers, homes, universities of third age, and so on, we can make an effort to think about how the same type of social and educational activities can be offered in a different space – the natural space of community. If we can refocus on community, it seems fair to state that a set of advantages will be available to older citizens. This means, in particular: the opportunity to address the problems and desires of the elderly, in the community, and not only within a limited and sometimes obsessive environment exclusively composed of older citizens; the opportunity for older adults to keep their natural bonds with people of various ages; the opportunity to strengthen the social networks that naturally degrade with age – but that provide friendship and social support; and finally, to hold the community responsible for their older citizens, fighting back against the trend to isolate them and send them to some space where responsibility is discharged to professional care, either public or private.
The magnitude of the phenomena of isolation and solitude also brings another issue to debate: the need for urgency in tackling the problem, which requires a multiple approach combining public policy, civil society organizations, and community programs, plus, finally, scientific research or participatory research projects that will illuminate the causes and solutions to the problem. This should be a priority in the agendas of Portuguese researchers, because it is a basic problem, and several other dimensions of the lives of older adults depend on it. Educators and adult educators are often more worried about learning and the participation (or non-participation) of older adults in learning. But as we saw, learning depends firmly on age, academic level, knowledge of languages and ICT, income, and global economic situation. That is to say, more significant numbers of participants in learning during older ages can only be achieved if we improve the quality of life of our adults; participation in learning activities of any kind is a function of more global factors. In a nutshell, it is no wonder that Portuguese older citizens are invisible learners, but the situation can only be changed if we fight for better public policies and are more effective in influencing politicians’ agendas.

In our very subjective opinion, we have many articles, books, and research projects involving the elderly. But I think we have a very small number of investigations being conducted along the principles defended above, particularly when it comes to giving (a Freirian) voice to the community and its members, and creating the possibility for the community to control the processes and make decisions, thereby fostering participation, as argued in this text. The majority of investigations, no doubt, reproduce and/or interpret the voices of older citizens. But how many investigations join research to action in the real world to work towards the emancipation of the elderly, or make efforts to engage them in processes where they would have the opportunity to change their lives? In short, it is our ethical duty to question ourselves about what we are doing, and perhaps from this reflection we can embrace new paths that are more important to people.

The high numbers of older citizens who live in institutional families or, additionally, simply those who need to, can benefit from the services of civil society organizations. But it is important to say that the services provided to the elderly in Portugal do not depend directly on the state. When neo-liberalism began to be implemented in Portugal, a special status for civil society associations called IPSS (Particular Institutions of Social Solidarity) was created. These civil society groups organize themselves and find the physical structures and equipment they need for their purposes according to technical requirements defined by the state. IPSS's receive, in exchange for the public services they provide, a financial contribution that is usually based on a per capita (of the children or older adults they provide services to) amount. This means that the services to older citizens are fully made by the civil society, although it is a contracted civil society with the state, which according to neo-liberal ideology exerts social control at a distance\(^6\)

\(^6\) In other texts we have raised this issue to question the relationships between the civil society and the state today. Following the ideas of the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, this can mean that, contrary to common discourses, the neo-liberal state is not a shrinking state, but a state that expands through civil society, with all the implications this can bring (Santos 1990).
and takes advantage of the civil society’s natural fragmentation. It is simply not possible, for instance, that 4,832 different institutions coming from the civil society – despite the fact that they are controlled by the mechanisms of the state – have similar working methods, philosophic action principles, common strategies, and a union that will allow them to make claims in the names of those who serve. Therefore, this fragmentation allows multiple and scattered approaches to the work and services provided to the elderly – legitimizing a basic philosophy of simple assistance to these citizens.

In this line of reasoning, it is time to debate future evolutions. The projections that will soon make us a country of more than 3 million older citizens, or 32% of the total population, with an average aging index of 243%, and with an incredibly high number of people who are isolated and severely institutionalized, pushing the poor into warehouses where they will wait for their final destination silently, is appalling. And, we cannot escape from the fact that this demographic projection questions our capacity to assure the public pension system, public health, and social protection effectively. How will the Portuguese state address this?

Today, every possible answer to this question has to be seen in the economic and financial crisis in Europe (especially in the Euro zone). A number of countries are being severely affected by this crisis, and Portugal, Ireland, and Greece have recently asked for the EU’s financial support, and are now subjected to structural adjustment plans. The events that took place in Portugal in the last year and a half, with Portugal having to take out big loans under the control of the so-called troika (European Commission, European Central Bank, and European Monetary Fund), that for now hold the political control of the country, are of course worrying. The major reforms done in Portugal, apart from the severe control of the public finances, were in the labor market: incomes have decreased about 30%, firing is easier, the social protection of workers was diminished, and unemployment subsidies are given under harsh conditions and over shorter periods of time. Apart from that, direct and indirect taxes have increased up to the point where small businesses and small and medium enterprises are going bankrupt at a high pace. Public funding in the areas of health, higher education, social protection, and formal education has decreased immensely. The unemployment rate has recently reached 15%, an unprecedented number in Portugal. In short, we have witnessed, under the troika’s control, a set of changes that have always been in the goals of right-wing political parties during the last few decades, but were never possible before, because of internal political balance and also simply because these changes would be synonymous to an electoral disaster for the government that dared to do it. The troika’s recent control was, therefore, the perfect pretext to the implementation of these galloping neo-liberal policies. If, during the next few years to come this very recent direction is not changed, than the future is gloomy for our older citizens; after all, the statistics reveal structural problems that, in our opinion, cannot be tackled by a neo-liberal policy that is destroying the last leftovers of a state that provides for its citizens.
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