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# Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics

**Edited by Benjamin Abrams and Peter Gardner**

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## The Symbolism of the Street in Portuguese Contention

Guya Accornero, Tiago Carvalho, and Pedro Ramos Pinto

*Só tu podes chegar a sentir*

*Qual a boa solução*

*Mas uma coisa é mais que certa*

*Tens de tomar posição.<sup>1</sup>*

—Xutos e Pontapés, “Sai para a Rua” (“Go Out to the Street”)

The street has long been a disputed symbol in the Portuguese history of contention. Usually understood as endowing political legitimacy, sometimes as an inherently emancipatory space, and latterly as an unsafe, risky, and unsheltered space, the street has long featured at the center of Portuguese democracy and political discourse.<sup>2</sup> But the street is not just a space used or occupied by contentious players, or only a symbol mobilized in their discourses. In the Portuguese cultural context, the materiality and physicality of street occupations offer a distinct potential for conflicts to invoke notions of legitimacy and emancipation. In relational terms, the street is mobilized by social movements, trade unions, and political parties

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1. “Only you can feel / what’s the good solution / but one thing is certain / you have to take a position.”

2. This work was in part developed in the context of the project Housing Perspectives and Struggles (HOPES). Futures of Housing Movements, Policies and Dynamics in Lisbon and Beyond (PTDC/GES-URB/28826/2017).

to narrate their struggles in a democratic space. The importance of the street extends to Portuguese pop culture, as seen in the lyrics quoted at our chapter's beginning. In the mid-1980s, Xutos e Pontapés, one of the most emblematic bands in the Portuguese rock scene, made it the main topic of one their songs. Their 1987 release, "Go Out to the Street," captures the spirit of what we focus on in this chapter: the importance of the street as the site of political action in Portuguese contention.

In this chapter, we explore the role of streets as a particular kind of symbolic object in Portuguese contentious politics, tracing their reconfiguration by contentious players from the 1970s transition to democracy to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. Like others before us (della Porta et al. 2018; Carvalho and Ramos Pinto 2019; Fishman 2019), we claim that the Portuguese revolutionary period was a critical juncture that shaped the country's contentious imagination and associated symbols throughout the subsequent democratic period. If the authoritarian dictatorship sought to downplay street politics, mobilizations throughout the transition to democracy brought it back as a privileged arena of politics. In this sense, the street became not merely a space where protests may happen, but in its essence an ever-present symbol, whose physicality matters, where and through which democracy is legitimized or disputed.

While the role of framing process in contentious politics has been quite comprehensively investigated by social movement scholars (Jasper 1997; Benford and Snow 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001), the role of symbols has not attracted proportionate attention. Yet some important contributions to the latter, smaller literature have informed our analysis. In her pioneering work on the construction of meaning and symbolic structures in social movements, Anne Kane (1998) identified important analytical, theoretical, and methodological distinctions between frames and symbols and corresponding lessons as to their relevance for mobilization processes. For Kane, frames, though important in contentious politics, are dependent on symbols that are "semi-coherent," "autonomous," and "volatile" in nature. As the wellspring of frames, cultural structures and symbols thus shape their construction and interpretation. Interpretation is consequently crucial, and it is seen as "a volatile process that occurs on two analytical levels, the individual analytic and the collective" (Kane 1998, 256). According to Kane,

[o]n both levels, people engage in a double interpretation: they interpret cultural experience using models, but in so doing they also

interpret the symbolic elements in the model itself[. . .] But in the often emotional effort to make sense of novel or difficult situations, this analogically creative process is set in motion within the individual, generating new ideas, thoughts, and emotional sentiments. (1998, 257)

Building on this trajectory of scholarly work, we understand symbolic objects, like symbols, to be in a state of constant change, and their meaning to result from a continuous process of negotiation, conflict, and interaction among cultural players. But the meaning of a given symbolic object at one time or another does not simply constitute a “compromise” among all the objectives held by players in a contentious process; rather, it is the result of a creative process in which new meanings are constantly introduced whenever such symbolic objects are invoked.

In this chapter, we trace the evolution of the meanings associated with the street as a symbolic object disputed by various contentious players in Portugal. We trace its development during three principal periods: the 1974 Carnation Revolution, the anti-austerity cycle of protest from 2010 to 2014, and lastly, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As will be seen, the street is not merely an object atop or within which contention takes place, but rather a distinctly symbolic object that has played and continues to play a sizeable role in Portuguese contentious political action.

Throughout the three periods analyzed, the meaning of the street has been contested along two axes. First, it has been the site of contestation between non-institutional and institutional players to define the locus of power: do the forces that fill the streets represent the people, or is it those in government buildings? Second, its meaning has been contested by non-institutional players in relation to the question of how street politics should happen: does the street emancipate us from political hierarchies, or is it merely another space to be filled? Various episodes attest to these contestations. With regard to legitimacy, the symbolic construction of the street is exemplified most strongly by struggles over the legitimacy of the government and protesters during the revolutionary period, and then subsequently in the Portuguese anti-austerity protests. As for the street’s emancipatory properties, these were most distinctly constructed and challenged during the anti-austerity protest wave, as groups disputed how the street should or could be used to display their claims. Moreover, we see how these longer-running contests over the street’s symbolic properties were temporarily superseded during the coronavirus pandemic, during which

connotations of vulnerability temporarily suspended their use in contentious politics.

### A Space of Legitimacy: The Portuguese Revolutionary Street

Throughout the early years of Portugal's authoritarian regime, street mobilization was almost absent. Over time, there were periods of conflict, but the street first appears as a relatively banal object without any substantial meaning associated with it, and it gained significance only slowly. It was with the 1974 military coup and revolutionary period that followed that the street truly obtained its potency as a symbol of democratic legitimacy that would shape the country's contentious politics thereafter.

Like other European nations struggling with the challenges of modernization, mass politics, and the global convulsions of the interwar period, Portugal experienced street protests that often spiraled into violence. In reaction, the dictatorship that ruled Portugal between 1926 and 1974 positioned itself as what we might call an anti-mobilization state. António de Oliveira Salazar, who in effect controlled the regime between 1928 and 1968, began his rule by emulating aspects of Italian "corporatist" fascism, but deliberately sought to quench its more animated tendencies for street-fighting and public battles. While public displays of support for the regime were encouraged and often orchestrated, Salazar's single party, the União Nacional, always aimed more at being a party of notables than a mass political organization (Costa Pinto 1995). Salazar's regime thus emphasized order and acquiescence over fervor and devotion.

Public displays of dissent were repressed, and even when the regime staged periodic simulacra of free elections, the few tolerated opposition groups were extremely constrained in their ability to use public space to reach out to voters. Nevertheless, the regime faced certain moments when popular dissent was able to break through its repressive apparatus. Such moments were among the regime's weakest. One of the earliest prominent instances was the spontaneous street celebrations following the Allied victory in World War II. Such celebrations amounted to direct criticism of Salazar's regime, which had remained neutral and even kept up supportive mutual relations with the Axis countries prior to the outbreak of war.

Thereafter, instances when opposition to the regime found expression in large public displays became increasingly common. Sham presidential elections in 1958 saw unexpectedly large crowds turn out in support of Humberto Delgado, a "fig-leaf" democratic candidate positioned by the

regime as controlled opposition, whose candidacy nevertheless quickly became a rallying point for discontent (Raby 1988). Four years later, in 1962, strikes and protests by university students were brutally repressed, initiating a cycle of protest, clampdowns, and politicization that would feed a growing opposition to the regime (Accornero 2016). As the 1960s heralded widespread conscription in intensified wars against liberation movements in Portugal's remaining African colonies, antiwar and pro-peace protests also escalated. Among the most notable, and damaging for the regime, was the police action against a pro-peace street-prayer vigil by young Catholics at a Lisbon Church in 1967 (Almeida 2008).

During the Salazar regime, street protests gradually emerged as the key means of opposition to the regime (alongside workers' strikes), and they were a central part of the political education of a generation that would soon have the opportunity to take center stage in the country's Carnation Revolution. When on April 25, 1974, a coup led by antiwar military officers thrust the dictatorial regime from power, unsanctioned street protests played a central role in the proceedings that followed. As a small number of army units descended on Lisbon, coup officers used radio to request that the people stay out of the streets. The Portuguese people's refusal to do so arguably transformed the events of the day from an audacious but risky coup to a popular uprising. In Lisbon, thousands rushed to the street to surround and support the insurgent units. Soldiers loyal to the dictatorship hesitated to use force that would inevitably shed civilian blood. By the end of the day, Salazar's successor, Marcello Caetano, handed over power to a provisional government so that, as he put it, "power would not fall to the street" (Palacios Cerezales 2003).

While the notion of "the street" owes its symbolic importance to the events and narrative of the 25th of April, its enduring characteristics as a symbolic object were cemented by the political dynamics of the eighteen months that followed. The ousting of the Caetano regime opened up the major question of which direction the country would subsequently take. Multiple political actors, ranging from parties to the now highly politicized armed forces, advanced competing visions of the country's future, ranging from a Western European-style parliamentary democracy to a revolutionary regime based on Third World examples (Cruzeiro 1994). With no direct legislative plebiscite on the popular will until 1976, the ability of a postrevolutionary faction to mobilize supporters on the street in public demonstrations of visibility became a vital political tool (Tilly 2004). Conversely, many sectors of the population outside organized political move-



ments saw in street demonstrations the most effective way to communicate demands to institutions in a state of flux.

In the days following the coup, thousands of ordinary citizens continued to take to the streets, demanding better salaries, working conditions, housing, and other services. Others came together to demand the arrest of those closely linked to the felled dictatorship. Shantytown dwellers in large cities occupied hundreds of vacant or under-construction public housing units, claiming urgent need. Despite calls for moderation from the nation's provisional government, the country was rocked by a titanic wave of street mobilization and demonstrations throughout the summer of 1974 (Ramos Pinto 2013).

Despite the participation of new political parties in the Portuguese political process, it was nonetheless the insurgent military—now institutionalized as the Movement of the Armed Forces (or *Movimento das Forças Armadas*, henceforth MFA)—that ultimately controlled the provisional government. Thus, parties came to rely on mass street rallies to assert their level of support and so claim a seat at the table. If the celebrations of May 1, 1974, a week after the coup, were a display of unity between left-wing parties (especially the center-left Socialist Party and the Communist Party) who held a joint mass demonstration on the day, as competition intensified in later months, each would rally its own supporters in competitive shows of force.

Conservative actors, rallying behind the interim president, General António Spínola, also sought to fill the street to demonstrate their support. Spínola's conservative politics and desire to transform the Portuguese Empire into an international federation were out of step with the feeling of the times. Seeking to cement his grip on power, Spínola emulated his hero, Charles de Gaulle, by appealing for Portugal's "Silent Majority" to show its support for his project in a September mass street rally in the capital. Political parties on the Portuguese Left read this as a threat to postrevolutionary progress and so called their supporters to take to the street and erect barricades to prevent an "invasion" of Lisbon by Spínola's "reactionary" forces.

The response to Spínola's rally culminated in his resignation, and thereafter the September events reinforced an already palpable sense that street mobilizations could forcibly determine political outcomes. Thereafter, political parties increasingly sent their supporters into the streets to pressure other actors—even those who had previously been hesitant to involve themselves in street protest. Those who had taken over the institu-

tions of the state (principally the MFA) rewarded such street mobilization by disproportionately responding to street mobilizations rather than other forms of contentious political action. The interaction between this new political order seeking to legitimate itself and a population with years of pent-up demands and unfulfilled basic needs generated a scale of popular political activism with few precedents in postwar Western Europe. It was a moment of widespread and genuine enthusiasm for experimentation with direct democracy and popular participation. Throughout 1974 and 1975, Portuguese politics lived on the street.

The central symbolic role of the Portuguese street was once more evident on March 11, 1975, when military units close to Spínola attempted to regain power through a right-wing coup. As in the previous year, crowds rushed to the streets to protect the revolution, building barricades and acting as human shields for left-wing army units. As the attempted coup collapsed, voices rose from the street demanding the arrest of leading right-wing figures. Rapidly, the day was cast as the moment when the people “saved” the revolution by filling the streets, and the pace of revolutionary change was correspondingly increased, leading to what came to be known as the “Hot Summer” of ’75.

The anniversary of the revolution in April 1975 heralded new challenges for the legitimizing symbolism of street action. On April 25, one full year after the revolution, the first elections for the Portuguese Constituent Assembly were held. The vote had given a majority to the Left, but the most radical revolutionary faction, Portugal’s Communist Party, placed behind not only the main opposition party, but also behind both the moderate-left Socialist Party, and the liberal Popular Democratic Party (*Partido Popular Democrático*). This led to both the Communist Party and ascendant left-wing factions of the MFA to increasingly seek to juxtapose the “revolutionary legitimacy” of the street against the “bourgeois legitimacy” of the Constituent Assembly (Noronha 2019).

Throughout the Hot Summer of 1975, these two legitimacies confronted each other in Portugal—at times threatening to spiral into a violent conflict. In some senses, this can be seen as contest between the “street” and the “ballot box” (Ramos Pinto 2008), but in reality the more moderate camp never truly gave up on attempts to win over the street and still tried to match the ultrarevolutionary camp in attempts to mobilize supporters in public demonstrations of strength.

In July 1975 the resignation of Socialist Party members from the provisional government prompted what Diego Palacios called a “duel of demon-

strations” (Palacios Cerezales 2003). On July 10, as the Socialist Party left the cabinet, a large demonstration expressed support for the MFA-led government and its program for a revolutionary constitution based on workers, farmers, soldiers, and neighborhood councils. A week later the Socialist Party resoundingly responded with mass rallies in the streets of Lisbon and Oporto, calling for the resignation of the provisional government and the creation of a new cabinet that reflected the results of the Constituent Assembly elections. From that point, increasingly strident demonstrations backing one side or another became an almost daily occurrence. In the north of the country, anticommunist street protests went as far as violent attacks on the Portuguese Communist Party offices. In mid-November, in a last show of strength, demonstrators close to the Portuguese Communist Party and supportive of the by-then-sidelined radical wing of the MFA occupied the streets and besieged the Constituent Assembly for almost two days. This was one of the most tense and emblematic episodes of the revolutionary period. Civil construction workers demanding better pay and working conditions—supported by farm workers from southern Portugal—surrounded the Parliament building, singing “long live the working class.” The streets adjacent to Parliament became an encampment of an estimated 100,000 protesters, warmed by bonfires and decorated with many flags and banners. Members of the Constituent Assembly, who were prevented from entering or leaving the building, had to camp out in their offices, while attempts by several political leaders to speak to the crowd from the balcony of the building were met with wall of noise. As the government refused to negotiate, rumors of an imminent storming of the Parliament or an attack on the crowds by right-wing forces spread inside and out.<sup>3</sup> While the siege was lifted through eventual concessions by the government, the event hardened the moderates’ determination to seize the initiative and bring politics back to the institutional arena.

Throughout this period, the symbolic significance of the street in Portuguese contentious politics must not be underestimated. Indeed, recourse to the street was one of the key ways in which ordinary citizens could express their voices (Ramos Pinto 2013). Aside from the last show of force in the siege of Parliament, the diminishing ability of the revolutionary camp to draw supporters to the street over the course of the Hot Summer is an important reason for the retreat of the Left in its latter weeks, and the

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3. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFZ5on3HEiI>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmCleIL2CE&t=2s>

eventual victory of the parliamentary democracy model. The inability of the revolutionary camp to sustain street mobilizations called into question the legitimacy of their power over the direction of the country. This period came to an end on November 25, 1975, when military units close to the revolutionary Left were disarmed in a series of swift confrontations with forces loyal to the moderate-led government. Unlike in September 1974 or March 1975, however, the streets were quiet. No crowds rushed to the street to defend the more ambitious revolutionary hopes.

In the wake of the Hot Summer, a parliamentary system was fully institutionalized, including representation for parties on the far Left, and then a moderate-dominated MFA retained a tutelary role until 1982. Politics were “normalized” in the sense that organized political parties were given an almost complete monopoly on political representation, to the comparative exclusion of the mechanisms of the direct popular voice experimented with during the revolutionary period, such as street protest and local popular assemblies.

By this point, the street, its materiality and use, had become enshrined as a central symbol of Portuguese democracy, aided by a wave of cultural production—song, film, poetry, and visual arts—that framed it as the essential aspect of the Portuguese revolution. The victorious moderates of November ascribed their legitimacy not to the anxious and conflictual days of the Hot Summer, when the country seemed on the verge of civil war, but to the moments of unity and joyful release of April 1974. The result was a somewhat paradoxical construct. As Robert Fishman (2011) has argued, the manner of Portugal’s transition to democracy is memorialized through the lens of April as a popular revolution, enacted on the streets by the people, which serves to give street protests a fundamental legitimacy in Portuguese political culture. However, many other perspectives on the Portuguese political system since the transition to democracy have highlighted how its institutions have been relatively insulated and hermetic to social movements and civil society. In this alternative analysis, the tolerance and legitimation afforded causes holding space in the street is more of an “escape valve” that does not necessarily translate into corresponding political influence (Cabral 2006).

As a result, in the three decades following the transition to democracy, Portuguese street politics acquired a somewhat ritualistic feel. Although the incidence of demonstrations declined from the very high levels of the revolutionary period (Francisco 2000), the street nonetheless remained an important symbolic object invoked in contentious performances. Despite

being structurally equipped to engage in strike actions, trade unions nonetheless exhibited a marked preference for organizing street demonstrations around regular collective bargaining events. Rural villages regularly use street blockades at election times to make demands for local services (Mendes and Seixas 2005). There were also important waves of street protest in the 1990s, particularly among university and high school students (Seixas 2005). In 1999 a series of vast street mobilizations—arguably some of the largest and most socially encompassing since the revolution—emerged in support of independence for East Timor, a former Portuguese colony under brutal Indonesian occupation (de Almeida 1999).

The revolution constituted a foundational moment of Portuguese democracy that shaped not only institutions, but also the collective memories and the inventory of symbolic objects that would be subsequently invoked. The pervasiveness of symbols related to this historical period throughout the anti-austerity cycle of protests was not a foregone conclusion; rather, it arose through subsequent processes of reappropriation, resignification, and dispute among the various contentious players. Indeed, Fishman (2019) argues that the revolutionary nature of the Portuguese transition, and the inversion of hierarchies present in Portuguese street politics, not only informed the nation's horizontal political culture but also created an enduring increased openness of institutions to protests in the nation's streets. Baumgarten likewise emphasizes the importance of the revolution for later contentious mobilizations (2017), highlighting that throughout the anti-austerity period, activists constructed collective memories referring to revolutionary identities, aims, and repertoires. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that this period would also be one in which the symbolic properties of the street were once again open to contestation and reconstruction.

### From Legitimacy to Emancipation: The Street in a Time of Austerity

In the wake of the 2008 financial earthquake and the economic and political crises that followed, Portugal was subject to an intense wave of protests, which lasted from 2010 to 2014 and involved grassroots organizations, political parties, and trade unions. This protest cycle was important not only because of the new configurations of street politics that ensued, but because it gave rise to radical new forms of political participation and engagement (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015, 2020; Carvalho 2022).

Portugal's anti-austerity protest cycle constituted one of the most contentious periods in the country's democratic history. It was a period during which protest arenas were reopened and reconfigured after decades of relatively inactive contentiousness in a country of "mild manners" (Accornero and Ramos Pinto 2015; Portos and Carvalho 2022). While the country had experienced some important episodes of contention in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>4</sup> the anti-austerity protests heralded an unprecedentedly enduring and consistent wave of protests, distinguished by wholesale mobilization of the different sectors of Portuguese society (Carvalho 2022).

Despite the existence and prominence of social movements in Portugal, institutional players such as trade unions and political parties often determined the path protests took during the country's anti-austerity wave. After an initially promising mobilization by the group named *Geração à Rasca* (Desperate Generation) in March 2011 that attracted wide participation, grassroots movements found that they lacked the intrinsic capacity to mobilize further, and instead arranged a strategic alliance between parties, trade unions, and movement groups connected to institutional actors. By 2012, these institutional players dominated protest in Portugal: trade unions disputed austerity in the streets, and political parties, particularly the "Left Bloc," had substantial influence over popular mobilizations.

It is in this context that the street emerges once again not only as a contiguous object on or within which protest occurs, but also as a disputed symbolic object. Throughout the anti-austerity cycle of protest, the symbolic dispute over the street revolved around two poles: legitimacy and emancipation. The conflict over the association of the street with legitimacy was principally staged between anti-austerity players and the Portuguese government. Anti-austerity players cultivated a notion of the street as an avenue for the democratic process, the only arena left to combat the imposition of the neoliberal austerity measures designed by the country's creditors—the so-called Troika of the European Commission, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank—and implemented by the country's center-right government after 2011. By contrast, the government saw itself as the legitimate holder of power, refusing to be ruled by the street and its claims, and thus seeking to rid the streets of their association with democratic legitimacy.

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4. Including strong labor mobilization through general strikes (Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2015) or student fees protests in the mid-1990s (Drago 2003).

*Re-invoking the Legitimacy of the Street*

The importance of the street during Portugal's anti-austerity protests came to the fore in September 2012 when Prime Minister Passos Coelho announced a new measure to reform corporate payroll taxes (a measure the Troika had long insisted be implemented). After more than a year of austerity, the announcement of these new measures inflamed public passions and popular protest, unleashing contestation from virtually every sector of society. This spanned social movements, workers and employers, and even the junior coalition partner in the government, the Centro Democrático e Social—Partido Popular. This coalition criticized the new payroll reforms as iniquitous, because this tax would increase workers' tax contributions and decrease those made by employers. This context sparked and framed mobilizations throughout this period, and in particular the emergence of *Que se Lixe a Troika* (Screw the Troika—QSLT).

Together with the announcement of new austerity measures, the QSLT's demonstrations created a wave of discontent that translated into the mobilization of one million people all over the country (according to the organizers' estimate) (Carvalho 2022). The aim was not only to establish an ideological and political line of demarcation, but to resurrect a social one: street protest as the foremost democratic expression of legitimate judgment on the ongoing austerity program. To reinforce its resurrection of the revolutionary legitimacy of the street, the QSLT also recruited other symbolic objects from the 1974 revolution, such as the rising's titular carnations. The group sustained its activity from September 2012 to March 2013 under the slogan of "*O Povo é quem mais ordena*" ("the people rule"), drawn from the lyrics of the song broadcast in 1974 that set in motion the overthrow of the dictatorship (a clearly legible reference to the revolutionary period). By carefully deploying revolutionary framing and symbolic objects, with their positive and polysemic meanings of the April 1974 coup (Costa Lobo, Costa Pinto, and Magalhães 2016), the QSLT achieved not only resonance (Benford and Snow 2000) but strategic modularity (Tarrow 2013).

During the battle over the payroll tax, one instance that draws particular attention to the symbolic properties of the Portuguese street occurred when 10,000 people occupied the area in front of the official presidential residence, where the State Council was meeting to discuss the proposed measures. Filling the streets outside, they chanted "*Cavaco Escuta, O povo esta em luta*" ("Cavaco, listen—the people are fighting") (Fishman 2019,

148–49). While the occupation achieved its aims and the law was withdrawn, the governing regime nonetheless used their concession to dispute the symbolic legitimacy of protest in the streets. Though he announced the measure's withdrawal, months later the prime minister publicly declared in Parliament that despite recognizing the legitimacy of street demonstrations, he did not govern at their pleasure, remarking instead that the measures had political legitimacy due to the government's parliamentary majority.

### *The Street as Emancipatory*

In addition to the symbolic dispute over the democratic legitimacy of movements filling Portugal's streets, a secondary, more minor area of symbolic contestation arose in relation to the street as an emancipatory space. The dispute here concerned whether protests in the streets should obey conventional leadership. Such symbolic disputes began early in the anti-austerity wave. When the first austerity measures were put forward by a soon-doomed center-left government in 2010, a general strike in November became the starting point for the then-upcoming cycle of protest. Traditionally organized by the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, a trade union with strong links to the Communist Party, the first general strike was instead jointly called by the two trade union confederations in the country. Usually, general strikes in Portugal solely involve workplace stoppages without any type of demonstration. However, as emerging social movement groups came to support this action against ongoing cuts in the public sector, they decided to defy the structure set forth by the unions and instead organize street demonstrations to supplement strike action, leaving them free to protest without obeying union leadership. From then onward, and given the pressure of social movement groups, in the following general strikes trade unions started to incorporate similar street demonstrations into their array of contentious performances and thereby exert discipline over this otherwise emancipated space.

In the aftermath of the 2010 strike, autonomist groups that rejected any link to institutional players also paid more attention to cultivating the emancipatory symbolism of the street. One clear example of this trend is the Acampada that occupied one of the central squares in Lisbon (Rossio) in May 2011. The Acampada started with activists gathering in front of the Spanish consulate in Lisbon in solidarity with the ongoing *15M/Indignados* mobilizations in Spain. After the initial assembly, the group decided to



move to Rossio, a large, open square in downtown Lisbon. The protesters remained camped in this square for three weeks, with more people joining over time, especially when the assemblies were held. Emerging almost spontaneously, the Acampada brought together anarchists, libertarians, autonomists, antiparty groups, and members of several groups within the Left Bloc. By occupying a central square of historical importance, the activists wanted to not only give public visibility to their demands, but make a statement that the street, as a public space, was fundamental to democratic practice. Their main point was one of replicating and living democracy as an everyday practice: the encampment became an autonomous space with daily assemblies. The participants would spend their day in the square, not only discussing with each other the way forward in their activities, but bonding and creating structures for future events (Carvalho 2022). Many of those who participated—despite an awareness that these assemblies lacked concrete outcomes—described it as an enriching experience where they got to practice democracy outside of an institutional frame in a city that lacked, at the time, more autonomist and libertarian experiences.

Some years down the line, the spirit of the Acampada returned. One particularly evocative instance was a street demonstration organized to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the 1974 revolution (Carvalho and Ramos Pinto 2019). Its organizers' central claim was that the anniversary had become too institutionalized and domesticated by mainstream, parliamentary parties. In their minds, the ideal of the revolution was lost, becoming merely a ritualized ceremony. To counteract this, some groups decided to organize an open demonstration called Rios ao Carmo (Rivers into Carmo). Participating groups converged at the Largo do Carmo, the square where the dictatorship had officially capitulated to the insurgent army and people. The street was portrayed as a river where the masses of people would spontaneously flow to the square. Their main objective was to bring back the "spirit" of the revolutionary period, while defying the more formal official commemorations and ritualization of this historical event. Rather than a well-defined and coherent group, this event was planned as an open-ended structure whereby each group would organize its own converging march to the Carmo Square, evoking similarly emancipated organizing seen in 1974. The street was thus a space for celebratory resistance to and emancipation from the ritualized forms of political engagement: emancipation lay in the street, and not in the Parliament and hierarchical institutions. In the various videos available online of this

event, the spirit of defiance is clear, with public space (either in the street or in public transportations) occupied by participants singing and playing music and some groups even playing music through speakers (it is possible to hear the British punk band The Clash being played in one of the videos). Once the groups arrive at Carmo Square, one can see children playing and people taking over a square, which over the last two decades has been commodified to become a tourist destination filled with restaurant terraces.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the anti-austerity cycle of protest, the street was not only a symbolic object within or on which protests were situated, it was also the center of disputes between elites and contentious players over its association with ideas of legitimacy and emancipation. Emerging social movements criticized the ritualized uses of the street and made use of contentious innovations to simultaneously exploit and contest its symbolic potential. For protesters in Portugal during this period, the street was a stage where they could not only voice their concerns, but also perform their alternatives and “present narratives, articulate symbolic arguments, and make proclamations” (see chapter 1). It is important to stress that when they are in the street, these protesters are in fact performing and enacting the ideals that they believe in and putting them into practice. The street is thus a prop through which players can achieve an emancipatory lived experience with emotional results. But as Portugal moved from the throes of austerity to the tumult of pandemic, the street’s symbolic qualities would undergo further invocation and reorientation.

### The Street in Pandemic Portugal: A Place of Vulnerability

Given the continuous and uncertain process through which symbolic objects (and symbols more generally) take on meaning, it is understandable that at certain specific critical junctures, these oscillations of meaning become more evident. Such has been the case during the current pandemic, which changed the meaning of the street as a space of democratic legitimacy or emancipation to something quite different: the street as an unsheltered place of extreme vulnerability. This reconfiguration occurred during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when, having declared a state of emergency, the Portuguese government introduced various limitations to citizens’ mobility and rights on March 22, 2020. Many of these directly prohibited public use of the street, such as the “interdiction of

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5. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4HGb5vxAVw>

unjustified displacement or stay in public streets” and the “limitation or prohibition of meetings and demonstrations.”<sup>6</sup>

The novel restrictions placed on protest had marked effects on the Portuguese contentious arena, seriously constraining the capacity of groups to engage in classic contentious performances such as street demonstrations and occupations, many of which had to be canceled or postponed. These constraints proved particularly harsh in a period when threats to labor rights and increasing vulnerability made protest particularly urgent.

Health measures implemented during the pandemic instructed citizens to “stay home” to protect public health, and many social and public uses of the street remained forbidden by law. The importance of such restrictions was recognized as undeniable, and among Portuguese contentious players it was initially difficult to find critical voices to the contrary. Indeed, the only group protesting in support of freedom of demonstration at the time was the *Climáximo* (2020), an anticapitalist climate-justice collective. However, the pandemic was seriously aggravating the risk of homelessness, and many in the Portuguese contentious political arena soon came to highlight how the nation’s strict public-health measures aggravated these and other inequalities. Above all, housing came to be at the forefront of contentious political action against the government’s new rules. One of the first issues raised by contentious players came to be: How could people be expected to stay home when they were homeless? How could people pay their rent—and thereby secure their homes—when many had suddenly lost their incomes because they had been fired or because they were not earning enough money?

From the first days of the pandemic, tourists abandoned cities, leaving luxury hotels empty. Simultaneously, struggling people continued to be evicted from the houses they were alleged to be “illegally” occupying, and were left with no alternatives but to live in the nation’s streets. As conditions grew worse, references to the street as a kind of inhospitable, extreme environment intensified among Lisbon housing activists’ discourses, as well as those of policymakers. The discourse of political and public health authorities was likewise one of “danger,” “unsureness,” and “prohibition,” framed in opposition to the safeness of being at home.

During this period, the symbolic meaning of the street as a place of

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6. In marked difference to other countries that adopted similar rules (even if elaborated under different legal frameworks), such as Italy and Spain, Portugal also suspended the right to strike until the end of the state of emergency, on May 3, 2020.

vulnerability strengthened, in opposition to appeals or even imperatives to “stay home.” On the other hand, the street still retained its longer-standing connotations from revolutionary and anti-austerity struggles. The ambivalence was evident between the street as a public and collective emancipatory but also unprotected space, and the “home,” a space of security and safeness but also of private and inward-looking values.

The construction of meaning cannot be understood only as a voluntary rational process, but also as an interactive dynamic resulting from the negotiation between different players and arenas. Nonetheless, there are times when the conscious strategic intentions of these players must be accounted for. Social movements can seek to create or strengthen “frames” to make certain situations and problems more salient, mobilizing people, attracting media attention, and influencing public debates and, finally, politics and policies. It was thanks to these conscious efforts that the street came to assume a new, powerful, seemingly “common-sense” contentious relevance in pandemic times, arising due to the increasing danger that extended time in the streets posed to their remaining, unsanctioned occupants.

Despite the notable rise of the street’s new symbolic connotations, its longer-running emancipatory properties were in no way abandoned. On April 25, an article appeared on the news page of the Portuguese news service, RTP online, associating the experience of lockdown, or *confinamento*, to Salazarism and the freedom to leave (*desconfinamento*) with the revolution (RTP 2020). This was more of a semantic, symbolic discussion than a polemical one: the article did not use this argument to criticize the rules and restrictions introduced to protect citizens throughout the pandemic, but rather it drew on the symbols, and thus the feelings and emotions associated with the street in the Portuguese contentious repertoire. As discussed in past pages, conquering the street gave rise to Portugal’s most powerful political revolutionary symbol. The impossibility of celebrating the revolution’s anniversary in the streets motivated the symbolic association of the pandemic (not of the rules to manage it) with the dictatorship, and the desired and imminent *desconfinamento* with Portugal’s emancipation.

Even without the traditional march marking the fall of the dictatorship, the celebration of the 25th of April, 2020, was nonetheless performed on and around the nation’s streets, but only at a safe distance. Citizens were invited to appear at their balconies and windows and sing the revolutionary anthem, “Grandola Vila Morena,” while cars with loudspeakers

roamed the streets of Lisbon playing the song. A compilation of pictures and video of various citizens singing into the street from their homes was then uploaded online and organized in a “digital” celebration.

Another revolutionary anniversary, May 1st, which was generally celebrated with a highly contested authorized in-person demonstration organized by the Portuguese Communist Party and the Trade Union General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, provides another case of the use and importance of the street—in both its immediate physical form, and digitally reconstituted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As opposed to the 25th of April, its organizers called for full-on street demonstrations, with the aim of demonstrating that it was possible to simultaneously respect the rules of public health and defend workers’ rights.

Though the event did not have the same dimension as in previous years, Portugal’s contentious forces nonetheless returned to the streets on May 1. For them, it was in these physical streets that protests and practices should happen. Even when meeting face-to-face has proven impossible, Portugal’s activists have continued to project the street and references to it into their digital organizing. Even when the copresence with the street as a symbolic object became impossible, it did not lose its potency as a referent for mobilization.

The pandemic period may come to constitute a critical juncture for the Portuguese street. In such extreme moments, symbols and meanings are frequently reshaped and new interpretations emerge. At times this is the result of what we could call a “cognitive shock,”<sup>7</sup> in which the scope of popular symbolic and ideological reorientation and reinterpretation is radically increased (Accornero 2019). With the cognitive shock of the pandemic in mind, the question now is: which kind of “street” can we expect at the end of the pandemic? With regard to contentious symbolism, there has been renewed interest in contesting the political character of the street. In the 2019 general elections a new far-right political party called *Chega* (*Enough*) elected one MP, the first manifestation of the resurgence of this political sector in Portugal since the transition to democracy. Throughout 2020, despite the restrictions of the pandemic, the new party mobilized demonstrators in the streets, and in recent interviews its leader stated that its party’s objective was to contest the Left’s hegemony over the street (TVI 2020).<sup>8</sup> In the 2022 general elections *Chega* became the third most voted

7. Complementary to the notion of “moral shock” identified by James Jasper as one of the main processes at the basis of individual mobilization (Jasper 1997).

8. Interview to Andre Ventura, leader of *Chega* at TVI (2020): <https://tvi24.iol.pt/videos/especial-24/continuacao-da-entrevista-a-andre-ventura/5fb2fe4d0cf2ec6e47137f72>

party, electing 12 MPs—but also became a more visible target for counter-mobilizations. Perhaps this will spark a renewed struggle over the street’s symbolic properties and their consequences for contentious politics.

Beyond the realm of protest, but certainly still within the realm of contentious politics, a debate has started in Portugal precisely on the question of which kind of street we want to inhabit in our postpandemic future. This debate has drawn in a broad spectrum of participants, ranging from activists and planners involved in the “right to the city” struggle to public authorities, academics, and media figures. New meanings associated with the street are already emerging from this collective process, and they stretch far beyond its use in protest. Many such figures have called for a street of inclusion and not exclusion, a street for energetic socializing and demonstrating and not for sleeping in, a street for walking and biking and not for cars. If this debate is to continue fruitfully, one of the main consequences of pandemic times may be that the street’s currently salient symbolic association with vulnerability is productively banished, while its long-standing status as symbol of emancipation and legitimacy is enhanced with new, positive symbolic connotations.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, we have traced the trajectory of the street as a symbolic object in Portuguese contentious politics all the way from the 1970s to the present day. More than just a coincidental space or place in which contention happens, the street exists in Portuguese contentious politics as a distinctive symbolic object used and disputed by players ranging from protest groups to governmental authorities. Even though new meanings of the street emerge in contentious discourses and public-health narratives, it has been through its occupation that the character of the street as a symbolic object has been most commonly produced and narratives about democracy continue to be articulated.

Above all, legacies of the revolution are still visible today in the way the street functions in Portuguese contentious politics. It is, in a way, where the roots of Portuguese democracy lie. As the Portuguese protest maxim, often heard at demonstrations, states, “Democracy is in the street.” As our section describing the events of the revolutionary period shows, the street emerged as the defining element and arena of politics that came to shape contentious politics over the following decades. As a place of contestation, the street had the potency not only to reverse the social and political hierarchies of the dictatorship but to make subsequent institutional players

open to the demands of protest by imbuing with legitimacy demonstrations that took place in it. Even if the meaning of the street was fundamentally structured by contentious activity during the revolution of 1974 and the subsequent transition to democracy, we have stressed that one cannot overlook the emergent variations in its meaning related to legitimacy, emancipation, and vulnerability that arose from interactions and conflicts between subsequent contentious players. The street remains a symbol of contentious politics par excellence in Portugal: it is not just a place or space where protest happens, but a symbolic object to be mobilized in and filled with popular energy.

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