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A SOCIO-ECONOMY OF CAPE VERDEANS' MUTUAL-HELP CIRCULATION ON THE LISBON PERIPHERY

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Abstract

Amidst a backdrop of commodity exchange and economic inequality, Cape Verdean labor immigrants circulate "gifts" of mutual help in order to ensure their horizontal mobility on the Lisbon periphery. This mutual-help circulation tends to deal with "commodities" that would otherwise be inaccessible or unaffordable: "good" childcare, home-building assistance, interest-free credit, and job-market placement. Obligation to kin and friends can often camouflage the economic relations of these practices. Even though similar goods and services "appear" to be available for purchase on the Lisbon periphery, the giving and receiving of mutual help is thickly woven into relationships governed more by trust and proximity than by contracts or market relations. Thus, one cannot simply determine the value of mutual help, for it does not replace products existing in the market.

Keywords: Cape Verde, Lisbon, Social Economy, Mutual-Help Practices, Exploitation, Crisis

I began collecting "data" for this project in 2006 while living in an interior village of Santiago, the island in Cape Verde from which hail a majority of Lisbon's sizeable Cape Verdean population. Having arrived in Santiago at the start of the rainy season, I couldn't help but notice the organized groups of laborers heading to the fields to practice what I later found out was *djunta mon*, which means literally "the joining of hands," but implies "to work together" or "a joint effort." Though at that time I understood little of the culture and spoke halting Kriolu, the national language of Cape Verde, I quickly began to learn more about this intricate system of labor exchanges.

Fortunately, villagers were eager to explain to me just why *djunta mon* is such a defining characteristic of everyday life in rural Santiago. *Djunta mon*, as I found out, serves as a loosely organized mechanism to distribute labor during peak periods of the growing season. Though groups need to be organized before the first rainfall, as my informants stressed, there is considerable continuity in their composition from year to year. As became apparent, such work in the fields is vital for life in rural Cape Verde; during seasons of sufficient rainfall, it is *djunta mon* that enables the reproduction of Cape Verdean agriculture, which is based on maize and pulses. I learned subsequently that the practice allows for flexibility and autonomy in allocating workers according to the needs of the farmer, reduces the amount of time spent on essential tasks, lessens the uncertainty surrounding activities fundamental to rural subsistence, and reinforces relations between cooperating friends and family members (Farelo & González, 2008, p. 78).

Four years later, while completing master's research in Lisbon, I was surprised to see *djunta mon* and *djuda*, Cape Verdeans' system of mutual-help practices, at work in the "shantytowns" and council-housing suburbs of the city's periphery. Unfortunately, I saw here

that a number of the people I knew as self-contained small farmers in Cape Verde had (sadly) been turned into marginalized and underemployed workers, anonymous to the larger society. Needless to say, the unexpected connection of *djunta mon* and *djuda* with my previous research site raised a number of questions. How did Cape Verdeans in Lisbon adapt a set of mutual-help practices that were originally formulated in a rural milieu? And why did they choose to reinterpret the mutual help of the Cape Verdean countryside in order to deal with the challenges of life on the Lisbon periphery?

These and similar questions provide the rationale for this paper, for which *djunta mon* in rural Cape Verde should be seen as a conceptual starting point. In particular, my goal is to interpret the exploitation that Cape Verdeans face in Lisbon in a critical way and analyze how a "socio-economy" of mutual-help practices enables their survival on the city's economically deprived periphery.

A typical mutual-help group is made up of several cooperating "households" of relatives and neighbors whose needs are similar and constant. Group contributors benefit collectively from the results of their cooperation, which means that no one person can claim that an accomplished task was the fruit of her exclusive labor. For most undertakings, everyone's efforts are intermingled and each person's share is inseparable from those of the others (Meillassoux, 1978, p. 326). Likewise, my informants offer mutual help not expecting an immediate counter-"gift" in return. This giving of mutual help is likely to foster in the giver a degree of satisfaction, while serving to fortify the bond between participants. Because "repayment" is delayed, mutual help between members of the group is generally "implicit, non-quantified, long-term, and often very long-term, indeed frequently never consummated" (Narotzky, 1997, p. 130). Repayment is in quotation marks in the previous sentence because the distinction between the initial and

counter offering of mutual help is usually blurred, as both are likely to be intertwined in a system of circulation that is of long standing. Thus, it is in the interest of these individuals to remain together so that they can continue to benefit from each other's mutual help (cf. Pina-Cabral, 1986, p. 159).

Although mutual help is "productive," in that it helps people to be able to sell their labor-power on the job market, the relations involved in its production differ greatly from wage labor. A Marxian interpretation would highlight the fact that capitalist production requires the domestic labor of mutual help and similar practices in order to ensure its supply of labor-power. In this light, Marxist-feminist approaches (e.g., Gottlieb, 1992, p. 135) cite how traditionally women-centered "reproductive" activities such as childcare, cooking, and food collection are necessary for capitalist production to continue. Proponents of this line of thinking believe that domestic labor can be valued by comparing it with the price paid in the market for the labor-power that produces similar domestic services.

To examine the circulation of mutual help from solely an economistic perspective, however, would be to overlook an important factor. Establishing an exchange value implies that mutual-help work is an impersonal, a fungible commodity that is exchangeable and indifferent as to who carries out the task (Narotzky, 1997, p. 148). Among my informants, the giving and receiving of mutual help is thickly woven into relationships governed more by trust (*konfiansa*) than by contracts or market relations. Accordingly, participants are bound to giving each other mutual help by means of intimate, emotionally charged relationships. Because these practices are strongly embedded within network relations, tasks completed by mutual help cannot be valued by a price system establishing market equivalence. In other words, one cannot simply examine

the value of my informants' mutual help, for it does not replace products and services existing in the market (Weeks, 2012a, pp. 35-36).

Mutual help strays further from being a kind of "currency" in that it cannot be manipulated as capital to be invested for accumulation. No one, after all, partakes in the practices for the purpose of lending or making a "profit." Nor is mutual help fetishized per se, for *no thing* serves to obscure from the participants the social relations involved in the practices. While material advantages and moral prestige do come from the circulation of mutual help, group members do not participate in it in order to gain at the expense of others. The underlying principle and aim of mutual help lies in the satisfaction of social needs, meaning that the people involved do not keep a detailed balance of their respective labor expenditures (Godelier, 1977, p. 150).

In general, mutual-help practices among Cape Verdean labor immigrants are less organized than their equivalents in rural Cape Verde, require fewer people and less time, and usually involve women and domestic tasks (Lobo, 2006, p. 22). Unlike in the Cape Verdean countryside, mutual help in Lisbon is "fragmented" and necessitates less upfront capital expenditure. Rather than being required to provide helpers food and drink, as is done with *djunta mon* in the islands, one can simply "repay" one favor with another. The practice frequently attains a "consumerist" or in-kind dimension, as goods and food circulate and are traded. Women can thus "consume" without having to purchase many items. Transmutability is a factor here and adds an additional degree of flexibility. Supplying a good – such as clothes, food, consumer products, or building materials – can return a favor that was done in the form of a service – like a ride, childcare, or the use of lent items – and vice-versa.

By means of their movement, these goods and services not only help to fulfill participants' daily needs in a context of scarce resources, but also serve to regenerate the social fabric of a kin group living and working in a city with an indifferent gaze (Narotzky, 1997, p. 141; Meillassoux, 1981, p. 23). While Mauss (2002, p. 101) famously wrote about the role of the gift in "primitive" societies, one finds that many aspects of gift circulation are strongly embedded within Cape Verdean communities amidst a backdrop of commodity exchange on the Lisbon periphery (cf. Martin, 2012, p. 133).

Though ostensibly classless, mutual-help practices reveal much about the underlying structures of social hierarchy and inequality among Cape Verdeans. It is important to note that the existence of mutual help does not necessarily mean that the *entire* social structure in rural Cape Verde or in Lisbon can be considered communal or egalitarian. In a better position to observe "desirable" norms of behavior, wealthier individuals are more likely to accumulate "prestige" capital by providing mutual-help assistance that cannot easily be repaid. These less common forms of mutual help in general require an item or technique that not everyone possesses (Godelier, 1977, p. 148). While the workings of mutual help usually serve to benefit the entire group, that particular individuals have a monopoly over providing certain goods and services means that relationships of dependence can arise. Accordingly, group members with this monopoly power can initiate more extended cooperative works for their own purposes and thus become even more autonomous within the group (Meillassoux, 1978, p. 323).

While mutual help can in part mitigate and register implicit protest against the structures of domination, it also indirectly "recreates" the worker, returning her recharged to oppressive toil. Though mutual help may seem at times to subvert the monetized system of commodity

exchange, it allows the Portuguese economy not to incur the cost for the reproduction and maintenance of its sub-proletarian workforce.

In this regard, mutual help is simultaneously incorporated into the greater economy, in that the practices help provide labor-power to the market, and is threatened by it, due to the deprivation that market forces cause for group participants. This contradiction means that mutual-help group members can lessen the exploitation they face in Portugal *even as* they are being produced within the larger economy to be dominated labor-power. Thus, to certain extent, the Portuguese economy can utilize mutual help for its own ends. The relations between these two systems are contradictory and unequal, with the former preserving the latter in order to exploit more effectively its immigrant workforce.

A palpable subtext in the discourse of my informants is an awareness that the giving of mutual help is becoming an increasingly less-common activity. Years of economic expansion on the Lisbon periphery have given way to marked discrepancies in wealth and privilege. They are adamant that they are no longer able to rely on aid from others to help them "get by." Fewer people seem to be embedded in the webs of mutual-help circulation that can enable a person on the margins to subsist. Worse, they say, friends and family continue to express empathy for those in need, especially in the current time of crisis, but are hesitant to take action to help the less fortunate among them. More and more Cape Verdeans fear putting themselves in a situation in which they might be the only person who steps in to provide mutual-help assistance. They believe that this situation is caused by less and less cooperation, that Cape Verdeans in Lisbon now "only care about themselves." "They are cold" (*a-es é friu*) or "they don't have time" (*a-es ka teni tempu*) are common appraisals (Weeks, 2012b, p. 37).

Furthermore, even as being forced to sell their labor-power for increasingly less remuneration threatens Cape Verdeans' ability to continue giving mutual help, the practices remain their only means of satisfying the basic needs that Portuguese society fails to provide. Even in the current crisis, the persistence of mutual help is not solely due to the "adaptability" of group members, but is also because the larger economy needs to reproduce the very workers who occupy a central position in the productive process (Meillassoux, 1978, p. 327).

Unintended consequences aside, the "kindness" of mutual help should be seen as a foil to the exploitation inherent in Portugal's stratified national socio-economic system. By taking place amongst family and friends, and not in the greater marketplace, mutual help carries the unseeming contradiction of providing the human relations not found in an otherwise inhumane world. When allowed to happen, mutual help can assuage the cruelty of the workplace and society and allow "invisible" Cape Verdean laborers to be at once altruistic and selfless (Weeks, 2012b, p. 41).

As we have seen, it is necessary for Lisbon's Cape Verdean workers to engage in mutual-help circulation in order to ensure their material survival and need for symbolic expression in social relations. In this regard, mutual help does not constitute a marginal activity, but is a strategic element necessary to ensure horizontal mobility within Portuguese society. To go further, we might even say that Cape Verdeans could not continue to subsist on the Lisbon periphery if not for mutual help (Godelier, 1977, p. 144).

In this paper, I have attempted to "uncover" what has been long naturalized by my informants, the usually obscured relations that make up their mutual-help circulation. While my initial intention was simply to describe the practices involved, it became apparent that the more pressing question at hand was one of the exploitation they face in Portuguese society. I hope that

my effort to address both these concerns is seen as an attempt to bypass the at-times esoteric concerns of anthropology and demonstrate the relevance of this study to contemporary affairs. Our discipline, after all, should no longer merely be a means for studying arcane exotica but become instead a way of engendering lasting progressive change.

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