

...À CONVERSA COM ONÉSIMO...
A CONVERSATION WITH ONÉSIMO TEOTÓNIO
ALMEIDA

Phillip Rothwell
Rutgers University

Born in San Miguel, the Azores, in 1946, Onésimo Teotónio Almeida studied Philosophy at Brown University, where he went on to become, and is today, Professor of Portuguese. Having published widely on Portuguese literature, culture and identity, he also has numerous volumes of creative writing to his name, the most recent of which is *Aventuras de um Nabogador e Outras Estórias-em-sanduíche*, (Lisbon: Bertrand, 2007), as well as a long-standing presence in the Portuguese media. The host of RTP's *Onésimo à Conversa com...* changes roles to answer a few questions about his academic and creative work, his passion for the Azores and the future of Portuguese Studies in the United States.

PR: A large part of your intellectual project, dating back to the 1980s, before it became fashionable, has been about debunking essentialist tendencies wherever they occur, and particularly in Portuguese intellectual thought. Indeed, you gave a very powerful critique of the “ontologizers” in Portuguese philosophy in 1985, and yet, as we know, the tendency resurfaces repeatedly, and increasingly, in postcolonial guises. I wonder if you would like to comment not only on how essentialism keeps cropping up, but why it has such a strangle-hold on what we do?

OTA: That was an expansion on a paper I read at the first conference of the *Associação Internacional de Lusitanistas* held in Poitiers, France, in 1984, which provoked quite a reaction for being iconoclastic. In it, I attempted a deconstruction of the essentialist views held by some Portuguese intellectuals, particularly regarding *saudade*, a quintessential obsession of those engaged in debates on Portuguese culture, namely the defenders of *filosofia portuguesa*. Soon after I developed it into a long essay, expanding on the logical

flaws detectable in arguments developed by the “ontologizers” of the concept.¹ This essay was published almost a decade before Boaventura Sousa Santos’s *Pela Mãe de Alice*, and long before essentialism became a buzzword in the academy. In the paper, I think I demonstrate how there cannot be a necessary connection between the past and future of a culture. Contingency, of course, is antithetical to absolutism, and also to essentialism. It does not follow, however, that the past does not weigh on the future of a culture, or that the history of a nation can easily be made to change its course. Hence it is preferable to speak of the predominant values of a given culture, values that may change over time, or persist over extensive periods. Any concept of value immutability is alien to this sort of language. Here, though, lies the Gordian knot of the debate. Academics not familiar with philosophy confuse essentialism with the predominance of cultural structures (this is perhaps what Fernand Braudel called “la longue durée,” and anthropologists have called value structures, cultural patterns, predominance of types, and cultural paradigms). Any confusion with essentialism reveals a failure to understand what exactly essentialism is. Essentialism derives from the Latin “essence,” and this in turn from “esse” (being), which implies immutability. Ignorance of this perhaps explains why so many people throw the charge of essentialism around so easily nowadays. Maybe they should read more before they speak or write, if they want to be taken seriously.

Given my longstanding critique of confusions over essentialism, and the umbrage it provoked among supporters of “Portuguese philosophy,” it is ironic that now, more than twenty years later, in an article published in a recent issue of *ellipsis*, Maria Manuel Baptista indirectly links my views on lusofonia to Salazarist leanings, or at least with some of its “myths and stereotypes.”² Also, a few years ago, while reviewing an article of mine in *After the Revolution: Twenty Years of Portuguese Literature, 1975-1994*, Marcus Freitas wrote that “Onésimo Almeida clearly follows Lourenço’s standpoint and refuses to accept the discontinuity between pre- and post-revolutionary [Portuguese] identity.”

Interview with Onésimo Teotónio Almeida

I have written extensively on the issue of identity both in Portuguese and in English. One of my goals in essay writing is to avoid jargon and use the most vernacular language. I try to keep my vocabulary tightly controlled, trimming all unnecessary obfuscations, valuing above all clarity and neat argumentation (perhaps a deformation due to a very strict training in analytical philosophy). Having written many papers on diverse, apparently unrelated topics, I pursue coherence even though such a goal is difficult to achieve. This is why my papers constantly refer to other papers of mine. My arguments are not bulletproof, but the charge of essentialism is uninformed. Of course, disagreements are the bread and butter of academia, but nobody likes to be misquoted or misunderstood. These incidents of misreading reveal a pattern that needs clarification.

In my work, I have called attention to the fact that debates on identity often collapse two dimensions. For some people, identity means a continuum between past, present and future. However, the word actually has two important and analytically separable dimensions: first, the value constants emerging in a culture's past; second, the goals, desires, and aims of a culture facing its future. Collapsing the two causes serious theoretical and practical complications.

For instance, Oliveira Martins may perhaps be charged with some sort of essentialism, but Antero de Quental should not. Antero is a good example of a thinker who separates past cultural patterns and future directions with remarkable success. He identified (whether one agrees or not) the patterns taken by Portuguese culture after the Counter-Reformation and called for a radical change toward modernization. This is the antipodes of essentialism.

PR: Following from that, could you comment on the continuities and ruptures you identify as occurring in discussions about Portuguese culture?

OTA: These postmodern times have brought about an array of intellectual production that is strongly anti-essentialist. Inevitably those debates reached Portugal. It was important for Portugal to end its isolation. A culture forced to be

Phillip Rothwell

monolithic for such a long time was in need of an earthquake. The April 25th revolution, however, did not really act as such, since the Left replaced one ontology with another, a variety of Marxist or Marxian dogmas, all sharing somehow an essence. It took a long while for that atmosphere to break up. But when it did, it went to another extreme. It is as if Portugal had gone from a pre-modern society to a post-modern, without going through modernity. Actually I think this is a serious matter. There are important values that we, in the West, have inherited from modernity that have not disappeared in this post-modern era. I have written about this in detail and I actually teach a course at Brown precisely on this topic. It looks like the baby is being thrown out with the bath water. Postmodernity basically underlines our incapability of holding in absolute terms any single value of modernity—knowledge and technology, liberty and justice, democracy, progress. Every one of them hinges on the others and middle grounds have to be found. We are back to where Aristotle was in his views on virtues—the secret is to strike the happy medium. Justice (or better, fairness) is nothing but the search for the equilibrium between individual liberties, that is, my rights and your obligations, which are proportionately symmetrical with my obligations and your rights.

We do not, however, have the time to talk about this here. I should simply add I fear that with all this postmodern talk in Portugal (even though the problem is not confined to my homeland), people forget that there are plenty of continuities in Portuguese culture. These are not ontological. They are cultural traits that have survived a long time. Every culture has them. It is ridiculous to elevate them to ontological categories, but it is also blindness to deny their existence. Curiously, someone like Boaventura Sousa Santos, who charged me once with essentialism in a debate after a lecture I gave at his invitation at the University of Coimbra, is now talking about the “epistemology of the South,” something I do not understand because either it means different cultural values—and that would be “axiology,” not “epistemology.” Or, if you claim that there is in the South a different epistemology, this would imply a different way of knowing, which

Interview with Onésimo Teotónio Almeida

smacks of ontology. Besides, what is the South? Australia is south and so is South Africa.

PR: As well as Onésimo, the academic, you are perhaps equally well known as a writer, and particularly, as a writer who humorously captures the absurdity of everyday experience. I wonder if you could talk a little about the “need to write,” and the importance of the process of writing in the development of your academic thought. In other words, I want to understand Onésimo not as an academic and separately as a writer, but as an entity (if you will excuse the ontology!) in which one aspect feeds into and nourishes the other.

OTA: You can say entity. I am not one of those who think that there is no self. As a human being I am an entity, even if I am one who has changed quite a bit over these sixty years, almost like Theseus’s boat, but one who indeed remembers being still the same person.

Yes, I do double as a scholar and as a writer. I could never separate the two and I am the same person expressing the same points of view in both forms. It is always the same voice speaking even though I make a huge distinction in styles. There are two basic ones—the analytical and the “creative.” In an analytical essay, I try to be as critical as I can: my philosophical training comes in full steam and I am after clear and distinct ideas, as Cartesian as I can be, even when dealing with matters that fall on the side of emotions. The other form of expression is much freer and incorporates all my other writings (which one could call “creative”), in the sense that I am not bound by empirical, analytical or critical concerns. In it, I feel a certain freedom in moving between genres and osmotically blending them. I have written *prosemas* which are prose poems, *crónicas* that seem like short stories and I have also mixed the story genre when writing “estórias-em-sanduíche” (stories sandwiched between *crónicas*). I have also explained elsewhere that my *crónicas* are short-sleeved essays. Usually, in my stories *I show*, whereas in my essays *I tell*.

Phillip Rothwell

I have also said in various interviews that I basically write about the same interconnected themes of identity, world-views, and values and, above all, about my life experiences. And here my living in two worlds, the Portuguese and the American, figures prominently. As a raconteur with no boundaries, basically telling stories in many ways and using the capabilities language allows us, I try to be creative in the way I tell them. However, even though I emigrated to the United States and I consider myself a hyphenated Portuguese (a Portuguese-American), I do not feel I have a divided self.

PR: Another facet that comes to mind when we think of Onésimo is the Azores. As well as the obvious affective link it holds for you, please comment on the importance of the islands in your intellectual development.

OTA: I imagine that I would be a desert lover had I been born in Morocco or Egypt. I do not know. I simply know that I am an island lover and that I need the sea as part of my surroundings. That said, I think it is very easy to love the Azores, as lots of people who were not born there do. The islands are indeed a bit of paradise. Having grown up surrounded by such natural beauty leaves its marks, among them, an almost pantheistic infatuation with nature. There is more to it, though. When I grew up, the Azores were really an old world. It was an orderly world, with proportion, rules, and where everything seemed to make sense. If Portugal was isolated from the rest of the world, in the Azores we were even isolated from Portugal itself, and most people lived isolated even from neighboring islands. Everything contributed to create an atmosphere which is today lost for the most part, for good or ill. But it is still within me. The first literature I read was Azorean. I was very young when a teacher of mine put Vitorino Nemésio, Nunes da Rosa and Roberto de Mesquita in my hands. In my adolescence, in the sixties, we were opening up to a wider world and news from outside arrived there, but filtered. Everything arrived in some sense in a cleansed, purified form. As I was growing up, things also started to change. But still not much information about the wider world was available. We heard

Interview with Onésimo Teotónio Almeida

more of the Vietnam War than of war in the African Portuguese colonies. In the late 60s, we lived in sort of a utopian age dreaming of the most naïf revolution of peace, love and justice for all. All that has contributed to my elevation of those islands to a certain mythical status that obviously only existed in my mind. I said I was analytical and rational when talking about reality, but I did not say I was not subjective.

PR: APSA celebrates ten years as an association, and clearly Portuguese and Brazilian studies has evolved immensely over the period. Where do you see it going next?

OTA: I remember very well what I thought were utopian dreams entertained by Joanna Courteau when she used to talk about creating an association for Portuguese Studies. I thought it would be a mistake to divide us even more, weakening the Portuguese presence at the AATSP conferences. But I realize now that it was a great move. APSA has come a long way and every bi-annual conference seems to attract more people. Our journal is now appearing more regularly and with better quality, but I think that the association should perhaps think in terms of strategizing the expansion of teaching Portuguese in the United States by identifying places where it could expand. Portuguese is growing slowly but steadily, but it needs to grow more. In the past, Portugal has been in a better position to help a variety of projects. Now, the situation is not so good and help is limited to the Luso-American Foundation for Development and the Camões Institute. Since Brazil continues to look the other way, we are on our own. But I feel that there is a growing interest in the US in Brazil and in Portuguese-speaking Africa. I fear though that the continental part of our programs will dwindle if the loss of interest in the past continues. I must add that I feel this is a mistake. We cannot form good Luso-Brazilianists without a strong background in Portuguese literature, for instance. Our overemphasis on the present has made us let previous centuries fall into oblivion. Another danger I see is the overemphasis on theory. It becomes so important to learn a few clichés applicable to everything that the actual study of the language, literature, history, and culture almost

Phillip Rothwell

appear to become secondary. I feel comfortable saying this because my doctorate was in Philosophy. I am not afraid of theory, but I must add that, with all due respect to those who do it well, a lot of what I see passing as theory is a mere repetition of clichés forcefully applied to fit ideological straightjackets.

Notes:

1. See “Filosofia Portuguesa; Alguns equívocos.” *Cultura: História e Filosofia* IV (1985): 219-55.

2. See Maria Manuel Baptista, “A Lusofonia Não É um Jardim ou da Necessidade de ‘Perder o Medo às Realidades e aos Mosquitos’.” *ellipsis* 4 (2006): 99-130.