

COLD LAND, LAND OF WOLVES

The region of Barroso - the 'cold lands' - has maintained a strong tradition of autonomy over the centuries. Remote and of difficult access, these mountains have always been places of refuge. Perhaps this is why traditions of communalism and collective life have remained so alive, such as communal grazing practices, or 'vezeiras', the sharing of threshing floors, the maintenance of small water canals, or 'levadas', the community mills and ovens and, above all, the management of 'baldios' or common lands, that still cover most of the territory and on which communities have always depended for their survival.

With communitarianism, pagan traditions were also maintained, a word that, having been used to designate non-Christians, originally meant nothing more than villagers. Perhaps because Barroso was a 'land of witches' and of 'promiscuous customs', the years of 1936-60 saw a failed attempt to implement a new social unit, under the fascist regime's Internal Colonization Council. As always in colonisation, the aim was to transform the relationship with the land to increase its productivity, to favour the nuclear family and private property over community and common lands, to regulate local spiritual beliefs and reproductive knowledge.

Similar objectives were pursued by the 1938 Forestry Population Plan, which forced the conversion of common lands into industrial forests (pine), uprooting people from their communal relationship with the land and converting them into a proletarian force. Or the construction of the Venda Nova, Paradela and Alto Rabagão dams, which forced the expropriation and submergence of vast territories, including wetlands and common lands, and with them submerging histories, artefacts, memories and customs.

In other words, the central government sees these territories only as suppliers of natural resources, paying attention to the cold lands only when it is interested in setting up extractive infrastructures. In the rare cases in which it makes itself felt, it is usually to violently subjugate its people, as happened to the populations who tried to resist the implementation of the Forestry Population Plan, to those protesting the submergence of Vilarinho da Furna, or as in 1946, when in a joint action between Portuguese and the Spanish military police, the village of Cambedo da Raia was bombarded with mortar fire, for giving shelter to Galician anti-fascist militants.

Even so, these cold lands have maintained their uniqueness, having recently been declared a World Agricultural Heritage Site by the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations), recognising the symbiotic relationship between peoples, customs, and environment - and how it manifests in Barroso's agro-silvo-pastoral system.

However, the fact that Barroso is an agricultural heritage site is of little interest to the state. The central government is more concerned with the lithium reserves underground and with opening a new extractive frontier. Under pressure from the EU, the Portuguese state is trying to position itself on the world market for the energy transition (expansion). In Barroso alone we are talking about more than 15 mining projects in the prospection or exploration stages, laying claim to a significant percentage of its territory, the most known being Mina do Barroso by Savannah Resources.

Long before the mines come into operation, their impact is already being felt, with the environmental destruction planned for Barroso wiping out investments in other possible futures. For each mine, hundreds of hectares of common lands will be appropriated,

disregarding their contribution to in the population's economic subsistence. Then there are the mining representatives who go from door-to-door coercing people to sell their lands. Shops and marketing agencies are set up, accompanied by constant articles in national newspapers, properties are bought up, neighbouring lands are occupied. Extractive pressure comes from all sides. The impacts of a mine are felt first and foremost at an economic level, but also on people's mental health.

We know that mines will have an impact on soils, plant ecosystems and biodiversity, due to the need to cut down forests and scrubland, to strip the land, to terraform and prepare the ground for open-pit mining. Mining is also a source of particulate matter emissions into the atmosphere, with potential impacts on public health. At the same time, the construction of various water diversion and retention basins implies the destruction of aquatic ecosystems, impacting surrounding soils and vegetation. And let's not forget, of course, the high risk of contaminating groundwater, watercourses, or adjacent rivers.

If mining in Barroso goes ahead, it will certainly affect many plant, insect, and animal species whose ecosystems, ecological corridors and prey will be at risk of disappearing. It is known that the Romano Mine in Montalegre coincides with the territory of one of the few wolf packs identified in the area. We don't know how many more there are. If, in the eyes of the state, these remote regions exist only to provide resources, what it continually ignores are their unique modes of coexistence.

But by ignoring the lands and people that are part of them, the state also ignores how this collective environmental architecture nurtures the will and capacity for resistance. In fact, we can say that these cold lands are still lands of wolves. Wolves, as we know, live and hunt in packs. They are multiplicities, not collections of individuals. Even though they have historically been enemies - as the wolf traps or 'fojos' of this region show - they share a symbiotic relationship with the inhabitants of Barroso. Wolves, people of the cold lands, are perhaps not so different from each other. Living collectively, resisting collectively.

It's no coincidence that through the resistance to mining, the communities of Barroso are also rediscovering their rich communal, mimetic, and animistic traditions, through which passages of recognition between the multiple entities that make up these existential territories are possible. It is precisely the modes of existence of the cold lands that go against the logic of the state - as they always have - , a reaffirmed possibility of living in coexistence with others, present, ancestors or future generations, whether they are our own or those of other species. This is because resistance, insofar as it refers to caring for alliances between communities - human, non-human, more than human - is always prior to violence. Resistance is nothing more than the affirmation of ways of existing, of knowledge, of practices, of ways of being of the environment, which the state only recognises insofar as they impede its designs.

But today, more and more, new packs are emerging in Barroso, multi-species, inter-temporal, perhaps monstrous, and certainly insubmissive. The state comes and goes, but in the mountains, the wolves howl.