

**Globalisation and Particularism in the Work of José Saramago:  
the Symbolism of the Shopping-Mall in *A Caverna***

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The 1998 Nobel literature laureate, José Saramago, Portugal's most celebrated living writer, is both a long-standing and unrepentant Communist Party stalwart and a globally active opponent of globalisation. Since leaving Portugal in 1992 he has been a Spanish resident, domiciled in the Canary Islands. His most recent novel, *A Caverna* [*The Cave*] appeared near-simultaneously in Portuguese and Spanish, in November 2000 and January 2001 respectively. The end of 2000 saw Saramago immersed in a 45-day tour over three continents<sup>1</sup>, in a planet-embracing promotion of a book whose symbolism decries the standardising and homogenising impact of global mass culture, as embodied in the shopping-mall. This novel's history so far points, in its very materiality, to a tangled intertwining of global and anti-global which in some respects typifies the radical criticism of culture in the early twenty-first century.

The veteran historian Eric Hobsbawm has defined globalisation as a phenomenon having three main aspects - technical ("the abolition of space and time"), economic ("the abolition of trade barriers and liberalisation of markets"), and cultural ("the trend towards homogenisation")<sup>2</sup>; while seeing globalisation itself as "undoubtedly irreversible", he denies any such inevitability to "the ideology based on globalisation, the neoliberal, free-market ideology" to which he gives the name "free-market fundamentalism"<sup>3</sup>. Another radical critic, the US academic Benjamin R. Barber, rather more apocalyptically views today's world as a battlefield between globalisation (whose combined forces he calls "McWorld") and the localist, particularist and often intolerant forces which he symbolically denominates as "Jihad". Humanity, Barber fears, may be "reduced to a choice between the market's universal clutch and a retribalising politics of particularist identities", in a world where "everyone is a consumer; ... everyone belongs to some tribe. But no-one is a citizen"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Mendoza, 64 (N.B.: for full references, see Works Cited).

<sup>2</sup> Hobsbawm, 64-66.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> Barber, 7, 8.

José Saramago's perspective on globalisation is overwhelmingly negative. At a recent Madrid press conference, according to *El País*, "afirmaciones como 'la globalización engullirá al ratoncito de los derechos humanos', 'la globalización fabrica excluidos' o 'el totalitarismo tiene muchas caras y la globalización es una de ellas' jalonaron la mayoría de respuestas de Saramago a los periodistas" ("Saramago's replies to journalists were typically studded with phrases like 'globalisation will eat up the poor mouse of human rights', 'globalisation manufactures exclusion', or 'totalitarianism's faces are many and globalisation is one of them'<sup>5</sup>). He believes globalisation to be a tired euphemism for the economic and political power of international capital ("aquellas que efectivamente governam o mundo, as empresas multinacionais e pluricontinentais" ["those who really govern the world, the multinational and transcontinental companies"]<sup>6</sup>) and the ideological power of the media ("Estamos confundiendo las imágenes de la realidad con la realidad (...) la propia realidad se convierte en espectáculo" ["We confuse images of reality with reality (...) reality itself becomes a spectacle"]<sup>7</sup>). In this totalitarian planetary space, the Portuguese writer fears that democracy, fundamental rights and the critical spirit are doomed to wither on the vine unless radical counter-action is taken.

The Nobel laureate's fictional production to date, taken as a whole, exhibits an unresolved tension between global and local, universal and Portuguese. Perhaps significantly, over time and as globalisation has spread its tentacles worldwide, José Saramago's writing has simultaneously become much less local in its themes. A Spanish reviewer has noted the lack of Portuguese content in *A Caverna*: "No hay portuguesismo ni color geográfico alguno" ("There is no Portuguese picturesque, no local colour of any kind"<sup>8</sup>). From his debut as a published novelist in 1977 up to 1989, Saramago's novels concentrated near-exclusively on Portuguese themes and locations. Since then, in a process surely not totally explicable by his physical exile in 1992, his native country has been conspicuous in his fiction only in its absence.

Saramago's early novels draw deep sustenance from Portuguese history and culture: *Memorial do Convento* (1982; in English, *Baltasar and Blimunda*) re-creates the building of the eighteenth-century convent of Mafra; *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis* (1984; *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*) explores the world of Portugal's iconic poet Fernando Pessoa against the backdrop of the fascist Salazar regime. *A Jangada de Pedra* (1986; *The Stone Raft*) extends the horizon to embrace a pan-Iberian perspective; in this highly ironic narrative, written precisely as Spain and Portugal prepared to assume their European option, Saramago imagines the Peninsula drifting away from the continent into mid-Atlantic and living out a defiantly particularist identity, an amalgam of rural, maritime and picaresque. After a one-off, and polemically nationalist, return to Portuguese preoccupations in *História do Cerco de Lisboa* (1989; *History of the Siege of Lisbon*), Saramago's fiction abruptly veers away from his origins: henceforth his novels are set either elsewhere (the symbolic Palestine of *O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo* [1991; *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*]), or nowhere (the post-Kafkian anti-utopias of the trilogy formed by *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira* [1995; *Blindness*], *Todos os Nomes* [1997; *All the Names*] and *A Caverna*). In these last three novels, the locations have become non-specific, as if cultural particularity had vanished under the standardising pressures of globalisation.

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<sup>5</sup> Villena, loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Saramago, Nobel speech, loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Saramago, interview with Hernández del Valle, 16.

<sup>8</sup> García-Posada, 7.

The events of *A Caverna* evolve in a drab, impersonal space on the outskirts of a nameless city in an unnamed country; if there is anything Portuguese about it, it is only the protagonists' names - the potter Cipriano Algor, his widowed neighbour Isaura Estudiosa, Cipriano's daughter Marta Isasca, and her husband Marçal Gacho - and a few stray details (e.g. "a sopa, que era costume da família comer depois" - "the soup which it was the custom in the family to eat after the main course")<sup>9</sup>. When the narrative begins, Cipriano, Marta and her husband have their domicile in a decaying, nondescript village near the metropolis: "A região é fosca, suja, não merece que a olhemos duas vezes" ("The area ... is dull and dirty, not worth a second glance")<sup>10</sup>. Between village and city lie an "Agricultural Belt", an "Industrial Belt", the all-powerful mall known as the Centro Comercial (the Shopping Centre), and a no-man's land of shanty-towns. Cipriano ekes out a living by selling his pots and ceramics, the artisanal product of his hands, to the Centre, where Marçal is a security guard, obliged to sleep inside the premises and leave his young wife at her father's, coming home only on rest-days. This precarious equilibrium is broken early on, with the revelation that the Centre has switched to plastic receptacles and no longer needs old-fashioned ceramics. After a vain attempt to fight the Centre's decision, the potter bows to the inevitable and agrees to accompany his daughter and son-in-law and move to a new model apartment inside the Centre. The rest of the novel narrates the characters' reactions to the Centre from the inside, and their final, desperate decision to say "no" to it.

The shadow of the shopping-mall looms over the entire novel. The decline and fall of the pottery workshop represents the last gasp of the artisan tradition, finally defeated by the forces of mass production. In the book's last quarter, the focus of attention shifts to the seemingly omnipotent Centre, perceived as a physical space in permanent expansion, if not a world in itself. In the potter's words, "o Centro está dentro da cidade, mas é maior do que a cidade ... desde o princípio tem estado a engolir ruas, praças, quarteirões inteiros" ("the Centre is inside the city, but it's bigger than the city ... right from the start, it has been swallowing up streets, squares, whole districts")<sup>11</sup>. It will now be useful to examine some aspects of the real external context of Saramago's fiction, and consider the architectural and cultural phenomenon known as the shopping-mall, in its present shape and in its origins.

Today's shopping-centres have their origins in the arcades, or "passages", of nineteenth-century Paris. As socio-historical phenomenon the arcades need no introduction, having been immortalised by Walter Benjamin in his immense unfinished study *Das Passagen-werk* [*The Arcades Project*], which occupied his attention across the 1930s and is today often seen as one of the key books of the twentieth century<sup>12</sup>. Benjamin quotes a passage from an *Illustrated Guide to Paris* of 1852 which sums up the essence of the arcades: "These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of the corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need"<sup>13</sup>. The earliest arcade proper, the Passage des Panoramas, dates from 1800, but the majority were constructed in the 1820s<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Saramago, *A Caverna*, 32, 20 (page references to the novel are to the original first and the English translation second). It is a Portuguese rural custom to eat the soup after the main course.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 12, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 259, 215.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, drafted between 1927 and 1940, finally appeared in German in 1982, and in English only in 1999.

<sup>13</sup> quoted in Benjamin, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 34, 39, 42.

Viewing the arcades as constituting "the most important architecture of the nineteenth century"<sup>15</sup>, Benjamin reads them as a historically ambiguous, Janus-faced phenomenon, a "dream- and wish-image of the collective"<sup>16</sup>. They are a "primordial landscape of consumption"<sup>17</sup>, temples built for the apotheosis of the commodity, with their seductively displayed, endlessly varied wares: "binoculars and flower seeds, screws and musical scores, makeup and stuffed vipers, fur coats and revolvers"<sup>18</sup>; and yet, in their glass and steel design, they both reflect and inspire the utopias projected by the social visionaries of the nineteenth century, embodying the "anticipation and imaginative expression of a new world"<sup>19</sup>. It has been said that "if Walter Benjamin had written novels, they probably would have read like Saramago"<sup>20</sup>, and clear analogies may be discerned between the nineteenth-century arcades as re-imagined by Benjamin and Saramago's latter-day shopping-centre - but the Portuguese writer's vision is darker, refusing the shimmering ambiguity of his predecessor.

Benjamin saw the arcades as "the forerunners of department stores"<sup>21</sup>. The latter came into being later in the mid-nineteenth century: the first recognisably modern "grand magasin" in Paris was *Le Bon Marché*, which flourished from 1852<sup>22</sup>. The classic literary account of the French department-store is Émile Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*), published in 1883 and based on a number of actual department-stores, notably the *Magasins de la Paix*, whose physical location Zola's fictional shop shares. *La Paix*, inaugurated in 1869, closed its doors in 1881, but in Zola's novel the *Bonheur des Dames* appears as an all-conquering, endlessly expanding juggernaut. The narrative may seem superficially optimistic thanks to its happy end (the owner marries one of his shopgirls) and to a consciously utopian dimension (the department-store as "l'immense bazar idéal, le phalanstère du négoce" ["a huge, ideal emporium, a phalanstery of trade"<sup>23</sup>]); but a dark undertone is sounded by the ruin of the small shopkeepers of the quarter (as typified by a draper and an umbrella-seller), bankrupted by a huge rival which they perceive as an insatiable monster. A Spanish commentator has signalled the analogy between Zola's and Saramago's novels<sup>24</sup>, and the parallel will merit closer examination.

The twentieth century saw the mutation, initially and classically in the USA, of the city-centre department-store into the out-of-town shopping-mall. The American social critic Tom Frank traces the phenomenon back to the Country Club Plaza built in Kansas City in the 1920s, the first suburban commercial area to be designed around the automobile, and to the invention of the closed and covered shopping-centre in the late 1950s by a promoter from Minneapolis<sup>25</sup>. Benjamin Barber, whom we have quoted earlier, describes the nature of such centres today: "These malls are entertainment plazas built around the multifaceted pleasures of shopping ... The express aim of developers is to contain the entire world within the shopping plaza ...

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 834.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 905.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 827.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 828.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 637 (Benjamin here quotes Marx, from a letter of 1866).

<sup>20</sup> Dennis Redmond, in Monteiro et al., *loc. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 58-60.

<sup>23</sup> Zola, 411; English translation, p. 355. The term "phalanstère" refers to the ideal communities projected by the utopian writer Charles Fourier (1772-1837).

<sup>24</sup> Bonilla, 37.

<sup>25</sup> Frank, 8.

'You don't have to go to New York or Paris or Disneyland or Hawaii. WE have it all for you in one place'<sup>26</sup>.

Light may be shed on Saramago's fictional shopping-centre by comparison with its predecessors evoked by Benjamin and Zola and the contemporary models described by Barber and Frank. Like Zola's *Bonheur des Dames*, it is an ever-expanding, tentacular monster, swallowing up whole quarters of its host city: "aqui nunca se acabam as obras, o Centro cresce todos os dias mesmo quando não se dá por isso" ("they're always building something here, the Centre grows every day without your even noticing it"<sup>27</sup>). In Zola's novel, similarly, "partout, le *Bonheur* rachetait les baux, les boutiques fermaient, les locataires déménageaient; et, dans les immeubles vides, une armée d'ouvriers commençait les aménagements nouveaux" ("Everywhere the Paradise was buying up leases, shops were closing, tenants were moving out; and, in the empty buildings, an army of workmen was starting on the alterations"<sup>28</sup>). Saramago's Centre crushes the small shopkeepers and artisans as consumers flock to it like flies, and in this sense it may be read as a metonym for the forces of globalisation that destroy the local and particular.

The utopian dimension evident in Benjamin and Zola has disappeared from view: this Centre is pure anti-utopia. It is an all-embracing world, like the *Bonheur des Dames*, in which "toute la vie était là, on avait tout sans sortir" ("Every need in life was provided for, everything was obtainable without leaving the building"<sup>29</sup>). Zola's department-store is larger than it seems, housing storerooms in the basement and workers' sleeping quarters upstairs, and as it expands to over 3000 employees it acquires cultural and entertainment facilities, with a staff orchestra and a reading-room and cafeteria for the public. Saramago's Centre, too, is more than just a shopping area; it has 48 floors above ground and 10 below, warehouses in the lower reaches and apartments in the upper stories. Unlike the *Bonheur* or the arcades, however, it offers not the slightest hint of a vision of a better world. All is consumption, ersatz spectacle and mindless mass entertainment; there is a clear parallel with the contemporary malls described by Barber and Frank. Barber writes: "To ensure that malls are fun, many developers are installing high-tech virtual reality arcade games"<sup>30</sup>, while Frank speaks of a mall in Illinois with a mock-Amazon "Rainforest Café" and a projected centre outside Madrid which will offer punters an artificial inside ski-slope<sup>31</sup>.

Saramago memorably captures this totalitarian universe of the spectacle, in a remarkable passage near the end. The potter Cipriano, having finally consented to live in the Centre, embarks on the discovery of its manifold marvels, some of which will now be evoked: "um carrocel com cavalos ... um túnel do amor, uma ponte suspensa, um comboio fantasma, ... uma porta ... com um letreiro que diz experimente sensações naturais, chuva, vento e neve à discrição, um taj-mahal, uma pirâmide do egipto, ... um convento de mafra, uma torre dos clérigos, um fiorde ... um lago ... um tiranossáurio em esqueleto, outro que parece vivo ... um rio amazonas com índios, uma jangada de pedra, ... uma cadeira eléctrica, um pelotão de execução, ... uma galaxia ... enfim, uma lista a tal ponto extensa de prodígios que nem oitenta anos de vida ociosa bastariam para os desfrutar com proveito, mesmo tendo nascido a pessoa no Centro e não tendo saído dele nunca para o mundo exterior" ("a carousel of horses

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<sup>26</sup> Barber, 130.

<sup>27</sup> Saramago, *A Caverna*, 281, 234.

<sup>28</sup> Zola, 254, 208.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 413, 356.

<sup>30</sup> Barber, 132.

<sup>31</sup> Frank, *loc. cit.*

... a tunnel of love, a suspension bridge, a ghost train ... a door ... with a notice on it saying experience natural sensations, rain, wind and snow on demand, a taj mahal, an egyptian pyramid ... a mafra monastery, a clerics' tower, a fjord ... a lake ... the skeleton of a tyrannosaurus, another one apparently alive ... an amazon river complete with indians, a stone raft ... an electric chair, a firing squad ... a galaxy ... a list of prodigies so long that not even eighty years of leisure time would be enough to take them all in, even if you had been born in the Centre and had never left it for the outside world")<sup>32</sup>. In this apparently surreal list, the fake "natural sensations" and the simulated Amazon actually uncannily resemble their real-world counterparts described by Barber and Frank. Images drawn from the most diverse cultures are reduced to the status of interchangeable sensations. Saramago here incorporates a triad of rare Portuguese allusions, two of them ironically self-referential: if the Torre dos Clérigos, or Clerics' Tower, is one of the landmarks of Oporto, the Monastery of Mafra is the subject of his own novel *Memorial do Convento*, and *The Stone Raft* is the actual title of another. The novelist darkly and mockingly imagines not only his local culture of origin but his own writings as food for the insatiable maw of the market, commodified, desubstantialised and turned into the raw material of spectacle.

Despite this, the novel's protagonists succeed in breaking the spell. Under the Centre, Cipriano discovers a sinister group of figures tethered together in a simulacrum of Plato's cave from *The Republic*, and concludes that, like the denizens of the cave, the inhabitants of the Centre are living in a world of illusion: "quem são essas pessoas, Essas pessoas somos nós" ("who are those people, Those people are us"<sup>33</sup>). Marta, who has been pregnant from the beginning, decides she cannot bring a child into the world in such an environment: "pari-lo aqui, eu não" ("I won't give birth to him here"<sup>34</sup>). Marçal gives up his job, and the family group, fortified by the widow Isaura, leaves the Centre forever, pledged to "uma viagem que não tem destino conhecido e que não sabem como nem onde acabará" ("a journey that had no known destination and which no one knew how or where it would end"<sup>35</sup>).

Saramago's narrative breaks off with the ball in the reader's court. The writer's ideological position is crystal-clear: the planetary free-market model, as symbolised by the Centre, is rejected. The characters' act of revolt could, however, be read, as anti-globalisation protests often are, as a negative gesture offering no credible alternative. The reader may also recall the ironic self-deprecation that creeps into Saramago's denunciation of the world of spectacle, as well as the paradox implicit in his global anti-globalisation campaign. All this does not mean the circle cannot be squared: Saramago himself is no techno-visionary, but his novel most eloquently speaks commitment to human communication - to a power, then, that may yet, through still-inchoate forms of networking, enable the emergence of a genuinely global alternative to market globalisation.

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<sup>32</sup> Saramago, *A Caverna*, 308, 259.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 282, 334; cf. *Republic*, Book VII.

<sup>34</sup> Saramago, *A Caverna*, 344, 290.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, 348, 293.

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(Note: all passages translated from languages other than English are the responsibility of the present author, except where an official translation is cited).

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