A Consul for Human Rights: Eça de Queiroz

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Resumo: Nun momento en que as relacións internacionais vólvense cada vez máis complexas, e no que as relacións entre o mundo occidental e China poden estar nun punto de inflexión, un retorno ás últimas décadas do século XIX pode ser útil para ler o contexto dos valores que poden animar estas relacións. Durante o decenio de 1870, o caso do Cónsul Eça de Queiroz é un exemplo interesante de como os diplomáticos poñen os intereses da humanidade como prioridade do seu programa. Más coñecida como un famoso escritor portugués, Eça de Queiroz ocupou durante dous anos o cargo de Cónsul de Portugal na Habana, nun período de transición do traballo escravo, e tomou a iniciativa de defender a causa de centenas de traballadores chineses chegados a Cuba desde Macao, recrutados masivamente como obreiros para as plantacións de cana de azucre, e explotados sen escrúpulos. O presente artigo describe, comenta e analiza este período praticamente descoñecido da vida de Eça de Queiroz, e mostra os límites da acción dunha personalidade que pode considerarse como precursor da promoción dos dereitos humanos.

Palabras clave: Eça de Queiroz; Cuba; China; Diplomacia; Escravitude.

Resumen: En un momento en que las relaciones internacionales se vuelven cada vez más complejas, y en el que las relaciones entre el mundo occidental y China pueden estar en un punto de inflexión, un retorno a las últimas décadas del siglo XIX puede ser útil para leer el contexto de los valores que pueden animar estas relaciones. Durante el decenio de 1870, el caso del Cónsul Eça de Queiroz es un ejemplo interesante de cómo los diplomáticos ponen los intereses de la humanidad como prioridad de su programa. Más conocida como un famoso escritor portugués, Eça de Queiroz ocupó durante dos años el cargo de Cónsul de Portugal en La Habana, en un período de transición del trabajo esclavo, y tomó la iniciativa de defender la causa de centenas de trabajadores chinos llegados a Cuba desde Macao, reclutados masivamente como obreros para las plantaciones de caña de azúcar, y explotados sin escrúpulos. El presente artículo describe, comenta y analiza este período prácticamente desconocido de la vida de Eça de Queiroz, y muestra los límites de la acción de una personalidad que puede considerarse como precursor de la promoción de los derechos humanos.

Palabras clave: Eça de Queiroz; Cuba; China; Diplomacia; Esclavitud.

Abstract: At a time where the international relations turns always more complex, and where the relationships between the Western World and China may be at a turning point, a return to the last decades of the 19th century may be useful to read the context of the values that can animate these relationships. During the decade of 1870s, the case of the Consul Eça de Queiroz is an interesting example of how diplomats put the interests of humanity as the priority of its
Eça de Queiroz (1845-1900), one of the most well-known Portuguese writers, famous for his novels and considered one of the references in the Portuguese literature, was in his lifetime a diplomat, having represented Portugal as a Consul in several countries. Considered by some as a dandy, by others as a mystic, part of his personality is still a mystery. Yet, one aspect of his life, namely of his professional life, has been left aside by his biographies, and should deserves more attention: it is his role as Consul General in Cuba, which was his first official position as Consul General, between December 1872 and May 1874. This relatively short period, shorter that usual for a Consul stay, may be explained precisely by the reaction (and actions) of Eça de Queiroz to oppose the labour exploitation in the sugarcane plantations. Such a situation was patronized by the Cuban authorities, which stimulated the recruitment and several hundreds of immigrant Chinese, arriving to Cuba after a journey from China, and more precisely the port of Macau — under Portuguese authority, reason why a Consul of Portugal was eventually needed.

This article looks at the man himself, putting this personage in his context and the context of his time. It also describes, succinctly, the conditions of life and work of the Chinese workers in Cuba, an island part of the colonial Spanish territories at that time, but where the autonomy of the local administration and the power of the landowners was the basis of many abuses, as in other overseas territories. Finally, the article deals with action of Eça de Queiroz, his initiatives to defend the humanity and rights of the Chinese workers, and the difficulties of his combat, sometimes desperate but insistent. A last point of the text includes comments on the stay of Eça de Queiroz on North America, here again a relatively ignored part of this story, which, would not be his protagonist a novelist himself, could well be the scenario of an excellent book.

2. The man

The author who is best known as Eça de Queiroz was born José Maria d’Eça de Queiroz, in Povoa do Varzim, Portugal, on 25 November 1845. His family was from the small provincial gentry, with on his father’s side several generations of magistrates and judges, and generations of soldiers on his mother’s side. Eça de Queiroz was born out of wedlock, four years before his parents’ wedding and, probably for this reason, was hidden by his parents during his first years.
He spent his childhood and adolescence first in Vila do Conde, in the north of Portugal, at a
childminder house, and then with at paternal grandparents house in Verdemilho, near Aveiro, in
the centre of the country. He will later be enrolled in a resident High school student in the centre
of Porto, at the Colégio da Lapa, where he stayed between 1856 and 1861 (Campos Matos, 2015,
pp. 317-320). It was there that he met a young French teacher, Ramalho Ortigão, actually himself
the son of the College’s director, and they became friends for life.

In 1861, at the age of 16, Eça de Queiroz joined the Faculty of Law of the University of
Coimbra. During five years, from 1861 to 1866, he studied Law without much interest, preferring
to play theatre and participate in the student life, including the literary protest movements
within the University community. During this period, he began to publish his first literary texts,
which were later collected in the opus Prosas Bárbaras. In 1866, already graduated in Law, Eça
de Queiroz moved to Lisbon and settled at his parents’ house. He registered as a Barrister with
the Lisbon Bar, but soon decided that the law profession was not his vocation. He then went to
Évora for six months, where he run a political opposition newspaper of which he was the sole
editor. He published articles in newspapers, leads a life of dandy and enjoyed a life of boheme
with his friends, and participated in a cycle of conferences that was quickly prohibited by the
police.

Searching for his own way, he started travelling. In 1869, he accompanied his friend
Luis de Castro, who was from old noble family of Porto, to officially represent Portugal at the
inauguration of the Suez Canal, in Egypt. Upon his return, in 1870, he got position, during a
few months, as an acting director of the territorial community of the District of Leiria. On the
same year, he passed the public competition to become a first-class Consul of Portugal. At that
time, he was considered as an opponent of the monarchy regime, a republican, and even close to
the socialist ideas if not almost a revolutionary, sharing Proudhon’s ideas for instance. Together
with his friend Ramalho Ortigão, he published a magazine, As Farpas, which was a satirical
monthly publication aimed at criticizing and reforming customs through laughter.

Over the course of seventeen years, As Farpas will draw up a picture of the Portuguese
society and culture, reflect on the social life, especially in the countryside, on education, politi-
cal life, religion, and the artistic trends. Eça will later characterize As Farpas, in a text posthu-
mosously inserted in the Notas contemporâneas, showing his empathy with his friend Ramalho
Ortigão:

And he gave everything to As Farpas: they were then like an open window,
through which great gusts of wind of civilization and education, irregular
and un-methodic, like all the gusts, were cleaning all the miasmes and always
bringing some good seed. How admirable, for example, the volume dedicated
to “Instruction in Portugal”! Pedagogy had constantly attracted him: the spec-
tacle of a generation atrophied in spirit and rachitic of body desolated him: and
it has not failed to call for a reform of education — that makes bodies healthy
and souls free.

On 16 March 1872, Eça de Queiroz was appointed to his first position in the Ministry
of Foreign Affairs, as Consul General of Portugal to the Spanish West Indies, were he actually
arrived only in December 1872. He stayed less than two years in Havana and, while occupying
his position, made a five-month long trip to the United States and Canada. After this position in Havana, he was appointed Consul in Newcastle (in late 1874), and then Consul in Bristol (in 1879). It is during this period that he married Emilia de Castro Pamplona Rezende, sister of his friend the earl of Rezende, in 1886. They had four children. Eça de Queirós was then appointed Consul General in Paris, in 1888, a position that he will keep until the end of his life. He died in Neuilly-sur-Seine, near Paris, on 16 August 1900, at the age of 55, severely weakened by a still unknown disease (probably intestinal tuberculosis or Crohn’s disease).

Eça de Queirós was never rich, and had to work for a living, contrary to many of his friends. Writing was not only a passion, for him, but also a way to sustain himself and his family. Eça de Queirós was a prolific writer, and a man opened to new ideas. As many men and intellectuals of his time, he was profoundly Francophile. As referred earlier, he was an admirer of Proudhon, and also of Victor Hugo. He would identify himself, as a writer, with authors of the so-called literary “realistic school”, and considered authors like Gustave Flaubert and Émile Zola as his masters. His masterpiece, *The Maias*, to which we could add *The Crime of Father Amaro* as well as *Cousin Bazilio*, three novels that plunge us back into 19th century Portuguese social life, are written with something in common with the manner of Zola. He left also many chronicles on the political life of his time, tales of great beauty, and he can be said to have contributed to introduce a sense of irony into the Portuguese literature. It was in Cuba that he wrote his first important text, in fact: the tale *Singularidades de uma rapariga loira*, published in his book of novels called *Contos*, in 1902, after his death. In fact, in Cuba Eça de Queirós will not have much time to develop his taste for literature. He will have a lot do, and will face new and drastic realities. It is even striking to observe how a man with his sensitiveness has been sent, for his first position, in a place where a challenge to the humane condition, in political and social terms, could be witnessed. Indeed, in Cuba, slavery was about to end, but was replaced by indentured labour in its worst form, the one taking advantage of the immigrant workers from another continent, from China.

3. Indentured Labour in Cuba in the 1870s

Slavery, as such, was not actually totally abolished in Cuba until 1888. It had been abolished in 1872, but reinstated almost immediately. However, it had been abolished in the English West Indies (1833/1840), as well as in the French West Indies (1848), and in the United States, following the Civil War (1865). Spain had banned, however, the clandestine trade of slaves from the African coasts. In Cuba, slavery still concerned the situation of black people, but it was exclusively slavery in the context of the household. Slaves, which were black people deported from Africa, did not work, as a rule, in the agriculture enterprises. As Eça de Queirós affirms in one of his letters to the Foreign Office, the contrast between the black slaves and the Chinese workers was obvious in Cuba: “The Chinese here are hated, they are attributed all the vices, and they are seen as enemies. Blacks are estimated as a domestic institution”. Work in the field, in agriculture, was almost exclusively done by the work of Chinese immigrants workers, and in conditions close or even worst that slavery, a situation that happened also in other locations in the Americas, namely in Peru and in the United States (Narváez, 2019).
Chinese immigration of the so-called “coolies” (or workers, a term used instead in this article) began in 1845, and the first Chinese contract workers arrived in Cuba in 1847, and it is estimated that within ten years about 250,000 Chinese immigrants workers left the port of Macau to America, including 100,000 having as destination Cuba. The first Chinese workers arrived in Cuba on 3 June 1847. From Macau left for America, in less than 10 years, 250,000 Chinese workers, of whom more than 100,000 settled in Cuba (Duarte, 1945, p. 8). Actually, Macau served as a platform and a port in the place of Hong Kong. The British authorities were reluctant to let the port of Hong Kong being used for sending workers to the territories of its rival, Spain. In addition, British rules obliged to limit the duration of the work contracts to five years, when a longer duration was possible in Macau (Duarte, 1945, p. 11). As soon as the Chinese workers arrived, they were subjected to the worse labour exploitation: work from sun to sun, underpaid, underfed, poorly housed (Hu-Dehart, 1994). Oddly, and for the simple fact of coming from Macau, the Chinese workers were regarded, formally, as being under Portuguese authority. As such, they had to register at the Consulate of Portugal in Havana, which was also supposed to be able to provide diplomatic protection, although the Cuban authorities were not expecting this to happen.

Most if not all the Chinese workers leaving for Cuba had in fact a formal contract for work in the sugarcane fields in Cuba. Cuba was the leading country in the sugarcane production, at that time (see Table 1). In fact, faced with the shortage of workforce, the Spanish “Real Junta of Fomento de Agricultura y Comercio” (the Chamber of Development of Agriculture and Trade) of Cuba, commissioned as early as in 1847 a Spanish company based in London, the company “Zulueta e Compañía”, to contract the first 600 Chinese workers, paying 170 US dollar per Chinese worker hired. The employment contract was to be for “eight years, the salary was four US per month. The workers were entitled to “two set of clothes per year, one pound of meat and two pounds of rice per day” (Duarte, 1945, p. 8).

Table 1. Sugarcane production in the 1870s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sugar can plantations</th>
<th>Total production in tons</th>
<th>% of the world production</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>359,397</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British West Indies</td>
<td>147,911</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana (United States)</td>
<td>132,468</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>105,603</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French West Indies</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Galván, 2004, p. 212, adapted from Thomas, Hugh.
The Chinese workers who arrived in Cuba had their status expressly fixed by the Regulation of Chinese Emigration (Regulamento de Emigração Chineza). They were entitled to a Portuguese identification document (called “cédula”, in Portuguese), issued by the Portuguese Consulate in Havana. Most importantly, one of the last changes in this Regulation was the possibility for the workers to be repatriated, may they change their mind. This fact, this specific document, explains that there will be a difference in status between the Chinese workers who arrived before 1861, who were supposed to have completed their 8-year contracts, and those who arrived after 1861. The problem is that the Cuba authorities in Havana prevented the Chinese workers who had terminated their eight-years contract from obtaining the renewal of the referred identity document, which would allow them to stay in Cuba, in Havana, as foreigners, but would also make possible for them to leave Cuba and return to China. Strangely enough, when issued by the Consulate of Portugal, the document in question was stolen or withdrawn by the local authorities or the employers of the Chinese workers in Cuba, under false reasons (e.g. that they were fake documents), or simply for arbitrary reasons. Without such a document, the Chinese immigrants were at the mercy of their employers. If they decided to hide, and work outside Havana, they would be arrested. When a Chinese immigrant was caught in such an illegal situation, without papers and without a contract, he was locked in a so-called “depositos”, which were nothing but forced labour camps, where he had to work in public works for the local authorities (“ayuntamentos”), in exchange of almost no payment (Archer de Lima, 1925).

Vianna Moog reports the practice of the “depositos”:

The depositos for the most part have no hygiene, no cleanliness, no order, no humanity; the supply of food for the settlers is given by auction to tavern owners who speculate materially on the living and are enriched by the hunger of the settlers, and there those wretches are kept until an owner goes to the deposition to claim a certain number of arms for the servitude of a second contract. Thus the deposit is only a slave interval between two slaves (Vianna Moog, 1943, p. 180).

In practice, the worst situations of exploitation occurred for the Chinese workers at the end of their contract period. Abuses were grossly committed, and protests were many among the Chinese population, up to the point that the Chinese government in Beijing sent a representative to investigate, the Mandarin Chin-Lan-Pin. He arrived in Cuba in 1874, and returned to China determined to lodge a diplomatic complaint. But he wasn’t the first to denounce the depositos, which were in reality true concentration camps. The first was actually the Consul Eça de Queiroz.

4. The Portuguese Consul in Havana

The position as Consul in Havana was the first post of Eça de Queiroz. He was appointed on 16 March 1872, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in a position of Consul General of Portugal to the Spanish West Indies. Yet, as seen before, the agreement of the Spanish authorities to the appointment of the diplomat (legally called exequatur) was not issued before 24 of October of that year. According to Beatriz Berrini, in the article on “China” written in the Dictionary
of Eça de Queiroz (Campos Matos, 2015, pp. 249-250), the presence of a consular representative in Cuba was not really appreciated by the local authorities, due to the potential difficulty it may create in relation to the Chinese workers coming from Macau. As a result, Eça de Queiroz arrived in Havana on 20 December 1872 and took office on the 21st of the same month, after the passage of powers by his predecessor, Mr Fernando Gaver. He headed a Consulate of Portugal composed of four members of personnel: the chancellor (or secretary), two officials and a Chinese interpreter. His task promised not to be easy.

Almost immediately, the Consul General Eça de Queiroz understood the dramatic situation that these Chinese “voluntary” workers had to face. Only a few days after his arrival, on 29 December 1872, he even wrote a long letter to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in Lisbon, Mr Joel de Andrade Corvo. In this letter, he strongly denounces the illegal practices of the Cuban authorities, and the inhumane treatment reserved to the Chinese workers in Havana. He affirms that if the emigration regulations may have helped to improve the conditions of transportation of the workers from China, but that his task needs to go further, and that it was the Consulate’s obligation to help them improve their conditions of residence in Cuba. In this letter, Eça de Queiroz does not hesitate to write that Chinese emigration of workers is a hidden and even vile under-covered form of slavery.

Eça de Queiroz also soon understood that the Consular Convention signed between Spain and Portugal on 21 February 1870, which was the basis for having established a Consulate of Portugal in Havana, was too vague, and did not give him the means to intervene effectively in his relations with the Cuba’s authorities. On 18 March 1873, he sent a long report to Lisbon on the political situation in Cuba, where he claimed that what ruled the island was in fact the “Casino Español”, which was a club in Havana founded in 1869, and composed of bankers and landowners of Cuba. Simultaneously, Eça de Queiroz shared his worries that he would not be able to perform his tasks alone. He requests the appointment of a Vice-Consul in Havana (letter of 15 March 1873), and of another one in Cárdenas, a port city located 150kms from Havana. Of the two Vice-Consuls, both Spanish landowners, the second one — in Cardenas — a former chief of the local police.

On 17 May 1873, Eça de Queiroz sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Lisbon, João de Corvo Andrade, in which he denounced the dramatic situation of the 80,000 Chinese workers, with he also called “settlers”:

> [W]ithout protection, without rights, abandoned to the exploitation of the owners, the arbitrariness of the authorities, the extortion of the police and the demands of the Ayuntamientos.

> Although the Emigration Regulation of the Government of Macao placed under the protection of the Consulate all settlers left from Macao, however, this protection could not be exercised with authority. The action of consular agents in Havana is so limited by the provisions of the Island Government that little more can be extended than to the maritime expedient.

> An old provision states that any settler who has fulfilled his first contract will be delivered by the master to the local authority, which terminates it in the deposit. The “deposit” is one of the most characteristic institutions of this legislation.
The deposits - each district capital has its own - are large barracks or huts where the settlers who fulfilled their first contract are closed as in a prison, until they are imposed a new contract.

In Lisbon, officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed to resolve the problem with an additional article to the Agreement with Spain. Informed of this proposal, Eça de Queiroz stated that he considered this to be completely inadequate and advocated, in a new letter, to sign a new international agreement which would be more detailed, more precise, and would clearly indicate the guarantees that must be given by the conveyors of Chinese workers, and also the powers that would be granted to Consular officers in order to be able to protect the workers. He was a lawyer, and as such he even sent the draft of the framework of the future international agreement, and the lists of the important points that should be clarified and would deserve specific revisions. He wrote:

> The agent in Havana needs to be have a convention that defines, article by article, all the rights of the colony, and which contains for each pending question a permanent solution; a detailed convention, taking for one of the four or five questions that are confusing, a clear, decisive article, which is not susceptible to subtle interpretations.

Who will decide, ultimately, the fate of the Chinese immigrants? After the many initiatives of Eça de Queiroz, a Colonization Commission was set up by the representative of the Spain, the Governor of Cuba (also entitled “Capitan General de Cuba”), the General Francisco de Paula Ceballos y Palma. This new body was composed of landowners and owners of the sugarcane factories. This “Central Colonization Commission” (“Central Commissão de Colonização”) (Ng, 2014), was immediately denounced by Eça de Queirós to his Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by a letter of 18 May 1873:

> There is in Cuba a Central Colonization Commission, without statutes and without the authorization of the Government of Madrid, and it is the one that has managed to get no Asian to take his identification document as foreigner from the Consulate.

> The settler is in an abnormal situation, inqualifiable: he is not a settler because he has finished his contract, and is not free because he does not have his identity document.

Indeed, Eça de Queiroz was putting the finger on what we would call today the many ways human rights violations can occur, in particular hidden and covered ones (which is not without reminding us some of the current realities, when considering the case of many migrants, which are “trapped” in a work which becomes a *de facto* slavery). In Cuba, Eça de Queiroz witnessed some desperate cases, and even situations were the Chinese immigrants commit suicide. Others Chinese workers also disappeared, and some hide in the island. Others even took up arms, and joined the armed insurgency fighting for Cuba’s independence (Serrano Sánchez, 1986).

Eça de Queiroz fights, but he will have to give up. He disturbs too much in Cuba, but also in Lisbon. In a letter to a senior official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, possibly in charge of the Consular Affairs, Jesuino Ezequiel Martins, who actually was his correspondent in Lisbon,
he writes bitterly, in a letter dated April/May 1873: “I received your Office about the coolies, that gave me the understanding that I, with my incessant evolving demands regarding the coolies, did not represent the intentions of the Government.” Eça de Queiroz had also an apparently rather serious incident with the Cuban authorities, probably related to the sending of the cédulas of the Chinese workers to Lisbon. The incident was solved after an explanation and a visit of the Secretary General of the Governor of Cuba. Eça de Queiroz indicates:

However, this incident did not change the difficulties: the dispatch of cédulas remains prohibited and today I had unofficial news that a decree cancelling in its effects all the ballots issued by the Consulate is being prepared in the Government. If such a decree is published, the existence and the reason for being of this Consulate will end. I cannot protest against the illegality of such a resolution. All my authority is implicitly lost from the moment a Chinese embassy arrives, claiming as its subjects the settlers left by Macau, and since the Government of the Island recognizes the authority of this Commission. All the issues of settlers are immediately dealt with between the Envoys of China and the Government of the Island, and I cannot even claim the right to intervene in the interests of those settlers who have Portuguese nationality, because the Government is preparing to annul the efficacy of these titles. I could certainly protest, but my protests would have no legal reason from the moment a Chinese legation or at least a Commission is on the island that attributes this characteristic. I therefore insist on the request I made in my last office: a precise order from you so that — or keep me here and that I may be entitled to claim as Portuguese settlers left Macao — or to waive all these rights before the Chinese Commission. In the second case, I beg you to send me a license to go to Portugal.

He resumed his work at the Consulate of Havana on 5 November 1873, after stay of a few months in the United States (cf. point 4 infra). He will continue to deliver identification documents to Chinese immigrants who had completed their employment contracts, however. Apart from providing a guarantee of legality to the workers, is also the granting of these documents that was the source of the Consulate’s rather comfortable revenue. But the situation will change quickly. Spain, probably with the Lisbon consent, set up a new Commission, called “Chinese Commission”, which will be a Joint Commission that will serve as the Chinese Legation in Havana. At the same time, Eça de Queiroz learns that the Governor of Cuba would cancel by decree all the identity documents (cedulas) issued by the Consulate to the Chinese immigrants. On 28 February 1874, Eça de Queiroz protested in a letter sent to Minister for Foreign Affairs, João de Andrade Corvo, admitting at the same time that he would abandon his projects.
subjects the settlers that have left Macao – or that I abdicate all these rights in favour of the Chinese Commission. In the second case, I beg you to send me a leave to go to Portugal.

The situation will be decided some time later: the boarding of Chinese workers from the port of Macau to the Americas will be simply prohibited. It is João de Andrade Corvo himself, now simultaneously the new Ministry of the Navy and Overseas since 1872, that will decide this prohibition of immigration from Macau to the Cuba. The communication of this prohibition will be then officially issued by the Governor of Macau on 20 December 1873. On 27 March 1874, in Macau, a decree will put a final end to emigration (Campos Matos, 2015).

Eça de Queiroz’s mission to Havana was over, as he had basically no more reason to remain on the island. He returned to Lisbon at the end of May 1874. Before leaving Cuba, the group of Chinese workers visited him, to offer him a golden cane, in sign of their appreciation for what he has done, or even tried to do (Campos Matos, 2015).

In Lisbon, and while awaiting his new consular assignment, Eça de Queiroz worked a few months at the seat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. His new position in the United Kingdom, as Consul of Portugal in Newcastle, was notified to him a few months later. Before leaving for Newcastle, he wrote a long official report to which he gave an emblematic title: Emigration as a civilizing force (A Emigração como Força Civilizadora). In this report, dated 9 November 1874, he refers the drama of Cuba’s Chinese workers, and his determination to try to find solutions to this human and diplomatic problem. He concludes his report in a rather pessimistic way: “The situation of the coolies is today more than ever disgraced” (Campos Matos, 2015, pp. 394-395).

5. The Stay in North America

Eça de Queiroz was also interested in the situation of forced labour in the south of the United States, were the situation had something in common with that of Cuba, and simultaneously would explain the workers’ flows to Cuba. Duarte (1945) actually underlines the reasons behind the recruitment of migrants to Cuba:

The abolition of slavery in America had created a problem inverse to that of Europe: the lack of arms. In the southern states, immensely free legislation encouraged the arrival of European emigrants. Tobacco planters from the South, from the slave states, now treat the European emigrant as they treated the black slave (Duarte, 1945, p. 30).

The Portuguese citizens did not escape this treatment. In New Orleans area, in particular, there was indications of abuses, which were probably transmitted by workers that in the meantime would have escaped to Cuba. The situation was serious enough for the Portuguese government to justify an enquiry, and Duarte sustains that Eça de Queiroz would have been contacted by the Portuguese Foreign Office to do an enquiry (Duarte, 1945, p. 30). Yet, it is not the main reason why Eça de Queiroz went to the United States. Eça de Queiroz asked for a leave, while in Havana, and justified it due to his poor health and his difficulty to adapt to Cuba’s climate. The request for leave of absence of Eça de Queiroz is documented. It is dated 15 March
1873, and he wrote in it: “Having been ordered by the doctors to avoid being in Havana at all, in this first year of acclimatization, on the occasion of the fevers, I pray Your Excellency, for the convenience of my health, to grant me leave to leave Havana in the coming months”.

Eça de Queiroz’s stay in the United States, between end May (when his leave is authorized) June and the first days of November 1873 (when he returns to Havana), is documented by Archer de Lima (1925)(also Campos Matos, 2015, p. 28), and the former gives extra information on the questions in cause. In fact, after the end of slavery, following the Civil War (1861-1865), companies and large landowners needed labour and European immigrants were called in. In the states of the south, were slavery was common, the owners treated European workers as they had treated their slaves in the past. Eventually this became known. Eça de Queiroz was already aware of this, and had reported to his government in Lisbon some cases of Portuguese immigrants who had worked in the New Orleans plantations, and that fled to Cuba. In fact, the capital of Cuba, Havana, was witnessing the arrival of many migrant workers escaping slavery or equivalent treatment in the Southern states of the United States, and was also the refuge of the Portuguese who fled the Virginia plantations, as recalls Archer de Lima (1925).

Eça de Queiroz had assisted them, as he mentions: “Tickets on board the Spanish ships to return to Portugal, monthly fees, help for families, housing paid by the Consulate for weeks (...), everything is achieved and is employed to give the widest protection to compatriots” (Archer de Lima, 1925). He was effectively appointed by the Foreign Affairs in Lisbon to go there, and to see what was going on and try to find solutions to help the Portuguese workers apparently being mistreated in the tobacco plantations in the southern states.

Yet, if there can be no doubt about the feelings of the Portuguese Consul of Havana about the working conditions of European or Chinese workers to the West Indies, in the letters that Eça de Queiroz sent during his North American stay, there is absolutely nothing about the working conditions of Portuguese immigrants. In fact, it does not seem that Eça de Queiroz stayed long in the southern states of the United States. He would instead goes straight to New York and to the north, where he will meet an American woman he knew in Cuba, Anna Canover. He then goes to Pittsburgh, where he meet another woman, Mollie Bidwell. In a long letter to his friend Ramalho Ortigão, dated 20 June 1873, he only speaks of Saint Louis, in Missouri, of refers Chicago, Philadelphia, the Lake Erie, the Niagara Falls, the Lake Ontario, and a trip up to the river Saint-Laurent to Montreal. In fact, it is likely that Eça de Queiroz organized this stay in Northern America with second intentions, and that he had expectations regarding a relationship with eh two women he met in the United States, and in particular Mollie Bidwell, who was a single. But, apparently, not only his visit to the workers failed, or even did not happen. He doesn’t talk about his problems in his letters, keeping his confidences and his moods for future face-to-face conversations with his friends. However, he appears nervous, sad, almost depressed. He writes: “Twenty days ago I left New York so sad, so nervous and yet so happy. (...) I was in Pittsburgh for about 10 of the most unique days of my life.”

Eça de Queiroz, considered as Proudhonian, the socialist, the friend of the marxist Antero de Quental, may not have been well received by the American upper-middle class members he met. He admits that he didn’t go to the big working-class centres of Pennsylvania to see workers. He writes: “I went to the manufacturing centre of Pennsylvania not to examine the worker
but to visit a capitalist [nota bene: who was actually Mollie’s Bidwell’s father]. Hide this point from the bloody Batalha [nota bene: one of his friends in Lisbon]”. And he even dares to admit that his conspiratorial temperament has calmed down (“vejo capitalistas sem empalidecer”).

At the end of the day, it is clear that Eça de Queiroz did not spent time in going to study the working conditions of European immigrants who worked on the large cotton and tobacco farms in the southern United States. It is likely that the frustration of the Cuban experience may have been a factor for his bitterness, and even inactivity while in the United States.

6. Conclusion

Eça de Queiroz is almost unknown as a Consul of Portugal. His works as a writer, made him a major author, not only in his home country, but also worldwide. This contribution aims to highlight one specific aspect of his life and career, one peculiar moment, which has probably more importance than may be suspected. Indeed, his first experience as a Consul of Portugal was a hard one: not only he was received with animosity, and stopped in his initiatives, but he also had to witness and assist a severe labour exploitation situation in the sugarcane fields, the gross exploitation and even a new form of slavery of the Chinese workers arriving from Macau. Eça de Queiroz did all he can to help, and did not spare his time and energy to change for better the situation. Despite the fact that he was hampered in his action, and that local authorities would manage to continue their abusive work practices, his intense activity had a result. By putting pressure on his government, it would end the workers recruitment and boarding of workers from Macau.

Eça de Queiroz will remain deeply affected by this experience in Cuba, and will always show great admiration for the Chinese people and the Chinese civilization. A few years after his stay in Cuba, in 1880, he will write a short novel called The Mandarin (Eça de Queiroz, 2009). It is a strange story, where a man is supposed to kill a mandarin to get access to a treasure. The moralistic conclusion echoes what certainly continued to live in the mind of the former Consul of Portugal in Havana: “And to you men, I will only leave you, without commentaries, these words: “Only tastes well the bread that day by day earn our hands: never kill the Mandarin!”” (“E a vós, homens, lego-vos apenas, sem commentários, estas palavras: “Só sabe bem o pão que dia a dia ganham as nossas mãos: nunca mates o Mandarim!””).

Eça de Queiroz himself will never go to China. However, almost at the end of his life, a friend of Eça de Queiroz brought him a Mandarin dress from China, that can be seen in his home in Santa Cruz do Douro, in Portugal. There are pictures with Eça de Queiroz dressed in his Chinese mandarin dress. Behind this almost insignificant aspect, many symbols are present: before all, his continuous admiration for the Chinese culture, but also the love for humanity. A true pioneer in this respect, Eça de Queiroz dressed, more than only a Chinese dress, the idea that we must fight for other men, however distant they may be by origin, language or culture, transcend international boundaries, restore a universal dignity, in the name of our common human condition.
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