ABOUT THE BOOK *PORTUGAL TODAY – FEAR OF EXISTING*

Can this be us? Moreover, it is what we want to be?

*Ana Pinto da Costa*  

José Gil is a teacher and a philosopher, deemed one of the great world thinkers by Le Nouvel Observateur in its 40th anniversary edition, on January 2005. Born in Moçambique 67 years ago, he got his master degree of Philosophy in the Sorbonne, Paris, where he walked the Quartier Latin, side by side with Lacan, Barthes and Derrida, among others. No wonder, so, that he decided to shed some light on the Portuguese being. As a result, he published, in 2004, the book *Portugal Today, Fear of Existing* (*Portugal Hoje, o Medo de Existir*), a shrewd analysis of a reality where creative thinking always comes last, and fear and envy grow. Along excerpts from the book chosen by the journalist who interviewed him, José Gil talks about his work and his conclusions.

**José Gil** – «I do not intend to analyse Portuguese identity – using Foucault’s terms, modestly, I would say that my goal is to analyse conditions or even the stratus of subjectiveness, that causes Portuguese specific behaviours, too obvious not to be of significance, nothing else. A Portuguese’s subjectivity changes when in different contexts. I look for something that can change, but that I perceive as recurrent and it is so for centuries, although it remains as stratus of subjectiveness. When I say stratus, I mean standards of thinking that froze in us, which we assimilated and some of which do not even report to the circumstances who gave them birth in the first place. »

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«It’s life. » The sentence that often ends the night Journal on television defines the mental atmosphere we live in. (...) It creates a small transcendence, imperceptible but indelible, the profound effect of the moral-metaphysical imperative: the viewer is placed inside the world but at the same time above it, living it without living. (...) It is this confused mixture of transcendence-immanence of our life to Life that provokes a mist in the spirit (...) a fog that surrounds us and does not allow us to clearly distinguish real from «unreal» (...). On one hand, television builds representations of a far away world; on the other hand, that is the world that suits my world. (...) No startle of the though exists.

José Gil - «There is a fear that makes inhibition a trend of Portuguese character. It seems to me Salazar’s regime reactivated, reinforcing it, a story of the crushing, the inhibition of the Portuguese people. We must remember Salazar’s goal, to put a stop to all Portuguese emotions – as he himself said in an interview to António Ferro, “to put an end to the Republic’s chaos”. Now we must be orderly, normalised, silent people. That is what he wanted. A politic with real instruments, and a repression that irradiated and everyone assimilated until no self-expression was possible. »

(...) lets accept the evils of the world, the vexations, all that goes against our will, because it results of power and logic well above ours. (...) Resignation leads to impotence, apathy to inertness and fogeysish attitudes.

José Gil - «It happens also because there is no public space, consequence of something that holds our experience – personal, professional – in its separate rooms, and that is extremely serious. People do not grasp the reach of an idea, and there is no criticism, no notion of what can or cannot be said. Truly, you can say anything; make whatever cocktail of olive and water you wish. This is a lack of tradition in investigation,
research in art history, philosophy... all we have is the historical studies, one of our most solid grounds, and even there some things cannot be spoken. »

(...) People go to exhibitions and shows, they «liked it» or «didn't liked it», and return home, that is, to other worries. Criticism as identical faith: if there are effects, any feedback, it stays deep down in spirit, the secrecy of lonely souls. Painters, sculptors seldom speak of their art among themselves. Art remains an individual matter. It does not enter peoples life's, it does not changes individual existences. It is displayed in windows.

José Gil - «As a consequence of lack of desire, lack of passion, expression is not permitted, and we do not create as we could do.

I remember seeing an interview of a genial young Portuguese mathematician, questioned about the reason why he was not working in Portugal. He answered that it would be impossible. Only in Oxford, with his colleges, he had the necessary intensity of though twenty-four hours a day. I lived in France during a very intense intellectual time, when Lacan, Barthes and Derrida walked, side by side, along the Quartier Latin, and I know what he meant.

Of course, there are Portuguese intellectuals, but our best ‘brains’ work in foreign countries... sure, there were times when such activity occurred, but I believe that today it happens only now and then, here and there. It takes all the conditions that form an environment to force us discover what is specific, creative, innovator in each of us, and to draw imagination. »

(...) Today, with the planetary broaden of kitsch as universal gender for taste, it was inevitable that rudeness became more acute in our archaic and so close to post-modern country. (...) Therefore, we have the strange image of a people with a barbaric background rapped in layers of culture (from Greek and roman paganism to the Celts and Arabs) who cannot transform completely that background into
civilisation. (…) (Brutality and the amazing length of domestic abuse; crimes of passion; child work – all this contradicts the statement of a veiled violence. It is not veiled, it is obvious and exerted clandestine every day).

José Gil – «I have my own experience as an example of the lack of public space and lethargy. When I gave seminars in Portugal, everybody just took notes in silence during the classes. In France, the same classes – often more difficult –, immediately had as a response heavy discussion among the students. There is a world of difference.»

(…) Numbness, delight, the violence of rudeness. And, above, on the surface, progressive proliferation of cultural types (especially the popular) to fill the absence (and as protection against the void).

Inside the houses, little things cover walls, tables, windows, the smallest space of a shelf beneath any given stair, and thoughts jump in extraneous and insignificant connections, continuously worrying awareness except when numbness crams it. Panic of the void rules inside as well as outside.

José Gil – «But things are changing, because people are sick of it. Because, even if they do not communicate among themselves, they communicate with foreigners and, eventually, will transfer it to Portuguese ground. Slowly, but it is changing. I would very much like to know (actually, everybody would), in economic terms, what would really change Portugal, from this kind of lethargy – a euphemism, for sure – to dynamics. After all, we all want dynamics; it is much more pleasant – instead of the secondary delight that doing nothing brings.

(…) We live in Portugal a specific situation, transition from «disciplinary» societies to control ones, more and more caught up in globalisation. (…) The rule is social stability, no conflict, and good sense. Like our president, supreme voice of the nation’s politic and civil life thinks, for our own good. Today, Portuguese self-
esteem hides a double fear, not being able to access to that centre of normalisation and be driven from it.

José Gil - «Some things still happen in Portugal, for instance, ethnography – a field I know well. Things vanished from the rest of Europe a century ago, like the ritual for the weight of souls in the north. Moreover, those who study it are French and Italian ethnographers. There is an abyss between the so-called popular and erudite culture that prevents the first one to be dignified and appreciated. Not to speak of other rituals lost in the rest of the continent since the XIIIth Century, still alive in our country, that could be studied. »

(...) But the fear or terror (white, invisible) of the terror (black, recognisable) keeps undermining our unconscious, inhibiting us, cautioning us, preventing us from creating other forms of thinking or existing.

José Gil - «We never speak of how interesting someone is – singularity is not appreciated, we are all immersed in self-contemplation. We needed a plan, a tissue woven with Portuguese experiences as a start to begin thinking. I just do not know how to do it, nor even am I sure, if it could really be a first step towards the change from lethargy to dynamics. »

(...) Fears, micro terrors everyday, multiple, like swollen glands of an announced plague, ripping the skin.