The occupation of the Portuguese Littoral in 19th and 20th Centuries

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Abstract

During the 19th and 20th centuries the Portuguese littoral suffered a series of alterations. Two distinct periods can be observed: The “Therapeutic” (19th and first half of the 20th century), and the “Recreational” (2nd half of the 20th century). A relationship between occupation related to bathing and thermal activity can be established. The development of the means of transport on a national level played an important role in the observed trends. This is true particularly along the coastlines.

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern times mark a turning point on an economic, political, social, cultural, and technological level that had great impact on everyday life. The development of means of transport, particularly after the introduction of railways and later cars, facilitated mobility to one’s work place, or destinations of entertainment and leisure. Consequently, old means of transport, such as rented ox-carts (Ortigão 1876) or coaches are abandoned. Besides the discomfort, there was no justification for spending several hours on a trip of just a few kilometres, such as the displacement from Porto to Foz, which could take six to eight hours (Ortigão 1876). Furthermore, the increase in life standard of different social groups allowed them to indulge in new customs and fashions, related to spending, or socialising. Standing out amongst these is a “popularisation of access to bathing resorts” (Vaquinhas & Cascão 1993), leading to an intensification of the occupation of the Portuguese littoral during the 19th and 20th centuries, which is the subject of this study.

Another interesting aspect is the correlation that can be established between this intensification of the littoral occupation and the crisis affecting thermal baths on a national level beginning in the nineteen-forties.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In past centuries the littoral has, in reality, always been an area with little attraction, which was avoided at all costs. With the exception of fishing communities and ports there was little that would attract populations to the coast, to the contrary. Climatically it is an area of contrast, hot during the day and cold during the night, windy, and without protection against the sun. In terms resources there were, with exception of fisheries and harbours, little to exploit.

On the other hand it was a dangerous area: People inhabiting it (mostly fishermen) were rude; pirates and corsairs made frequent incursions killing and looting. Consequently the littoral was for a long time an area of scarce occupation.

The awakening interest for the sea and the beaches manifesting itself in Portugal from the end of the 19th century onwards was a phenomenon that paralleled a trend all over Europe, since “the promotion of the sea in European social life is a recent phenomenon. Until the 19th century, and with exception of the ports, many coasts were almost empty and remained so in some regions to our days”. “(...) this social phenomenon is European in character. The sea emerges like a discovery (...) curiously, this fashion only reached the Mediterranean and the margins of the Adriatic very slowly” (Du Jourdin 1995). Here and there all over Europe the first bathing beaches appeared, with focus on France and Britain.

From the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century it can be said that the occupation of the Portuguese littoral was of therapeutic character, as the objective of bathers when they left their houses carrying their bags and baggage to the beach resorts (to the north as well as the south of the country) was to “go to the baths”, a phenomenon which consisted in exposing oneself to the waves at the beach. Such practice was subjected to medical prescription, being indicated as treatment for several physical illnesses or states of the mind, and applied to adults and children. Baths in the sea were taken “as remedy, not for pleasure”. (Colaço & Archer 1943). These baths were taken according to a ritual as instructed by bathers (individual responsible for administration of baths). These were mostly fishermen, who due to their knowledge of the sea, the force of waves, and the beaches, exercised these functions during the bathing epoch.
The baths had to be “quick, including three dives during which the person taking the bath had to take the brunt of seven waves” (Colaço & Archer 1943).

On the 5th of March 1933 José Filipe Alvares, a doctor in the region, wrote in the newspaper “O Algarve”: “our Algarve would be very rich if its medical doctors made a widespread propaganda of the region, with abundant publication of books with therapeutic indications confirmed by cases of cure or improvement of its patients”.

But not all social groups were able to spend a bathing epoch in these resorts. Initially this was a privilege of the aristocratic elite. However, in the course of the 19th century, and parallel to the ascension of the middle classes, new social customs emerged, such as enjoying a public walk, the popularisation of access to bathing resorts (Vaqueinhas & Cascão 1993). Consequently, the frequentation of beaches expanded to wider social groups. However, the fact that the access to beaches had become more popular does not mean that it resulted in an amalgamation of different social groups. What occurred was a hierarchisation of places, depending on who frequented them. So, there were more elegant beaches of aristocratic character, such as Paço D’Arcos and Cascais in the vicinity of Lisbon, frequented by the king and his court; Granja, which emerged after the construction of the railway (Linha do Norte) in 1864 (Vaqueinhas & Cascão 1993) and was occupied by a few rich families from Porto, that had their summer residences there (Sociedade de Propaganda de Portugal 1918); or Figueira da Foz which, in spite of serving as a summer resort for various social groups, “had a social segregation on a temporal level”, that is, “the noble period of the bathing epoch, between mid-August and the end of September was almost exclusively reserved to the rich families of Coimbra, Lisbon and the Beira Alta” (Vaqueinhas & Cascão 1993).

These resorts were frequently coveted by those who pretended to ascend socially or make an “entrance in the world” (Ortigão 1876), which led the elites to abandon these localities and to chose others, which then in turn became the spots of fashion and elegance, as was the case of Cascais and the Estoril (Colaço & Archer 1943).

Also the period of stay varied according to the social group of the visitor; there were those who stayed for two or three months (particularly the ladies, who came accompanied by several suitcases with elegant dresses, to be used in the soirées and parties organised during this time), or those who arrived and, in two or three days took their baths and returned to their place of origin (Ortigão 1876).

During the course of the 20th century begin to appear alterations in this form at looking at the littoral. It turns into a place for pleasure par excellence, where the beach plays an important role in leisure and becomes a holiday destination for individuals of all social classes.

This is evidenced by contemporaneous publications, particularly newspapers and magazines. The Século Ilustrado (Illustrated Century) from 25th of August 1945, in an article called «Portuguese Beaches, Beaches of Dreams» says: “the sea is conquering the soul of our people every day, making them fall in love with it. Where there once was a deserted beach, there are now white spots of canvas, signs of life”, or “the sun, the sand, and the sea constitute nowadays the biggest attraction for those wanting to invigorate themselves, or simply spend a day in the open air”, or even, “the brave and fearless people set out to discover beaches wherever they could find a place to do so”. In another article in the same newspaper but from 5th of August 1939, the advantages of the sun and the sea were exalted in publicity-like style “girls: the sea and the sun are your friends. They are calling you wanting to take care of your health, your beauty, and your youth”. These affirmations are unmistakable: the drive to the coast is now motivated by questions of fashion, associated to criteria of beauty and aesthetics, “after four or five days at the beach the skin gains a bronzed tone, which for the ladies is a pleasure, because it will cause jealousy in friends with a white body” (Século Ilustrado, 4th of August 1945).

There is also an increasing preoccupation with the appropriate clothes to be worn at these places. Publications from that time such as «Revista Turismo» from August 1948 show this, when referring to the patterns on the bathing suits: “they are a pleasure for the eye, and make the beach look like a field of flowers”. Forgotten are the times when men and children “entered the water in long mesh suits, collars and sleeves below the elbow” (Colaço & Arche 1943) and the ladies dragged heavy tailed dresses when entering the water. With the new century “the bathing suit suffered an audacious modernisation. Naked legs appeared for the first time on the beach” (Colaço & Arche 1943). The process leading to the use of the bikini would be completed during the sixties, already influenced by foreign tourists, which already frequently used them at that time, particularly in the Algarve. However, still in October 1969 the «Algarve Ilustrados» (Illustrated Algarve) referring to the use of bikinis in the Algarve region says: “the sea corporals, until then with severe orders to apply fines, were given instructions to «close their eyes»”.

86
A paradigmatic example for the recreational occupation of littoral is the region of the Algarve. Still during the first half of the 20th century the Algarve was waiting to be discovered. In a conference in Lagos on 28th of May 1928, in a cycle promoted by the «Diário de Notícias», it was said, referring to the Praia da Rocha, “you still don’t possess anything, forgotten by everybody nearly all the time, forgotten even by those who live nearby and owe everything to you” (Franco 1928). However, an intensification of tourist occupation throughout the region can be observed during the sixties, carried mainly by foreign tourists, and maybe motivated by the “slogan of the 4S – Sun, Sea, Sand and Sex” (Ferreira 1997).

Initially through private initiative but helped by political leverage and later already with a “orientating scheme for the urbanisation of the entire marginal stretch” («O Algarve», May 10th 1964) steered by the Ministry for Public Works, infra-structures were being built throughout the entire Algarve (mainly Hotel units) to answer the necessities of those looking for them. Parallel to the tourist/bathing occupation during the analysed period, “also the thermal baths, spread through several parts of Portugal and very appreciated for their medicinal virtues, constituted fashionable tourist destinations” (Serrão 1991), mainly until the middle of the 20th century.

The tradition of the so-called “going to the waters”, has been known since roman times, with periods of more and less popularity, according to the taste and fashion of the ages. However, the passage from the 19th to the 20th century culminated in what was known as the “golden age of Portuguese thermal baths”. Frequenting them became part of the customs of several kings and their families such as D. Luís, D. Maria Pia, or D. Manuel II who, in 1910, in the eve of the end of the monarchy, spent his summer holidays in the pastoral Mata do Buçaco, dislocating himself “to the beautiful town of Luso for thermal treatments” (Sociedade da Água de Luso, s.a 1997). In the heels of royalty the “aristocracy and wealthy burgeois” followed this fashion (Azevedo & Vasconcelos 1995).

Thanks to this elegant clientele, thermal baths turned into centres of luxury and leisure, containing infra-structures such as casinos, ball- and dining rooms, where orchestras entertained the guests (Azevedo & Vasconcelos 1995) or car racing circuits, spaces for horse riding, swimming, cinemas and theatres (Ferreira 1995). For these guests the therapeutic dimension was little more than a pretext for the celebration of an idle lifestyle within the resort (Ferreira 1995), the same as occurred during the initial occupation of the littoral.

An account made by the “Sociedade da Água de Luso” refers that in 1874 “the bathing epoch ends with 1308 visitors, coming from a variety of places in the country (...) 308 from Coimbra, 198 from Lisbon, 108 from Cantanhede, 99 from Porto, 98 from Mealhada, 58 from Anadia, 42 from Montemor, 34 from Oliveira do Bairro, 33 from Éstarreja, 31 from Aveiro, 37 from Aqueada, 23 from Ovar, 15 from Penacova, 13 from Mortágua, 12 from Figueira, 12 from Alvaiázere, 12 from Ilhavo, 10 from Vagos, 9 from Tomar, 8 from Santa Comba – Dão, 6 from Albergaria, 5 from Condeixa, 3 from Vianna, and 134 from various provenance. This number is indeed extraordinary if we take the transport means of the epoch into account, seen that the Beira Alta railway line is only inaugurated later, in 1882” (Sociedade da Água de Luso, s.a 1997).

Another example for the importance of transport is the case of Caldas de Moledo (Peso da Régua) which benefited from the construction of the road from Régua to Amarante in the mid eighteen hundreds and which rapidly “(...) transformed into a places where wealthy people met. There were even special trains leaving from Régua (...)” (in “As Caldas de Moledo” by Rui Machado, cit in Jornal de Noticias, 11th of June 2000).

During the wild twenties, and similar to what occurred in the rest of the world “a shiver of enthusiasm went through the Portuguese thermal baths” (Azevedo & Vasconcelos 1995). To attend to the well-being of all guests, the thermal resorts tried to find means providing maximum comfort; this is related by the magazine “Revista Turismo”, in the edition of May/June 1942, making a description of several thermal resorts, such as the ones at Luso, where “there is no lack of links, good hotels and pensions, incentives for entertainment and leisure, everything you could imagine in the most sophisticated and modern form”, pointing out the “ Grand Hotel of the thermal baths of Luso, recently built in the best style and with luxurious installations”, with a capacity of up to 400 guests. Clara Azevedo writes, referring to the thermal baths during this period: “more than ever they have turned into centres of leisure, places to spend the summer where you can shine, or bathe in the glow of stars of first order shining around you like some kind of magic” (Azevedo & Vasconcelos 1995).

In the already cited article in the magazine “Revista Turismo” it says, still, that the thermal baths “the luxury one as much as the cheaper ones, have made progress in the past years”.

However, this “golden age” was soon to finish. Due to insufficient diversification of leisure and spotting installations, the isolation of a few establishments, their location in non-wealthy places (Cavaco 1980), the change of customs and
tastes of individuals (Azevedo & Vasconcelos 1995), the “crisis that this type of medicine and therapy, based on the use of mineralised waters, was going through, and whose medical credibility was questioned in face of the development of more modern medical techniques” (Ferreira 1995) led to a prolonged crisis of thermal baths on a national level that followed a European trend beginning in the nineteen-forties. Still, the period of the Second World War was for the Portuguese thermal baths a period of growth, since these attracted many foreigners “probably refugees, and not bathing guests” (Cavaco 1980). These resorts probably served as shelter/lodging to many refugees, similar to what occurred later after the 24th of April 1974, when a wave of people returned from the Portuguese ex-colonies.

The decades of the nineteen-fifties and –sixties marked an accentuated decline in thermal tourism.

The increased mobility beginning in the nineteen-sixties, mainly through improved transport networks and the increasing importance of air traffic (particularly in the case of the Algarve with the inauguration of the International Airport in Faro in 1965), led the national and foreign bathing guests to choose the littoral for a few days break or simply a change of air, with a preference for the south coast of the country. It was thus that the so-called “mass tourism” emerged (Ferreira 1997).

On the other hand, if the capacity of the offer of bathing resorts is compared to that of thermal baths, it can be seen that the first have a physical space that allows to host all those arriving, while the thermal baths are always conditioned by the local infrastructure.

The “cult of sunshine, symbol of health, image of vitality and promise of beauty” replaced the old “cult of the waters”, leading to a decrease in number of bathing guests and, consequently, to the “reduction in the numbers of active establishments” (Azevedo & Vasconcelos 1995).

The crisis of thermal baths continued until the nineteen-seventies, when the thermal activity received a new life-line after the installation of the democratic regime in 1974. The Portuguese state created programmes of financial support to thermal resorts, institutionalising what became known as social thermalism: making thermal visits more attractive to a wider clientele, conceding subsidies to patients on social security going to thermal resorts to receive treatments, and transforming the thermal resorts into centres of therapy and leisure (Ferreira 1995). At present thermal baths are visited by a new group pertaining to the urban middle classes choosing them as “an alternative to the big centres of mass tourism” (Ferreira 1995). Thus a new clientele was configured for the several active resorts.

The increase in leisure time thanks to the reduction of weekly work hours to 44h (Dec.-Lei 409/71, 27th of 1971) – “English Week” – (only Saturday afternoon and Sunday) and later the transition to 40h (Lei de 21/96, 23rd of July 1996) – “American Week” – allowed the working class to reserve Saturdays and Sundays for activities of recreational character. However, shortly after the 25th of April 1974 state employees already stopped working on Saturdays although their weekly schedule had not been officially reduced.

On the other hand, the right for paid holidays every year guaranteed by law, the first reference of which can be found in the law decree Dec. nº. 47031 of the 27th of May 1966 and later the attribution of a holiday subsidy (Dec.-Lei nº.292/75 of the 16th of June 1975), allowed a great majority of the Portuguese population to spend a few days away from their normal residence looking for the most pleasant places, amongst which the littoral of the Algarve stands out.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The awakening interest for the littoral during the 19th and 20th centuries reflected a changing society. The middle classes succeeded in establishing themselves as a strong social group, able to interfere in all aspects of life, and imposing themselves onto the traditional privileged classes.

As seen they introduced new customs, new fashions, and new habits, which were rapidly assimilated by the contemporaneous society, standing out the “democratisation” in the access to bathing resorts. Initially people went to the littoral for therapeutic motives since baths in the sea were used in the treatment of illnesses; from the second half of the 20th century onwards going to the beach during the holidays became a leisure activity for thousands of people, for which the sun and the sea were a perfect combination to spend a few agreeable and restful hours.

This way of looking at the littoral was directly related to the crisis that during the nineteen-forties hit national and international thermal resorts. If on one hand the new way of looking at the coast absorbed great part of the old clientele of thermal baths, on the other hand in Europe the destruction of thermal bath infrastructure, and members of the aristocracy of the most affected European countries fleeing during the Second World War contributed to the closure of establishments. In Portugal, this crisis was felt later, coinciding with the return of exiled people to their countries of origin and the intensification of the occupation of the littoral.
The increase in buying power of the Portuguese the attribution of holiday subsidies and the introduction of new customs such as taking a vacation contributed in decisive manner to a search of new spaces dedicated to rest and leisure: the littoral and the south became the preferred destinations.

An important aspect to be taken into account when talking about the occupation of the littoral is without doubt the role played by the means of transport. If on one side they facilitated the fixation of population along the length of networks (roads and railways), on the other their existence also served as an incentive for the creation of industrial areas and the growth of agglomerations already existing in their proximity.

An intensification of littoral occupation, particularly from the nineteen-sixties onwards, had a few negative consequences for the affected coastal areas; problems of visual pollution, disrespect for dune belts leading to their thinning, noise pollution and urban questions amongst others, motivated the concern of a series of organisms and institutions. With the objective of repairing in some and preventing in other cases, the state is taking measures in order to minimise such effects. For this, protected landscapes were created, such as the southwest of the Alentejo region and the Vicentina coastline, created by the law decree nº 241/88, of the 7th of July of 1988, which clearly refers to “a still little adulterated area with natural aspect. However, there are movements in the sense of a larger occupation and utilisation, that should be regulated so that the development of the area can occur in an equilibrated way, respecting natural, landscaping and cultural values that should be preserved”.

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