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An ethnography of austere livelihoods in Northern Portugal

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A photograph of a village in Northern Portugal, featuring stone buildings with tiled roofs and a cloudy sky. The scene is a hillside village with several stone houses. In the foreground, there is a stone wall. A person is visible near the wall. The sky is blue with white clouds. The text is overlaid on the upper part of the image.

“We Have Always Been in Crisis”
An Ethnography of Austere Livelihoods
in Northern Portugal

Carmen Leidereiter

“We Have Always Been in Crisis” An Ethnography of Austere Livelihoods in Northern Portugal

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SUMMARY

Based on 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation aims to provide an ethnography of the crisis of livelihood in the Vale do Ave (Northern Portugal) from the perspective of the household. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the Portuguese government signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2011, which introduced a wide set of austerity measures. This adjustment programme was marked by harsh tax increases, cuts in spending and the reduction of welfare benefits. Most commonly, such austerity measures are defined as a radical break from a previously stable socio-economic situation. In opposition to these popular narratives, this thesis argues that livelihood-making in northern Portugal has been shaped by recurrent and persistent crises for a long time.

“We have always been in crisis and coped with it” was the most common response to my initial questions about the 2008 financial crisis. This crisis, I propose, can therefore best be understood as a folk term: a grassroots notion that furnishes the political and economic imaginaries of my interlocutors with the necessary urgency to pursue their survival strategies. Introducing what I call “the crisis of livelihood”—a situation in which all the possibilities available to families and households are being foreclosed—I locate the livelihood crisis within particular historical processes and trace its manifestations into the present. The crisis of livelihood is far from straightforward, however. It is a situation in which all the possibilities for livelihood-making available to households are either disappearing, as is the case of formal, waged employment, or are made impossible by state-led regulation, as is the case for informal provisioning avenues. This is an adverse reality to inhabit, that has economic, social, affective and political implications for my interlocutors’ lifeworlds.

Given this context, this thesis investigates the material and social relations of the crisis of livelihood as well as the ways people have learned to engage with state-led regulation, ideological projects and political practices as a matter of everyday survival. The argument proceeds from the main hypothesis that far from an exceptional, recent circumstance, crisis is in fact the persistent mode of livelihood-making for households in the region. This mode is the result of the deep entanglement between household survival and the reproduction of capitalist cycles of accumulation. Refracted by state regulation, capitalist relations come to be embedded in the everyday crisis of household livelihood: the labour and working arrangements that are available, the avenues for provisioning that are opening or closing, the future projects that seem desirable, and the value constructions that are in flux. Following this hypothesis, I offer an anthropological and historical account of the production of a particular working class lifeworld by documenting how households make a living.

In order to set the scene, chapter 1 begins with the ethnographic case of a raid at the municipal market in Guimaraes, during which the tax authority confiscated “illegal vegetables”. I show how austerity heralded an increase in performative state regulation, designed not for the people it targets, but as a sign of good will to the country’s international creditors. All the same, it produces anger and anxiety among the people it targets. Beyond their performativity, however, these kinds of interventions also have consequences for making a living, and I trace these by displaying how families retreat into their homes in order to avoid regulation, taxation and surveillance. The chapter concludes with a more refined definition of the crisis of livelihood in the current conjuncture and the implications it may have for subjectivity, citizenship and studies of state-led regulation in times of austerity.

In chapter two, I consider the crisis of livelihood from the perspective of labour and subjectivity. The chapter charts the daily lives of home-based petty textile producers who are subcontracted to multinational fast fashion corporations. By showcasing how the productive organization and micro-workshops interact with the ideology of entrepreneurialism, I display a shift in personal and governmental logic. In this context, what is effectively highly dependent labour controlled from above is recast as autonomy. This not only allows the state to increasingly withdraw from the responsibilities of social reproduction, but pushes petty entrepreneurs into blatantly exploitative work relations. My analysis also reveals how turning once jointly employed people into competitors on the ‘free market’, effectivity dismantles the possibility for class-based solidarity and collective social bargaining. I thereby contribute to a growing body of literature detailing how dominant models of work and production are tied to particular ideologies, which in turn are contradictorily articulated by people on the ground. This focus connects productive organization in general, and entrepreneurialism in particular, with the regulation of social life under neoliberalism and its perfidious effects on subjectivity.

Bringing together the findings of the first two chapters, chapter 3 explores the personal and psychological consequences of the crisis of livelihood. Establishing the intimate realm of the body as a site of crisis, I examine the link between affliction, (self-) medication, and structural inequality. The experiences of state-sanctioned injustice, combined with the conditionality of citizenship rights, are ‘taken home’ into the most intimate sphere of the family and the household. I show how household members turn to different medications in order to continue coping with the crisis of livelihood. After briefly elaborating different types of affliction, I consider how they open the possibility for the contesting of structural violence. Moreover, I propose to take anger seriously as a quest for recognition, albeit one that is inapprehensible using the specific categories of ‘registering victimhood’ available in the modern liberal state.

The final two chapters widen the analytical scope to include what is outside the household and question the various ways that the crisis of livelihood is contested. Chapter four recounts the only political protest that I encountered during the time of fieldwork. It came about in order to oppose a spike in property taxes brought on by austerity and

conservation efforts that were targeting inner-city houses. Inner-city residents describe the present policies as both an attack on their livelihoods (through tax burden and unfair laws that end up dispossessing them) and a fear for the erasure of working class presence (resulting from gentrification). I argue that inner-city residents advance their claims for presence, housing and social justice by referring to austerity and conservation as mutual forces that are deliberately set up to work against them. Herein, they display their sentiments of injustice while simultaneously making sense of their mounting marginalization. The questions of value, human worth, and access to the basic rights and conditions of citizenship under austerity are thus rendered a topic for analysis.

Finally, I present the case of an organic farmer's cooperative as an example of a group of people who, apparently, are not suffering the livelihood crisis to the same degree. Local responses to global crisis offer us a view of austerity and economy from below and can thereby shed light on the imagination of alternative modes of economic conduct, moralities and meaning-making. Coop farmers reclaim farming from its past association with dirt and poverty, and re-signify it with the hope for a better future. Using a comparative lens, the case of the coop brings into focus the production and distribution of the resources necessary for hope. Albeit ambivalently so, this case thus offers an important corrective to the xenophobic, sexist, racist, and menacing responses to uncertainty and precarity that have structured the implementation of austerity EU-wide.

I conclude by pulling together the patterns and analyses developed in the preceding ethnographic chapters in order to address and add to several fields: the idea that a crisis can be permanent, the nature of expanded reproduction as penetrating the everyday lives of people's survival, the various forms dispossession can take, the shifts to state-led regulation and governmental morality that austerity heralded, and the intersection of value, recognition and citizenship. From this rehashing, I scale up to question the shattering of the socio-economic convergence promised by EU integration. Thereby, I highlight the broader implications of my research for both Portugal and the EU.

RESUMO

Com base em 21 meses de trabalho de campo etnográfico, esta dissertação explora as possibilidades de sustento no Vale do Ave, desde a perspectiva do agregado familiar. Após a crise financeira de 2008, o governo português assinou um Memorando de Entendimento em 2011, que introduziu um conjunto de medidas de austeridade. Este programa de ajustamento foi marcado por aumentos bruscos de impostos, cortes nos gastos e a redução dos benefícios sociais. Comumente, essas medidas de austeridade são definidas como uma ruptura radical de uma situação socioeconômica anteriormente estável. Em oposição a estas narrativas populares, esta tese argumenta que a criação de meios de sustento no norte de Portugal foi moldada por uma crise recorrente e persistente já durante décadas.

“Sempre estivemos em crise e lidamos com á” foi a resposta mais comum às minhas perguntas iniciais sobre a crise financeira de 2008. Portanto proponha-se que esta crise pode ser melhor entendida como um termo popular: uma noção de *grass-roots* que fornece os imaginários políticos e econômicos de meus interlocutores com a urgência necessária para perseguir suas estratégias de sobrevivência. Apresentando o que chamo de “a crise do sustento”—uma situação em que todas as possibilidades disponíveis para as agregados familiares estão a ser impedidas—localiza-se a crise do sustento em processos históricos e traço suas manifestações até o presente. No entanto, a crise do sustento está longe de ser simple. É uma situação em que todas as possibilidades de subsistência disponíveis para as famílias estão desaparecendo, como é o caso do emprego assalariado formal, ou são impossibilitadas pela regulação liderada pelo estado, como é o caso das vias de abastecimento informais. Esta é uma realidade adversa para habitar, que tem implicações econômicas, sociais, afetivas e políticas para os mundos da vida de meus interlocutores.

Dado este contexto, esta tese investiga as relações materiais e sociais da crise de subsistência, bem como as formas pelas quais as pessoas aprenderam a se engajar com intervenções políticas, regulação e práticas políticas como uma questão de sobrevivência cotidiana. O argumento procede da hipótese principal de que, longe de uma circunstância excepcional e recente, a crise é, de fato, o modo persistente de geração de sustento para as famílias. Este modo é o resultado do profundo entrecruzamento da sobrevivência das famílias e a reprodução dos ciclos capitalistas de acumulação. Refratada pela regulação estatal, as relações capitalistas passam a ser incorporadas na crise cotidiana do sustento familiar: os arranjos de trabalho disponíveis, as vias de provimento que estão abrindo ou fechando, os projetos futuros que parecem desejáveis e as construções de valor que estão em fluxo. Seguindo esta hipótese, ofereça-se um relato

antropológico e histórico da produção de um mundo da vida da classe trabalhadora particular, documentando como as famílias se organizam para viver.

Para definir a cena, o capítulo 1 começa com o caso etnográfico de um “assalto” ao mercado municipal, durante o qual a fiscalização confiscou “vegetais ilegais”. Mostra-se como a austeridade trouxe um aumento na regulação estatal performativa, concebida não para as pessoas visadas, mas bem como um sinal de boa vontade para os credores internacionais do país. Mesmo assim, produz raiva e ansiedade entre as pessoas que alvejam. Além da sua performatividade, no entanto, esses tipos de intervenções também têm consequências para as possibilidades de sustento, e eu as acompanho mostrando como as famílias “se retiram” em seus lares para evitar a regulamentação, a taxação e a vigilância. O capítulo conclui com uma definição mais refinada da crise do sustento na atual conjuntura e as implicações que ela pode ter para a subjetividade, a cidadania e os estudos de regra e regulação.

No capítulo dois, considera-se a crise do sustento a partir da perspectiva trabalhista e da subjetividade. O capítulo traça o cotidiano dos pequenos produtores de têxteis que trabalham em casa e são subcontratados por corporações multinacionais de fast fashion. Ao mostrar como a organização produtiva e as micro-empresas interagem com a ideologia do empreendedorismo, identifica-se uma mudança na lógica pessoal e governamental. Nesse contexto, o que é efetivamente um trabalho altamente dependente e controlado desde acima, é redefinido como autonomia. Esta redefinição não apenas permite que o Estado se afaste cada vez mais das responsabilidades da reprodução social, mas leva pequenos empreendedores a relações de trabalho descaradamente exploradoras. A minha análise também revela como uma vez que as pessoas empregadas conjuntamente se transformam em concorrentes no “mercado livre”, a possibilidade de solidariedade baseada em classes e de negociação social coletiva é efetividade desmontada. Contribua-se, assim a um corpo crescente de literatura detalhando como modelos dominantes de trabalho e produção estão ligados a ideologias, que por sua vez são contraditoriamente articuladas por pessoas nos grassroots. Esse enfoque conecta a organização produtiva em geral, e o empreendedorismo em particular, com a regulação da vida social sob o neoliberalismo e seus efeitos perversos sobre a subjetividade.

Reunindo as descobertas dos dois primeiros capítulos, o capítulo três explora as consequências pessoais e psicológicas da crise do sustento. Estabelecendo a esfera íntima do corpo como um local de crise, examina-se a ligação entre (auto) medicação, sofrimento e a desigualdade estrutural. As experiências de injustiça sancionada pelo Estado, combinadas com a condicionalidade dos direitos de cidadania, são “levadas para casa” onde entraram a esfera mais íntima da família e do lar. Mostra-se como os membros da família recorrem a diferentes medicamentos para continuar lidando com a crise do sustento. Depois de elaborar brevemente sobre três tipos de sofrimento, ofereço uma articulação complexa de raiva como agência. Ainda que seja inapreensível usando as categorias específicas de “registrar a vitimização” disponíveis no estado liberal moderno, proponho que é necessário levar a sério a raiva como uma busca por reconhecimento.

Os dois capítulos finais ampliam o escopo analítico para incluir o que está fora do domicílio e questionam as várias maneiras pelas quais a crise do sustento é contestada. O capítulo quatro relata o único protesto político encontrada durante o tempo do trabalho de campo. O protesto surgiu a fim de se opor a um aumento nos impostos sobre a propriedade que foi provocado pelos esforços de austeridade e conservação que visavam as casas no centro histórico da cidade. Os residentes do centro da cidade descrevem as políticas atuais como um ataque aos seus meios de subsistência (por meio de carga tributária e leis injustas que acabam desapossando-as) e um temor pelo apagamento da presença da classe trabalhadora (resultante da gentrificação). Argumenta-se que os residentes do centro da cidade promovem suas reivindicações por presença, moradia e justiça social, referindo-se à austeridade e conservação como forças mútuas que são deliberadamente criadas para trabalhar contra elas. Aqui, eles exibem seus sentimentos de injustiça, ao mesmo tempo em que dão sentido à sua própria marginalização crescente. Questões de valor, valor humano e acesso aos direitos básicos e condições de cidadania durante a austeridade emergem como um tópico para análise.

Por fim, apresento o caso de uma cooperativa de agricultores orgânicos como um exemplo de um grupo de pessoas que, aparentemente, não estão sofrendo a crise do sustento no mesmo grau. As respostas locais à crise global nos oferecem uma visão de austeridade e economia a partir de baixo e podem, assim, lançar luz sobre a imaginação de modos alternativos de conduta econômica, moralidades e construção de significado. Os agricultores da cooperativa reivindicam a agricultura de sua associação histórica da sujeira e da pobreza, e re-significam-a com a esperança de um futuro melhor. Usando uma lente comparativa, o caso da cooperativa permite colocar em foco as temporalidades e visões futuras contidas em muitos dos capítulos anteriores. Embora de forma ambivalente, este caso oferece um importante corretivo às respostas xenófobas, sexistas, racistas e ameaçadoras à incerteza e à precariedade que estruturaram a implementação da austeridade em toda a UE.

Conclua-se reunindo os análises desenvolvidos nos capítulos etnográficos para abordar e acrescentar a vários campos: a natureza da reprodução expandida como penetrante na vida cotidiana da sobrevivência de gente comum, as várias formas que a expropriação pode tomar, questões de reconhecimento e a intersecção de valor, mérito e cidadania. A partir desta reformulação, questiona-se o projeto da UE como uma promessa de convergência socioeconômica, e destaca-se também as possibilidades de pesquisas adicionais no contexto da emancipação local, nacional ou mesmo pessoal.

SAMENVATTING

Dit proefschrift beoogt om, op basis van 21 maanden veldwerk, een etnografie te bieden met betrekking tot de mogelijkheden van huishoudens in Vale do Ave (Noord Portugal) om in hun eigen levensonderhoud te voorzien. Na de kredietcrisis in 2008 tekende de Portugese overheid een Memorandum of Understanding in 2011, waarna een breed pakket aan bezuinigingsmaatregelen werd ingevoerd. Dit programma kenmerkte zich door hardvochtige belastingverhogingen, het snoeien in overheidsuitgaven en bezuinigheden in de verzorgingsstaat. Vaak worden deze maatregelen geduid als een radicale breuk met de oorspronkelijke, stabiele, situatie. Echter, in tegenstelling tot deze algemeen geaccepteerde duiding, beargumenteert dit proefschrift dat huishoudens in Noord Portugal in hun levensonderhoud kunnen voorzien precies omdat ze bestaan in de context van een terugkerende en hardnekkige crisistoestand.

“Het is altijd crisis geweest en we hebben hier mee leren leven,” was de meest voorkomende reactie op mijn eerste vragen over de kredietcrisis. Mijn stelling is dan ook dat deze crisis moet worden begrepen als ‘landstaal’: een lexicon dat de belevingswereld van mijn gesprekspartners voorziet van de benodigde urgentie zodat zij hun overlevingsstrategieën kunnen volgen. Met de introductie van het begrip ‘de crisis in levensonderhoud’ (origineel *the crisis of livelihood*)—een situatie waarin families geen mogelijkheden hebben om in hun levensonderhoud te voorzien—plaats ik dit begrip in haar historische context en schets ik haar manifestaties in het heden. De crisis in levensonderhoud is echter geen eenvoudig concept: dit geldt vooral in situaties waar de mogelijkheden voor een formeel en regulier inkomen verdwijnen en waar alternatieve mogelijkheden in de informele sector onmogelijk worden gemaakt door de overheid. Dit resulteert in een vijandige wereld die economische, sociale, emotionele en politieke gevolgen heeft voor mijn gesprekspartners.

In deze context onderzoekt het proefschrift de materiele en sociale relaties tussen de crisis in levensonderhoud en de middelen die mensen ontwikkelen om beleidsmaatregelen, regulering en politiek beleid te overleven. De argumentatie vloeit voort uit de primaire hypothese dat, in plaats van een uitzonderlijke en recente situatie, crisis juist een blijvende manier is om in levensonderhoud te voorzien. Deze modus is het resultaat van de diepe verstrengeling tussen het voortbestaan van huishoudens en de reproductie van kapitalistische cycli van accumulatie. Bij gebrek aan overheidsregulering worden deze kapitalistische relaties ingebed in de dagelijkse crisis om in levensonderhoud te voorzien. De arbeids- en werkregelingen die beschikbaar zijn, de veranderende mogelijkheden om in levensonderhoud te voorzien, toekomstige ondernemingen die gewenst zijn, en het normen en waardenbesef die in een

staat van flux zijn. Op basis van deze hypothese bied ik ook een antropologisch en historisch verslag van de productie binnen een specifieke arbeidsklasse door te documenteren hoe zij in hun levensonderhoud voorzien.

Om een duidelijk beeld te schetsen begin ik Hoofdstuk 1 met een etnografische casus over de inval van een gemeenschappelijke markt in Guimaraes, waar de belastingdienst “illegale groenten” in beslag nam. Ik toon aan dat het bezuinigingsbeleid een periode van overheidsregulering inluidde die deels enkele beeldvorming als doel had, met als resultaat woede en angst onder de mensen die getroffen werden door de maatregelen. Het hoofdstuk eindigt met een genuanceerdere definitie van de ‘crisis in levensonderhoud’ in de huidige conjunctuur en de implicaties die dit mogelijk heeft voor de subjectiviteit, burgerschap en beschouwt wetgeving en regulering vanuit de overheid.

In Hoofdstuk 2 beschouw ik de crisis in levensonderhoud vanuit het perspectief op arbeid en subjectiviteit. Het hoofdstuk geeft een overzicht van het dagelijks leven van een huishouden wiens inkomen is gebaseerd op kleinschalige textielproductie die wordt uitbesteed aan multinationale fast fashion producenten. Door de onderzoeken hoe de organisatie van kleinschalige productie en ondernemerschap op elkaar inwerking illustreer ik een verschuiving in persoonlijke en bestuurlijke logica. Wat essentieel een strenge arbeidsrelatie is wordt in deze context herschikt als autonomie. Door deze verschuiving kan de overheid zich niet alleen afstand nemen van haar verantwoordelijkheid voor sociale reproductie, maar worden kleine ondernemers ook gedreven tot oneerlijke werkrelaties. Mijn analyse laat ook zien hoe, door het omvormen van mensen die voorheen samenwerkten tot concurrente, de capaciteit voor collectieve solidariteit en collectieve onderhandelingen wordt ontmanteld. Hiermee draag ik bij aan een groeiende literatuur die beschrijft hoe dominante modellen van arbeid en productie zijn verbonden met ideologieën, die op hun beurt tegenstrijdig worden begrepen door mensen zelf. Deze focus verbindt productie in het algemeen, en ondernemerschap in het bijzonder, met de regulering van het sociale leven onder neoliberalisme en de perfide effecten op subjectiviteit.

In Hoofdstuk 3 komen deze bevindingen samen in een onderzoek naar de persoonlijke en psychologische gevolgen van de crisis in levensonderhoud. Door het menselijk lichaam zelf als een plaats van crisis te beschouwen onderzoek ik de relaties tussen leed, (zelf)medicatie en structurele ongelijkheid. De ervaringen van het leven in een context waar onrecht wordt toegestaan door de overheid, burgerrechten conditioneel zijn, worden ‘thuisgebracht’ in de meest intieme sfeer van het gezin en het huishouden. Ik laat zien hoe familieleden verschillende vormen van medicatie gebruiken om te leven met de crisis in levensonderhoud. Na een kort overzicht van vormen van leed, beschouw ik hoe deze al dan niet bijdragen tot verzet tegen de onrechtvaardigheid van de ‘crisis in levensonderhoud’. Ik stel hier ook voor om deze woede serieus te nemen als een zoektocht naar erkenning, al is het in een vorm die niet geplaatst kan worden in de specifieke categorieën waarin slachtofferschap geregistreerd kan worden in de moderne, liberale staat.

De laatste twee hoofdstukken verbreden de analytische reikwijdte naar de wereld buiten het huishouden en onderzoeken de verschillende manieren waarin de crisis in levensonderhoud wordt betwist. Hoofdstuk 4 beschouwd de enige politieke demonstratie die plaatsvond tijdens de periode van veldwerk. Dit kwam tot stand als een verzet tegen een piek van ontroeringsgoedbelasting die werd veroorzaakt door bezuinigingen en andere maatregelen die richt waren op huizen in de binnenstad. Inwoners beschrijven de huidige maatregelen als een aanval op hun levensonderhoud (door belastingdruk en oneerlijke wetten die hen uiteindelijk onteigenen) en een angst voor het verwijderen van de arbeidersklasse (als gevolg van gentrificatie). Ik beargumenteer dat inwoners hun claims voor aanwezigheid, huisvesting en sociale rechtvaardigheid naar voren brengen door te verwijzen naar bezuinigingsmaatregelen en bescherming als krachten die opzettelijk in hun nadeel werken. Hiermee geven ze hun gevoelens van onrechtvaardigheid weer, terwijl ze tegelijkertijd hun eigen groeiende marginalisatie begrijpen. De vraagstukken van waarde, menselijke waardigheid en toegang tot de fundamentele rechten en plichten van burgerschap onder het bezuinigingsbeleid worden zo onderwerp van analyse gemaakt.

Tenslotte presenteer ik de casus van een biologische boerencoöperatie als voorbeeld van een groep mensen die blijkbaar niet in dezelfde mate de crisis van levensonderhoud ondervindt. Lokale reacties op de crisis geven een beeld van bezuiniging en economie van onderaf en kunnen daardoor licht werpen op de alternatieve vormen van economisch gedrag, moraliteit zingeving. Coop-boeren koppelen de landbouw los van haar associatie met modder en armoede en zien het juist als een manier om de toekomst hoopvol tegemoet te gaan. Met een vergelijkend perspectief brengt deze casus de productie en verdeling van middelen die nodig zijn voor hoop in focus. Hoewel enig sinds ambivalent, biedt deze casus een belangrijke correctie in de xenofobe, seksistische, racistische en dreigende reacties op onzekerheid en die de bezuinigingen in de hele EU hebben teweeggebracht. Deze vergelijking brengt de tijdelijkheid en toekomstvisies die worden beschreven in eerdere hoofdstukken beter in beeld. Hiermee vormt de casus een belangrijke correctie op de xenofobie, seksistische, racistische en dreigende reacties op onzekerheid en onzekerheid die de implementatie van bezuinigingen in de hele EU hebben teweeggebracht.

Ik concludeer door de patronen en analyses die in de voorgaande etnografische hoofdstukken zijn ontwikkeld samen te brengen door een aantal onderwerpen te bespreken en toe te voegen: het idee dat een crisis permanent kan zijn, de aard van groeiende reproductie die doordringt in het dagelijks (over)leven van mensen, de verschillende vormen die onteigening kan aannemen, de verschuiving naar overheidsregulering en overheidsmoraal die voortvloeien uit de bezuinigingen, de intersectie van waarden, erkenning en burgerschap. Vanuit deze samenvatting schaal ik op door naar ondermijnen van de belofte van EU-integratie te kijken: die van sociaal-economische convergentie naar een Noord-Europees ideaal. Hiermee benadruk ik de bredere implicaties van mijn onderzoek voor zowel Portugal als de EU.

MAP OF PORTUGAL



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