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Toward Poetopolitics: Attempts at Landing as a Collective in Portugal

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Abstract: This article returns to an intentional collective in Alentejo (2011–2013) that later coalesced into Minga. Through a feminist, post-qualitative, diffractive method, I track how a patient wager on regeneration encountered hard limits: Absent shared livelihoods, low legal literacy, and a technophobic localism blind to planetary urbanization, and infrastructural entanglements. From this failure-that-taught, I propose poetopolitics – a grammar for acting under constraint that holds care with legality and presence with property. Coupled to pericapitalism, a deliberately disenchanted agenda, the emphasis falls on subsistence before symbolism, legal legibility, infrastructural sobriety, and structured horizontality. Rather than a model, the contribution is a practical lexicon and prompts for composing reciprocity between citizens, cooperatives, municipalities, and universities, pointing toward pluriversities as living platforms for durable transformation.

Keywords: Integral Cooperatives; Intentional Communities; Pericapitalism; Pluriversity; Regenerative Culture.

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Introduction

A line in the sand

Between 2011 and 2013, I was part of an intentional collective[1] of around 100 people of all ages and backgrounds aiming to imagine and realize an integral cooperative[2] in the deserted areas of rural Portugal. Arising in a context of deep economic, financial, and social crisis (following the subprime global meltdown), the idea was to escape the »urbanized world« in order to imagine, research, and experiment with post-growth, postcapitalist ways of living loosely aligned with the ideals of the 1974 Carnation Revolution[3]. Even though there was no local or state public policy to support cooperativism, the project mobilized many Portuguese and European foreigners living either in Portugal's urban areas or in the diaspora (many of whom, like me, were living in and fed up with Berlin). We called it the Research Center for Culture and Sustainability (Centro de Investigação Cultura e Sustentabilidade) – CICS – with the intention to establish interdisciplinary partnerships with multiple research institutions in a wide range of issues: co-housing, regenerative farming, transformative learning, socioecological economies, eco-tech, participatory decision-making, etc.

To this end, we created a substantial, participatory document that we affectedly named »Integrated Regional Development Plan« (Plano de Desenvolvimento Regional Integrado); it contained a long list of projects, from LETS to agroecology, eco-construction to solidarity economy, and transformative pedagogy to the recovery of local knowledges. The title was carefully engineered to appeal to city councilors, though the »plan« was not

1 I take »intentional collective« as a critical iteration of the term and idea of »intentional community.« This iteration aims, simultaneously, to highlight both the need for modes of communing/communalization typical of intentional communities while refusing the identitarian traits that often and deliberatively bind them.

2 An integral cooperative is a type of multisectoral cooperative that aims to be comprehensive, encompassing various aspects of social and economic life within a community - such as housing, work/production, consumption, education, health, culture, etc. The first self-named experience was »Cooperativa Integral Catalana,« begun in 2010 in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain.

3 *The Carnation Revolution* (April 25, 1974) was a military movement in Portugal that ended almost five decades of dictatorship and established democracy in the country. The name comes from the fact that the demonstrators wore carnations as a symbol of peaceful resistance.

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particularly integrated, nor regional, nor much of a development strategy. For several months, some of us toured the deserted and impoverished municipalities of Portugal's deep hinterland – north to south, away from the urbanized coastline – with this plan in hand, hoping to get a piece of rural land upon which we could implement the project.

The local response, however, oscillated between curiosity and mistrust. Montemor-o-Novo (fig. 1), located about 20 kilometers from Évora and 90 kilometers east of Lisbon, was the only one to offer us, through a potential long-term concession contract, 33 ha of land within its urban industrial perimeter (figs. 2 and 3). It was not the rural idyll we were looking for, because, according to the Portuguese land-use law, it is not possible to build privately on rural land, with the exception of agricultural, forestry, or touristic purposes, but we accepted the terms imposed and, over the course of a year, dedicated ourselves to collective work, meeting frequently in Montemor.

We wanted to root ourselves in the long term in a local context, and to escape and oppose the logic of the event (that much-abused word!). We did not want to activate a place, but to try to regenerate it, as well as ourselves in the long term. From the outset, we started to relationally cartograph and establish equal partnerships with local organizations and entities to avoid duplication and, where ethos and pace aligned, to hand over coordination to local entities. In parallel, we cultivated translocal networks (Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013) – ties with research centers and civic organizations capable of deepening the practice on the ground without turning Montemor into an academic outpost. Collaboration, not objectification, was the rule (fig. 4).

Unlike many intentional communities of the 1970s, we were neither governed by dogma, single discourses, nor obedience to any diktat. We cultivated an ethic of adventure (Debaise and Stengers 2017; Ingold 2015; Savransky 2016), in which contradictions, ignorance, and dissonance could fit. Conflict was seen as an engine for collective maturation, not as a threat to cohesion. The spectrum of political positions on the left spanned from the most radical to centrist moderation (anarcho-communism, communism, libertarian socialism, and social democracy), and some of the people involved had non-negligible financial, social, or cultural capital. Even so, the group responded to the paradoxes with frank discussion, without ostracism or purism. We were there to learn from each other, to reflect on differences, and not to establish armored identities (Agier 2016), while trying together to transform contradictions into questions of politics and structure, rather than of individual conduct (Ahmed 2012).

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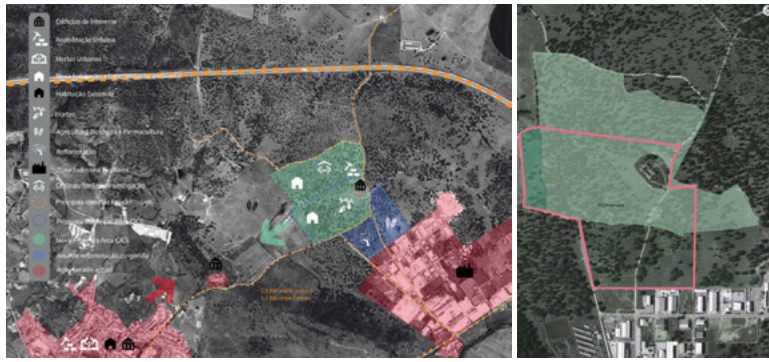
1.
Montemor-o-Novo in 2019. Photograph by União de Freguesia de Nossa Senhora da Vila, Nossa Senhora do Bispo e Silveiras.



2.
CICS, Location Plan and Preliminary Site Proposal. Plan by author, adapted from Tânia Teixeira, 2012.

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3.
Crossroads leading to the proposed CICS plot of land in 2013. Photograph by the author, 2013.

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4.
A sense of (un)commoning. A celebratory dinner. And a piano concert by Ulf Ding from the 2013 festival, »Shadows Are Offered,« curated by Vera Mantero, a choreographer and member of CICS in Montemor-o-Novo. Adapted by author, credit: Inês Ivangelista, 2013.

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Gradually, however, the collective imagination was confronted with material realities.

- How would we finance a common house?
- How could we self-build when paid work was a hundred kilometers away and childcare was scarce?
- How to live on intermittent research contracts under one thousand euros?
- How to share unequal project incomes without reproducing privilege? How many local jobs would we actually create?
- How to justify a public grant of land amid long social-housing lists?

These were practical and political questions: of legitimacy, distribution, and fair access to property, voice, and decision-making.

After painful moments of unbearable dissension, approximately a dozen people remained who managed to settle in Montemor-o-Novo. The project later gave rise to the integral cooperative named »Minga« – a nod to South American indigenous practices of local mutualism, cooperation and solidarity – the genesis of which preserved many of the premises of the collective. Today, twelve years later, Minga is well known in the Portuguese cooperative milieu as a kind of a benchmark in second-generation (non-agricultural) cooperativism in Portugal. It continues to bloom, however slowly, into a fully developed multi-sectoral cooperative that may come to integrate dimensions of production, consumption, co-housing and, perhaps, education.

However, that part of the story will not be explained here. Instead, I am interested in understanding what went wrong, where things went awry and how we ended up contributing to the crushing statistics of failure. Around ninety per cent of all »intentional communities« collapse in their early stages (Stevens-Wood et al. 2021). Most seriously of all, I want to understand how we ended up reproducing a logic of urgency that disproportionately overburdened the most precarious and vulnerable people, thereby reversing the very ethics of care that we had set out to defend. The intention is not to humiliate or disqualify, but rather to provide a heuristic platform from which I can craft tentative proposals; proposals that, from my insider perspective and as a student of socio-spatial practices, could have prevented the collapse of the project, or at least avoided many of the (inter-)personal costs involved in its dissolution.

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Factors of Implosion

One of the major blind spots was the means of subsistence. In CICS, the directive was neoliberal: Everyone was to generate their own income through individual research gigs. That »ethos« not only prevented the collective from stabilizing, it actually reproduced precarity by design. The housing component of the project added contrast to the already evident fault line. Construction or renovation required a financial equity, owned, borrowed or donated capital, which most of us, despite our relative privilege, were unable to access. Unlike the Uruguayan model of housing through mutual aid (FUCVAM 2012) or the Danish co-housing communities, both sustained by long-term policies (Larsen 2019), public policies on cooperative (co-)housing in Portugal were limited to some post-revolutionary years after 1974.
From the outset, CICS would have needed a common economy, however partial and minimal, with the capacity to mutualize risk, infrastructure, and property; An income-generation ecosystem anchored in social ecological economies (Spash 2024) and ecological technologies (Bihouix et al. 2022), paradoxically recognizing that cooperatives compete at a structural disadvantage against capitalist firms which are trained for marginal-cost competition (Das et al. 2023). The charts show it clearly: Most proposals clustered around arts/education with mainly public or non-profit partners, while initiatives capable of generating a sustained independent revenue were almost non-existent (fig. 5).

Another challenging issue, which is by no means unique to CICS, concerned the paradox of the rural bias. Like so many other intentional collectives and communities, CICS cultivated a diffuse distrust of technoscience – a kind of new-generation luddism, associated with the celebration of »appropriate technologies« and DIY aesthetics (Schumacher 1974; Wahl 2016). Instead of forcing necropolitical industries and extractive landscapes to transform, that nostalgia made projects like CICS dependent on technologies with as little energy yield or scalability and as labor-intensive as micro wind turbines, solar ovens, or home chemistry. And while doing so, it also escaped the reality that, in order to build all of these, there must still be mining, metalworking, magnet production (Michaux and Butcher 2022), as well as rail networks, public investment and global logistics (Crary 2022). In other words, while CICS never rejected the relevance of the »urban« as node of encounters, negotiation, and supra-local governance, it also lacked – perhaps feared – to gaze non-innocently, and responsibly, at the monstrous

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translocal entanglements of planetary urbanization and industrialization with radical honesty (Brenner 2014; Ghosh 2016).

Finally, there was also a glaring lack of legal literacy, including an almost ignorance of the land-use planning tools in force: Municipal Development Plans, land use restrictions, health and building regulations, e.g., legal restrictions imposed on self-building due to seismicity or documented dangers to public health, or even the instruments of the Alentejo's Regional Development Coordination Commission[4]. Most of the projects designed for the »Integrated Regional Development Document« ignored previous local diagnoses, as if the state were just an intrusive presence and not an arena for legitimate dispute (Mouffe 2005; Tormey 2005).

This rejection of anything that smacked of »institutionality« was also manifested in the internal domains of the CICS: governance, organization, and planning. As in so many community experiences – such as the eco-village of Findhorn, Scotland, or the eco-city of Auroville, India – horizontality was confused with the absence of structure. Information circulated unevenly; decision-making channels were sometimes opaque; meeting agendas could be changed at the last minute or iterated by figures with greater symbolic capital; charismatic authority – the one that fares worst in participatory arenas (Gaventa 2006; Caser et al. 2017) – emerged alongside the tacit exclusion of less confident voices (Freeman, 1972; Polletta 2002). Figure 6 tries to capture the atmosphere with stark economy: »freedom is indeed an endless meeting.«

Under these pressures, time and care were the first to yield. Relocating to Montemor required a support system able to absorb different speeds, childcare needs, and uncertain incomes. Those who remained were, tellingly, people already living locally, able to work remotely, or hosted by local organizations; single parents and the most precarious rarely had a way in. Our optimism bowed to familiar lines of privilege, as we lost sight of the necessarily relational limits of our agency against the brutal agency of (power) institutions to constrain through discipline or submission. »All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.« (Marx and Engels 1848)

4 The Regional Development Coordination Commissions are peripheral services of the Portuguese State's direct administration, endowed with administrative and financial autonomy, which have powers in the areas of coordination and articulation of various regional sectoral policies: https://www.ccdr-a.gov.pt/, accessed October 5, 2025.

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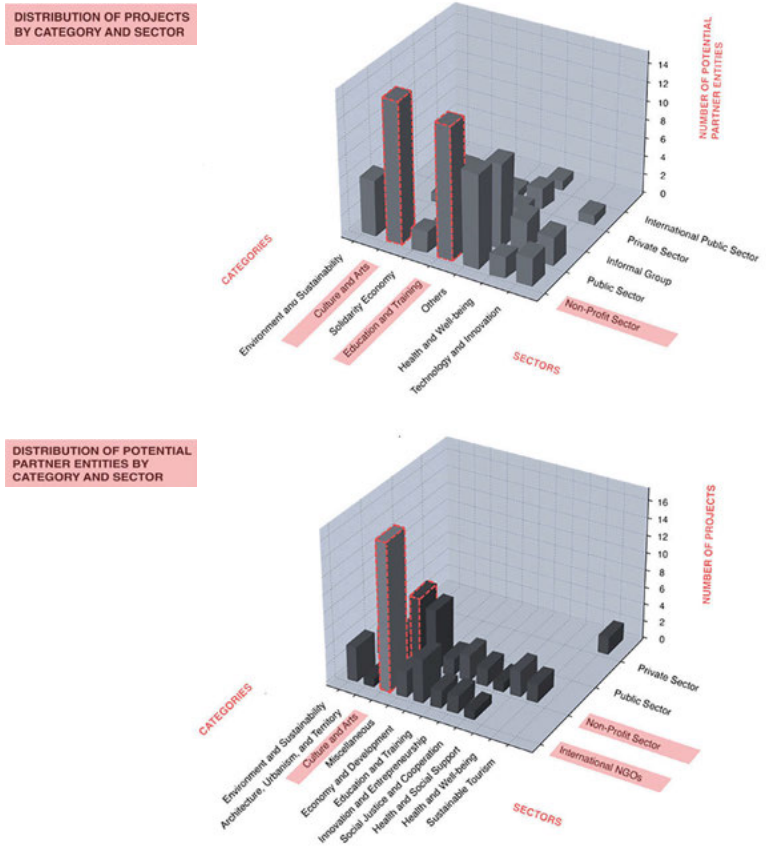

5.
3D graphs provide detailed insight into the socioeconomic categories and sectors of activity of the projects listed in the »Integrated Regional Development Plan,« as well as their potential partner entities. A substantial number of projects is evident in the arts and culture sectors, whilst there is an almost total absence of projects aimed at creating financial autonomy through the generation of an independent income. A similar trend is evident when the planned partner entities are analyzed. These entities are predominantly from the cultural and educational fields, with the vast majority falling within the non-profit or public sector – (though) many of these entities are research, experimentation, or artistic creation centers. This fundamental cultural and intellectual vibrancy stands in stark juxtaposition with the inability to conceive of subsistence strategies that would facilitate a »partial/selective de-linking« (Friedmann 1987). Graphs by author.

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6.
Credit: Inês Evangelista, 2013.

Pericapitalism

In retrospect, and from my perspective alone, establishing a praxis like CICS meant, and still means, squaring the circle: Sustaining the gesture of radical openness while ensuring the pragmatic conditions of survival through caution, protection, and infrastructural grounding. On the one hand, the proposal of (in)communalizing everyday life requires an ethos of radical openness and adventure (Debaise and Stengers 2017; Ingold 2015; Savransky 2016). On the other hand, the toxicity inscribed and reproduced in most of our current institutions (Stengers 2009) – from market to courts, from tax codes to state forms – has a formidable force that must be recognized and never underestimated (Foucault 1977). It's not a question of choice, having to deal with legal systems that often suppress possibilities of social experimentation or the crushing forces of capitalist competitive markets.

From here, I adopt a deliberately disenchanted agenda: *Pericapitalism* as the craft of composing at the edge of capitalist circuits without letting them script the ends (Tsing 2015). More specifically, my view is that the survival or collapse of projects like CICS or Minga depends largely on their capacity to operate within, and not outside, the constraints imposed by state and market. To keep experimentation possible, one must first secure subsistence, (a)legality, and time – otherwise it will not work. Projects like CICS

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must be able to compose with the frictions at hand while crafting provisional infrastructures of habitability, to respond to the tensions between care and legality, presence and property, desire and constraint.

Following this harsh proposal, I would like to summarize, briefly, seven points in this deliberately exploratory agenda. First, livelihoods must be secured up front so that precarity does not besiege every promise: Design the subsistence layer early, favoring modest revenue engines with predictable flow sized to local purchasing power. Second, treat bureaucracy like geology: slow, shaping, and non-optional. Legibility is not capitulation; it is a condition for staying. Third, practice infrastructural sobriety: Compose with what exists, however monstrous, rather than fantasizing off-grid autonomies that externalize dependencies. Fourth, root-structured horizontalities: Participation needs form, that is, clear mandates, decision rights, time boxes, and conflict protocols that protect slower life rhythms. Horizontal does not mean amorphous – structure prevents charisma from ossifying into power. Fifth, address property and access. If land and tools are the backbone, their governance cannot slide into uncertainty; explore forms of common property, such as community land trusts, and design entry/exit rules that do not punish precarity. Less heroic generosity, more boring justice embedded in instruments. Sixth, budget for time and care. Arrival requires a support ramp; housing transitions, childcare, retraining, and local learning are financed by small funds and shared-care networks; otherwise, urgency will again fall along predictable lines of class, gender, and even citizenship. Seventh, cultivate reciprocity with institutions: Work with municipalities, cooperatives, unions, and universities as sites of co-production, not audiences, that is, mutualize revenues, risks, and responsibilities.

Poetopolitics = Poiesis + Ethos + Topos + Politicus

Adding to its »cruel optimism« (Berlant 2011), I also think that CICS lacked a dense post-disciplinary ecology of practices: A set of integrated, situated and grounded methods/processes, (social) technologies, knowledges, competencies and skills capable of grounding ambitious visions of infrastructural, affective and institutional conditions of survival (fig. 7). A post-disciplinary platform (Lykke 2012; Wodak 2005) capable of generating integrated, symbiotic, thick alliances between different kinds of necessary knowledges from multiple cosmos/worlds: a tool of and for *transknowledging(s)* (King 2012).

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Take the example of certain practices of landing – in the literal and in the *Latourian* sense: Not seizing control and exploiting the land to fulfill a civilizational telos indissociable from infinite growth, like the Moderns did and do, but rather becoming with the land/earth, as terrestrials bounded by finite resources (Latour 2017). Specifically, and to name just a few, Permaculture (Watkins 1993), Sustainable Urban Livelihoods Framework (Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones 2014), and the eco-swaraj experimentation of Vikalp Sangam (Kothari et al. 2019). Each of these, in their own way, reflects an attempt to assemble infrastructures of life that intertwine everyday life, knowledge production, spatial composition and institutional experimentation through entangled *transknowledgings* and ways of working. Permaculture reminds us of the domains that must be braided together – care of the earth, tools, education, culture, and finance. Vikalp Sangam's »Flower of Transformation« maps interconnected arenas – ecology, justice, democracy, economy, and culture – as sites for rooted transitions and transformations (fig. 8). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework insists on the basics: Assets (human, social, natural, physical, financial), then structures, then processes; and only then decide who cares, and how (fig. 9).

Read together, these three practices converge on a double recognition: First, that everyday life is woven through socioterritorial meshworks rather than arborescent logics; second, that institutions powerfully regulate access to resources, services, and even capabilities. It is along this double recognition that I conceive poetopolitics – a tentative and post-disciplinary toolkit and grammar that can be self-described as design, ethics, spacing, and politics. Because of this fourfold nature, I call it *poetopolitics*, a name that I hope can put the four vectors on an equal footing and simultaneously signal, not a model, but a practice of compostable co-composition across lands, institutions and people's everyday life. In my difficulty to decide on the centrality of politics in the production of space to the detriment of design and vice versa, or to take a definitive position on the primacy of *praxis* over *poiesis*, I aggregate them through juxtaposition. *Poiesis* refers to the act of world-making through situated creation, fabulation, and design-with: Not as projection, but as tentative crafting with what is already present. *Ethos* names the affective and relational disposition to stay-with, to remain present, to care, to become involved even in brokenness and risk. *Topos* designates not a neutral geography, but a terrain charged with memory, infrastructure and friction: A ground never innocent, but never uninhabitable either. *Politicus* invokes the field of shared conflict, where coexistence is not given but must

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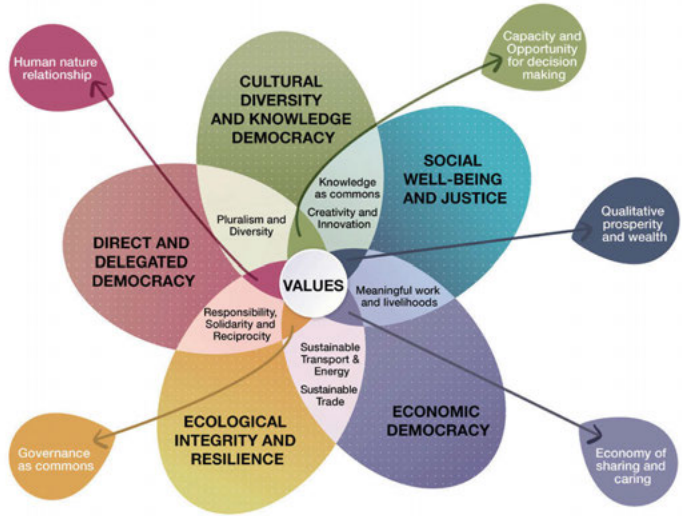
7.
Permaculture Flower. Adapted from David Holmgren, 2002.



8.
Vikalp Sangam's guiding framework, the Flower of Transformation. Adapted from Vikalp Sangam, 2014.

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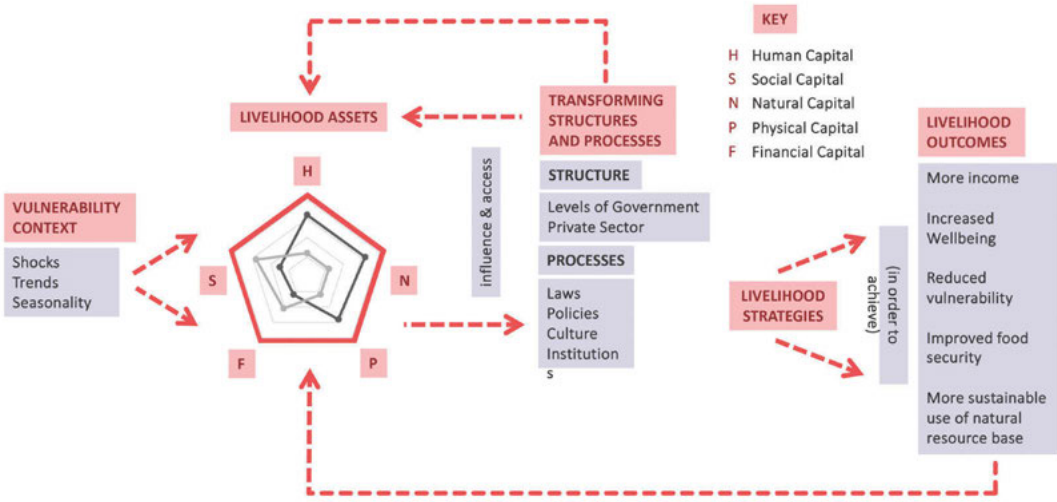

9.
Sustainable Livelihoods Framework was a conceptual tool used by the UK Department for International Development developed in the late 1990s to analyze how people make a living in complex and changing environments. It highlights the crucial importance of available goods and resources as capital(s). Although it was designed to understand and eradicate poverty, and despite the comprehensible criticisms of those who would rather have political revolution over capacity building, it remains a valuable tool for identifying and mapping the minimum material conditions critical for survival and flourishing. Adapted from DFID, Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, 2002.

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be composed, negotiated, and held without guarantee. Together, these vectors do not form a system, nor their articulation a concept, but a kind of »compostable dispositive« that tries to address and articulate technical, socio-economic, ecological, political, and cultural matters-of-concern.

Poetopolitics may, or may not, have an obvious spatial/territorial expression and bear an observable mark in the built environment. As Latour (2017), Stengers (2009) and Haraway (2016) rightly point out, all entities, living or not, untouched or manufactured, as well as all actions, have their subsistence territories which mobilize, in one way or another, a translocal set of materials and energy, many of which are limited, either absolutely or through manufactured scarcity. Keeping this in mind, the word topos in poetopolitics means precisely that, a Gaia-graphic, terrestrial translocatily without which the exercise of politics or poiesis may become dangerous or even deadly. We should never forget the terrible consequences that both the »u-topos,« e.g., terra nullius, and the contrasting blood/land nexus have imposed on humans and non-humans in recent centuries. Poetopolitics, therefore, is deeply and deliberately partial by design, situated by necessity, and mesopolitical by temperament – not a bird's-eye concept, a »view from nowhere,« or a »God-trick« device (Haraway 1988).

Epilogue: Pluriversities

Because space/territory can be rethought as translocalities of subsistence – rather than as nowhere/everywhere or as a singular locus with its *genius loci* – poetopolitics emerges as a fitting lens for imagining, and perhaps implementing, platforms like CICS where change can learn to persist. Indeed, had CICS pursued a more pericapitalist, poetopolitical trajectory, one might imagine it evolving not as a conventional research center but as an incipient pluriversity – a living platform holding learning, doing, and governance together long enough for habits to ripen in the body. Platforms always in the making, yet to be fully defined, stitching cross-cutting alliances among knowledges, organizations, and territories without claiming a single center; platforms which are honest about power and infrastructure. The point would not be not to collect flags, but to assemble procedures, scopes, and tools that make reciprocity legible and durable.

This connects with the notion of *pluriversity* (Escobar 2018; Tinel et al. 2018): Though post-colonial Portugal may not be the most obvious site to

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invoke the practices and institutions of *pluriversity*, they might be pivotal as critical *non-occidentalist Western* (Santos 2009) living laboratories for situated transition and transformation. At this juncture, where political, human, and more-than-human histories converge under climate collapse (Chakrabarty 2014), the question is no longer whether institutions will change by decree but what sort of restorative practices we might be able to conjure together. A *pluriversity* is, therefore, a call: A potential choreography where citizens, cooperatives, municipalities, and research bodies can share resources, knowledges, revenue, power, responsibilities and risks for joint invention and careful adventures towards a horizon of possibilities beyond pericapitalism.

In these arrangements, universities could act as compostable, not central, institutions. Concentrating forms of capital that mediate access to rights and obligations under law–and to essential goods, services, knowledges, and capabilities–their role is not epistemic sovereignty but contribution: Co-producing situated experiments, lending legal legibility, and offering labs and budgets that can braid with civic infrastructures. Municipalities, in turn, could provide places to live and robust, long-term, cross-sectoral support so that such projects could flourish safely, durably and in an integrated manner. Finally, projects like CICS or Minga should sustain durable pacts between citizens and local government, not to fine-tune a sector here or there, but to recompose everyday *modi vivendi* under planetary urgency.

The challenge is immense, the path uncertain, and error likely. Even so, we are called before future generations and as non-innocent heirs of modernity's monstrous project to answer their appeals and to learn from one another on the platforms of the possible. As in Haraway's (2016: 6) words, »either we become with each other, or not at all.«

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