Interview with Marisa Matias

by Tatiana Moura

| Portugal |

translated by Daniel Stefani and Edmund Ruge

"I have been Marisa's friend for a long time and I know well the conviction with which she personifies the maxim of "the personal is political." If it weren't so, I wouldn't be the one here. And just as Marisa knows it, so too do the millions of Portuguese men and women that have felt the consequences of the last several years of austerity in their skin and in the most intimate spheres of their lives. They've felt the lack of hope in a future for themselves and for their children, the daily struggle for those who are lucky enough to have jobs, the intimate partner violence made worse by desperation, depression and abandonment, humiliation. Few have not experienced a number of these realities in their lives or in the life of a friend. This is why we know that politics is personal, and that each and every political decision affects us daily.It is for this reason that we must think of politics as by the people and for the people, conducted in the name of the collective good and not private or individual interest. We know that Marisa stands up to those who would trample on us and scorn us, from the micro level of day to day relations to the macro level of international politics."

Our interview, replete with love and warm with Marisa's personal tone, took place on a comfortable afternoon in Coimbra. It demonstrates that the personal is political and international throughout the world. In contexts like Brazil, facing the current political, social, and economic future, it is essential to keep this thought in mind. This concept is inseparable from the mission of Peripheries Journal and the Instituto Maria e João Aleixo."

INTERVIEW WITH MARISA MATIAS

Tatiana Moura – Marisa, we would like you present yourself, openly, in terms of personal, professional matters. It's for the Peripheries Journal.

Marisa Matias – Ok… Marisa Matias, woman, 42 and a half years old. Peripheral*, feminist, politicized and at service, that's basically it.

Tatiana Moura – Profession?

Marisa Matias – Sociologist and Member of European Parliament.

Tatiana Moura – Since?

Marisa Matias – 2009.

Tatiana Moura – Can you explain, given that the Peripheries Journal is from Brazil, how many years mandates in the European Parliament last?

Marisa Matias – Each mandate lasts 5 years. I'm in the 4th year of my second mandate and basically there isn't much difference compared to national mandates, which last 4 years in Portugal.

Tatiana Moura—And your mandate finishes on May 10?

Marisa Matias – Yes. In 2019.

Tatiana Moura – Thank you. Let me see, we have some questions here… they are 6 questions, which were assembled jointly, though Eduardo Alves, from the Favela

Observatory, contributed more. He is our poet-philosopher. The second question we thought about is: Considering your life trajectory from civil society activist to congresswoman, what changes has this brought to your life?

Marisa Matias – I think it is impossible to be a Member of Parliament without being an activist. The greatest change was starting to realize there was so much, that I actually come from environmental activism, from women rights activism, from LGBTI activism, from citizenship activism - referring to the movements I had been involved in for the last 20 years almost, before entering the European Parliament for the first time, which happened before I was first elected, in 2009. If I start thinking seriously in regards to activism, since I was 15 and belonged to the student movement and to other organizations, I thought there was a certain illusion between institutional politics and activism, which continues to exist and makes sense. But the truth is that the areas sometimes considered more institutional and devoid of activism, also carry a significant dimension in this regard. And I work in the driest areas, economic and political issues, monetary policy, budgetary policy; issues related to investigation, energy, industry - these are my Parliamentary Committees. In regards to international affairs, I work especially with Middle Eastern issues... and I was already an activist, for example, of the Palestinian struggle, but I realized it was much broader than the Middle Eastern context I worked with. I also started to realize that many activist issues I worked with, like gender equality issues, women rights - and I do not want to be misinterpreted, but I realized it was way more useful to work over them in connection with matters associated to the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs (ECON), rather than within a specific Parliamentary Committee for women rights, because these issues are transversal. And there are areas that carry zero legislative power and we can say all the pretty things we like and even arrive at a concrete solution, and it won't have any impact. Then there are other areas where we work with regulations and pure and tough legislation, though these lack an activist dimension, a part of society, since we are talking about politics and not about technique. I realized my activism in technical areas was more useful than those supposed activist areas in parliament.

Tatiana Moura - And what has this meant in terms of changes in your daily life, in your private life, in how you see everyday life?

Marisa Matias – A greater discomfort perceiving limitations and insufficiencies while also seeing that there are many fields yet to be opened in terms of activism, since they are usually siloed into institutional categories. And it is in those areas that we have to go and break down barriers in order to be more effective. For example, it took me some time, because I did not choose it, and I was led to become part of one of the most powerful Committees of the European Parliament in terms of legislation involving countries' economies, economic regulations, economic governances, financial systems and monetary systems. It all led me to realize that it was a world completely closed to fundamental political issues like gender equality or people's daily lives. I currently have in my hands, for example, a legislative proposal that aims to combat gender inequality in regards to fiscal taxation, and I've been learning a lot with it, since we usually think of those matters as based in economic dimensions, or we refer to fiscal matters in terms of tax dodging, fraud and tax avoidance. But if we start analyzing the data, we realize, for example, very concrete things: that a large part of what goes on in this uncontrolled and unregulated world of the financial system - and what enables tax evasion, tax avoidance and tax fraud - have to do with practices related to drug trafficking, arms trafficking as well as human trafficking. And after we realize that 70% of human trafficking cases are related to the trafficking of women, very often for sex work, and after we realize that things are not solved at their roots, but rather at their ends, from a very technical perspective and through very limited mechanisms, and they are very limited because of the control financial powers exert over democracy – unfortunately - and democracy must be rescued. But if we realize afterwards that maybe if we work at the roots rather than the outcomes, that is to say, once we have more gender equality policies that anticipate, or prevent, in such cases, processes, regularized phenomena like human trafficking that harm women overall - then we may need not to work that much towards criminalizing practices and we even may prevent these practices from occurring. It is a continuous learning process we undertake, and we realize within institutional politics that most areas are closed to activism since they are considered serious, technical and devoid of any soul. In fact, it is only because we deal with the end of the process and do not work with preventing those phenomena. And that's why this example that I was giving, it has do with a report I have with me now. It has to do with how we combat the maintenance of gender inequality in terms of taxation, fiscal fraud and evasion. If we have progressive policies that are much more pro-gender equality -- and this implies some level of activism -- they can prevent those situations from coming to pass: massive profits for organizations and entities and organized groups involved with, for example,

human trafficking and, above all, the trafficking of women for sexual purposes. This happens because there isn't any legislation that offers progressive protection.

Tatiana Moura – So regarding your private life, this meant a conversation between areas… or an intersection between areas that previously in your life as a social activist and researcher, didn't cross paths?

Marisa Matias – They didn't intersect. They didn't.

Tatiana Moura – Considering your trajectory from civil society activist to Member of Parliament, what were the changes for Portugal, Europe and for the world? Can you give us examples of three actions, or something you have done as a civil society activist and Member of Parliament, that have impacted Portugal, Europe and the world?

Marisa Matias – This is very complicated, since they are mixed-up. I have just given an example of how things mix-up and I just can't separate them…

Tatiana Moura - It would be interesting to know more about your action within those ten years as a congresswoman in EU parliament, like specific actions that you have taken, and struggles that you have engaged in that somehow changed Portuguese people's life and policies, that have influenced European policies and have had some kind of reflection in the world.

Marisa Matias - This has a lot to do with those legislative processes, with which we can really change something just as we can change people's life. I am sure that in regards to my near 10-year mandate, the Falsified Medicines Directive was undoubtedly what most changed people's lives. It was the first time I had taken the opportunity and accepted the difficulty of legislating for 28 countries and 500 million people on a matter that I still consider to be absolutely invisible to the people.

Tatiana Moura – People were not even aware of it?

Marisa Matias – They were not and they continue not to be, but this is irrelevant since we do the job for things to change, and sometimes it is possible to gain awareness, sometimes not. It took me two and a half years working to conclude this work and I think that up to today the overwhelming majority of the 500 million people of the European Union are not aware of it, but this is a little irrelevant over the perspective of the…

Tatiana Moura – What existed before, how were things and what was expected to change?

Marisa Matias – Well, there's a whole criminal organization, so to speak, of counterfeit medication production that enters the regular chains of distribution and consumption. They are actually not more than silent killers because they do not present any of the active pharmaceutical principles to cure diseases.

Tatiana Moura – And do they enter into the formal pharmaceutical networks?

Marisa Matias – They come from all sides and even enter formal networks, going so far as to arrive at hospitals, pharmacies… It was one of the toughest fields I have had because there is an extremely strong pharmaceutical industry lobby and since it is an area supposedly not to be changed. It was a very painful process that, as I've said, lasted almost two and a half years, and was full of threats. It was very difficult and, as for the European Union's case, which is one of the most protected, we are talking about networks of counterfeit medication amounting to approximately 550 million euros annually and which started as a network oriented to the so-called life style medicines, since what was initially falsified were medicines like Viagra, for example. Later on, it extended to those medicines used for chemotherapy, to treat cancer or diabetes, as in the case of insulin, in addition to other medicines.

What was then acknowledged was the existence of a very well organized network of counterfeit medication production with no active pharmaceutical ingredient. Therefore, people facing mortal illnesses are taking medicines that may be a mixture of sugar and water, which are completely useless, even though they enter legal distribution chains, are transported by carriers, sold in pharmacies, used in hospitals and so on. This led me to

conduct work field in those countries, let's put it this way, that analyzed their respective legislations, and sought to understand how distribution worked from the producer to the user, then to that person who benefits from selling these medications. The aim was to find control mechanisms that could prevent counterfeit medications from entering the European Union. At that time, counterfeit medications were estimated at 3% in the EU. So it's not even that much, because if we look to the other continents, figures are much scarier: 16-20% in Africa, much more than the EU; for Latin or Central America, the same or close level, though in Asia it might be even more. Anyhow, 3% of people in the EU consuming medicines, which were counterfeit – this was a very complicated issue, and we have people who really rely on those medicines, whether it's for combating cancer, Alzheimer's or diabetes, or whatever. And to imagine a universe of 500 million people, of which 2 or 3% are consuming medications that are completely useless, hurting them more than helping them, - and that was the point - it was a very tough process to deal with because we were being pressured by all sides. Threats came from everywhere and the only promise I had once I started this file was that it wouldn't pass and no legislation on this matter would be approved. And beyond that, there was excessive protection in regards to what entered the EU, but there was no concern over the EU as a channel, or platform that enabled counterfeit medications that might come from Asia or Africa, to get to other regions of the world. So, it was very complicated to bring this legislation forward because I had a "tantrum" and thought we could not, in a piece of legislation, demand for ourselves what we didn't demand from others. Therefore, I also had to include customs and export issues in addition to the matter of the EU being a platform distribution of counterfeit medication, even though counterfeit medications were overwhelmingly not kept here.

Tatiana Moura – And this is one of the examples.

Marisa Matias – It is one of the examples because it was against the current, completely counter-current. I remembered that when I proposed the legislation's first draft, I had meetings with those many EU governments who told me that they would never pass that legislation.

Tatiana Moura – And what was the conclusion?

Marisa Matias - I had 11 red lines, 10 of which passed… and I lost one.

Tatiana Moura- And eventually it means that…?

Marisa Matias – That in the end… regardless of whether or not anyone knows it, even though no one perceives it, and since we are, now in 2018, in the legislation's last phase of implementation, control has already been done as well as transposition to State-Members. Although no one knows it, whenever I go to a pharmacy, health center or hospital and I see that the medicine's barcode is one that we defined in the legislation, I consider that Directive as a kind of daughter. I have no kids so it's kind of daughter that I share with millions of other citizens that live in the EU, so the code's change…

Tatiana Moura – Was it a quiet change? Or let's put it this way, it isn't something visible?

Marisa Matias – No. No one knows it at all.

Tatiana Moura – Do you think that politics undertaken at the European level, in Brussels, is quieter than direct politics in Portugal?

Marisa Matias – We are always working against the tide, so matters never amount to the same as those worked on at the national level, at the same moment. But if we were to work at the same time, I believe that this would always be a minor matter. But for me it is absolutely essential, not because I was the one to work on it, but because, as a matter-of-fact, I still remember the day when I, as a regular pharmacy customer, entered and saw the barcode of active pharmaceutical ingredients. It resulted from a legislation that I had drafted and was in effect for 500 million people in the EU. I felt like crying, but not for being mushy or anything like that, I just thought that: Ok, this makes sense. At a certain level, someone thinks that something must be worth doing, so it makes sense.

Tatiana Moura – There is a feminist motto that says that the personal is political and the political is personal…

Marisa Matias—Absolutely. But I was talking about the change in legislation and last week there was a seminar in the European Parliament to celebrate the final implementation phase of the counterfeit medication Directive, and I was invited. After all there are other more symbolic things that do not directly impact people's lives, direct in the sense of change. But I obviously feel that, regardless of what happens, it was worth becoming a deputy, for the matter of medication but also for others such as investigation, research, defense of social securities and humanities – which were about to be eliminated but we defended and kept them in the financial framework. Then there are other things that have nothing to do with that and have no immediate effects, like for example, whenever we discuss income inequality…

Tatiana Moura – So this brings us to the next question. I was thinking about income inequality, your engagement with the Middle East and with informal caretakers, which I think has a lot to do with the following question: how does your engagement as a Member of Parliament contribute, or how has it contributed to democratic advancement? Which elements and symbols of democratic advancement can contribute to fighting inequality?

Marisa Matias - In 2011 I was responsible for drafting the European strategy for combating Alzheimer's, vascular dementia and several other types of dementia. Countries are kind of obliged to have a national plan for dealing with this matter, though almost none has got its own. So I was responsible for drafting this European strategy, even resorting to very unorthodox methods in this political context. At that time, I saw its approval at risk. I contacted José Mourinho, who at that time was Real Madrid's coach, in order to ask him for a personal statement.

Tatiana Moura – Why a personal statement?

Marisa Matias – I had no idea… he was a Portuguese public figure and besides, he was in a totally different political context than mine, because I'm a leftist and he is clearly not, which was something people knew. Then I did this ridiculous thing that ridiculous people do, and I am a ridiculous person, so I called Real Madrid's general number and asked to speak with the coach. I waited on the line for two hours but eventually, I could talk to the coach and he gave us an impressive supporting statement. He said he wouldn't support it without seeing

the proposal beforehand, which I sent him. Then he read it and made the statement, which he actually recorded with Real Madrid's stadium in the background. He defended the proposal and the video was broadcasted during a parliamentary session in the European Parliament. People still think José Mourinho and I are friends, though I have never met him personally. As a matter of fact, he had the generosity to defend this proposal that was related to a series of issues. First, a steep increase in terms of prevalence and incidence of dementia in the EU, as well as a lot of people leaving their formal jobs and having to give up their workers' rights and benefits in order to look after their family. There aren't public care networks that enable them to carry on, and even though such networks could exist, what made sense was for family members to take over, providing care voluntarily.

Tatiana Moura – Should it be a right?

Tatiana Moura – It should be a right. Throughout those years and during the years that I worked on this proposal, I also noticed a series of contradictions and injustices that exist in all processes, because I met family members, women who were victims of domestic violence during their entire life and who found themselves in a situation of having no other choice than to care of the person living in state of dementia and who they were victims of, and who do not recall anything, so it's twice as much violence. Anyway, dementia-related matters are always matters of profound violence, because they mean permanent losses on several levels.

Tatiana Moura - You worked with the Alzheimer's issue, being the…

Marisa Matias – Yes, Alzheimer's and vascular diseases.

Tatiana Moura – Given that the matter of caretakers can be much broader.

Marisa Matias – Sure, this was in the beginning. I then extended it to the matter of informal caretakers in conditions like deficiency, who in those cases, are fathers and mothers who take care of children with strong disabilities. The definition of "caretaker" was completely wrong from the very beginning, since it should be "women caretakers" if the majority was to be considered. We undertook a comprehensive study, at the EU level - which

I think is likely to be an average applicable to many different societies and not only Europe's, given that the EU average is of 80% women caretakers. They are almost always women who gave up their professional career and personal life in order to provide care.

Tatiana Moura – After all, if we talk of a life process, we are also talking issues related to life's beginning:, from pregnancy, paternity, maternity, parental leave, and on.

Marisa Matias – Yes, it is not an exception, it's a rule. And dementia cases are processes than might last several years and I have contacted many families, a lot of women caretakers, as well as men caretakers and they see themselves as forced to leave their jobs, their contribution periods, personal, familial and social lives. Those processes might last 10, 15, 20 years, or they might only last 5 years, though 5 years on such a scale means 100 years and there isn't a single statute that acknowledges it. Therefore, this was what happened: this European strategy was adopted as a recommendation to EU countries, and then each country started to work over it on the basis of their understanding. There were a series of advancements in many countries. France, for examples, made immense progress in recognizing the informal caretaker statute, without a loss of rights…

Tatiana Moura – What does that mean?

Marisa Matias – It means, for example, having the right to leave without an end date. Instead, you count these leaves as years of work contributions.

Tatiana Moura – But which are non-remunerative…

Marisa Matias - Non-remunerative, but as long as support isn't a basic, minimum support, but rather a support tantamount to the minimum wage, which enables people to continue to live. In Portugal everything is at step one. That is to say, there's nothing done. How does this construct democracy and citizenship? Well… I had a kind of nervous breakdown 3 years ago during a caretakers and informal caretakers annual meeting that I organize. A woman caretaker told me: ok, this is all very beautiful, a lot is talked about, there are many proposals but, what is actually being done? I had to tell her that I was more frustrated than

she was -- though I couldn’t put myself in her position, as she takes care of her sister -- which was the case. However, it all has to do with power relations and the capacity for political decision-making, which we haven’t got enough power to undertake. I was a little bit fed up of losing more than winning and I'm constantly losing. In regards to the matter of informal caretakers, I was always losing.

Tatiana Moura - Do you have any case [of dementia] in the family?

Marisa Matias – No, fortunately, and I hope I never will, but I think that at some point in our life we will all have to take care of someone, but that's not the matter. Fortunately, I have never had to encounter such a situation.

Tatiana Moura – Extreme, isn’t it? Because we are always caretakers…

Marisa Matias – Yes. It was not a personal matter, rather a matter of the personal is political and the political is personal. I faced many situations coming from different families and by the way, the whole organizing annual meetings of informal caretakers in Portugal thing began with an interview I was giving to TSF Portuguese Radio. An informal caretaker called, telling me he had been taking care of his mother and was a successful businessman. He lost everything and was living under miserable conditions because he dedicated his to life to taking care of his mother. So he lost his friends, he lost everyone and called to ask: ok there’s the European strategy, but what does that mean? And he gave an extremely devastating personal statement. At the end of the broadcast I asked the radio if I could have his personal contact. They told me they had to ask his authorization, which they did. I was given his contact two hours after the radio’s live broadcast. On the line with him I asked if men and women caretakers knew each other, and he said: no, we don’t have time because we live at home 24 hours a day, we can't get out of our places, so we don't have time for getting to know each other, but we are in contact with each other through social media. At that time I had the idea that it might not be bad to think of financing a meeting on a given day when their family could be taken care of. The caretakers could meet in the same spot and get to know each other face to face and share the stories they have in common, which

they are already sharing on social media. This was one of the most heartfelt things I've ever felt in life because those caretakers who had been in contact for years via social media met in person for the first time. On that occasion a woman told me, ok, this all lovely, spectacular, but what is it that we do? So **I fully realize that those who are providing care do not have time to project their voice, because they are providing care 24 hours a day, every single day of the year. And who is being taken care of doesn't have a voice at all so this is why it is not a relevant matter for sparking off demonstrations or strikes, because everyone is exhausted. The one being taken care of does not have the means to raise their voice because they cannot mobilize, due to the worst reasons, and neither do those who are providing care, given that they are exhausted and no longer have the ability. In this sense, we start contemplating, then, how to transform those moments so that people can regain their voice**. And that woman caretaker told me: ok, but this is not going anywhere. And I replied: but I am much more frustrated with that than you are ma'am, because even though I don't live the same situation, I'm tired of losing in this regard, as obvious as it is. And she asked: but can we do something? I said: I don't know, do what you wish, form a petition, do what you wish. But force those decision-makers and political representatives to work seriously on that. And the truth is that, from that meeting on, without any interference coming from me, they've organized a petition that raised over 14000 signatures, which was delivered to the Assembly of the Republic in Portugal. They created a national caretakers' association and continue to work through social media, since they do not have greater options. The informal caretaker statute is being finally discussed in the Assembly. It will be voted on soon. Three years have passed though, it is obviously an eternity for those who provide care because it does not meet those immediate needs. We went from a nothing to a situation in which people, driven by revolt and total incapacity, transformed their situation into one of power and gained the capacity to reclaim and strengthen democracy. I do not recall a movement that has gained so much force and relevance in the past years of Portuguese democracy, like the informal caretakers movement did. Afterwards, it went from the dementia issues and broadened to fathers, mothers, children or young adults, or even adults with disabilities, people who take care of others and friends related issues. So there are many cases which pass by unnoticed and suddenly, we have a national network and a newly created association, which is one of the strongest, most highly attended and most demanding associations of people who can't leave their home. Imagine if they could, how would it be. They can't leave their home and they are really forcing a decision in the

national parliamentary context. It was one of the greatest lessons of democracy that I've had, honestly, it was an initiative that came from those that were there themselves...

Tatiana Moura – It was bottom-up.

Marisa Matias – Yes, and it was almost direct confrontation to say: ok, but what can be done? I've been saying there are more of you, and I am in the middle of an impossible power relation and you are living an impossible situation because you cannot mobilize, but if you get together, you might help to change this.

Tatiana Moura - It reminds me of your first time in Rio de Janeiro. Do you remember it?

Marisa Matias – I do. I remember those mothers of the victims of massacres.

Tatiana Moura – This was probably around 2005/2006, when you were a CES researcher [The Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra]. And I remember you were impressed by the movements and strength of …

Marisa Matias – Of mothers.

Tatiana Moura – Of mothers, because they're fighting for someone, fighting for justice for someone they've lost, considering that they have been excluded from these debates, those mothers and fathers who deal with those who have survived, and not only children and the family who lives amid violence everyday. Peripheries Journal comes from the Maria e João Aleixo Institute (IMJA), located in Maré, home to 140 thousand residents - more than Coimbra. When there is visibility regarding those who died, who are transformed into figures, we do not even talk about those who have survived, youngsters, and with what they must deal with. We must also consider those who were harmed and became somehow disabled, who must be taken care of. I think that this debate would also be very interesting to be introduced, not only as a matter of justice, but also because caretakers, most of whom are women but also men who provide care, they take care of survivors who sometimes carry physical and psychological traumas.

Marisa Matias - Definitely, as a matter-of-fact, the quintessential motto of the first meeting was really this one: Who takes care of whom.

Photo: João Lemos

PART II

Tatiana Moura – […] This leads us to the following question, which is a long one: Considering that the periphery lives a scale of inequalities, as opposed to what prevails in other social-historical environments, what is the proposal for a parliamentary policy, one which contributes on the one hand to the development of subjects from the peripheries, and on the other, to fostering a new perspective regarding the peripheries that overcomes the perspective based on prejudice, which contributes to worsening the peripheries' environment?

Marisa Matias - This requires a cigarette, hold on a second.

Tatiana Moura – If you were a member of parliament working on the question of global peripheries, and I've given you the example of Rio de Janeiro, the social historical geographical space that we to this day, that we learned about together and where we worked… if your field was the peripheries, what would you do to combat the demonization of the peripheries, and to work towards a social-geographical and economic integration… what would you do, since your work is overwhelmingly related to issues related to the peripheries?

Marisa Matias – Yes, with the world peripheries, with EU peripheries and with the issue of refugees and migrants…

Tatiana Moura – And with Portugal, evidently.

Marisa Matias – And Portugal is a permanent periphery. I truly became a relentless advocate for public policies, services and of the welfare state, because I was a direct beneficiary of equality policies, equal opportunities policies. For a long time now I have had the perfect notion that I was a product of the peripheries…

Tatiana Moura – Which you will have to explain us…

Marisa Matias – I am completely aware that having been born in a village which to this day does not even have 100 inhabitants, way smaller than Coimbra, I am completely aware that my parents started working, my mother at the age of eleven, my father at the age of ten(…) I am a peripheral woman born immediately after the implementation of democracy in Portugal, and I have lived in a very small village, small and far from even attempting to fight for its own rights…

Tatiana Moura – In a village close to Coimbra…

Marisa Matias – Yes, close to Coimbra. And which was far from striving for rights the of existence, or thinking of having the same rights of existence as others. And I actually grew up hearing that I could not be a demanding person, because I did not have the right to be that way, even when I was a child. But the truth is, it happened…

Tatiana Moura – Your Village, could you tell us a bit more? The Village of Alcouce…

Marisa Matias – Yes, Alcouce…

Tatiana Moura – Which does not have even 100 inhabitants…

Tatiana Moura – No. Not even 100 inhabitants…

Marisa Matias – So it was a village when I was born there and remained a village as I grew

up. At that time, it was devoid of the most basic things, which we today understand as basic conditions for existence -- which took place during Portugal's transition from dictatorship to democracy.

Tatiana Moura – No electricity?

Marisa Matias – There was no running water…

Tatiana Moura –There were no pipes?

Marisa Matias – There were no water pipes and no running water. There was no electricity, no running water. There were two houses with television. We lived on what we planted and from the animals we had. So, it was a kind of a direct version of food sovereignty. We ate what we produced. And I remember it perfectly, since I have lived it, and had to go every day to… ah, there was no school, no public health, nothing like that…

A periphery, really. I remember having running water at home at the age of 10 or 11. Before that, our daily routine was to get up early and to go to the water fountain and getting water for all the day's necessities, be it showering, cleaning, cooking… I remember what it was like to have dinner by candlelight, by lantern even. Yes, those with petroleum, we had to buy petroleum… and light it so as to keep the light for dinner, since at night there was no other light source. I remember what it was like going to primary school on foot, five kilometers there, five kilometers back. I remember it all because it was my childhood, and I recall how transitioning to democracy was… I was moving up to third grade, a primary school was being built in my village. Therefore, I no longer had to walk to school. I also remember that later on, the National Health Service arrived and a Health Unit was created, only 2 km away, which was great because it was much better than walking to the doctor. I also remember people starting to have television, electricity. I remember it all because I lived it in my skin. And my resolute defense of the Social State and public services is related to the fact that I realize I have lived in the best phase of access, following a dictatorship of access to what should have been everyone's guarantee as a society, the basic. The same things that, for example, my nephews once again do not have…

Tatiana Moura – How many nephews do you have?

Marisa Matias – Five.

Tatiana Moura - Where do they live?

Marisa Matias – Four of them in the village. But they no longer have these things, they once again do not have school, health center and the mail delivery…

I have the feeling that I was one of those cases of having had the opportunity to live in the right place, at the right time. The country's peripheries' general condition, following the dictatorship, in the rural world, was one of the accomplishment of democracy and its effect on people's lives.

Tatiana Moura – I am sorry to interrupt you, but drawing a parallel, I am thinking about the *favelas* of Maré, Rio de Janeiro. I am thinking about global peripheries but transposing it on the Brazilian peripheries. Evidently, there is the rural space, whose issues are the same, but being the *favelas* of Maré, located in an urban space and which is a result of migration, it differs considerably from your birth in a very small rural periphery, located close to Coimbra, it is different from…

Marisa Matias – Yes, but the point is that in post-dictatorship in Portugal, 90% of the territory was periphery…

Yes, because it was meant for keeping people from education, training, depriving them of access. For being obedient and not rigorously questioning whichever were the decisions taken… For agriculture to continue, for all the processes related to dictatorship we know to continue. So…

Tatiana Moura – So as a member of parliament, if you were in charge of the peripheries?

Marisa Matias – Given my personal experience…

Tatiana Moura - Five basic things**.**

Marisa Matias – Basic things are those which guarantee equal opportunities to people, regardless of where they are. Public, free and quality services in education, health, culture. In short, those which are the basic of the basics in order to live. I also recall that at that time public and itinerary libraries started reaching my village, and I did not have a single book at home though I have read a lot, throughout my entire childhood, since I could request books and bring them back the following week and get new ones. There was that thing of a Gulbenkian project, an itinerary library supported by the state. So we had libraries every week…

Tatiana Moura – You have two siblings, right? There are three of you, right?

Marisa Matias – Yes, we are three siblings. And this was what we had access to, we had access to health services, schools. We began to have access to schools in the village, which nowadays no longer exist because of austerity policies. Therefore, I think that the Social State and public services are two inevitable dimensions. Then comes free access…

Marisa Matias – I do not know how to exist without the periphery, I am peripheral, period. And I do not want to pretend otherwise. It is where I found myself and I think that people must have the right to be wherever they want to be, but that is not the point. The point is that the periphery should never be a condition of subjection. It must always be a condition of access, in a different space, geography, put it as you wish, but rights cannot be withheld because of the place where you live. This is absolutely unacceptable in a democracy. Therefore, there is a profound contradiction in democracy when peripheries are put back in their pre-condition of peripheries, after achievements had already been reached to keep that from happening. For example, I was completely shocked this week, referring just a little to the political context we are experiencing in the European Union, which is very scary, because Denmark approved a Decree, the Ghetto Decree. And the Ghetto Decree, approved

by the majority of the Danish parliament, says that every family living in peripheral neighborhoods, urban or rural, whose earnings are below the national average, must hand their children, for at least 25 hours a week, to public Danish institutions which will be responsible for teaching those children the values of being Danish, teaching Christians values, and they will be forced to celebrate festivities like Easter and Christmas...

Tatiana Moura – Children whose origins are…?

Marisa Matias – Diverse and many of whom are surely already Christians, this is not what is at stake.

Tatiana Moura – In other words, they do not have Danish origin, right?

Marisa Matias – No, but some will, because…

Tatiana Moura – They were already born…

Marisa Matias – They were already born…

Tatiana Moura – But the focus is on… immigrant children.

Marisa Matias – Yes but from then on Danish kids who are children of parents who live in those neighborhoods, or peripheries, whose earnings are below that of the national average, those parents must hand their children for at least 25 hours a week...

Tatiana Moura – Therefore, 3 days… 8 hours a day.

Marisa Matias - Yes, in order to teach them what the Danish values are, the Christians values, Easter and Christmas celebration. And this is something and at least scary, in addition to those other things going on in the world…

Tatiana Moura – It is an attempt of "monsterization" of the peripheries, because the Instituto Maria e João Aleixo's (IMJA) discourse and project under construction is to work with the periphery as a part of the city. The periphery is not something that is outside, it is not a space of denial, it is not a space of absence, and the periphery is an integral part of the city…

Marisa Matias – Surely.

Tatiana Moura – Which is ostracized by the center…

Marisa Matias – Yes, and which must not be. Which must not be. And what we are facing now in the EU's context is the systematic negation of the periphery, ostracizing it, turning it into a non-space, a non-location. A place for no one, of no existence, no identity, no life…

Tatiana Moura – It's a denial, right?

Marisa Matias – It is a complete denial. And it is happening in several EU countries, Denmark is just an example…

Tatiana Moura – Do you think that it has to do with the EU or do you think it is a global tendency?

Marisa Matias—I honestly want to believe it isn't global, but in the EU it is really, really… it is becoming mainstream politics, that of the denial of the periphery…

Tatiana Moura – If we consider Trump's politics, for example.

Marisa Matias – Trump, or if we consider Latin America or Central America, or a lot of countries in Africa, or Asia, I mean… really…

The problem is that many spaces are being created, which are completely empty spaces,

occupied by simplistic and antagonistic forms of democracy, because those powers which were taken as instruments by the financial powers gave neither real nor concrete answers to the people's necessities, be they education, health, culture…

Tatiana Moura – Is this a problem from the left?

Marisa Matias – It is everyone's problem, but I think that the left was not able to answer properly…

Tatiana Moura – You use this expression often, and publicly and so I can reproduce it here: the right-wing has won the battle over common sense.

Marisa Matias – Yes, it has.

Tatiana Moura – What do you mean by that?

Marisa Matias – There are different dimensions, but as for the EU, it happened when we lived through a brutal financial crisis… in 2007, 2008, 2009… It turned into an economic crisis and easily and rapidly developed into a social crisis, because it was a financial crisis that was transformed by the instituted powers into a sovereign debt crisis and, therefore, the responsibility was no longer attributed to the financial system. The taxpayers were held accountable for it. It became our crisis, a crisis that we did not provoke and had to pay for. When it happened, what the financial leaders did was put the blame for the crisis on the citizens' shoulders: "living beyond one's means" and well, a series of lies that people bought…why? Because in fact, people did have low earnings and they realized that maybe they were living a life which was not compatible with their earnings. But that is really just a stupid lie, because in order for lies to have a foundation, they need a slight trace of truth. We have always had a policy of very low incomes, so people truly believed that the fault was theirs. The fact that the crisis was acknowledged in the EU only occurred through a Decree that basically said it is not a financial crisis but rather a sovereign debt crisis. The blame was transferred and everyone accepted it. And everyone accepted and took responsibility

for paying it. Somehow, the process of placing culpability regarding a matter that people did not have any control over at all would have to occur. We are far from rescuing democracy in the financial space, far from that. But when I was saying that I am neither fatalist nor pessimist, it was also because I think that it is obvious that, given a context of massive unemployment and poverty, rapidly advancing, and given a context of higher inequality between the center and the periphery in the EU…

Between each countries' center and periphery, it is very easy to sell people the image that they are to be blamed, and it is even easier to add to that, adding that if there are no jobs, and if there is poverity, it is because there are people arriving from other countries -- be they refugees, migrants or whatever. The phenomena they want to elaborate is that those who are coming are occupying their positions and this is why they have no job and are poor. This is the simplistic explanation, though it fits perfectly for unprepared people who have not seen their future expectations consecrated, but have seen them, instead, destroyed. Then I think that the left bears great responsibility, yes, I think so. And if this space has been occupied and is being occupied, not only in the EU - though a lot in the EU - by the far right, with its racist and xenophobic discourse that denies equality, basic and fundamental human rights, in addition to putting into dispute that basic and fundamental principle of the concept of human rights, which is a universal. And this is regardless of context, geography, age and gender. This is an even harder path to take, because we are far from getting there since we lost the battle to the common sense. The easy explanation was that this happens not because the financial system seized democracy, not because there was a true adoption of public policies guided by the financial system’s reasoning, and not based on the service of collective needs and common interest, but suddenly, the other is seen as a potential enemy and politics based on fear has gained this entire space. And we from the left did not know how to occupy those empty spaces that were left behind in the absence of solutions and concrete policies to meet people’s concrete needs.

Tatiana Moura – I will ask you about the Left in the seventh question, regarding your opinion over Brazilian politics and peripheries. For now I will move to question five: We from the Instituto Maria e João Aleixo consider that the peripheries are centralities, since strategic subjects construct them as a collective organization. How do you consider the transformation carried out by the participation of those strategic subjects and civil society

organizations from the peripheries? The second part of the question is: do you consider that those actions can somehow expand human creative potency, within people and of the people?

Marisa Matias – I believe in all of that, because I think that one of most tremendous democratic losses we have had in the last decades was the disqualification of people as active political subjects, as well as the decrease in people's comprehension regarding the power they have, the real power they have.

Tatiana Moura – A phrase you use a lot: I am at the service of people!

Marisa Matias – Sure, but there was a complete inversion in democratic values. A kind of people's subservience regarding who represents them, when it should be exactly the opposite, because who represents them is at service of people. People are not at the service of those representing them. Therefore, there is a total inversion of what democratic values are, and the collective conception lost what real power is and what democracy means. So I, as a people's representative, always feel that I am a person with less power in this whole thing, because I am one representing many. Consequently, those many people have much more power than I do.

Tatiana Moura – How many votes did you receive?

Marisa Matias – In the last election I had a half million votes among five million voters, so more than 10%. Though voting is not mandatory and since the abstention level is very high. But this varies a lot and, above all, there is this incapacity we also have as citizens. I am not speaking here as a representative or party leader. I mean that there is an inability to understand the power we have in a democracy. And no one, I mean, we are not equal in life when we are born, because we are born in very different circumstances, with very different economic conditions…

Tatiana Moura – We are not equal but we should be…

Marisa Matias – We should, but we are not. So, this is the starting point. This is why engage in politics, so that everyone can born equal. We will get there some day. I am optimistic.

Tatiana Moura – Activists must be optimists.

Marisa Matias – Exactly, I am an optimistic activist. But in a context in which inequalities prevail, in which they are a condition, unfortunately a condition of our human circumstance and one which we should fight against, I think that inequalities are the root of all problems. There are two moments in which we are truly equal, in voting and in death.

When we are born, we are not equal, we are not born equal. But when we vote we are equal, I mean, it does not matter if I am voting as a congresswoman, citizen or as the President of the Republic or Prime Minister. It does not matter, it is worth the same as anyone else. And when I die, I die as anyone else, so…

Tatiana Moura - You can die with quality or not. We had the debate over euthanasia in Portugal…

Marisa Matias – Yes, but that is another debate. What I mean is that the specific moment of dying, and of course you can die with quality or not and we carried out the euthanasia debate, which we lost by five votes, five representative votes. So I think that it does not represent the social majority, but this is also a problem we can talk about: when will the political majority, someday, represent the social majority? But this is something. Currently, we are equal when we vote and die. I will never forget the moment I was with the women workers struggle, in a factory…

Tatiana Moura – Triumph?

Marisa Matias – No, that was the last one, but these women are another example of strengthening democracy, because they have fought enough to achieve their rights when nothing else was possible. They camped for 3 months, with rain, wind, hunger and winter,

which in Portugal is hard.

Photo: Paulete Matos

Tatiana Moura – Women workers, right?

Marisa Matias – Yes, women. Women that did not give up and I have been with them afterwards, and they have suffered a lot but they succeeded in gaining their rights when the odds were that their rights could not be granted. Whatever the case, I have never again bought anything from Triumph and I recommend everyone not do so until they do comply with the established women's labor rights. But I was saying that I was in a picket at a women's strike in Montemor-o-Velho, here close to Coimbra, at a time close to the elections. They were holding a day and night vigil at the company, for it not to remove the machines, because if they did so, women would not have the right either to indemnity or to their late salaries. And on that occasion, I asked: there will be elections soon, will you vote? And they all answered: No. And I asked, but why? Because it does not change anything. And I said: So it does not change? No. And I asked: do you think your boss will vote? And they answered: Oh, of course he will, he has interests to defend. And I said: but you are many more…

Tatiana Moura – And have interests to defend…

Tatiana Moura – And have interests to defend… And one of them said: I have never thought about that this way. And I said, but you are many more than him, you have much more power than he does.

Tatiana Moura – We have witnessed in Latin America - Colombia, Nicaragua, Brazil – peripheral leaders that stood out and have been murdered…

Marisa Matias – Marielle…

Now, in Mexico's presidential elections, 204…

Tatiana Moura – I think it shows the absolute power of the peripheries, however tragic it may be… with the radical impunity that takes hold in countries where the judiciary is doubtful and inefficient. It silences those voices that may have somehow managed to put things in their proper terms. And this is very scary. Even while it gives us the will to fight, to fight more, as representatives of the periphery…

Marisa Matias – But I do not even make the comparison, I do not even compare them because we are talking about different contexts. But if I, here in the comfort of the European Union, theoretically the house of human rights where nothing is accomplished, but that is another point… If here I have already been subjected to death threats, I cannot imagine what daily life is like for those dealing with this everyday.

Tatiana Moura – Or what daily life is, as you previously said, for those who grew up thinking: I do not have the right to anything.

Marisa Matias – Exactly, but I was also educated, not by my parents but my previous generations, in order to have…

Tatiana Moura – You have not mentioned what your parents did, and I know your life history…

Marisa Matias – My father was an emigrant in Luxemburg and worked in civil construction. He started working at the age of 10, then never stopped. When he came back to Portugal, he became a Park Ranger and my mother cleaned and looked after the children…

Tatiana Moura – And they are both farmers…

Marisa Matias – Both are farmers of the village. And today, fortunately, they are both retired.

Tatiana Moura – That leads us to the last question, which is very easy: Is it possible to create a hub of international dispute whose core is democratic progress guided by the pedagogy of coexistence and by the deepening of common socialization?

Marisa Matias - **I do not think that there is any alternative in this moment, honestly, and I think that is what is missing. I mean, I do not want to believe that it is impossible. I really don't...**

Tatiana Moura – Otherwise, you wouldn't be doing this.

Marisa Matias - No, otherwise I would have already packed up and would be doing other things in life...

Marisa Matias – Of course it is possible and it must be possible, otherwise, none of this would make sense. And my basic question is, how is it that every empty space -- and we know that within politics there is a fear of emptiness -- becomes rapidly occupied by retrograde, racist, xenophobic forces...

Tatiana Moura – Conservative.

Marisa Matias – Conservative and also those that eliminate the possibility of the collective and common. I, coincidently, am the president of the Parliament for the *Intergrupo dos bens comuns [Intergroup for the common goods].* And it has not been an easy task, but I think that...

Tatiana Moura – Do you think an intergroup of the common people should be created?

Marisa Matias – Of the common goods and common people. And I think that we should move on from… I mean, as hard as it might be and for all the anguish it causes, we should leave our academic and theoretical comfort and realize that not everything in life is explained by the concept of property. It may rather be explained by the concept of access, of that which must be a common good and a common right to everyone. And I think that a part of the left's problem is to think that it is less left-wing if you don't include all the requisite terms and jargon in every little intervention, because if you don't, it is not really left-wing but something entirely different. And it is possible to be even more of a leftist radical by giving answers to people's concrete problems and questioning concepts that we assume are acquired, rather than to continue to talk as if we were in 19th century Europe, and not say anything rigorous to anyone…

Tatiana Moura – The last question, which is mine. The other questions were thought together… Seeing as the IMJA and is geographically located in a Periphery and assumes its role as an international center for knowledge production…

Marisa Matias – It is a center, a center non-recognized as center, probably… What I mean is that we must multiply the *Maré* [the tide], that's it.

Tatiana Moura – There are waves…

Marisa Matias – Yes, we must multiply the *Maré* and we must multiply the peripheries.

Tatiana Moura – I want to start with the phrase: Temer, Out!

Marisa Matias – First and foremost.

Tatiana Moura – Firstly. The last reflection is: elections are coming in October, what is your reading?

Marisa Matias – I have the feeling that everything is being done for elections not to happen and that elections are to take place in a very conditioned way. I find it very hard to talk

about contexts I do not live in…

Tatiana Moura - You have political relations with Brazil…

Marisa Matias – Yes, I do. Political relations, and I obviously already have my…

Marisa Matias - In fact, my positions are surely known to the Brazilian community as a whole, especially as for the politicized cohort that follows all of this. So, I am not impartial, I take positions and I have already done so. Actually, in regards to the elections, I have supported and I will continue to support Guilherme Boulos. That being said, I really think it is impressive to see from the outside how a concept of society, in which inequality is the norm, where it is being normalized, and this is very scary. And how is the public space being occupied? It is being occupied with a lot of resistance and vindication. But at the same time there is a huge normalization of what should not be accepted, which is a reproduction of what we had so far. We are living a moment in which Brazil is under a coup. I have been recently to Brazil and by the way, we have also had this discussion very recently in the European Parliament regarding indigenous communities. I was in Brazil visiting indigenous communities in the context of trade negotiations among European Union/Mercosul, and we must free ourselves from fear, because fear is what is destroying democracy…

Tatiana Moura – Yes, but the fear is for real when people are being murdered, right?

Marisa Matias – I know, but returning to the previous question… Even in different scales and dimensions, and with different impacts, we must free ourselves from fear and I truly believe that… I do not know what the impact was, or what impact Marielle's murder continue to have…

Tatiana Moura – It is huge.

Marisa Matias – I hope it continues to be, because internationally speaking it continues to be and people do not forget, because nothing is worse than erasing memory.

Tatiana Moura – Yes, but at the same time there is a lack of faith in the judiciary, I mean, people are murdered and…

Marisa Matias – But of course, how come can you trust a judiciary that conducted, for example, a process like Lula's. It cannot be trusted at all. But fighting for separate powers and for its independence, this is fundamental. Above all, people must realize that in a democracy, per the norm, it is the majority is that rules, therefore, if the majority mobilizes, oppression cannot continue at all.

Tatiana Moura – If the majority mobilizes the periphery becomes the center?

Marisa Matias – If the majority mobilizes we can even discuss the elimination of the concept of center/periphery itself.

Interview held July 2018
