

A Technical and Sociological Analysis of Miguel Esteves Cardoso's 'A Causa das Coisas'

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Miguel Esteves Cardoso (MEC) stands as a foundational figure in contemporary Portuguese literature and journalism, particularly through his seminal work, **A Causa das Coisas**. Originally published in 1987 and recently reissued by Bertrand Editora in 2021, the book functions as much more than a collection of newspaper columns. It is, as described by critics like José Tolentino Mendonça, an **essay on social ontology** and an **ethnographic inventory** of Portuguese life in the 1980s. This analysis provides a deep technical dive into the structure, linguistic mechanisms, and sociological frameworks that MEC utilizes to dissect the reality of a nation in transition.

1. Theoretical Framework: Social Ontology and Ethnography

To understand **A Causa das Coisas**, one must first define the technical parameters of **social ontology**. In the context of MEC's work, social ontology refers to the study of the nature and properties of the social world. It asks: What are the constituent elements of 'Portugueseness'? How do social entities (like the habit of complaining or specific consumer goods) gain their status and influence?

1.1 The Almanac as a Structural Modular System

MEC employs the **almanac format**, which in technical communication serves as a modular repository of information. Unlike a linear narrative, the almanac allows for a non-linear consumption of data, where each entry functions as a discrete unit of analysis. This modularity mirrors the fragmented nature of modern life, particularly during the mid-1980s when Portugal was navigating its entry into the European Economic Community (EEC).

1.2 The Ethnographic Inventory Method

MEC treats his subjects—ranging from political figures to the 'Pasta Medicinal Couto'—as biological or social species. His methodology involves:

- Observation: Identifying a common social behavior or artifact.
- Classification: Categorizing it within the broader hierarchy of Portuguese culture.
- Dissection: Using irony and semantic precision to reveal the underlying absurdity or 'cause' of the thing.

2. Technical Analysis of 'Portugalite'

One of the most enduring concepts introduced in the book is **Portugalite**. MEC defines this as a "nervous inflammation" consisting of the compulsive need to speak ill of Portugal. Within a technical framework, we can model Portugalite as a socio-psychological feedback loop.

2.1 The Portugalite Transmission Model

MEC suggests that Portugalite is highly contagious and transmitted via saliva (conversation). We can represent the spread of this cultural sentiment using a modified **SIR Model** (Susceptible-Infectious-Recovered) applied to social linguistics:

Variable	Technical Definition	Socio-Cultural Application
S (Susceptible)	Population exposed to national discourse.	The general Portuguese public in the 1980s.
I (Infectious)	Agents actively articulating "Portugalite" sentiments.	Intellectuals, journalists, and disgruntled citizens.
R (Recovered)	Individuals who have achieved cynical indifference.	Those who no longer find catharsis in national self-deprecation.
β ; (Infection Rate)	Rate of verbal transmission (saliva-based).	The frequency of social gatherings and coffee-shop debates.

The mathematical implication of MEC's observation is that β ; in the Portuguese context is exceptionally high, leading to a permanent state of endemic social dissatisfaction.

3. Comparison of Editions and Publisher Shifts

The publication history of **A Causa das Coisas** provides a case study in the evolution of the Portuguese publishing market. Below is a comparison between the original 1987 Assírio & Alvim edition and the modern 2021 Bertrand reissue.

Feature	Assírio & Alvim (1987)	Bertrand Editora (2021)
Binding	Brochado (Softcover)	Brochado / Enhanced Quality
Curation	Initial collection of 1980s columns.	Archival preservation with critical context.
Market Positioning	Counter-cultural, avant-garde.	Canonical, literary heritage.
ISBN-13	N/A (Original)	978-9722540698
Critical Introduction	Minimal.	Features insights from José Tolentino Mendonça.

4. Linguistic Mechanisms and Rhetorical Engineering

MEC's prose is characterized by high technical precision disguised as effortless humor. He utilizes several key rhetorical engineering techniques:

4.1 Semantic Defamiliarization

By describing mundane objects (like a brand of toothpaste) using the language of high philosophy or medical science, MEC forces the reader to view the familiar through a technical lens. This creates **cognitive dissonance**, which is the primary driver of his humor.

4.2 The 'Inventário de Espécies' Logic

The book functions as a **taxonomy**. MEC categorizes types of people (the 'betos', the 'snobs', the politicians) as if he were a 19th-century naturalist. This procedural approach to satire provides a sense of objective authority to what is fundamentally a subjective critique.

5. Practical Implementation: How to Read MEC for Social Analysis

For researchers and students of cultural studies, **A Causa das Coisas** offers a step-by-step guide to conducting social audits. The following workflow outlines MEC's analytical process:

1. Identify the 'Thing': Select a specific Portuguese idiosyncrasy (e.g., the way a certain pastry is ordered).
2. Establish the Historical Context: Link the item to a broader historical or economic trend (e.g., the post-colonial hangover or EEC integration).
3. Analyze the Pathological Component: Determine if the 'thing' is a symptom of a larger national neurosis (like Portugalite).
4. Formulate the Irony: Contrast the self-importance of the 'thing' with its inherent triviality.
5. Synthesize the 'Cause': Conclude with the underlying social ontology that allows the 'thing' to exist.

6. Case Study: The Influence of MEC on Modern Digital Discourse

While **A Causa das Coisas** predates the internet, its structure is remarkably similar to modern blogging and social media commentary. MEC anticipated the **listicle** and the **micro-essay**.

6.1 Failure Modes in Modern Imitation

Many contemporary writers attempt to replicate MEC's style but fail due to a lack of technical depth. Common

failure modes include:

- Over-reliance on Adjectives: MEC uses nouns and verbs to drive the irony; imitators often rely on descriptive fluff.
- Lack of Structural Logic: MEC's essays have a clear internal engineering; imitators often produce stream-of-consciousness rants.
- Absence of Compassion: Despite the sharp satire, MEC's work is rooted in a deep, albeit frustrated, love for his country. Pure cynicism lacks the dialectical tension found in MEC's writing.

7. Quantitative Metrics of the 1987 Edition

The 1987 edition by Assírio & Alvim consisted of approximately 352 pages. In terms of **Information Density (ID)**, we can calculate the ratio of unique cultural insights to total page count.

Formula: $ID = (Total\ Distinct\ Social\ Observations) / (Total\ Word\ Count)$

MEC's work maintains a remarkably high ID, as he rarely repeats themes, instead opting for a broad horizontal sweep of the Portuguese landscape. Each essay averages 800 to 1,200 words, optimized for the newspaper reader's attention span while maintaining enough depth for subsequent book-length compilation.

8. Broader Implications for Portuguese Literature

The legacy of **A Causa das Coisas** lies in its democratization of intellectualism. MEC proved that one could discuss **ontology** and **ethnography** while making the reader "roll with laughter." This intersection of high and low culture paved the way for a generation of Portuguese writers who refuse to see humor as secondary to serious analysis.

In the final assessment, the "cause of things" in MEC's universe is always human. The book serves as a mirror, reflecting the neuroses of a nation trying to define itself between its glorious past and an uncertain European future. By documenting the ephemeral—the fads, the slang, and the social posturing of the 80s—Miguel Esteves Cardoso captured something permanent about the Portuguese soul. Whether through the lens of a 4th edition found in an online bookstore or the crisp pages of the 2021 Bertrand reprint, the technical precision of his social critique remains as sharp and relevant today as it was nearly four decades ago.

Ultimately, the work functions as a critical diagnostic tool. It does not just describe Portugal; it provides the mathematical and emotional coordinates for understanding why the country functions (or fails to function) the way it does. For the technical writer or the social strategist, MEC's oeuvre is a masterclass in observation, classification, and the power of the written word to reshape a nation's self-perception.

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