



Portugal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

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HISTORY

Portugal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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The historiography written about Portugal has been particularly productive over the last three decades. There has also been no shortage of histories of Portugal attempting to produce syntheses, some more analytical, others less so, and almost all of them published in Portuguese.

Yet another two works of this nature were published recently, both in the same year: one in English (Disney 2009) and another in Portuguese (Ramos et al. 2009). In both cases, the general public's reception was a warm one, bearing in mind that they have both already been reprinted. And, in fact, they can both be considered to have been praiseworthy efforts from the outset. Not since A. H. de Oliveira's *History of Portugal* has a text of this scope enjoyed such widespread dissemination in English. In the case of the work edited by Rui Ramos, attention is drawn immediately to the attempt that was made to update the syntheses available in one single volume.

This brief article seeks to contribute towards the debate about the way in which the history of Portugal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is dealt with, in both works, and to analyze to what extent these two texts can be considered up-to-date, taking into account the bibliography that was available roughly two or three years prior to their publication. Obviously, attention will be given only to those parts relating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the case of the work edited by Rui Ramos, the chapters relating to the Modern Age were written by Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro.

It should, however, be noted that both A. R. Disney and Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro go into greater depth about the eighteenth century than they do about the previous periods. Furthermore, in the case of the first author, there is no doubting his interest in the colonial and export trade, even if one only considers the first volume of his work. In general, the pages that he writes about economic matters are almost always highly pertinent and interesting.

Disney makes a good synthesis of the bibliography available in English about the eighteenth century in Portugal. In turn, Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro capitalizes on his own research experience into various themes relating to the eighteenth century and offers a brilliant synthesis. However, given that there will certainly be specialists on the eighteenth century, as in this panel of commentators assembled here, my considerations will be centered upon the previous centuries.

It should be stressed that the plan of A. R. Disney's book recovers the traditional organization of history into Golden Ages and Dark Ages and dedicates just one volume to the Portuguese empire from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. In this way, there is little connection to be noted between the empire, which is studied in some detail, and which the author is remarkably knowledgeable about, and the dynamics of the metropolis. The author seems to confirm the principle that "the Portuguese are better known in the world at large for their role in the process of Western global discovery and expansion, than for their contribution to the internal history of Europe" (I, 333). This criterion is therefore presented as one of the main bases for the selection of the information the author managed.

For A. R. Disney, the "period from about the mid-1490s to the early 1540s is in many respects the most memorable in Portugal's history" (I, 143). The Dom João III of the "Golden Age" differed greatly from the one of the "Tarnished Age" (I, 172). The successive deaths occurring in the family of Dom João III, the disinterest that Dom Sebastião showed towards women, the economic crisis that was also a crisis in the cape route to India, with a gradual and

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progressive impact on metropolitan Portugal, together with the consolidation of the Inquisition, all of these features made this change possible. The picture was further complemented by the Jesuit education system and by censorship (I, 190). The 1580 crisis of succession was part of this phase. In the author's own words, "The royal house, accounted so fortunate in the time of King Manuel, was now struck by a succession of devastating family tragedies that eventually imperiled the survival of the nation itself" (I, 172). The nation was identified with the Royal House and already existed in the sixteenth century. It is because of this context that he speaks of "reconstruction" when examining the period from after the Restoration until the late seventeenth century.

While the quality of his text has already been stressed in the sections where the records associated with international trade are brought into play (e.g., 208-213), the same cannot be said in relation to matters of social history. Notions such as class and bourgeoisie appear to be used inadequately in relation to pre-industrial society (182, 185) and the same can be said about the social effects and the scope of application of the *Lei Mental* (237). This latter ruling was only used to regulate succession in matters relating to the crown's estate and did not interfere juridically with any other type of property. For the succession of the crown's estate this law required the legitimacy of birth, the male issue and the primogeniture, together with the indivisible and inalienable nature of property. For these reasons, it was profoundly hated by the Portuguese nobility. Those who received resources from the crown, whether for their lifetime or forever, could easily lose them if they did not have a son, or if this son were a member of the clergy. As such rules did not exist in Castile, at the time when the throne was being disputed in 1580, there were some in Portugal who nurtured the hope that Filipe II would eliminate the law. Such an expectation contributed to the fact that some nobles showed themselves to be favorable to the House of Austria, but their hopes were thwarted because this law was a way of guaranteeing income for a Monarchy that permanently had many services to pay for.

In the text by Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, there is a good interconnection made between the coming into being of the extra-European space and the history of Metropolitan Portugal. Little by little, a picture is painted of Portugal as a multi-continental monarchy (435), but without its being denied the status of a colonizing power and with its being seen as an active agent in the spread of slavery. The author is quite clear in regard to this particular question by attributing to the Portuguese a decisive role in the consolidation of the slavery originating from sub-Saharan Africa: "Between the mid-15th century and the beginning of the 17th century, the Portuguese were practically the only Europeans involved in the trafficking of African slaves all around the Atlantic Ocean, exercising an almost exclusive control over their introduction into Southern Europe, the Atlantic islands, Brazil and Spanish America, although at first they largely relied on the support of Muslim networks that already existed inside Africa" (246). In the work under analysis, Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro also adopts a stance that attaches great importance to the dynamism of the peripheries, something that becomes very clear when he writes about Brazil.

While, according to Disney's work, the Portuguese identity, both in the Iberian Peninsula and on the international stage, arose from the role that this political unit played in the process of Europe's global expansion into other continents, and from its involvement in the trade and the wealth that were generated in this way, in Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro's text, this participation takes on another meaning. The empire is not seen as an element that was external to Portugal, but rather as a structural feature that shaped the intrinsic make-up of this political unit and gradually informed all of its various aspects, beginning with politics. The history of Portugal in the modern period is almost completely transformed into the work of disentangling the intricate webs that configured this reality.

In his organization of the different subject-matters, Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro oscillates between an approach based on structural content, such as "The 16th-century realm," and chapters of a conjunctural nature. Chapter III, "A Peninsular destiny: Portugal and Castile (1557-1580)," seems not to make any sense as such. The contents that he presents would be better off being included in the next chapter, "Portugal in the Hapsburg monarchy (1580-1640)."

In fact, of all the themes that Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro dealt with here, it was in the discussion of Portugal under the rule of the House of Austria that he proved to be the least innovative, making this an area where some of his pages can be considered to have been less successful. It was here that he returned to a series of well-worn clichés, such as the "Statute of Tomar" or the "Pact of Tomar" (271-277) or the *Real de Água* presented as the equivalent to a tax

on meat and fish (292). In reality, it was only in 1582, when he was ready to return to Castile, that Filipe II subscribed to the principles by which he would govern Portugal and not at the *Cortes* of Tomar. As far as the *Real de Água* is concerned, it was a tax that could fall upon those consumer products, just as much as it could fall on others. The more fundamental these products were for people's daily lives, the greater was the tax's effectiveness.

Putting details to one side for the moment, and without claiming to sanction the status of an "interpretive synthesis" with which Rui Ramos introduces this volume, Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro's text launches a series of new ideas that deserve to be discussed by all those who write about early modern history. I shall now attempt to present them.

First of all, he highlights the involvement of the nobility, together with the Royal House, in the process of overseas expansion (209-210). Without denying the role that was played by groups of merchants, or the importance of the Royal House, he draws attention to the military aspect that was involved in this process. Indirectly, he redirects our attention to the social implications of that fact, which went far beyond the standard pattern of the merchant-knight, expressed by Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, or to the conquest of the fortresses in North Africa. It is a pity that the author is so summary in his analysis of this matter, particularly after introducing some bibliography on the problem, which he also quotes from (Boone 1986; Elbl 1997; Cunha 2004; Cunha 2005). Reading between the lines, it can be understood how, with their interest in these services, many members of the nobility—including the *fidalgia* (grandees)—ended up taking part in this process. However, it was worth taking time to be more precise about the type of *fidalgos* that were involved and under what conditions they set sail from Portugal heading for the empire.

In studying the institutional reforms of the first half of the sixteenth century (publication of the *Ordenações Manuelinas*—1512-1521; replacement of the medieval charters (*forais*) by the Manueline ones—1497-1520; installation of the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Portugal—1536; the annexation of the masterships of the Orders of Christ, Santiago and Avis to the Crown, in 1551; and even the division of the six judicial districts (*comarcas*) at the end of the Middle Ages), he classifies these as the most important cycle of changes taking place until the liberal revolution (228). In fact, apart from the introduction of the polysynodal system of governance (even though the genesis of this system should be attributed to the first half of the sixteenth century, and not to the period of the dynasty of the Kings Filipe, as Disney suggests), few reforms were introduced that had such a distinct effect on the structure of the regime until the nineteenth century. Without it having been conceived or planned as such, this set of changes was to mark Portuguese society for the long term, from all points of view. The fact that this topic has been highlighted in this way is one of the great merits of this work.

Another important question is the fact of his pointing out that, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, "the court in some ways replaced the parliament (*Cortes*) as the essential form of the realm's representation" (340). In this case, the author is particularly explicit in the way that he demonstrates his interpretation of this matter: "Anyway, most of the little more than one hundred nobles summoned to the *Cortes* in 1697 coincided with those who were to acclaim Dom João V king in 1706. These aristocrats also held some of the highest offices in the realm (*mordomo-mor* (Lord Chamberlain), *estribeiro-mor* (Chief Equerry), *monteiro-mor* (Chief Huntsman), etc.) at the court of the new monarch. [...] The court, in the broad sense that includes not only the Royal House and the holders of the respective offices, but also the central administration of the monarchy, was reinforced and tended more and more to appear as the space that monopolized political life. The power and influence of the high nobility were no longer exercised, except in a residual manner, on the periphery of the territory and in the local spaces, but instead inside the court itself" (340-341). In reality, rather than the court replacing the *Cortes*, what clearly seems to have happened is that the high politics were played out in the Court and that it had more or less been like this since the Restoration. The concentration of the aristocracy in Lisbon, a process that has been studied so frequently by the same author, had been decisive in this regard, as had the fact that there were no medium-sized cities to be found in Portugal and no intermediate power bases. These last two aspects are not mentioned by Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, and yet they seem to be decisive. Power moved from the court at the centre to the *concelhos* (boroughs) without any focal point in the middle. In this way, the periphery had lost the leading influence that it had attained in the past.

Finally, we should discuss the idea that the break with Castile in 1640 had pushed Portugal away from the cultivated and enlightened Europe and inevitably made a certain contribution to the

country's cultural isolation (343, 349). The author seems to be indisputably right in relation to the theatre, for example, given the traditional dependence on the theatrical companies on the other side of the border. However, wasn't Portugal's cultural isolation also a product of the court's difficulties in establishing itself immediately after 1640? With the war, the financial difficulties and the lesser demands of the "courts held in the villages", which dominated the period of rule by the House of Austria, did the right sort of conditions exist for the practice of artistic patronage or to encourage the development of a high-quality standard of consumption?

In short, whether one agrees or not with these interpretations, the launch of this problematic picture will certainly have repercussions on later historiographic production. If this is the case, this will undoubtedly be the major virtue of this work.

Finally, we should look at the question of just how up-to-date these texts are.

Taking the bibliographical references into account, Disney—in the pages that he writes about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—refers, above all, to a bibliography written up to 2002 and 2003. The only exception to this rule is the biography about Filipe I of Portugal, written by Fernando Bouza Álvarez and dating from 2005.

In general, Disney tends to use works of synthesis, such as volumes 5 and 7 of the *Nova História de Portugal*, edited by Joel Serrão and A. H. de Oliveira Marques. Of all the texts of this nature, this is the one that he quotes most often. Volumes from the *História de Portugal* by Joaquim Veríssimo are also frequently referred to in many of the notes. The *História de Portugal* by A. H. de Oliveira Marques, as well as the History of Barcelos, are also quoted. Overall, the author shows that he knows the works of reference published in Portugal, and above all the classical texts. Certainly the difficulties that he had in gaining access to the Portuguese publishing market explain this situation. Where he is most exhaustive is undoubtedly in the work that is published in English. Here, he makes very good use of the specialist bibliography and one should highlight the excellent mastery that he displays in relation to what has been written in this language about international trade.

In the case of Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, the titles that are examined reach up to 2008, and he even includes one from 2009. One can clearly see the effort that he has made to include some of the texts published in Brazil, which is certainly praiseworthy. His synthesis is founded above all upon the specialist texts and has little recourse to the histories of Portugal, even to the one coordinated by José Mattoso, in which he himself participated.

To sum up, we are confronted here with two syntheses of the Portuguese dynamics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, each with its own distinct profile. That written by Disney represents a commitment to the production of a textbook, almost providing an updated version of A. H. de Oliveira Marques's *History of Portugal* for English-speaking universities; while, in his turn, Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro takes advantage of the macro scale to attempt (in a text of a type that is little given to great innovations) to paint a problematic picture that seeks to be regarded as a major reference. I believe that he has succeeded in doing so.

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