



The contemporary era

Autor(es): Oliveira, Pedro Aires

Publicado por: Brown University; Universidade do Porto

URL persistente: URI:<http://hdl.handle.net/10316.2/25311>

Accessed : 26-May-2019 04:00:00

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Vol. 8 · n.º 2 · Winter 2010



e-journal
of **PORTUGUESE**
HISTORY

The Contemporary Era¹

Pedro Aires Oliveira²

After its clamorous reception by the media and the praise heaped upon it from many different quarters, the *História de Portugal* edited by Rui Ramos (and particularly the chapters for which he himself was responsible) met with a chorus of criticisms made by some of his peers in statements that were gathered together and published by a daily newspaper.³ The most negative reactions related, above all, to the author's approach to the period of the Portuguese Republic and the New State. More than seeing it simply as a revisionist exercise, some historians suggested that what we were witnessing was a kind of whitewashing of the iniquities of Salazar's dictatorship. It would be hard to think of a more unfortunate way of beginning the debate that this work undeniably merits, and my personal wish in this matter is that initiatives of the sort now being promoted by the *e-Journal of Portuguese History* will be able to pave the way for a more rational and calmer tone in this debate.

Rui Ramos has never enjoyed what might be described as an easy relationship with the tribe of Portuguese historians. In his vast and important oeuvre about contemporary Portugal (most particularly covering the period ranging roughly from the Regeneration to the end of the Republic), very few books have merited the critical review of other colleagues from the same profession. Curiously, it was a Spanish political science journal that was to publish what has so far been the only joint examination of his work and his theoretical and methodological premises.⁴ The fact that, in recent years, the author has become one of the best known and most popular intellectuals (he was a columnist in three leading national newspapers and a resident commentator on a TV talk-show), making no bones about his defense of a program of liberal reform for Portuguese society, has won him few friends in academic circles, where left-wing ideas still tend to prevail.

It would clearly be absurd to reduce everything to a question of envy or resentment. After all, Ramos is not the first openly right-wing historian to be adopted by the media. The antibodies he has aroused may perhaps be explained in two ways. First of all, as a reaction to his adopting a clearly different approach to history from the one that traditionally prevailed in Portuguese historiographic circles until quite recently—currents of thought that are in some ways linked to a Marxist origin, on the one hand, and the “French Historical School” (the generation of the *Annales* and their continuers in the 1970s), on the other hand. In line with the criticism leveled by the American historian Gertrud Himmelfarb against the so-called New History (which includes the post-*Annales* historiography and other more “structuralist” currents), Ramos wrote an article in 1991,⁵ defending the supremacy of a political history that constructed its problems from the questions posed by the witnesses and sources of each period, and not from some agenda provided

¹ I wish to thank Bruno Cardoso Reis and Margarida Lopes for the helpful comments that they made after reading a preliminary version of this text.

² IHC, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1069–061 Lisboa, Portugal.
E-Mail: mpoliveira@fesh.unl.pt

³ Cf. *Público*, 31 May 2010, São José Lopes, “A História de Rui Ramos desculpabiliza o Estado Novo?” Amongst the historians and political scientists consulted by the newspaper were António Costa Pinto, Fernando Rosas, Irene Pimentel, Manuel Loff and Manuel de Lucena (the latter being the only one who praised the work, despite also making one or two criticisms; the book's most severe critics were Rosas, Pimentel and Loff).

⁴ Luis Arranz Notario, “Un Hito en la historiografía portuguesa. El Portugal contemporáneo según Rui Ramos,” *Historia y Política*, 20, July-December, 2008, 315-358, which describes the author's work as “a major contribution to European historiography.”

⁵ Rui Ramos, “A causa da história do ponto de vista político,” *Penélope*, 5, 1991, 27-46.

by modern social sciences. The “agency” of history would therefore be given back to those who, in each period, had most distinguished themselves in the struggle to assert a certain vision of the world or a project for society. This would be the historian’s main aim, with all the other dimensions normally highlighted by a more structuralist approach to history (geography, economics, social conflicts) basically being regarded as accessory to his explanatory efforts. To quote the author in his original text: “History can make use of sociology, anthropology or psychology, just as it avails itself of paleography, numismatics, climatology or archaeological techniques—as auxiliary sciences—in order to establish the boundaries of its subject-matter: political events, everything that has to do with the way in which men consciously sought to live in a community – in the ‘polis’.”⁶

It is quite possible that at the time of its publication, many people may have read this text as a rehabilitation of the old-fashioned political history, even including possible revanchist overtones (the Berlin Wall had fallen two years before the article was published, and the USSR was on the brink of imploding). By removing the social classes and the “economic contradictions” from the equation normally used for explaining great changes, Ramos was paving the way for the return of an elitist history, and, even worse, an eminently reactionary one. As long as he confined himself to discussing themes and periods that were less laden with ideological considerations, his work did not fuel any controversies that could be said to be too awkward. However, by undertaking a radical reinterpretation of the established versions of the history of the First Republic, in Volume VI of *História de Portugal* edited by José Mattoso,⁷ inspired to some extent by Vasco Pulido Valente’s pioneering study of the events of 5 October 1910,⁸ Ramos earned himself the title of “revisionist,” a term that in Portuguese intellectual culture, still heavily marked by the anti-Fascist tradition of opposition to the dictatorship, does not have very pleasant overtones.

The second factor fuelling the animosity towards Ramos’s approaches is precisely the suspicion that his history may be the vehicle for a hidden ideological agenda. Although this is not made explicit by his critics, it is reasonable to suppose that in their opinion Ramos’s revisionism not only seeks to belittle the contribution that the anti-Salazar left made to the construction of the present-day democratic regime, but also has the aim of legitimizing the idea that the solution to Portugal’s current problems requires the adoption of a neo-liberal orientation that will, in turn, free it from the constraints of an atavistic statism.

Maintaining an exceptional publication rate (without repeating himself from article to article), and making regular contributions to the media, Ramos has become possibly the most widely quoted modern-day historian, as well as the one most frequently commented upon. And, in the year marking the hundredth anniversary of the implantation of the Portuguese Republic, he has been like a wet blanket for all the official commemorations, a kind of Portuguese Furet. Whether or not one shares his philosophy of history, reading him is always a pleasure—because of the clarity of his thinking and his formidable erudition, of course, but also because of the intelligent way in which he outlines problems and hazards explanations, in a register that is always accessible to any curious reader.

The roughly 350 pages that he edited for this work synthesize many of his interpretive hypotheses formulated over roughly twenty years, and (possibly to the disappointment of some of the admirers of his more iconoclastic vein) they dispense with much of the outspoken language that was to be found in previous works (particularly the already-mentioned *A Segunda Fundação*).

For the period 1807-1890, which up to now the author has essentially approached through the study of some of its main intellectual figures (especially those who remained active after 1860, and particularly the historian J. P. Oliveira Martins, who was the subject of his PhD thesis defended at Oxford in 1997), we might perhaps highlight a few of its more suggestive moments. The first has to do with the extraordinarily intense labor pains involved in the birth of political modernity in Portugal, in a context of war and foreign occupation, economic devastation and the loss of an empire—a political transition that was much more prolonged and painful than the one that was eventually to take place, in fairly similar circumstances, in the mid-1970s. Secondly, there is the

⁶ *Idem*, 43.

⁷ Rui Ramos, *A Segunda Fundação*, Lisbon, Círculo dos Leitores, 1994 (there is a second revised edition published in 2001).

⁸ Namely in *O Poder e o Povo*, originally published in 1975. There is a third edition from 1999, published by Gradiva.

sheer magnitude of the transformations brought about in the aftermath of the triumph of the Liberals in the civil war of 1832-34, which the author does in fact refer to as the “Liberal Revolution” (1834-1851). As Oliveira Martins noted, it was in fact the Portuguese equivalent of 1789, because of the way in which it radically reshaped the “institutions and forms of power and relationship that had been the norm for centuries—the greatest and most brusque social and political change ever to have occurred in Portuguese history” (493). The royal power was restricted and stripped of its sacred significance, Catholicism was placed on the defensive, the power-holding elite significantly renewed, while areas such as taxation, justice, public order, bureaucracy and local power emerged from the liberal reforms with an almost unrecognizable appearance. Some of these changes arose from the ideological options of liberal legislators, who, despite the significant differences that existed between them, firmly believed in the State’s power to transform and the need to protect the Portuguese economy from outside competition. Other changes—the expropriations and confiscations of the land belonging to the Church and to the Miguelist nobles—were also dictated by the realm’s impoverished financial state. The divergences between a more radical current of Portuguese liberalism, historically identified with *Vintistas* and Septemberists, and another more moderate current, consisting of the supporters of the 1826 Constitutional Charter, fuelled much of the atmosphere of endemic political conflict that was rife until 1851, but Ramos stresses that these factions came together in a project for the regeneration of Portuguese society, the realization of which was to depend on the commitment of its most active and enlightened citizens, duly supported by the leverage of state power. In his opinion, it was this that gave substance to the culture of “civic patriotism,” which had evident affinities with a “republican” tradition forged in the course of the Italian Renaissance and with several followers in the European Enlightenment (Rousseau above all). Ramos states that this civic patriotism was also shared by the founders of the PRP (Portuguese Republican Party), which would have led various members of the ruling monarchic elite to consider that these people were fighting a pointless battle, since they were trying to break down an open door: in reality, although the king still enjoyed important constitutional prerogatives, the republican aspirations had largely been assumed by the monarchic regime, as Fontes Pereira de Melo once suggested to his fellow party member, and future president of the Republic, Bernardino Machado. Seen in this light, the conflicts between monarchists and republicans were basically the result of the “narcissism of minor differences,” and, when compared with the great upheaval of 1832-34, the regime change that took place in 1910 could almost be reduced to the level of a mere reshuffling at the heart of the Portuguese governing elites, a “detail,” as Ramos claimed in one of the interviews that he gave when the book was launched.⁹

Which does not mean that the Republic didn’t have a “revolutionary” regime in other aspects. We should therefore regard it as an unstable power that was regularly obliged to suspend its own procedures of the Rule of Law, by virtue of the reactions that its highly authoritarian methods of government ended up arousing. Basically, rather than diverging in terms of the ends to be achieved, the republicans marked their difference from the political elite of liberalism by the type of means that they were prepared to adopt in order to achieve their “Civic State,” which could only be built by “making a revolutionary break with the dynastic and Catholic past, accepting no compromises” (582). Now, as contemporary history has taught us, the question of the means is crucial for defining the possibilities of a regime founded on pluralism and tolerance, something that the First Republic most definitely never was. Frightened by the possibility of the leading figures of the Monarchy infiltrating the new parties and political institutions, some of the most influential members of the PRP pursued a radical strategy based on a “separation of waters” (in which the anti-clerical legislation of Afonso Costa played a critical role), while at the same time taking steps to prevent the discontent with their governance amounting to a decisive expression in electoral terms. Without the king’s moderating power, the regime set up by the 1911 constitution made it possible for the party of government to prolong its hold on power through greatly rigged elections, in which only a tiny fraction of the Portuguese population were qualified to vote. As the author says, “Given the impossibility of a peaceful rotation of government, the oppositions gave themselves up to conspiracy and attempted coups” (595). Notwithstanding important differences in their orientation, the republican elite, including the breakaway groups to the right and the left of the PRP, were never able to overcome this “democratic deficit,” which, in the medium run, was to prove fatal for the

⁹ Cf. his interview with José Manuel Fernandes, *Público*, 22 January 2010.

regime's legitimacy. Achieving an excellent equilibrium between the political narrative and a more analytical register, the author demonstrates how the more "progressist" projects of the Republic in the social and cultural field were irretrievably compromised by the disastrous options taken by the government (such as Portugal's participation in the First World War), and stresses how the regime founded in 1910 was one of the few to escape the widespread introduction of universal suffrage in the first half of the twentieth century. The fact that most of the initiatives promoted under the scope of the Commemorations of the Centenary of the Portuguese Republic have shown some circumspection may, to some extent, be put down to the historical "revisionism" that authors such as Rui Ramos and Vasco Pulido Valente have helped to popularize, and, as it happens, in a similar vein to the one in which liberal historiography popularized the Jacobin mythology of the French Revolution.

Bearing in mind these credentials, it is understandable that the chapters dedicated to the New State and the 1974 Revolution should have been awaited with a particular sense of expectation. His description of the end of the Republic and the advent of the Military Dictatorship, for example, highlights the enthusiasm with which he always seeks to capture the ambivalent meaning of historical changes. Whereas the classical version of the historiography most closely identified with the opposition to Salazar underlined the complete break with the past and the ideological and political antagonisms, Ramos prefers to emphasize the lines of continuity and the points of affinity between the republican elites and the right-wing forces that came together on May 28. Once again, the author suggests, political change arose from a disagreement between groups and factions during the last days of the Republic, who were attempting to develop solutions within its framework to bring an end to the political monopoly of the PRP—solutions that all tended, on both the left and right of the political spectrum, to underline the need for an authoritarian government.

The figure of Salazar, who only in 2009 was made the subject of a biography written by an academic,¹⁰ does not appear painted in a very different light from the one that has been presented by the scholars of the New State over the last few decades: a cold, realistic politician, highly skilled in achieving the balances and compromises needed to perpetuate his hold of power, although without sacrificing a set of more or less coherent principles associated with a Catholic and ultramontane world view. From the outset, Ramos moves away from the idea that Salazarism can be regarded as something that was monolithic and constant over time, and therefore does not waste much time on the debate about the putative "Fascist" nature of the regime. There were various kinds of "Salazarisms," which corresponded to the need that the leader of the New State felt to adapt to the challenges that each set of historical circumstances placed before him. In one particular aspect, however, his regime displayed great consistency—its faithful adherence to a series of arbitrary procedures and repressive instruments, which remained remarkably stable for more than forty years. The fact that the author once again places this dimension in perspective, establishing comparisons with other similar European regimes (which inevitably tend to lend a more benevolent air to Salazarism), has been criticized as an expedient for shifting the blame from the dictatorship, but this is, in my opinion, a rather exaggerated view. The way in which Salazarism managed violence, which not so long ago was defined by the sociologist Hermínio Martins as "optimum terror" (as opposed to the "crude maximum of terror"),¹¹ may not have been analyzed with the depth that the theme required—if only because this must have been one of the most original and disconcerting features of Portuguese authoritarianism. But let us agree, nonetheless, that this would always be a very difficult reality to describe given the constraints that are inherent in syntheses of this type.

An innovative aspect of this work is its exploration of the interaction between the metropolitan and colonial dimensions, something that had been completely neglected in the *História de Portugal* edited by José Mattoso, for reasons of a purely editorial nature (the publisher was about to publish a 5-volume *História da Expansão Portuguesa*). In the case of the New State, it would be impossible to underestimate the value of this interaction, in view of the connection that was established between the fate of the regime and that of the colonial empire, especially after the

¹⁰ Filipe Ribeiro de Menezes, *Salazar: a political biography*, New York, Enigma Books, 2009.

¹¹ Hermínio Martins, *Classe, Status e Poder e outros ensaios sobre o Portugal Contemporâneo*, Lisbon, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 1998, 68.

Second World War. I do not, however, believe that Salazar's decision to resist the decolonizing pressure can be considered comparable to certain attitudes of other democratic powers that also sought to postpone the granting of independence to their overseas territories, as is upheld by the author (680). The colonial policies adopted by France, the United Kingdom, Holland and Belgium displayed significant differences between one another and in comparison with Portugal, besides the fact that, in 1961, the key decisions taken by these countries in relation to decolonization, including the behavior of Gaullist France towards Algeria, were far removed from the course that had been laid down by Salazar. The statement—admittedly qualified with inverted commas—that Portugal would also have decolonized in its own way, namely with the reforms promoted by Adriano Moreira and with certain adaptations to the discourse (the incorporation of the Luso-tropical “vulgate”), in the absence of a more developed explanation, may confuse readers who are less familiar with the real meaning that the author wished to give to the expression.¹²

Despite his having tried not to lose track of the already-mentioned constraints of space, I do believe that the consulate of Marcelo Caetano, to which the author only devoted nine pages, was worthy of a more detailed treatment. I say this because of the premonitory nature of some of his social, economic and educational policies, because it was a crucial period for a better understanding of the genesis of the April 25 revolution, but also because of the testing ground that it represented for the generations that would very shortly come to dominate democratic politics.

The Revolution and the PREC (Ongoing Revolutionary Process), which have earned the right to the rather generous quantity of forty pages, benefit from the author's experience as a student of other revolutions and do not disappoint the reader. Once again, at the centre of events we find not the “people” or the “revolutionary masses,” but instead the leaders and the activists who were very conscious of their aims and the means that were necessary to achieve them, whether in the lands of the agrarian reform, factories, residents' committees or meetings of the MFA (Armed Forces Movement). “(...) Despite the ‘rank and file’ rhetoric of the revolution, political and social action continued to be hierarchical,” writes Ramos. “At the top, the revolution corresponded more to a generational change of elites, prepared by the socialization they were given in left-wing politics at the universities, than to a break with the social constraints of the past.” (730).

The great break with the past did, in fact, come with the institutionalization of a pluralist and competitive democratic system, whose historical singularity the author very fairly highlights in the final chapter. This was perhaps one of the most difficult chapters to write, given the absence of sufficient distancing in terms of time, of the kind that normally helps to hone the analytical capacity of historians. I do, however, believe that the challenge is overcome in an entirely satisfactory way, and not just at the level of the appreciation that he makes of the political and institutional evolution of the last thirty-five years. The profound economic, social and cultural changes that Portugal has undergone since the PREC are described with empirical rigor—here the author was able to benefit greatly from the studies directed by the sociologists António Barreto or Manuel Villaverde Cabral—but also with imagination and a touch of humor (see, for example, his references to the country's “ecological footprint” in 2003 and the increase recorded in the average height of Portuguese men throughout the twentieth century, or his remark about the public's relationship with the work of the film director Manoel de Oliveira).

Syntheses of this kind seem to be condemned to producing a sense of dissatisfaction amongst professional historians—as was, in fact, made obvious in the session organized by this journal, in May 2010, to discuss the book. There will always be some who feel that fundamental aspects of the history of a human society, or the type of interactions that different groups establish within themselves, are missing in this work, or were insufficiently discussed. It would, however, be unfair to lose sight of the scope and purpose that the authors (in fact, at the editor's suggestion) defined for the project: to write “the History of a unity built up by the political power over the centuries” (III). It is possible that what was involved here was the wish to embark upon a political history of a “narrativist” nature that would ultimately gain the approval of the general public, but the final result did not sacrifice the analytical depth that is to be expected in a more sophisticated history. Anyway, it seems to me to be undeniable that the perspective adopted helped the authors to construct an interpretation that fairly effectively incorporates both those features that continued

¹² On this question, cf. his article “‘O império que nunca existiu’. A cultura da descolonização em Portugal, 1960-1980,” *Revista de História das Ideias*, 28, 2007, 429-477.

to exist and those aspects that represented a break with the past, and which have marked these nine centuries of Portuguese history at the most varied levels. Critics of this *History of Portugal* are left with the challenge of seeking to produce an alternative view that manages, at the very least, to be as persuasive and readable as this book.