

Joaquim Romero Magalhães: The Writing of History

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Abstract

This article deals with Joaquim Romero Magalhães' writing of history, emphasizing the importance of both form and style in his work. I make use of my own reflections and memories as his student and friend, as well as Professor Romero's book reviews, speeches as a member of PhD examination committees, articles and books. Even though an attempt is made to fulfill the formal requirements of this type of analysis, I must mention that this text is intended to raise questions and suggest possible directions for future research and does not seek to draw any definitive conclusions on the subject apart from the following—that Joaquim Romero Magalhães's writing of history deserves to be studied and exalted.

Keywords

Writing of history; methodology; narrative; art; science

Resumo

Este artigo versa sobre a escrita da História de Joaquim Romero Magalhães, com destaque para a importância da forma e do estilo em seus trabalhos. Uso reflexões e lembranças (de orientando e amigo), e resenhas, arguições, artigos e livros da lavra do Professor Romero. Ainda que procure cumprir os requisitos formais que se exigem de análise deste tipo, deve-se salientar que se trata de texto que busca levantar questões e sugerir encaminhamentos, e não propriamente tirar conclusões peremptórias sobre o tema. Afora uma: a escrita da História de Joaquim Romero Magalhães merece ser exaltada e estudada.

Palavras-chave

Escrita da História; metodologia; narrativa; arte; ciência

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“The writing of history, although always careful, is perhaps a substitute for being a failed artist.”
Joaquim Romero Magalhães, 2018

I first met Professor Romero—this is how Joaquim Romero Magalhães was known to some of his friends and students—in December, 2004 at the University of São Paulo, Brazil during the international seminar on *Lights in the Tropics: The 18th-Century Captaincy of São Paulo*, promoted by the Jaime Cortesão Chair, a research body of the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences of the University of São Paulo in association with the Camões Institute, which is itself linked to the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From this first encounter, a friendship blossomed fueled by endless correspondence and many personal meetings in both Brazil and Portugal. In 2008, I started my PhD studies under the scope of the graduate program on Economic History of the University of São Paulo, focusing on the Portuguese Atlantic between 1640 and 1808 and supervised by Professor Vera Lucia Amaral Ferlini. In 2010, I was awarded a scholarship to undertake research in Portugal and so I consulted Professor Romero about the possibility of his being a co-supervisor of my thesis together with Professor Vera Ferlini. He accepted the invitation and a close relationship between student and advisor was then initiated, further strengthening the ties between us. This biographical background is provided in order to clarify the purpose of this article and the means of its preparation.

Even before I met Professor Romero in person, I had long admired his writing of history. My admiration grew over the years through my various readings of his works and the teachings that I received from him. This article deals with the making of history of Joaquim Romero Magalhães, emphasizing the importance of form and style in his works. I make use of my own reflections and memories as his student and friend, as well as Professor Romero’s book reviews, speeches as a member of PhD examination juries, articles, and books. Even though an attempt is made to fulfill the formal requirements of this type of analysis, I must mention that this text is intended to raise questions and suggest possible directions for future research and does not seek to draw any definitive conclusions on the subject apart from the following—that Joaquim Romero Magalhães’ writing of history deserves to be studied and exalted.

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Until the *Belle Époque* period, chapters were dedicated to the subject of History as a literary genre in books about the History of Literature and chronologically arranged according to styles in various parts. After that moment, with the gradual disappearance of that suggested genre, historians were moved more by concerns relating to science. According to Novais and Silva, the result was “an irreparable loss” historians “began to write badly, sometimes very badly” (Novais and Silva 2011: 12-13). In this process, the traditional approach to history was “turned upside down” (Hobsbawm 1998: 84). Description and narrative were relegated to a lower level, allowing greater room for analysis and explanation. As a consequence, less care was taken about good writing. This was a misguided carelessness because narrative should not be abandoned. The great difference was that, with the advent of the social sciences, there was a constant tension between explanation and narrative in the writing of history. However, the reconstitution of events in the world of humankind continued to be the final goal of the historians’ discourse (Novais and Silva 2011).

In this sense, the “revival of the narrative” typical of the so-called third generation of the *Annales* should not be criticized for its aspirations towards “stylistic elegance.” Indeed, according to Lawrence Stone, “[the authors] are not content to throw words down on a page and let them lie there, with the view that, since history is a science, it needs no art to help it along” (Stone 1979: 4). As Eric Hobsbawm rightly pointed out, the emphasis placed on events or even on the individual should not be simply rejected in itself because it can represent a means “of illuminating some wider question, which goes far beyond the particular story and its character” (Hobsbawm 1980: 4). The problem is not the actual narrative, but the abandonment of the explanation and the renunciation of concepts.

Joaquim Antero Romero Magalhães was the perfect role model of a historian who knows how to skillfully balance analysis and reconstitution, combining clarity and elegance in his writing with a concern for scrutinizing the big “why” questions. Hobsbawm’s disagreement with Lawrence Stone’s criticism of the “revival of the narrative” can be exemplified by one of the chapters of the book *O Algarve Económico (1600-1773)*, in which Joaquim Romero Magalhães recounts the wars in which the Algarve region was involved in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and provokes the reader: “A factual chapter, this one? Yes and No. Yes, in its determination of data that are indispensable for understanding the past. And no, because war does not fail to influence structural aspects, particularly in terms of a region’s settlement” (Magalhães 1993: 101). The narrative was not there for mere aesthetic enjoyment but rather served the purpose of explaining the effects of the war

on the composition of the Algarve's population at that time. Even so, the facts were not just thrown down on paper in a random and slovenly fashion. Instead, they were carefully architected in prose written in a well thought-out and elaborate style.

It is impossible to think of Professor Romero's writing without mentioning a phrase included by Virginia Woolf in her novel *Orlando*, often recalled by Professor Vera Lucia Amaral Ferlini, a great friend of mine and of the professor and my advisor in Brazil: "We must shape our words till they are the thinnest integument for our thoughts." (Woolf 1963: 122). From among the literature written in the English language, if faced with a choice between James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, Professor Romero would quite possibly have chosen the second. Hemingway is my insertion because we never got to talk about him; an author whose precise and syncopated style allows us to draw parallels with the writing of Professor Romero. Even more so if we take into account some of the rules of *The Star Copy Style*, a former style guide of *The Kansas City Star*, the newspaper for which Hemingway worked between 1917 and 1918 and which had a great influence on his style of writing: "Use short sentences. Use vigorous English. Eliminate every superfluous word. Never use old slang. Slang to be enjoyable must be fresh." (The Kansas City Star 1915). I certainly know that Joyce was not Professor Romero's predilection: he once wrote to me, "it is literature that is incomprehensible to me, Joyce's." He did not deny its relevance, but its form was not to his liking.

What Professor Romero preached and practiced was simple writing. Simple does not mean "poor," nor does it mean that it is not worked upon. Facing the rough stone, taking away what is excessive, and allowing beauty to emerge is no easy task. He followed the teachings of the philologist Manuel Rodrigues Lapa, whose book *Estilística da língua portuguesa* (with its first edition dating from 1945) he once recommended to me. Rodrigues Lapa warned against writing with a "scent of mold," a "pretentious and inflated style, very fashionable in academies," emphasizing the writer's obligation to "use the word in its current sense," having always "present and fresh the feeling of the language of today" (Lapa 1991: 19). He also advocated conciseness in writing: "In a good style, one does not say anything more or less; what is needed, to the exact extent of what is thought and felt, is vigorously and clearly stated. And it is better to err on the side of sobriety than engage in a useless overloading of words" (Lapa 1991: 11).

Born "amidst books and papers," as he himself once said, Professor Romero—the son of Joaquim da Rocha Peixoto Magalhães, a philologist and teacher of French and Portuguese at the Liceu Nacional de Faro—came into contact with the best of Portuguese

literature at an early age. As far as the writing of history is concerned, his most evident influence came from France. Ever since the submission of his final work for the completion of his BA in History, presented to the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra in 1967 (Magalhães 1970), Joaquim Romero Magalhães' academic supervisor had been Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, who was strongly inspired by the *Annales* group to which he had contributed between 1947 and 1960 while living in Paris. It was only to be expected that the student under his supervision would also benefit from the influence of this French style of historiography. And so it was—the *Annales* left indelible marks on Professor Romero's work, beginning, most notably, with his concern for writing. While, on the one hand, in the early days of their activity, the historians of the *Annales* were fierce critics of the so-called *histoire événementielle* ("history of events"), consisting of a pure narrative without any problematization, they were, on the other hand, generally very careful about ensuring that their own studies of history were well written. Fernand Braudel is perhaps the best example. A great writer, and a great narrator. Another direct influence of the *Annales* on the work of Professor Romero was the relationship between history and geography, which is explicit in his studies on the Algarve (Magalhães 1970, 1993, 2012b). As far as these works are concerned, it would be remiss of me not to mention the account of a young Brazilian teacher who had read one of Professor Romero's books just before going to sleep. This reader became so captivated by the brilliant perfume of Professor Romero's description of the Algarve's landscapes that, during the night, he dreamt that he himself was in the Algarve, walking along the seafront and visiting the mountains. More recently, in his "Digressions on Geography and History," Professor Romero said the following: "The domains of history combined with geography exert a strong influence on the decisions of societies—albeit without any form of determinism. But the study of time and space can never be ignored when one seeks to understand and explain reality." (Magalhães 2017a: 19).

Among the Portuguese authors dedicated to writing about history, the admiration that Joaquim Romero Magalhães had for António Sérgio deserves a special mention: "[A]n essayist, no doubt an instigator of research, an architect of issues and problematizations, and at the same time a fearsome polemicist." (Magalhães 2012a: 332). In August 2010, he recommended that I read some of the writings of Jorge Borges de Macedo as well as António Sérgio's essay on "The Two National Policies," for my doctorate. A few days later, in reply, I wrote to him, commenting that Jorge Borges de Macedo, although not as seductive in writing as António Sérgio, says some interesting things. On August 18, 2010,

Professor Romero replied: “Sérgio, a philosopher and pedagogue, had brilliant ideas in history—without being a historian. And he’s a great writer. Jorge de Macedo was a good historian [...] and a terrible writer. But he offers important ideas.”

While valuing good writing, he did not neglect the other fundamental aspects of the work of a historian, starting with a well-thought-out research question and an adequate selection of time periods and spaces. Although he preferred wider issues and more extensive timeframes, this did not prevent him from dealing with certain more circumscribed themes, focusing on a character (Magalhães 2010), or even a company (Magalhães 1997), or reconstituting events that occurred within a period of just a few years, albeit a decisive one (Magalhães 2009). Concepts were also considered to be critical. In 1966, Roland Mousnier promoted an international colloquium at the Sorbonne on the theme of “Problems of Social Stratification: Castes, Orders and Classes.” In the translation notes of the Portuguese edition of the proceedings of this colloquium, Professor Romero discusses the importance of concepts in history, a lesson that is still very pertinent: “If historians do not understand one another and use different concepts and expressions, how can History come close to the social sciences, which already have, at least partially, solved the problem of language? By mere copying and transfer? It is not enough and is simplistic. By using the words of the society one is studying? It is an uncontrollable Babel” (Magalhães 1988: 8).

According to Joaquim Romero Magalhães, a well-thought-out research problem, “coherent architecture,” and a “well-written narrative and secure information” are indispensable requirements of any work written about history. When we notice the absence of these characteristics, we should not remain silent. Thus, in a critical review, he pointed out the failings of a *History of Portugal*, whose countless volumes began to be published in 1977: “It is a heap of data, not infrequently changed and afforded crude and careless treatment, citing bibliography which, although up-to-date, is poorly read, even more badly understood and re-expounded without any comprehension or elegance.” (Magalhães 1979a: 121). Among the defects of the first volumes, two points are most intolerable in the analysis of Professor Romero. The first is the lack of problematization: “We notice its inability to expose problems, and remember that, without problems, there is no history. Mere narrative does not serve our purposes. Today we are required to use conceptual tools, to question the past in order to obtain an explanation and an understanding.” The second is “the poor literary skills of the author,” turning the introduction of one of the volumes into one of “the most painful readings of 22 pages I have ever engaged in” (Magalhães 1979a, 1979b, 1980).

Such criticism is harsh but accurate and correct. It is the criticism of an attentive reader who also served on committees as an examiner at the public defenses of master's degrees and PhD dissertations. On these occasions, Professor Romero did, in fact, present his arguments in the form of "always serene" communications, seeking not to "leave a record of academic virulence" while, at the same time, "not avoiding being vehement and above all provocative in the presentation" of objections (Magalhães 2017b: 11-12). His speeches on such occasions were interventions with lots of irony and much good humor, as Sergio Campos Matos has stressed (Magalhães 2017b: 285-290). He regarded criticism as "one of the mandatory attitudes of university members" and not even the students under his supervision escaped this. He said, with playful delight, that he had managed to find a minor slip in the information provided in the text of one of his students, a researcher known for her extreme rigor and competence. This was duly highlighted during the candidate's defense of her thesis, or, as Professor Romero used to say, during the "beheading of the innocent." It was no different with me. A sixteenth century that, due to a moment of inattention, became the fourteenth century, or an Island of Mozambique that was not explicitly differentiated from the mainland country with the same name were slips that were easily detected by the careful observation of the examiner, putting the candidate into an embarrassing situation, especially when the former decided to publish the speeches that he made as a member of an examination jury, consequently making public the mistakes that only family members and friends present at the defense of the thesis would know about. It is possible (is it really?) that some of those who defended their theses in his presence were not very happy with the publication of his *Provocações: por dever de ofício*, the book that gathers together some of the speeches that he made as a member of these juries between 1987 and 2014 (Magalhães 2017b). That is not the case for me, however, for I even contributed to the book, sending him a copy of the text of one of the questions that he had raised about my work, which Professor Romero no longer had. I also contributed by making a suggestion for the name of his book, which ended up prevailing. Fortunately, I was not put down in a particularly heavy-handed manner. In addition to allowing for the future correction of any misunderstandings, the highlighting of errors in the case of my PhD thesis served his own speech, lending it a certain bittersweet flavor when, at the end of his argument, he engaged in what he referred to as "bizarre and worthless antics" as he outlined the "gross blunders that insidiously find their way into all theses." His justification, too, came in handy: it was the old "*pecha coimbrã*" (the "Coimbra flaw") —"It's not okay just to praise people" (Magalhães 2017b: 264-265).

Having spent so much time with Professor Romero during all those years, as well as reading most of his works, I find that both experiences have brought me the certainty that the scientific nature of history is not incompatible with a certain literary pretension. It is not enough to explain, it is not enough to analyze, it is not enough to reconstitute. It is necessary to write well and to write beautifully. Beyond problematization, precision, and erudition, good history must also be touched by the muses. Clio is the most important of them all, certainly, but not only her. She wants to be accompanied by her sisters. If not all eight, at least a handful of them. Joaquim Romero Magalhães was touched by the muses. It was not, however, a mere question of divine grace, because competence, great erudition, and lapidary writing, as well as talent all require an intense and dedicated effort.

Despite not being a literary work, history also has its artistic elements. Having said this, we must recognize that Joaquim Romero Magalhães was not a failed artist. On the contrary. He was not just one of the greatest historians of his time. He was truly an artist of history writing.

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