

# What I Learned from Joaquim Romero Magalhães

Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Precisely because they were grounded on a solid knowledge of institutional and social matrices of the Portuguese trans-continental reality, Romero Magalhães's works provide many relevant contributions on specific matters. Often there are less prominent ideas in the overall economy of a work that can be very striking to those who read them. I would like to emphasize three, which decisively influenced my understanding of Portuguese history and all my historiographical output.

## Keywords

Municipal power; nobilities; regions; pombaline; reforms

## Resumo

Exactamente porque alicerçada com solidez no conhecimento de matrizes institucionais e sociais da realidade trans-continental portuguesa, os trabalhos de Romero Magalhães fornecem muitas e relevantes contribuições sobre matérias mais específicas. Muitas vezes, existem sugestões relativamente secundárias na economia global de uma obra que podem ser muito marcantes para quem as lê. Gostaria de sublinhar três, que influenciaram de forma decisiva a minha maneira de entender a história portuguesa e toda a minha produção historiográfica.

## Palavras-chave

Poder municipal; Nobrezas; Regiões; Reformas pombalinas

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Social Sciences/University of Lisbon, Portugal. *E-Mail:* [nuno.monteiro@ics.ul.pt](mailto:nuno.monteiro@ics.ul.pt). Translated with financial support from FCT (project UID / SOC / 50013/2019)

As may have happened in other cases, invoking a great historian and a recently deceased friend inevitably has to include an aspect of personal testimony and, in this way, take on features which intersect with the intellectual and historiographical paths of the writer. That will be, in any event, be the form of my contribution.

I read and was profoundly influenced by the works of Joaquim Romero Magalhães long before I had him as my discussant for my PhD dissertation defense in 1995<sup>2</sup> and also in my aggregation academic jury in 2001 and with this our personal bond became closer. Although the titles of the books which were based on his academic dissertations reference the economy of the Algarve during the sixteenth century (published in Magalhães, 1970) and between 1600-1773 (PhD thesis defended in 1984 but only published in book form in Magalhães, 1988), his work, as is well known, cannot be reduced and confined merely to the disciplinary terrain of economic history. According to a broad classical tradition of historiography, notably the first Annales schools, he was a general historian who used economic indicators (and more in-depth research not confined to the Algarve) in his essential works on the early modern age in Portugal and its Empire. His most significant contributions lie in the areas of social and institutional history, with corresponding ramifications in the field of politics. In these fields, the works of Romero Magalhães constitute an authentic re-foundation of historiography, that is, they are part of a group that forced us to rethink Portuguese early modern history as a whole. The assertion of the “municipal power,” that is, of the municipal institution as a fundamental institutional matrix in early modern times—contesting its atrophy in the fifteenth century and considering the “right science” and “absolute power” then proclaimed by the kings as “a purpose,” “not a reality” (Coelho and Magalhães, 1986, 29)—represented a break from a very ancient historiographical point of view. It is true that other authors had previously made suggestions in this direction (cf. Silbert, 1966 and Boxer, 1965), and that others had followed this (cf. Hespanha, 1986, and Capela, 1987), but Romero Magalhães’s contributions were decisive. The connection to the historical debates of the early modern period about the Portuguese reality, the strong empirical foundations, and the selective incorporation of more general bibliographic contributions were marks of the works of the author who assembled them like classic works, similar in many aspects to the studies of António Dominguez Ortiz on Spain, from which he frequently cited.

I would like also to emphasise that the work of Romero Magalhães is exemplary from this point of view, particularly for the historiography of the present. Firstly, although

---

<sup>2</sup> Later published in Magalhães, 2017

building on these Portuguese debates, he had never been associated with traditional perspectives on history, in particular, of the Portuguese empire and its more recent extensions; rather as critic of them, as it was in the whole of his activity in public office and in political life. Also, he was never seduced by the unrestricted translation of terminologies of today's fashionable historiography, whether in its "scientific" facet (economic history) or in its taxonomic and identitary strand. That is to say, he refused the uncontrolled and emphatically chronocentric wave of the imposition on the past of classifications from the present. Moreover, it is easy to perceive that the bibliography of the 1970s that has shown itself to be least resistant with the passing of time has been exactly that which was guided by this inclination for compulsive translation.

However, precisely because they were grounded on a solid knowledge of institutional and social matrices of the Portuguese trans-continental reality, Romero Magalhães's works provide many relevant contributions on more specific or less prominent matters. Often there are relatively minor ideas in the overall economy of a work that can be very striking to those who read them.

I would like to emphasize three, which decisively influenced my understanding of Portuguese history and all my historiographical output. I repeat and insist that what I am going to do is talk about the uses I made of Romero Magalhães's work and the ideas that I have appropriated in ways for which he is not to blame.

The first refers to the definitions of the Portuguese nobility, their statutes, and their hierarchies—a matter always complex but which previously was one of confused form (Macedo, 1971). As I wrote in the thesis I defended in 1986 and in an article published in 1987: "I think it was J. Romero (de) Magalhães who drew attention in recent historiography to an essential distinction: 'not to confuse (...) noblemen with noble people, although the confusion is even made in the documentation of the time, but it seems to me that there are very clear strata, on the one hand the upper entitled aristocracy, then the noblemen (*fidalgos*, the lords of the manor) and underneath this layer of noble people of the governance of the municipal councils.'" <sup>3</sup> More than three decades later, it seems clear that the research undertaken in the meantime has corroborated the above suggestion.

Of course, Romero's diagnosis referred mainly to the municipal elites, which he called the "oligarchies of the noble people of the governance of the municipal councils." (Coelho and Magalhães, 1986, 41) There were, however, other works that reinforced, amplified, and clarified this idea, including the research of Jorge Pedreira (1995) and

---

<sup>3</sup> Monteiro, 1987: 42, quoted from Magalhães, 1985.

Fernanda Olival (2001) on the qualifications of military orders. Of course, these taxonomies are more of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than of earlier periods.

In fact, this aspect was largely a result of Romero's research into the municipal councils, initially concerning the Algarve but extended to other territories and consolidated in 1986 in the overarching book published with Maria Helena da Cruz Coelho. This is where another fundamental diagnosis is presented: "local power is a-regional and anti-regional" (Coelho and Magalhães, 1986, 35). The argument is that the municipal oligarchies never liked to submit to each other, but of course the topic can be expanded.

In 1993, I used this reference to support the idea, taken up by Romero, that "the main counterpoint to the centralization efforts erected by the monarchy, especially after the mid-seventeenth century, was the local powers" (Monteiro, 1993, 275), and not just any kind of regional powers. The kingdom had not been extended by the integration of pre-existing communities, but by conquest, with no "regional rights, no actual provincial institutions, not even sharply diversified linguistic communities" (Idem, *ibidem*). This fundamental aspect of Portuguese reality was associated by Romero Magalhães, as we have seen, with the anti-regional feature of the municipal councils that in the kingdom never came to encompass entire provinces and tended to act as autonomous bodies within the institutional networks of the monarchy. It is true that this idea has been debated. It has been argued that the large municipalities acted as a regional power vis-a-vis parishes and other forms of local organization (Capela, 2005) or by the recent and innovative research on the joint action of various municipal councils, both in the kingdom, in the islands, and in Brazil (Bicalho, Cardim, Rodrigues, 2017). However, it can be argued that this was a very exceptional type of action in the kingdom. On the contrary, it may be pointed out that the municipal councils of the main captaincies of Brazil often acted as spokesmen of the same. The urban municipal councils of Brazil could act as head of a region rather than the kingdom. This reflection and research by Romero Magalhães thus opened up a wide area for extended research and fruitful debate. In addition, it could also be suggested that other focuses of power may have crystallized at certain moments (the most evident being the house of Bragança in the Alentejo, as studied by Mafalda Soares da Cunha, 2000). But this crystallization of regional powers has not happened, as is well known.

Lastly, without this being an endorsement of the intellectual responsibilities of the options of my own work, I would like to underscore that a 2004 article by J. Romero Magalhães clearly influenced my interpretations of the Pombaline period. The statement that "the so-called Pombaline policy was not born ready and finished since Sebastião José

de Carvalho e Melo was appointed Secretary of State on 2 August 1750" (Magalhães, 2004) is not in itself an absolute novelty. In order to report the outstanding contributions, this idea was well supported in a set of articles by J. S. da Silva Dias, which Romero also cites, as well as in previous studies by J. Borges de Macedo. However, the very interrogative manner of that article, provided a more nuanced balance of that which is current in the Pombaline political options regarding Brazil which constitutes an essential inspiration for my own reflection and research on the subject (Monteiro, 2008). Certainly, it is a theme that still deserves much discussion.

I was subject to considerable criticism for questioning the pre-defined size, removing coherence, and minimizing some of the overall impacts of the so-called Pombaline policies (cf. Hespanha, 2007 and Paiva, 2009). It is possible that some interpretations were exaggerated and a great deal of research has still to be undertaken on the period in question within a connected perspective, which may alter much of what is thought. However, Romero's critical reflections were and are a source of inspiration.

Of course, these are not the main nor the most significant subjects of the wide-ranging and multi-faceted work of Professor Romero Magalhães, but they were those that marked me the most and that I think I should invoke. The friendship and admiration nurtured through him and the emotion of his sudden departure have stimulated me to summon up the reading of his works, part of which was carefully reedited and assembled in the last years of his life (cf. Magalhães, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013 and 2017). Critical reflection on his remarkable legacy will certainly be an antidote to the uncritical and brainless taxonomic translation which, together with unrepentant parochialism, has guided more recent Portuguese historiography and its funding agencies.

## References

- Bicalho, M. Fernanda, Cardim, Pedro and Rodrigues, José Damião (2017), “Cortes, Juntas e Procuradores,” Fragoso, João, e Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo (orgs.), *Um reino e suas repúblicas no Atlântico. Comunicações políticas entre Portugal, Brasil e Angola nos séculos XVII e XVIII*, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira.
- Boxer, Charles (1965), *Portuguese Society in the Tropics. The Municipal Councils of Goa, Macao, Bahia and Luanda*, Madison.
- Capela, José V. (1987), *Entre-Douro e Minho 1750-1830. Finanças. Administração e Bloqueamentos Estruturais no Portugal Moderno* (tese mimeo), Braga, Universidade do Minho 3 vol.
- Capela, José Viriato (2005), “Administração local e municipal portuguesa do século XVIII às reformas liberais (Alguns tópicos da sua Historiografia e nova História),” Cunha, Mafalda Soares da, and Fonseca, Teresa, *Os Municípios no Portugal Moderno: Dos Forais Manuelinos às Reformas Liberais*, Lisbon, Ed. Colibri.
- Coelho, Maria Helena, and Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (1986), *O poder concelhio: das origens às cortes constituintes. Notas de história social*. Coimbra, CEFA.
- Cunha, Mafalda Soares da (2000), *A Casa de Bragança (1560-1640). Práticas senhoriais e redes clientelares*, Lisbon, Ed. Estampa.
- Dias, J. S. da Silva (1982), “Pombalismo e teoria política,” *Cultura-História e Filosofia*, vol.I.
- Dias, J. S. da Silva (1983), “Pombalismo e projecto político,” *Cultura- História e Filosofia*, vol. II.
- Dias, J. S. da Silva (1984) 1984, “Pombalismo e projecto político,” *Cultura- História e Filosofia*, vol. III.
- Hespanha António Manuel (1986), *As vésperas do Leviathan. Instituições e Poder Político. Portugal - séc.XVII*, 2 vols., Lisbon.
- Hespanha, António Manuel (2007), A Note on Two Recent Books on the Patterns of Portuguese Politics In the 18th Century, *e-JPH*, Vol. 5, number 2.
- Macedo, Jorge Borges de (1951), *A situação económica no tempo de Pombal*, Porto.
- Macedo, Jorge Borges de (1971), “Nobreza - Época moderna,” in Joel Serrão (dir.), *Dicionário de História de Portugal*, vol. II, s.l, Iniciativas editoriais, s.d.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (1970), *Para o Estudo do Algarve Económico Durante o Século XVI*, Lisbon, Edições Cosmos.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (1985), “A sociedade portuguesa. Séculos XVI-XVIII,” In M.E. Cordeiro Ferreira (ed.), *Reflexões sobre a história e cultura portuguesa*, Lisbon, Universidade Aberta.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (1988), *O Algarve Económico 1600-1773*, Lisbon, Editorial Estampa.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (1993) (ed.), *O Alvorecer da Modernidade*, Vol III of *Historia de Portugal*, Mattoso (dir.) Lisbon, Círculo de Leitores.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (2004), “Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo e a economia do Brasil,” *Revista de História Económica e Social*, nº8, 2ª serie.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (2011a), *Concelhos e Organização Municipal na Época Moderna*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (2011b), *Labirintos brasileiros*, São Paulo, Ed. Alameda.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (2012), *O Algarve na Época Moderna*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (2013), *No Portugal Moderno*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra.
- Magalhães, Joaquim Romero (2017) *Provocações: por Dever de Ofício (1987-2014)*, Coimbra, Palimage.
- Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo (1987), “Notas sobre nobreza, fidalguia e titulares nos finais do Antigo Regime,” *Ler História*, nº 10.

- Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo (1993), "Concelhos e comunidades," *O Antigo Regime (1620-1807)*, António M. Hespanha (ed.), IV vol. *História de Portugal*, José Mattoso (dir), 4º vol., Lisbon, Círculo de Leitores.
- Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo (2008), *D. José. Na sombra de Pombal*, 2ª ed.. Lisbon, Temas e Debates.
- Olival, Fernanda (2001), *As Ordens Militares e o Estado Moderno. Honra, Mercê e Venalidade em Portugal (1641-1789)*, Lisbon, Estar Editora
- Paiva, José Pedro (2009), "Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo, D. José I, Lisbon, Círculo de Leitores, 2006," *Ler História*, nº56.
- Pedreira, Jorge (1995), *Os homens de negócio de Lisboa de Pombal ao vintismo (1755-1822)*, dis. dout. mimeo., Lisbon.
- Silbert, Albert (1966) *Le Portugal Méditerranéen: A la Fin de L'Ancien Regime XVIIIe - Debut du XIXe Siecle*, Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N.