

Two Comments on the Contemporary Period

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I. *The History of Portugal*, Part III, authored by Rui Ramos does not explicitly examine the eternal problem of the causes of Portugal's economic backwardness, and consequently it does not seek to develop any theory that might explain this. Yet it does confront us with this backwardness in a very direct way, and the reader feels a certain sense of frustration at not being able to find a clear and systematized answer to this problem. On page 524, we find ourselves confronted with a chapter entitled "Growth without Structural Change." On pages 524 and 525, some indicators are presented of the growth experienced by Portugal in the second half of the nineteenth century, beginning with the building of the railways, including the Dona Maria Pia rail bridge, with the largest span in Europe; the installation of an electric telegraph network; the establishment of links with England and Brazil via underwater cables; the rapid growth of our external trade towards the end of the century; the remarkable growth in Port wine exports; the increase in the useful area of the land available for agriculture; the import substitution made possible by industrial development; the significant increase in the consumption of meat, sugar, coffee and tobacco; the growth in the income of all professional groups; the urban development of Lisbon. All these indicators point to a radical break with the past, such as it was in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Yet beneath this wave of change and novelty, there persisted, as if etched in stone, the old national atavisms inherited from long before. One sign of this is the fact that Portugal diverged from the most prosperous European countries between 1850 and 1910. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Portuguese GNP per capita only amounted to 40% of the GNP per capita of the richest countries, whereas in 1850 the proportion had been 55%. Consequently, Portugal diverged sharply from Europe, and it is impossible not to compare this phenomenon with the divergence that has once again been experienced in the last ten years. Today, just as was the case a hundred years ago, it seems that "there was not in Portugal the same 'structural change' that was noted in the other economies". This absence of structural change is what explains the divergence that could be seen a century ago and possibly explains the divergence that has been witnessed over the last decade. A simple numerical example is enough for us to form an idea of the gulf that separated Portugal from Europe in 1900: Belgium used 720,000 horsepower, while Portugal did not go beyond 111,000! As a percentage of its active population, Portugal employed more people in agriculture, and fewer in industry, than any prosperous country in Europe.

But there are other analogies between Portugal at the end of the nineteenth century and Portugal at the beginning of the twenty-first century. State spending always increased more than its income. The State lived in a situation of permanent indebtedness, just as is the case today. Just to give an idea of the extent of this problem, the public debt rose from 80,000 *contos* in 1850 to 600,000 *contos* in 1890! This amounted to something like 70% of GNP. Almost half of the State's spending related to interest payments, with the particularity that then, like today, Portugal had the heaviest interest rate burden in Europe when considered as a percentage of public expenditure.

I know that the obsession with Portugal's economic backwardness is now considered to be unfashionable. It went out of fashion when Marxism ceased to enjoy a position of hegemony in the Portuguese social sciences and historiography. Unfortunately, the theme seems to have become contaminated by the slogans and clichés that punctuate the Marxist discourse written about it. Yet, at the same time, the subject is an important one and cannot be ignored. If only because of its current relevance: everywhere people are already talking about the lost decade, referring to the period between 2000 and 2010. Well, it seems to me that a history of Portugal that begins even

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before the foundation of our nationality would be the appropriate (if not the ideal) place to point out and examine, in a more thorough and systematic fashion than is done here, the possible explanations for a backwardness of which the Portuguese had already been aware since at least the seventeenth century, and which today has placed itself firmly within the horizon of our reflections. In the nineteenth century, our economy was not competitive, and in the twenty-first century it continues not to be so. Why? The longstanding nature of the problem does not lend itself to explanations that are based on more or less short-term and conjunctural factors. There must be something deeper that goes back a very long way, that a book with this time span might very well have been able to discover, since it makes it possible to think about the problem from a very long-term perspective.

In this respect, *The History of Portugal* does not help to clear up my perplexity.

II. The second topic that I consider to be worth noting has to do with the definition of liberalism. I know that Ramos defines this as a discussion, a public and rational debate that is not therefore based on theological or dogmatic premises. But I disagree with this definition—I consider it to be too ill-defined—and the person who first inspired me, many years ago, to disagree with this standpoint was Robert Nisbet in his work *The Sociological Tradition* (published in 1967, if my memory serves me well). In this book, Nisbet states that the French Revolution gave rise to three currents of quite distinct political thought: conservatism (or traditionalism), liberalism and radicalism. For him, liberalism essentially consists in stating the fundamental importance of human autonomy. As far as radicalism is concerned, he sees in it secular forms of statism and millennialism.

And, in fact, in my contact with nineteenth-century history, I have consistently found the existence of a political current of thought that was distinct from liberalism and was even completely opposed to it, which rejected the most important aspects of the liberalist doctrine, and which coexisted with it either within a relationship of great tension or by demonstrating manifest hostility and open political combat. I would even go so far as to say—and I implicitly defend this point of view in my history of the nineteenth century²—that it is in this tension, in this antagonism between liberalism and radicalism, that one can find the main source of the political dynamics to be noted in the nineteenth century.

Liberalism and radicalism immediately diverge about the way in which religion is to be approached and lived. Liberalism always sought to reconcile freedom of thought with respect for the Church and the acceptance of religious dogmas, and it did not admit the hypothesis of a society that was based on purely lay foundations, which, in its view, would not be strong enough to erect an effective barrier against license and anarchy. As was to become evident from the end of the 1850s onwards, with all the controversy generated about the sisters of charity, radicalism openly tended towards atheism, or at least towards agnosticism, and, as Garrett revealed in the late 1830s, it considered that the Christian doctrine was incompatible with freedom and equality. And it was its radically secularist stance that led it—unlike the liberals and in open conflict with them—to demand freedom of worship and a secular state, from the 1850s onwards.

Its position or attitude towards the monarchy was also radically different from the liberal one. The liberals attempted to reconcile the monarchy with freedom—and even with democracy—hoping that this reconciliation would result, on the one hand, in freedom, but, on the other hand, in public order too. Radicalism was anti-monarchical and virtually republican in nature, when not openly so. However much it might be prepared to extend popular suffrage, in the final analysis the monarchy had a religious and dogmatic basis that justified the exorbitant privileges enjoyed by the king, who held this position by virtue of a hereditary right that was considered by the radicals to be as absurd as the divine right that was imputed to him. At best, radicalism would tolerate a king who amounted to no more than a hereditary president of the republic and limited himself to being a decorative figure, stripped of any effective powers. The radicals, whom the newspaper “*O Português*” expressly defined as “republicans” and “democrats,” offered a pact in the following terms: “if you want there to be a king, then let there be a king; we will accept him as we would the supreme head of the Republic. [...] But we do not want a mulatto or Lazarist king, or a Jesuit [...] we do not want a king who is subordinate to the Czar of Rome [...]. That is our pact. If you want it, then let’s go for it... if not, then don’t” (September 1860).

² *A Monarquia constitucional (1807-1910)*. Lisbon: Texto Editores Lda., 2010.

The radicals did not seek to establish any synthesis between the old and the new: they simply wished to tear down the old and build the new from scratch.

Whereas the liberals defined freedom as a possibility of choice, the radicals did not regard it as an area that could contain a plurality of opinions. Quite the opposite. There were opinions that they regarded as harmful to freedom, and these had to be suppressed. Or, in other words, in the name of freedom, there had to be restraints on freedom. There should not, for example, exist any freedom of education, not even in terms of domestic education, because if it were given over to the freedom of private initiative that was dominated by the clergy, education could easily be transformed into an instrument of reaction, in an environment where men were brought up fettered by their fanatical beliefs, deprived of that *hombriedad* (nobleness of character) that is the hallmark of all true citizens. The clergy dominated private education. This had to be prohibited, while at the same time education had to be regulated by the State right down to the tiniest detail. The liberals argued that competition was beneficial in all walks of life, and, above all, that it was not the task of the State to arbitrate over conflicts of opinion in society. The radicals, however, argued that the State had this obligation.

Radicals and liberals were also separated by profound, antagonistic differences about the concept of the relationship between State and society, or between individuals and the State. The radicals advocated the subordination of individuals to the State and society, being obliged to engage in a struggle for the civic emancipation of populations that turned them into a community of virtuous citizens and lovers of their nation, entirely dedicated to the *res publica*, into whose collective destiny their own particular destinies were to be diluted. And it was precisely such dedication, such commitment to the common cause, that was the only thing that could make sense and elevate mankind. Or, in other words, man's humanity was achieved through his political existence. It was in the *polis*, and not in the sphere of their private life, that men could realize their destiny and attain happiness. The liberals did not think in this way at all. They understood that, out of respect for the law, individuals were sovereign in their private life and that no human power could impose on them a duty of militancy in favor of regeneration or human redemption. For the latter, freedom was a natural attribute; for the former, it involved the creation of the *polis*.

The radicals understood freedom in accordance with what had conventionally come to be considered its positive acceptance—as a political action, as a way of participating in power. In the classical definition of Benjamin Constant, the liberals understood it as the possibility for each person to enjoy independence or autonomy. The radicals caused their notion of freedom to be derived from the republics of ancient times, adopting the liberty of the ancients, and Constant shows point by point how this notion contradicts the modern notion of freedom. Constant succeeded better than anyone else in explaining what this liberty of the moderns consisted of:

“For forty years I have defended the same principle: freedom in all things, in religion, philosophy, literature, industry and politics. And by freedom I mean the triumph of the individual both over an authority that would wish to govern by despotic means and over the masses who claim the right to make a minority subservient to a majority. Despotism has no rights. The majority has the right to oblige the minority to respect public order, but everything which does not disturb public order, everything which is purely personal such as our opinions, everything which, in giving expression to opinions, does no harm to others either by provoking physical violence or opposing contrary opinions, everything which, in industry, allows a rival industry to flourish freely – all this is something individual that cannot legitimately be surrendered to the power of the state.”³ And later on, he clarifies this idea: “But what is political freedom? It is the ability to be happy without any human power being able arbitrarily to trouble that happiness.”

This was a concept of freedom that horrified the defenders of radicalism. It seems to me to be very difficult to understand the political conflicts that existed in the nineteenth century without taking into account the antagonism between liberals and radicals.

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³ *Mélanges de littérature et politique* (Preface). Paris: 1829.