

Joaquim Romero Magalhães's Thoughts about Early Modern Portugal

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Abstract

Joaquim Romero Magalhães's essays on Portugal's early modern economy raise several questions about the contribution of the empire and of the crown's fiscal needs to institutional innovation. In these pages we pay a tribute to the author's intellectual legacy by summarising the research avenues he opened up throughout his academic life, partly gathered in the collection of articles intitled *Miunças*

Keywords

Early Modern Economy; Portuguese Colonial Empire; Taxation; Public Debt

Resumo

Os ensaios Joaquim Romero Magalhães sobre a economia portuguesa no período moderno abordarem questões fundamentais sobre o contributo do império e das necessidades fiscais da coroa para a emergência de inovações institucionais. Nestas páginas prestamos um tributo ao seu legado intelectual, sintetizando as diferentes pesquisas que o autor seguiu e cujos resultados foram em parte reunidos na colectânea de trabalhos intitulada *Miunças*.

Palavras-chave

Portugal; economia do período moderno; império colonial; impostos e dívida pública

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Joaquim Romero Magalhães (1943-2018) has left us with an extensive and remarkable series of publications resulting from his search for a comprehensive view of Portugal's identity, a country built with (and from) a colonial empire. He enjoyed remembering the contribution of renowned authors in the field of Portuguese social thought, such as Jaime Cortesão, acknowledging this author's main concept of the Atlantic Ocean as an economic space determining Portugal's path to modernity (Cortesão [1930] 1964; 1940). In a nutshell, without its colonial offshoots, Portugal would have remained as a kingdom entirely integrated into the Hispanic polity, just as did Catalonia.

Already widely recognized ever since his early academic years due to his innovative vision of the Algarve from the time of the Discoveries until the eighteenth century, Joaquim Romero Magalhães gave us printed testimonies of his intuition as a social scientist, expressing himself in a careful and studied prose, occasionally sarcastic in tone but always demonstrating his boundless erudition (Magalhães, 1970; 1993). As his former PhD student, I am indebted to him for the most rewarding conversations that we had and for his teaching. Therefore, I am taking advantage of this journal's special issue to recall a set of essays recently reprinted by the University of Coimbra Press in a four-volume collection entitled *Miunças*. The choice of this concept (*Miunças*) to highlight some carefully selected essays underlines Romero Magalhães's fondness for agrarian themes as well as his expert knowledge about the fiscal procedures that were to affect the lives of rural people for several centuries. *Miunças* was the name of certain taxes levied on a variety of agrarian products, usually combined with the payment of the tithe. Nowadays, however, the concept has come to mean "odd scraps," suggesting the reader will find in each volume smaller fragments of a much greater work, although, in this case, the essays are far from being insignificant. In this collection, Joaquim Romero Magalhães has gathered together several articles that raise new questions about the economic, institutional, and political history of early modern Portugal. More than anything else, these essays are particularly valuable for the suggestions that they provide for possible avenues of future research.

In the limited number of pages allotted for my collaboration to this special issue, my tribute to Romero Magalhães will focus on Volume 3 of the collection, which is concerned with the subject of "*espaços, tratos e dinheiros no Portugal moderno*"² (Magalhães, 2013). This is a set of essays dealing with the colonial scope of the Portuguese economy, although, in three of them, special attention is given to domestic forces that did not involve the empire. As a disciple of Fernand Braudel, Romero Magalhães is concerned in this

² Spaces, trade, and money in early modern Portugal.

volume as much with the geography as the history of a people who left clear evidence of their motivations in the way that they organized their economic production and distribution. In this sense, the economy is seen as a means for the social appropriation of resources as well as a political system that involves an unequal distribution of income and different uses of money. These themes are the unifying element of fifteen essays, each of them assigned by Romero Magalhães to a friend and former student, in a very subtle demonstration of his affection.

The first chapter summarizes six centuries of history, dating from the time that Portugal became a separate kingdom from Leon until 1807, when the Portuguese royal court fled to Brazil after the country's invasion by Napoleon's army. The central question in this essay is in keeping with Cortesão's teachings. Romero Magalhães claims that the Atlantic Ocean determined the make-up of Portugal—it was the sea that enabled the Portuguese to engage in collective action against the Spanish domination from 1580 to 1640. Again, in 1807, the nation's Atlantic offshoots enabled the royal court to resist the power of the French empire when the government was transferred to Brazil. However, this is not a history of a nation of seafarers. It is a history of the Atlantic as a platform of communications that connected the country to a wider world outside Europe.

The next three texts deal with the Portuguese archipelagos in the Atlantic (Madeira, the Azores, and São Tomé and Príncipe). The economies of these islands represent the earliest experiences of a plantation system, revealing the role that was played in the Portuguese colonial expansion by foreign capital and investors from different European origins. This is why Romero Magalhães recalled that "Portugal is at the very origin of capitalism. Although less so due to Portuguese investment." The author made use of contemporary chronicles to provide a lively description of the effort that was made to improve empty spaces. In these chapters, as well as in another one about eighteenth-century Brazil, Romero Magalhães leads us to see colonization as a collective effort dedicated, above all, to the clearing and opening up of extensive areas, spaces that were created without either law or order. In the early days of the exploration of the Atlantic, much of the Portuguese emigration relied on carefully organized and regimented work on manorial lands. So great was the fear of settling deserted islands that many of these emigrants claimed that they would have preferred to serve at military strongholds in North Africa. Nevertheless, it took only thirty years—one single generation—for these islands to be turned from deserts into the first experiences of a system that would then arrive in the Caribbean, a century and a half later.

The theme of the Atlantic islands is followed by a brief essay on the Portuguese in Asia. The limited amount of space afforded to this part of the Portuguese empire clearly underlines Romero Magalhães's lesser interest in this particular topic from the country's colonial history. The main argument is, nevertheless, a provocative one, when he recalls that war in Asia was not an end in itself, but instead a necessity in order to satisfy a job description. The goal, then, was clearly revealed in a letter quoted by Romero Magalhães, sent by a father to his son, who had just been made governor of the state of India: "Son, ship the pepper and then get some rest."³

Respecting the chronological sequence in the arrangement of the essays, two foundational texts on the economy and taxation in seventeenth-century Portugal come next. Here, we find a unique work on the beginnings of Portuguese public debt and the social uses of this financial instrument in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As the author reminds us, for more than fifty years, trade (the exploitation of the pepper monopoly) and not war was the reason for the largest increase in debt. This seems to have been a fairly distinctive feature of Portuguese history when compared with other European experiences in the making of the modern state. Although it was mercantile activity that led to the king's indebtedness, the aristocracy turned out to be the final beneficiary of the financial yields from this chain of exchange. Romero Magalhães assumes that much of this debt, forever locked in the form of perpetual securities, was held by the nobility because these bonds were viewed as an asset of identical value to real estate.

The pepper trade was indeed one of the determining factors behind the king's debt, which, in seventeenth-century Portugal found the necessary institutional arrangements to be converted into a "public debt," just as was the case elsewhere. However, Romero Magalhães also reminds us that war necessarily led to financial changes, especially in the form of fiscal innovations, of which the income tax known as the *décima* is the best example. In his own quite distinctive style, the author highlights the antagonistic role played by the two social bodies that mostly structured the Portuguese fiscal system: on the one hand, the municipalities—the local powers—which assisted the central power and greatly contributed to the local implementation of uniform taxes; on the other hand, the Church, which had the best information about the income to be collected but was also the one that avoided cooperating with the State's demand for yet more taxes.

This seventeenth-century Portugal of fiscal modernization was largely composed of an agrarian world that promised some changes, too. For reasons that have yet to be

³ Letter from Tristão da Cunha providing some colorful advice: "*Manda pimenta e deita-te a dormir.*"

discovered, historians can find no immediate evidence of any substantial gains in productivity. Romero Magalhães looked for changes in production under an apparently immutable institutional order that allowed for new ways of dividing agricultural output between large and small landowners or between landowners and tenants. He concluded that improvements may have derived from the greater diversification of crops and suggests that Portugal, too, could have undergone an agricultural revolution, although Romero Magalhães claimed that further research was still needed.

The Atlantic theme is resumed in the final essays, with attention now being paid to Portugal's connections to Brazil's gold mines. Two fundamental and entirely innovative studies on the making of the Brazilian economy in the eighteenth century are to be found in this volume of *Miunças*. Once more, Romero Magalhães's attention was drawn to the conflicting forces underlying the processes of social change. The central power in Lisbon required emigrants to go and populate the hinterlands of the overseas colonies but the seat of the empire in Lisbon did not know how to discipline these masses. While, in Portugal the municipalities behaved as loyal agents of the king's disciplinary and centralizing power, in the immense Brazil of Minas Gerais, the municipalities behaved as organized nuclei of resistance against the taxation imposed from Lisbon.

The building of an economic space in the faraway, lawless regions caused taxation to become the obvious instrument of a top-down structural order. The tax models centered around gold production are addressed in the two final chapters dedicated to Minas Gerais. Furthermore, in these essays, there is room for the individual. As such, there would necessarily have to be room for one of the most charismatic figures in Portugal's history—Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, the Marquis of Pombal. During his government, viewed through the lens of Romero Magalhães, Brazil was still threatened by the risk of insubordination from lawless people who retreated into the woods “where it is said they caused a thousand disarrays” (p. 240). Given this dimension of the Brazilian territories, where people could easily escape from public order, the Marquis of Pombal appears not only as the minister who replaced the old forms of taxation on gold (one fifth of the gold extracted), but above all as the politician who inflicted a unifying order dictated from Lisbon. This ambition of imposing a hierarchical organization came up against ancestral forms of bilateral channels of communication based on the principle of governors reporting directly to Lisbon and not to the Viceroy, first in Bahia and later in Rio de Janeiro.

Miunças ends with an essay on Portuguese historiography. According to Romero Magalhães, writing history needs intuition but history is not intuition, particularly economic

history. The specialized field of economic history was only truly developed in Portuguese universities after the revolution of April 25, 1974, which restored democracy in the country, demonstrating that economic history is a field that is perhaps more susceptible to ideological adulteration than, for instance, the history of art.

At the end of the collection, the reader of *Mimças* is led to think of Portugal as a country that had limited human resources for developing the spaces that it built. Empty spaces predominated at the expense of cooperation and conflict. Joaquim Romero asked new questions and to many he offered new answers. Nonetheless, his intention was perhaps to leave one question unanswered—what were the special links that bound Portugal and the empire together, given the tenuous lines of communication that required months of travel? What prevented the “tyranny of distance” from activating its forces of disintegration?

It will take many more generations of historians before we fully come to terms with the questions raised by the pioneering work of *Mimças*.

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