

# The Internationalization of Portuguese Historiography and its Discontents

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Portugal has long been a peripheral country. The hard facts of geography – both size and location – have coalesced with lasting economic, political, and cultural structures to keep the country away from the forefront of historical change. Chances for national improvement and for the integration in the ever widening international community have been accordingly slim. In such a context, academic research, which was for a long time regarded by consecutive governments as an extravagant luxury, could hardly keep pace with the developments occurring elsewhere in the world.

The laggardness and seclusion of Portuguese academic endeavours have been commonplace, in almost every field of knowledge. Only recently have the want of innovation, the backwardness of the scientific system, and the poverty of its internationalization come to be understood as problems that must be addressed. With the help of newly available European funds, the promotion of research and development has been steadily pursued by governments for the last ten years or so. This effort is still clearly insufficient to bridge the wide gap, which kept expanding over such a long period, and this shows in the position Portugal holds in most international scientific and academic rankings. However, the change of scale of the public investment in this area has already produced some results, particularly in the fields of Engineering and Technology, Health and Life Sciences, and Economics. The number of young researchers doing their doctoral and post-doctoral studies abroad has multiplied, and internationalization advanced, through network building, new – more demanding – standards of publication, and a more cosmopolitan outlook. But this is not exactly true of all fields of knowledge.

The Humanities and Social Sciences (with the conspicuous exception of Economics) have not figured high in the list of priorities in public policies. Therefore, the lack of resources has certainly played a part in restricting the opportunities for internationalization. However, there is more to the prevailing parochialism of research in these fields, than just inadequate funding. It has to do, for one thing, with the very nature of these disciplines, as their agendas tend to be national-specific. But it has also much to do with an established narrow-minded attitude which pervades most academic institutions, and which is a long way from having been displaced. This is not to say that some progress has not been made, because it has. Familiarity with the more important theoretical and methodological breakthroughs, general knowledge of foreign bibliographies, and the practice of comparative analysis are now much more common among Portuguese social scientists. Still, parochialism remains very much at the core of the academic system. This is particularly the case of historiography.

To be sure, in the last few decades, Portuguese historians have become increasingly aware of the foreign literature in their specific fields of study. Sometimes they have even been inspired by that literature when setting their agenda for research, and a measure of comparative concern is less extraordinary than it used to be some twenty or thirty years ago. But this has not uprooted the lasting insularity of national historiography.

As a matter of fact, when it comes to historiography, the long peripheralization of Portugal has had a double bearing. In the first place, as happened in other scientific domains, the community of Portuguese historians (if it may be so called) became relatively isolated and remained aloof from the international trend towards the internationalization of research. But what is specific to our discipline is that Portugal and Portuguese history also became peripheral as objects for research, a circumstance which could not help restricting the opportunities for internationalization.

In fact, if the Great Discoveries and the role that Portugal played in the early-modern European expansion are left out, one must reckon that Portuguese themes have consistently not appealed to foreign researchers, and when they have, they usually interested peripheral historians (with the odd exception). A peripheral country usually attracts peripheral historians. Portuguese researchers, then, have not met the challenge in their home ground of more advanced historiographies; they were not forced to learn from and adapt to new approaches, insights, and methodologies. As a result, they did not find it necessary to take part in the exchange within the international historiographical community. Most never even dreamed of studying anything other than national history.

Furthermore, there is the language problem. Although one of the more widely spoken languages in the western hemisphere, Portuguese is scarcely known to non-native speakers. This is undoubtedly a handicap, but it must not be an impediment to internationalization. Other countries, with an even greater linguistic peculiarity, have dealt with the problem, resorting to the widespread use of English, which has become the language for international publication and communication. This is an irresistible trend to which Portuguese historians must become accustomed, should they really want to take part in the movement towards the internationalization of their discipline, that is.

The resistance to internationalization is not simply a story of missing opportunities; it is at least as much a case of forsaken opportunities. Even when funding was available (for instance through the National Commission for the celebration of the Portuguese Discoveries) and international interest significant (although still peripheral in global terms), as with the history of Portuguese expansion, which drew the curiosity of reputable scholars in the wake of Charles Boxer, the chances for putting together large-scale international networks have been grossly neglected. For sure, most of those scholars have developed an interest in the history of Portugal and her empire which is an offshoot of their main concerns as Brazilianists (Stuart Schwartz, John Russell-Wood, Dauril Alden and their students), Africanists (Edward Alpers, Malyn Newitt, John Thornton, Joseph Miller) or specialists of India and the Eastern world (Om Prakash, Michael Pearson, Anthony Disney). They nonetheless form an excellent group, which could be successfully turned into an important and internationally visible community for scientific discussion and exchange. Some of these researchers may have their contacts and keep relationships with individual Portuguese colleagues and take part in some of their ventures, but this has not produced consistent results, at least at the institutional level. The possibility of turning the Commission for the celebration of the Discoveries into a research institute, which would promote the internationalization of Portuguese social sciences in the area of colonial and post-colonial studies, was promptly rejected, thwarting in this way any prospect of a pro-active institutional development.

Bearing in mind what has been said so far, it may not come as a surprise that the record of international publication by Portuguese historians, even in the more favoured fields, is so meagre and that the Portuguese historiography continues to be largely unheard of in the major international centres of research. There are some exceptions to this rather gloomy perspective. For instance, studies on the history of early-modern law and institutions carried out by António Manuel Hespanha and his followers and on Salazar's dictatorship and the transition to democracy by António Costa Pinto and some younger researchers have befitted the agendas of international research networks. There have developed some small groups which consistently work in an international framework, and one can find more often chapters on Portugal in cross-European comparative volumes. Nevertheless, the Portuguese case is still missing from many such works, and the number of papers by Portuguese historians that find their way into the pages of internationally renowned journals is almost ridiculous.

Is it just because Portugal is out of favour as topic for research? Because it is definitely not central to be part of the mainstream surveys and not peripheral enough to find a place in cultural or area studies? Is it that Portuguese historians are turned down, because the papers they submit are not satisfactory or sufficiently appealing to an international audience? It may be so, but one of the main reasons is that the concern for internationalisation is largely rhetorical. This clearly shows in the charade of international participation in academic evaluation and research assessment. For the most part, internationalization is irrelevant for the national recognition of academics and academic institutions. Those with significant international records are not necessarily praised or rewarded, and the more close-minded are certainly not penalized. With a few worthy exceptions, the academic *nomenklatura* have built their power on parochialism, and have grounded their international connections on the control over national resources, not on the internationalization of their work and research.

While this system keeps in place, strategies for the internationalization of Portuguese historiography, however well-intended they may be, will only produce minor results, because it will never be at the core of the research agenda.