

The Internationalization of Portuguese Historiography: The View from Economic History

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History is by nature an international topic. If it is written within national boundaries, it is because sources are mostly of a national kind or because of language barriers and political interests. Consequently, the internationalization of historical research is a natural movement to overcome constraints imposed by sources, language and politics. This view necessarily applies to economic history. In fact, this discipline is mainly about understanding economic growth and backwardness, which are by definition concepts of an international kind as they derive from comparisons of levels of development across boundaries. Moreover, topics in economic history that do not refer directly to growth – such as financial or institutional history – also need to take economic growth into account, as it embodies the dynamic of historical analysis.

The international nature of economic history is patent in some of the earlier Portuguese historiography over the last two centuries. For example, the books by Armando de Castro (*A Revolução Industrial em Portugal*, 1946 and 1978) and Borges de Macedo (*Problemas de História da Indústria Portuguesa*, 1963 and 1982) provide an international perspective on Portuguese nineteenth century industrialization. In fact, these two authors attempt to explain why Portugal did not have an industrial revolution in the beginning of the nineteenth century, in contrast to what they believed had happened in Britain from the late eighteenth century onwards and in the case of other European forerunners. This was of course a major concern of the international historiography by then. In the 1970s, the works by Halpern Pereira (*Livre-câmbio e Desenvolvimento Económico*, 1973 and 1983) and Villaverde Cabral (*O Desenvolvimento do Capitalismo em Portugal*, 1976 and 1981) set the study of Portugal's nineteenth century 'underdevelopment' in the context of theories of dependence, which were a major concern of development theories at the time.

The perspectives on which the above works were based proved to be less promising than anticipated. In fact, the concept of industrial revolution was peculiar to Britain and not to the rest of the European continent. By the same token, the postulates of the dependence school were based on insufficient evidence. That is, however, beside our point, which is that those books deal with problems of an international relevance. Many economic historians of nineteenth century Portugal that followed kept alive that international perspective, although that implied shifting to other historical interpretations and theories of growth.

Most studies of Portugal's twentieth century economic history tend to be less international. Not many authors have dealt with the Republican regime (1910-1926) in a comparative framework that would have placed Portugal's performance in the context of what happened elsewhere in Europe during the period of growth and depression between the two World Wars. Neither has the regime of the Estado Novo (1926-1974) been satisfactorily analyzed in an international perspective until recently. The study of institutional development during that era still needs to be placed in the context of similar developments elsewhere in Europe. After all, Portugal was special in Western Europe both because it was not a democracy but also because it was a poor country.

Clearly, the efforts for the internationalization of Portuguese historiography have not been sufficient to include satisfactorily this country in the general interpretations of economic growth. In fact, major textbooks on European economic history, such as those by Paul Bairoch (*Commerce Extérieur et Développement Économique de l'Europe*, 1976), Sydney Pollard (*Peaceful Conquest*, 1982 and 1994) and the more recent ones by David Landes (*The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, 1998) and François Crouzet (*Histoire de l'Économie Européenne*, 2000), only marginally mention Portugal, and with little detail and precision.

Thus, there is an obvious need to make an effort in order to place Portugal more squarely on the international agenda of economic development research topics. For that purpose it is necessary to divulge abroad recent research on Portuguese economic history, which implies breaking the language barrier and

publishing more in English. There is a great need to submit papers on Portugal to international journals and book publishers. One way to achieve a greater interest from publishers abroad is by exploring topics on the international economic history research agenda that can be highlighted by the study of the Portuguese case. That aim can be achieved by leaving behind topics that emerge from national historiography and replacing them by topics that emerge from international concerns – as occurred with the authors that picked the ‘dependence’ question.

Because Portugal is a part of European history, there are many aspects of that history that can be clarified by Portugal’s experience. After all, in order to conclude about the relative importance of any list of factors which are posited to lay behind economic success in the more developed countries, we have to show that the absence of those factors was crucial to explain the poor performance of the countries that lagged behind.

The example of this small and poor country can highlight the relevance for successful industrialization of factors such as domestic markets, availability of cheap natural endowments in water and coal, or high levels of literacy and highly dynamic entrepreneurs. In the agrarian sector, Portugal’s case is useful for the debate on the importance of the constraints imposed by climate and soil conditions in determining factor productivity. The debate over the effects of tariff protection may also gain from the example of Portugal. In fact, we can ask whether protection was harmful to growth in the nineteenth century. If so, what explains the fact that Portugal’s growth performance improved as it did during the interwar period which was a highly protectionist period? Moreover, what explains the convergence of Portugal’s income per capita and productivity levels up to 1973 and the period of divergence that followed? Portugal’s economic history of this period illustrates how difficult it can be for less developed economies to converge during periods of slow growth in the core countries.

These are no doubt relevant questions in European economic history which could benefit from the study of the Portuguese case. The fact that it is a small country shows how important or not the size of domestic markets is for industrialization; the fact that it is a country not particularly favored in the typical natural endowments of the first industrializers highlights the importance of such resources; the fact that it remained persistently a country with low levels of literacy, reveals the importance of human capital; and the fact that its institutional development lagged behind developments elsewhere in Europe highlights the importance of institutions, such as banks or regulatory institutions.

One form of achieving a greater level of internationalization of Portuguese economic history is through the higher mobility of students and scholars on an international stage. As a growing number of Portuguese economic historians study abroad and participate in international conferences, the need for internationalization will develop naturally – because of the intrinsic international nature of the discipline and because of the many insights that Portugal’s experience can provide to international themes. The creation of conditions for that mobility is thus the single most important policy measure to be followed by those who have responsibilities in government and the universities. This leaves the choice of topics with international relevance and the act of submitting papers and book manuscripts to international publishers as the most important responsibilities of each one of us.