

The Internationalization of Portuguese Historiography

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I shall begin with a true and curious story. In March 2003, I went to give a lecture in an European university, as part of a seminar on the Far Right in the 20th century. In the room was a Portuguese student whom I barely knew and who had landed in that University some months earlier. In the course of the customary conversation after the seminar, she told me about her great perplexity when she realised that many of the leading figures from the Portuguese intellectual and historiographical world who had passed through that University were unknown to their peers abroad. She was even more surprised when she submitted their names to the “tyranny” of the gigantic databases at the university library and discovered that these names were not even mentioned in the summaries of the thousands of articles and books published in English over the last 20 years.

This student’s discovery was the same I had made 15 years earlier, when in the 1980s I had left Portugal to study for my doctorate at the European University Institute. For several years, I tried to find explanations for this phenomenon, which has definitively marked a generation of historians and sociologists, who are now nearing the age of retirement. They had been the first to “go abroad to study” either as political exiles or as some of the rare beneficiaries of scholarships, shortly before the fall of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974. They wrote their theses in English or French, but this proved to be of little benefit to them. In a world of academic publishing that was demanding but generous and which published dozens of works about the dictatorships of Paraguay, the Bulgarian aristocracy, or the ethnic groups of Lower Guinea, I saw no Portuguese name, and I couldn’t even justify this fact by its being part and parcel of the so-called “destiny of small countries”. The reasons for this phenomenon, about which I have been thinking over the last few years, would fill a great number of pages and would be the subject of an essay on the history of the mentalities of the Portuguese academic community during the 1970s and 1980s, but there is no space for this in my brief commentary.

Internationalisation first appeared on the agenda of Portuguese social sciences a few years ago and has now reached History. The process has been a complex one and has met with much resistance. Yet, thanks to some outside encouragement, namely from the Foundation for Science and Technology (or, in one particular area, from the Commission for the Discoveries), the Portuguese universities have found themselves obliged to think about this subject. In addition to a number of isolated initiatives, such an obligation has arisen because the policy introduced for the funding of research has begun to require greater contact with institutions and colleagues from other countries, introducing non-nationals to the assessment committees and gradually obliging journals and reviews to use a system of peer refereeing etc. On the other hand, the number of students studying for master’s degrees and doctorates or enjoying brief stays at foreign universities has increased significantly. These outside impetuses have altered the research agenda in History, even though it is still too early to fully review the situation.

As a specialist in contemporary political history, it is not easy for me to undertake a global analysis, but I do believe that it is not difficult to find some changes, most of which became particularly visible in the 1990s. The first is the “rediscovery of Brazil”. I have always thought it strange that most historians from my generation, who studied the Old Regime, did not know a single Brazilian historian. About Brazil itself they had what can best be described as a “vague idea”. The overall picture has changed quite dramatically over the last few years and I believe that this is not only

a circumstantial and short-term phenomenon. Another change, and this one dates back even further, has to do with comparative Iberian history. Contacts and research initiatives have multiplied over the last 20 years or so. But it would be an illusion to think of internationalisation in terms of “geography”. The fact is that the fundamental questions direct our attention towards the inclusion of national areas of research in the respective international historiographical communities, and here the limitations are still quite significant. I limit myself to presenting just some of them:

1. Portuguese historiography has enjoyed only very scanty exposure in international journals and amongst international publishers. Here the panorama varies from area to area. But the parochial resistance of many established historians has been transmitted to their students. As a small country with a small community of historians, where access to the immediate audience was easier, many were content with the greater facilities provided by the national market where, until quite recently, special requirements such as assessment by one’s peers or the scientific editing of books were few and far between. Except for a few sporadic individual cases, the impetus in this instance came from outside, or, in other words, as I pointed out earlier, from the new funding and assessment requirements introduced by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, and these are finally beginning to bear fruit.

2. The historiographical community is still heavily dominated by what is termed the “national fact”, so that it does not generally develop comparative projects. One can count on the fingers of one hand those who study other national or cultural realities. Until quite recently, the university teaching of history itself provided very little stimulation in this area. The most important factors leading to internationalisation have been the increase in the number of scholarships for doctorates taken abroad and the funding requirements of projects.

3. With only a few exceptions, the community of Portuguese historians has demonstrated a reduced level of international academic mobility. The Chairs in History created by the Portuguese State and some Foundations at a number of European and American universities, such as Brown University, the European University Institute or Kings College, London, are important, but there has been no Portuguese academic diaspora similar to the one found in Greece, just to give an example of another southern European country. At the same time, there are very few foreign historians teaching in Portuguese universities, not only because the working conditions are relatively unattractive, but also because of the fact that these institutions have informally blocked applications by non-nationals. Since even mobility amongst Portuguese university teachers has itself proved to be complex, international mobility is understandably almost non-existent.

4. It is obvious that underlying this problem is yet another problem of a more theoretical and methodological nature and one that, at least superficially, can be summarised as follows: the greater the tendency towards writing narrative history, the more parochial it is; the closer it is to the social sciences, the more likely it is to become part of international historiographical debates.