



BOOK REVIEW

Histoire du Portugal contemporain – de 1890 à nos jours, by Yves Léonard, by Duncan Simpson

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The histories of contemporary Portugal written in French have been few and far between. Prior to Yves Léonard's new book, the only scholarly synthesis of Portugal's recent past had been Jacques

Marcadé's now dated *Le Portugal au XX^e Siècle* (1988). French readers interested in engaging with contemporary Portugal have been restricted mainly to the general histories of Portugal written by

Robert Durand (1992), Jean-François Labourdette (2000) and Albert-Alain Bourdon, the latest edition of which includes an “épilogue” written by Yves Léonard on “today’s Portugal” (2014). By nature these works are extremely brief, to the point of offering at times little more than a factual panorama of the country’s recent past. None of them offers anything like an updated synthesis of Portugal’s contemporary history. This is particularly regrettable if one considers the wealth of innovative investigation produced by researchers in the subject area over roughly the last two decades. Léonard’s new book is thus a timely addition to the existing bibliography.

Léonard, a professor and researcher at *Sciences Po* Paris, is arguably France’s leading authority on the history of contemporary Portugal. His works on New State imperialism (1999, 2011) and on the political definition of Salazarism (2003) have become important references in their subject area. One may say that his new book represents the sum of a lifetime of academic engagement with the history of contemporary Portugal. Its stated objectives – “tenter un état des lieux [des] connaissances, mettre en perspective les usages contemporains du passé, mettre en lumière la complexité et la richesse de cette histoire loin des idées reçues” (p. 14) – signal the ambitions of a work designed to provide both a readable introductory synthesis for the layman and a carefully nuanced interpretation informed by historiography’s most recent inputs. Underlying it is Léonard’s laudable belief that “ce vingtième siècle

portugais mérite mieux que d’être réduit à un réservoir d’exemples annexes dans le cadre de recherches comparatives, simple appendice parfois encombrant de l’Espagne, source d’illustrations plus ou moins exotiques” (p. 12).

Léonard succeeds in living up to these ambitions. The pedagogical value of the book – a concern openly acknowledged by the author (p. 15) – results primarily from its clarity of form and argument. The structure behind its ten chapters, which follow the chronology of political events, is unoriginal but efficient. Moments of rupture between regimes (in 1910, 1926, 1933, 1974 and 1976) and of discontinuity within regimes (in 1890, 1945, 1961, and 1986) provide essential reference points for the reader to assimilate. Political history furnishes the chronological framework but is never allowed to become a straitjacket. Indeed Léonard endeavors to offer a far more complete account of Portugal’s recent past by continually incorporating up-to-date aspects of social, economic, and cultural history. One of the most satisfying features of the book is the author’s decision to reserve a relevant place for culture, often overlooked in this kind of work for reasons of space. Many of the leading literary figures of the era are called upon, sometimes to illustrate a point, often to offer a striking insight into the specificities of Portuguese culture, recognized as a fundamental part of the nation’s recent history. Noticeable in this respect are the quotes from Eça de Queiroz’s despairing letter written in the aftermath of the British ultimatum (p. 33), from Sophia

de Mello Breyner Andresen's poem *25 de Abril* beautifully capturing the hopes generated by the revolution (p. 171), or from José Saramago's *Jangada de Pedra* as a telling expression of the reservations felt by some as Portugal acceded to membership of the EEC (p. 205).

Léonard writes an engaging synthesis which remains extremely readable throughout, avoiding oversimplification and highlighting the originality of Portugal's contemporary trajectory. Contrary to the "Hobsbawmian" precept, the history of contemporary Portugal, he argues, can be interpreted as a "long Twentieth Century" (p. 15). It started with the British ultimatum of January 1890, marking both the "autumn" of a disconnected monarchy (and consequent "spring" of the republican idea) and the start of a quest to reclaim the nation's past glory through its imperial dimension in Africa. This quest can be said to have ended when the country gained membership of the EEC and subsequently underwent rapid modernization, culminating in the showcase "Expo 98" which aptly coincided with the 500th anniversary of Vasco de Gama's voyage to India. But to an extent it is also an ongoing quest, as showed by the fact that Angola emerged once again as the potential "savior of Portugal" during the latest economic crisis (pp. 16 and 243). Within this broad interpretative framework, each of the regimes in power during Portugal's long Twentieth Century is analyzed in its political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions: the downfall of a monarchy unable to

answer the challenges of modernity (chapter 1), the hopes and ultimate disillusion engendered by a republic riddled with internal division and ideological excess (chapter 2), the military reaction and ascension to power of Salazar (chapter 3), the stifling effects of New State authoritarianism that only Salazar's political balancing act and Cold War geopolitics allowed to survive until the tragic dead-end of mass-scale emigration, persistent poverty and unending colonial conflict (chapters 4-6), the singularity of the 25 April revolution as the "last romantic revolutionary spasm in Europe" (chapter 7), the end of empire and re-anchorage of Portugal in Europe (chapter 8), the accession to EEC membership in January 1986 accompanied by the Europeanization of lifestyles and stabilization of a political system of liberal democracy (chapter 9), the search for answers to the grave social effects of troika-imposed austerity and widespread disenchantment with a party system seen as running out of steam (chapter 10). In each of these chapters the author brings the reader up to date with the most recent investigative trends, such as the current interest in a history "from below" (p. 12) or the application to Salazar's rule in the 1960s of a Kershaw-style questioning of his position as a "strong dictator" (p. 143). The most important historiographical debates are also analyzed, such as the "Verão Quente" of 2012 which saw Portuguese historians engage in heated exchanges over the "fascist" nature of the Salazar regime amid accusations of

ideologically motivated revisionisms (pp. 119-123).

One of the risks inherent to such a publication is that it can easily end up offering an excessively positive – almost hagiographic – account of the object of study. While Léonard’s book certainly comes across as the work of a scholar passionate about his subject, it also includes the critical posture essential to any impartial study. His comments on the racist outlook embedded in part of Portuguese society today, quite at odds with official discourse and the old luso-tropicalist myth, is a case in point (p. 223).

The engagingly written text benefits also from a quality selection of iconography and exemplary publishing by Chandeigne, making of Léonard’s book by far the best synthesis on the history of contemporary Portugal available in French today. Small details might have made it even better. The opening part of the first chapter (pp. 19-23), which sets the context of Nineteenth Century Portugal before 1890, is so short it allows only for the most schematic review of events. A few additional pages would have done greater justice to this complex period without disturbing the overall economy of the book. Repetitions might also have been avoided regarding the country’s economic situation in the 1980s and 1990s (pp. 211-212 and pp. 240-241). Although it is understood that this was surely intended to allow each chapter to stand on its own, it was perhaps not necessary in a short work of this kind. Finally, placing on an equal footing the extremely serious charges levelled by

the justice system against José Socrates (for tax evasion and money laundering) and the accusations made in the press against Pedro Passos Coelho (for failing to pay his social security contributions) as two examples of the politico-financial scandals that have fed the “anti-system” sentiment in recent years (p. 250), would perhaps have been best avoided, all the more so since such a statement can lend itself to accusations of political bias.

Since it is written for the intelligent reader eager to gain a stimulating introduction to contemporary Portuguese history, one can doubt whether this book will succeed in reaching the hordes of French sun-worshipping tax-avoiding tourists currently pouring into Lisbon and the Algarve. That would be a shame. In a country where, depressingly, the common representation of the Portuguese persists in being openly depreciative, a quality work of historical divulgation such as this one would deserve to reach the wide audience it was written for. Were this to happen, it would have accomplished its primary mission in promoting a deeper understanding of Portugal’s rich contemporary history among the French public. It would also have helped overcome the negative stereotypes that survive in France today as a painful reminder of the heavy imprint left by Salazar on Portugal’s long Twentieth Century.

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