

The Failure of Portuguese Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century

Based on the author's book entitled 'The Concession of Évora Monte - The Failure of Portuguese Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century'.

By Ron B. Thomson

My book discusses the political events of 1807-1853, focusing on the role of the monarchy, as played out by Dom João VI, Dom Pedro IV, Dom Miguel and Dona Maria II. It also outlines the various attempts to establish liberalism in Portugal, beginning with the 1820 revolution and the 1823 counter-revolution, through Dom Pedro's Constitutional Charter - rejected by Dom Miguel in 1826, the War of the Two Brothers and the reestablishment of a constitutional monarchy, the Setembrismo of 1836, and the reinstatement of the Constitutional Charter in 1842.

I carry the discussion in a summary fashion on into the Twentieth Century and the First Republic, and look at the fate of liberalism in Portugal from the 1820s through to the Twentieth Century. These latter points are the subject of this essay.

PORTUGAL, 1861-1910

The passing of the "old heroes" of the War of the Two Brothers¹ opened up politics in Portugal to men of new blood with new ideas. Even the monarchy changed. Luís I² was a "model constitutional" king, in the Twentieth Century sense, preferring not to exercise his real constitutional powers within the political sphere. Among those charged with governing, factionalism based on personalities lessened and more professional politicians and more organized parties began to take control. But even at this time there was in reality very little political stability. The twelve years from 1856 to 1868 were years of almost continual political disorder with successive changes of government.³ While this was a period of seeming concord, with the centre-left and the centre-right alternating power, the only "agreement" in the political sphere was to continue the national program of extensive public works (roads, railroads, etc.) and the exclusion of any radical element from power. The last few years of the 1860s were particularly turbulent – militant urban demonstrations, especially in Lisbon; insoluble financial problems; a succession of governments unable to agree on or impose a program of development and/or reform – against a background of a nation of peasants struggling simply to subsist.

Modernization continued as the road and rail network expanded and as gas, electricity and telecommunication systems grew. Small industries (compared to other European

¹ The Duke of Palmela had died in 1850; the Duke of Terceira died in 1860; the Duke of Saldanha was placed in "benevolent exile" as ambassador to Rome (he died in 1876) although he was prime minister for a short period in 1870; Sá de Bandeira also died in 1876, although he was prime minister 3 times before that, for 4½ months in 1865, for 12½ months in 1868-1869 and 2 months in 1870.

² 1838-1889, reigned 1861-1889.

³ The inability to develop a stable system is demonstrated by the fact that between 1834 and 1910 there were 43 parliamentary elections, or, on average, one every 21 months.

countries) were established and the cities in particular felt themselves very much part of the “European scene.” But the dependence on agriculture, as well as fishing, also continued for the vast majority of the Portuguese. The economic expansion of the second half of the Nineteenth Century did not affect many in the lower rural classes. Rural technology was slow to change, as were the social constraints. The countryside remained strongly conservative, centered on the family, the seasonal cycle and the church. The high rate of emigration in this period was both a safety valve for and a strong symptom of the problems of subsistence farming. The culture of Nineteenth Century Europe meant nothing to them, nor did any of the progressive politicians vying for power in Lisbon. Although “Miguelism” *per se* declined after the death of Dom Miguel in 1866, the fundamental conservative principles remained: local independence, resistance to taxation, investment in land, and not in commerce or industry, traditional methods of farming, traditional prejudices. Dom Miguel and Absolutism might not return, but the principles that had supported him lived on.

The Twentieth Century

Republicanism, which arose during and after the 1880’s included both liberal and conservative elements. It was seen as an answer both to excessive monarchical participation in political affairs and to the excessive life-style of Carlos I (1889-1908), who was very much disliked. At the same time a Reformist party developed on the left, followed later by a still much more radical Progressive party. The old left (Historicals) once again was splintering into moderates and radicals. Attempts continued to construct an ongoing power base in the centre, alternating between the centre-left and the centre-right, but this attempt to exclude both Republican and Radicals from power came apart in the 1890s.

The main cause of this new state of affairs was the loss of diplomatic and military credibility and the resulting loss of public support for the government over the acceptance of the British Ultimatum in January 1890, concerning control of central South Africa, the territory between Angola and Mozambique.⁴ Continued unrest in Portugal, plus another financial crisis and a prolonged economic recession destroyed the traditional system of power sharing. Factionalism – Nationalists, Regenerationists, Liberal-Regenerationists, Progressives, Progressive Dissidents, Republicans – all reemerged with no party or leader popular enough to establish a stable government. The assassination of King Carlos and Crown Prince Luís in 1908 marked the beginning of the last days of the constitutional monarchy. A young and inexperienced King Manuel II⁵ and more government scandals led to a complete collapse of support for the current system. The proclamation of the Republic on 5 October, 1910, was seen as a new start, even though the new constitution and other changes (e.g., a reformed monetary system, complete secularization of schools, etc.) masked a continued inability to deal with the fundamental problems of the underdeveloped Portuguese economy, and the inability to produce a widely-agreed upon program for Portugal in the Twentieth Century.

⁴ The British government under the Marquis of Salisbury peremptorily ordered the Portuguese to evacuate the territories now known as Zambia and Zimbabwe.

⁵ Manuel II (1889-1932), reigned 1908-1910.

Portugal in 1910 consisted of almost 6 million people, of whom 80% to 85% still depended on agriculture, while half of the remainder lived in Lisbon and Porto, and the rest in other much smaller urban centres. Left-wing politics survived in urban areas where most of the political interest lay. But conservative rural voters continued to block attempts at reforming the agricultural-based Portuguese economy. As such, no governmental stability was possible for the first quarter of the Twentieth Century. A military coup by Catholic army officers in 1926 led to the appointment of António Salazar as Minister of Finance (1928) and Prime Minister (1932) and the establishment of the Estado Novo (New State) in 1933. This coup was essentially a conservative take-over of the country, and Salazar's success for forty years came from exploiting the conservative nature of the majority of the country, reinforcing traditional values of family and church, and the traditional economy of agriculture and fishing (to which he was able to add a certain amount of manufacturing), even though this economic program continued to subject the vast majority of the population, both rural and urban, to harsh levels of poverty lasting much longer than elsewhere in Western Europe.

The real change came only after the Carnation Revolution of 1974. The economic backwardness of Portugal was simply too great to contain, not in the face of increased communication (telecommunications and travel) which show-cased life-style advances enjoyed elsewhere in Europe. The reaction of young officers to new military laws⁶ and to fighting the losing colonial wars – another legacy of nineteenth and Twentieth Century conservative policy – may have been the trigger for the revolution, but the bankruptcy of right-wing political ideals and policy meant that truly liberal, even socialist policies would not only be introduced but also be taken up by the majority of the population seeking to rise above the abject poverty of their parents.

Liberalism, which failed in the early Nineteenth Century, finally succeeded in the late Twentieth Century.

The failure of Liberalism

There are two issues which I address in my book. The first is, was there a liberal “success” during the first half of the Nineteenth Century? In my opinion, there was not. There was, instead, a failure of liberalism to take hold among the majority of the Portuguese, a failure to be accepted beyond a certain small segment of the urban population of Lisbon and Porto, which themselves made up at most only twelve percent of the country.

The revolution of 1820 was least of all a liberal revolution, although a number of liberals participated, and were perhaps the most vocal. But the majority of supporters of the Vintismo were not liberals. These non-liberals included merchants and other commercial interests who wished to regain control of the Brazilian trade, opened up in 1810, mainly to Great Britain. Supporters of the revolution also included those desiring the return of the monarch to Portugal, either for the sake of efficiency in government or

⁶ The new laws allowed the commissioning of militia officers at the same rank as graduates of the military academies. These militia officers had completed only a brief training program although they had served overseas in the colonial wars.

in reaction to the humility of being “governed” from a colony. Associated with these concerns was the desire to regain access to and influence over the royal court and its decision-making power, rather than see it subject to Brazilian influence. Finally there were those who resented the predominance of the British in Portugal, in its commerce, in its government and in its army; the French may have invaded in 1807, but they were forced out while the British, once they arrived, never left.⁷

It should also be remembered that the Vilafrancada in 1823 was not a revolt by Dom Miguel alone, but a reaction of the military and of conservative politicians who wished to aid Dom João in proroguing the Constitutional Cortes and suspending the new constitution. The reaction was particularly strong in the north, controlled as it was by conservative land-owning families such as the Silveiras. And it also had a great deal of popular support. Many of the “great liberals” who would work with Dom Pedro, and lead his armies ten years later, supported the Vilafrancada and rallied around Dom João – Palmela, Vila Flor, Saldanha, Sá da Bandeira, Mouzinho da Silveira – seeking roles in the replacement government. The counter-revolution succeeded precisely because so many had deserted the liberal cause because of its attempts to introduce more fundamental change.

Later on, while Dom Miguel may have been arbitrary and ruthless in his attempt to control Portugal, part of this was “necessary” in so far as most European nations refused to recognize his accession. However the estimated number of liberals who went into exile (and not all who went into exile were liberals) was only 20,000 to 25,000 out of a population of 3,000,000 (less than 1%). The leading liberal of the 1830s was Dom Pedro; those who fought with him as senior officers or ministers were more likely to be competent military commanders rather than ardent liberals themselves. The conservative tendency of these colleagues of Dom Pedro, who after his death formed the majority of the ministries under Dona Maria II, belie their status as outstanding liberals. And while a number of changes were made in the structure of society after 1834 (or 1832 in the Azores), many of these were in response to the economic crises of the period and attempts to meet them by nationalizing the old regime holdings of the church and the crown. And some of the changes were simply to meet the minimum standards of modernization (and the more rigorous needs of centralized government) faced by all governments in Europe in the 1830s and 1840s.

This modernization which took place is one of the confusing aspects of the period. In large part it occurred through (or because of) the introduction of foreign technology. The industrial revolution had made great changes in the major cities of Europe by introducing mechanized manufacturing powered by inanimate or artificial energy sources. Some of these changes occurred in Portugal as well, but very much later and on a much smaller scale. For instance, by 1855 there were 8,280 miles (13,325 km) of rail lines in Britain, while the first line in Portugal had yet to open; rail did not reach the Algarve until the end of the century.

⁷ There were also pressing economic issues which added to the discontent – an excess of Portuguese wine on the world market which was driving prices down; a flood of cheaper foreign grain into the country undercutting internal production; a need to reform and update rural rents and dues; the flow of national revenue out of the country (that is, over to Brazil) and the lack of local spending by the government to stimulate the local economy.

But even this modest modernization in transportation, energy and communications was undertaken against a conservative backdrop. It was introduced in large part by a civil service of technocrats eager to display their training and as authoritarian in their actions as any landowner under the old regime. Also many of these changes were in areas of interest only to the urban and commercial classes, and in so far as they had little effect on the day-to-day life (or hopes) of the average Portuguese they were accepted, or at least tolerated. One need only look at the negative reaction (the Maria da Fonte movement) in the mid-1840s to the new regulations on sanitation and land registration to see that once modernization intruded into the real life of the countryside, it was totally unacceptable. While urban leaders were continually attempting to match in Portugal what was occurring elsewhere in Europe, rural life remained very much as it always had.

Modernization, in and of itself, was not tied to any ideology (except that of modernization), neither liberalism nor conservatism. Modernization of the infrastructure did not mean the modernization of ideas.

One final point about the period should also be made, and that is the relationship of liberalism to democracy. The tendency to make democracy one of the fundamental pillars of liberalism is very much a late development. Early liberalism, an interest in freedoms, was centred more on freedom of thought and of expression (and of religion), on liberty of person and freedom from arbitrary measures (as well as equality before the law) than on a political system run by and meeting the demands of the people as a whole. In fact, early liberalism emphasized the role of deputies, not as reflections of the voters, but as debaters seeking to find through public reason the “best” laws for the country. When Portugal became a constitutional monarchy, it did not become a democracy. Even direct elections did not become permanent until the 1850s with the amendments to the Constitutional Charter.⁸

Early in the Nineteenth Century liberals tended to be from the urban middle class, the bourgeoisie, who believed that they had the competence to choose the government of the day and to determine its actions; but they did not believe that those beneath them or in the isolated countryside had the same competence.

The electoral process in place had the tendency to select more educated deputies rather than populist leaders, but the rural conservative countryside, the majority of the voters, had the ability to make any Chamber of Deputies in the Cortes as much conservative as the large cities could make it liberal. And the creation of the Chamber of Peers under the Constitutional Charter also meant that a strong conservative non-democratic, even anti-democratic, force had significant power in the legislature.

The concept of a democratic system, where both the executive and the legislature are responsible to the people, was a long way from what existed in Portugal as a

⁸ The participation by the general populace in voting was extremely low because of the high qualifications set either in the constitutions or in the electoral laws of the period. In the 1834 elections it appears that less than 14% of active males voted. Voting percentages were higher in urban areas and lower in rural areas. In the two districts studied, only 4.6% (Torres Vedras) and 2.2% (Amarante) of the total population voted. In the 1840 elections (under the 1838 Constitution with direct elections for both chambers), it appears that less than 6% of the total population participated in the vote. Under various electoral laws of the 1840s, the total number of potential voters was about 300,000, or only 9% of the total population

constitutional monarchy and a long way from what most people thought of as the necessary, or even the ideal, form of government.

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The failure of liberalism to firmly implant itself in Portuguese society can be highlighted by reviewing the concepts which were part and parcel of the liberal ideology. While many of the elements seem to have been implanted in Portugal, on closer examination they were often only superficially applied, or else distorted; but in many instances they were simply ignored.

Certainly the “reform of society” through the application of reason might be considered successful, yet the reform of the society of most of the Portuguese, the rural society, was minimal. The class structure based on birth and education, and access to education, remained relatively untouched. The upper middle class, well versed in the new politics and backed by the resources of an expanding urban economy, in many cases simply replaced the old nobility in the countryside, becoming the new nobility. Feudal dues and customary work were abolished, but the new taxes, rents, and fees for services more than replaced them.

Universal rights and freedom of thought were guaranteed in the various constitutions, even the Constitutional Charter, although they were often honored in the breach; freedom of assembly and freedom of the press (which at times was particularly irresponsible) were regularly suspended. And although equality before the law was enshrined, as was due process, laws which discriminated against the foes of the government were not uncommon. Judicial tyranny, especially in the wake of the War of the Two Brothers, was often used to maintain the power of the constitutionalists and to exact revenge on their enemies.

Again the division of power was laid out in the constitution, with the crown balanced by the cortes, but the cortes itself was also divided between a Chamber of Peers serving for life and a Chamber of Deputies which (because of the highly restrictive suffrage)⁹ poorly represented the general populace. The long running deadlock over the control of government policy often led to bombastic speechifying in the cortes and to ministries resorting to corrupt or semi-corrupt practices to try to move their agendas forward. Little of this reflected the wishes of the general population.

On the whole most of the people did not care about their new liberties. Their focus was on survival in the countryside and most of the liberal reforms were irrelevant to their interests. Their survival depended mostly on the forces of nature, for good or for ill, not on the government. Within their society their main concerns were to lower rents, avoid taxes, and reduce fees for necessary services. Education was for the most part out of reach and freedom of religion was irrelevant to the faithful who were almost 100 percent Catholic. The countryside saw the government in Lisbon, and in the district capitals, at best as irrelevant¹⁰ and at worst interfering, with their policies of land

⁹ If reform and progress is to be developed by reason, then of course only the educated should be allowed to vote.

¹⁰ Policies focussing on the development of trade and commerce and the necessary infrastructure was of interest to at most 15 percent of the population.

registration or local taxation.

Government officials dealt with the general populace, both urban and rural, with an arrogant, often arbitrary, authoritarianism which belied the so-called liberal governments which had given them their posts. The masters of the old regime gave way to the technocrats of the new, with little improvement in the real freedom or the economic burden of the average person.

Interference with land ownership and the imposition of new local taxes for road work were of benefit mainly to those in trade and commerce, as well as interference with traditional funerary practices, all at a time of general agricultural crisis, were the main issues behind the active resistance of the countryside to the liberal governments in the 1840s.

Similarly another major concern of the general populace was the implications of war. After 70-odd years of peace in Europe the politicians in Lisbon joined with the western allies during World War I, partly as a way to make the country more cohesive and governable during a particularly unstable period. But in fact the widespread unpopularity of the war, which included conscription, throughout Portugal made the problems of governing at the time even worse. On the other hand Salazar's success in keeping Portugal out of World War II was a major reason (along with a sense of stability) for his popularity at the time and afterwards. Again it was the colonial wars of the 1960s and 1970s which split the people from the government, leading to the 1974 revolution.

Those in the countryside were interested in practical issues which affected their ability to exist, and not in any ideological agenda, and certainly not in an ideological agenda of change.

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The second issue of interest to me, therefore, becomes “why was this so?” why did the principles of liberalism fail to establish themselves in Portugal?

The key reason, I think, lies in the nature of the Portuguese economy, an economy centered mainly on agricultural production with a second tier strength in fishing. Both of these occupations involved a dispersed population, living in some areas in scattered farm houses, in other areas in small hamlets or villages, but nowhere in real urban conglomerations with urban infrastructures and the urban experience of multiple occupations and outlooks in close proximity to each other. Even fishing was done mainly in small boats out of small coastal villages. Portugal remained “rural” much longer than many other parts of Europe: Great Britain, France, the German lands, the Low Countries, Italy.¹¹

What industry there was in Portugal was mainly in Lisbon and Porto and a few other larger urban centres. As well, most of the urban economy was one of trade and commerce (mainly in agricultural goods), rather than manufacturing on any large scale. The lack of any real resource extraction industry, for instance the mining of coal

¹¹ Factory workers numbered about 200,000 (ca. 1914), or approximately 3.6% of a population of about 5.5 million. At the same time at least 57% of the population was directly involved in agriculture.

or metal ores, meant that concentrations of miners or smelter workers were also missing in Portugal, unlike in some other parts of Europe.¹²

The second aspect of this agriculture-based economy, besides the dispersion of the population, was its subsistence nature; whether it was corn or potatoes in the north, or wheat or cattle in the south, or wine in various specialized areas all over the country, the standard of living for the farmer and his family was extremely low, amongst the lowest in Europe. Any sort of adverse crop condition meant a failed harvest and extreme hardship until a new crop could be sown and harvested. There was no room for risk, no room for change, no room for a new way of life.

The way of life that did exist was cyclical and traditional: cyclical as it followed the seasons and the planting and reaping of crops or birth and growth of herds (or the annual migration of fish species off the coasts), traditional in the interactions with landowners, markets, merchants, and the church.

The people of the countryside – small tenant farmers, peasant proprietors, sharecroppers – were firmly conservative because they dared not be otherwise. Those blessed with access to a formal education and to new and different ideas could dabble in organized politics and political “fashions”; but the everyday Portuguese had no time or place for such luxury.

Such a life, such an outlook, was reinforced by a view of the nation as permanent and unchanging, and symbolized by a strong monarch. In many ways Miguel was an ideal king: all-powerful and forceful, leading the nation on the basis of his regality rather than any constitutionally derived power. Politicians who ruled under a constitutional system, whose power derived in part from the monarch but also in part from the Cortes were temporary and weak, and not at all inspiring. Absolute monarchs and their actions had made the country “great”: the reconquest of the south from the Moors, the crusades into North Africa, the voyages of discovery, the restoration of a Portuguese monarch to the Portuguese throne in 1640. This was the tradition into which Dom Miguel fell and for which he was accepted and respected.

That this outlook was true for Portugal in the Nineteenth Century is not surprising; that it continued so long into the Twentieth Century is more interesting. Documentary evidence about daily life in Portugal after the Second World War and even into the 1950s and 1960s shows that it was much harsher and much poorer than elsewhere in Europe, which seems to have recovered from the war and moved forward at a much more rapid pace. Farmers in the Algarve in the 1970s were still plowing small plots of land with burros, and a large number of craftsmen were still producing shoes, boats, carts and basic household, agricultural and fishing equipment by hand, using very simple traditional tools. At the same time there still existed water peddlers bringing

¹² The advances made in industry (e.g., textiles) and commerce (and the development of infrastructure) in the Nineteenth Century, mask the fact that this was still a small segment of the whole economy, and that Portugal lagged far behind other European countries in terms of an industrial economy. For instance, industry in Belgium (with half of Portugal’s population) employed 720,000 horsepower early in the 20th Century, while industry in Portugal employed only 111,000 horsepower. On a per capita basis, Portugal’s use of mechanical power was only about 8% of that of Belgium. Other activities which made small contributions to the Portuguese economy in this period were the re-export of colonial produce, the development of colonial markets (protected by tariffs), and remittances from emigrants.

water from wells or wall faucets to homes with no direct supply.

The other element which played a large part in the failure of liberalism was factionalism. Many liberal leaders were unable to see beyond their own agendas, and unable to co-operate and build alliances to get their programs enacted. Dictatorial, uncompromising, self-conceited, they had an exaggerated sense of their own importance. Perhaps this was a continuation of the old absolute monarchical tradition, where one person was the key to the whole of society. Perhaps they saw themselves as “monarchs” in turn, selected not by birth but by direct (or indirect) election. Whatever the cause the forces at play in politics were broken up into segments too small to govern effectively, and too self-centered to broaden their support and therefore their effectiveness.

While this factionalism was particularly true of the period from 1820 to 1850, it continued to some degree in the second half of the Nineteenth Century. Here, however, the main problem was that there was no obvious answer to the fundamental economic problem of the country (its dependence on inefficient agriculture and fishing and, later on, on inefficient industry) around which parties could coalesce. And so factionalism continued into the Republic. It was not until the early 1930s that Salazar could overcome this factionalism, or to become the supreme factional leader (the despair of the great depression probably had much to do with this) and create a government – a highly conservative one – with a broad base of support throughout the country.

But in the first half of the nineteenth century, insofar as political groupings were important, the splintering of left, centre and right, and the resulting infighting among various groups which should actually have been allies, left the rest of the country dissatisfied with all political groupings and their leaders. And, while liberals, sustained by a small urban base, were vocal, they did not succeed in capturing power for any significant period, nor in convincing the large majority of Portuguese to accept their political agenda. While 1820-1850 can be seen as the period of the “introduction of liberalism” into Portugal, it was certainly not a period of the “triumph of liberalism”.

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