

Algarve, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic¹

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Abstract

Joaquim Romero Magalhães was to begin with a regional historian rooted in the French *Annales* tradition of social and economic history. His regional history of the Algarve in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries overflows into the much wider and evolving complexes within which the Portuguese region was framed—the ageing Mediterranean and the growing Atlantic, and their shifting balance in the weaving of a new world economy. It is in the regional origins of Romero Magalhães’s trajectory that we find many of the topics and problems that he developed in his historical travels across the empire.

Keywords

Atlantic; Joaquim Romero Magalhães; Mediterranean; Portugal; Regional history

Resumo

Joaquim Romero Magalhães foi, antes de mais, um historiador regional enraizado na tradição da história económica e social dos *Annales*. A sua história regional do Algarve entre os séculos XVI e XVIII transborda para os complexos muito mais amplos e em transformação que enquadravam a região portuguesa—o Mediterrâneo em envelhecimento e o Atlântico em crescimento, e o seu equilíbrio em mutação no tecer de uma economia mundial nascente. É nas origens regionais da trajetória de Romero Magalhães que encontramos muitos dos tópicos e dos problemas que ele desenvolveu nas suas viagens históricas pelo império.

Palavras-chave

Atlântico; Joaquim Romero Magalhães; Mediterrâneo; Portugal; História regional

¹ By its very nature, a personal tribute expresses an opinion, although hopefully it is accurate as well. While I am responsible for all the mistakes and errors in judgment that this article may contain, I am indebted to the concise and systematic bio-bibliographical roadmap compiled in Mata and Valério (2012). All quotes from Portuguese texts and most of the titles mentioned in the article are my translations. In all quotes I have translated from Romero Magalhães’s writings, I have kept his writing style using the historical present or future tenses whenever he did so.

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The title of this article quotes the landmark study on regional geography, *Portugal, o Mediterrâneo e o Atlântico* (1945), by the Portuguese geographer Orlando Ribeiro. I use this quote to remind my readers that, to begin with, Joaquim Romero Magalhães was a regional historian deeply rooted in the French *Annales* tradition that viewed historical geography as a central component of social and economic history: a tradition to which some of Ribeiro's professors at the Sorbonne had already made a major contribution. Romero was the historian of the Algarve, the quintessential "Mediterranean Portugal" with its "[...] two natural sub-regions, the mountains and the seaside [...] the two Algarves well known to geographers" (1970: 135, citing Ribeiro, 1963). Furthermore, Romero's historical-geographical approach to the regional economy was very much inspired by that of Albert Silbert, the historian of other areas of *The Mediterranean Portugal at the End of the Ancien Regime*, published a few years earlier (Silbert, 1966), and of which Orlando Ribeiro wrote an extensive review (1970).

As a historian myself of social and economic questions relating to "Mediterranean Portugal," this is the natural vantage point from which to pay due tribute to Romero Magalhães for his teachings and for his unsparing, if always good-natured, criticism. He rightly chided me over my MA dissertation: "[...] the case-study constrains too much, and, when it is understood in its strictest sense, it is too conditioning" (Magalhães, 2017: 37). For all his acute sense of place and time, he was never one for confined spaces or narrow time frames: he always saw people, events, and places as points located within the more or less stable, but ever moving, coordinates of wider spaces, durations, relationships, and processes. This brings me to a second layer in the quotation in the title.

At least to historians and historical social scientists, the word "Mediterranean" inevitably evokes Braudel's 1949 book on the Inner Sea and the complex of peoples, realms, and empires toiling in and across these "liquid plains" (Braudel, 1987: 94) in the sixteenth century. It is especially fitting here to recall Braudel's emphasis on the outpouring of the Mediterranean world towards its "oceanic destiny," the ever growing Europeans' Atlantic, which began its history as a "Greater Mediterranean" (204-10). Above all, it was this ambitious program of total and interdisciplinary history, intended to be built from the ground up, which helped set the course for Romero's journey and very much maintained it throughout.³

³ His first book cited the 1959 translation of *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'Époque de Philippe II* into Spanish by the Mexican *Fondo de Cultura Económica*. Portuguese-speaking readers would have to wait until 1984 for a translation, coincidentally in the same year as Romero was awarded his doctorate.

Together with Braudel, a second and more recent evocation is, of course, made here of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, both a disciple and a creative interpreter of the French historian, and the author in 1950 of a two-piece article about *The Making of the Atlantic World* (Godinho, 2005), and in 1956 of a booklet on the gold caravans of the “Saharan Mediterranean” (Godinho, 1956)—to mention but two works referring to both seas in their titles. Both of these texts were steps on a trail leading up to Godinho’s *Doctorat d’État* at the Sorbonne in 1959, later reviewed and published piecemeal in Portugal (Godinho, 1963-1971).

It was this scholar (enveloped in the innovative aura of the *VIème Section de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études* and, by then, an icon of democratic resistance to the Portuguese Fascist regime, particularly in the ideological battlefield of the history of the discoveries and empire) that the young undergraduate turned to for guidance in the writing of his first degree dissertation, approved in 1967, and later published as his first book in a collection that Magalhães Godinho edited for the publishing company Cosmos. Along with Braudel and many others from the first generation of *Annales d’Histoire Économique et Sociale* onwards, Magalhães Godinho, quoting Romero’s biographical tribute to his master and friend, had taken part in that “[...] great work of attempting to historicize all social sciences, to fertilize history with the objects, theories and methodologies of the other social sciences” (Magalhães, 1988a: 8).

That is why the adjective “economic” in the titles of both Romero’s books on the Algarve means that he took the region’s economy—embedded in geographical constraints and opportunities, social hierarchies and networks, institutions and power structures, beliefs, and mentalities—as a focal point to much wider problems; an angle from which to exercise his “[...] ability to encompass the different chronological rhythms, relevant spaces and facets of total social facts” (Mata and Valério, 2012: 14). It is also why he always took his questions about the Algarve much further than the region itself, further even than that core complex of “Algarves” connecting it with Andalusia and Northern Africa (Magalhães, 1970: 235).

In keeping with Braudel’s guidelines, and with Godinho’s (1961) operational concept of a “historical-geographical complex”—akin to Braudel’s soon-to-be-coined “*économie-monde*,”⁴ though less abstract and schematic—Romero Magalhães’s (1970) first

⁴ At the risk of seeming pedantic, I have opted for maintaining the French term because I find the established English translation “world-economy,” quite literally, equivocal. A mere hyphen is far too slight a difference to distinguish this term from the expression “world economy” (*économie mondiale*), two concepts that Braudel explicitly strove to set apart. “Economy-world” would be a much better translation, strange though it may sound to the English reader. At any rate, it is no more of a neologism than the French original.

book on the economy of the sixteenth-century Algarve framed the region's dynamism within a secular movement of

[...] this Mediterranean Atlantic made up of the Peninsular South, North Africa, the Islands and, by the beginning of the century, the Western Mediterranean, a movement progressively displaced from the latter area towards West Africa, Brazil and the Indies of Castile (Magalhães, 1970: 208).

In turn, he described this moving complex from a broader perspective: the flows of licit and illicit trade penetrating deeper into the Mediterranean and into Northern Europe, through which Algarve's own products (fruits, fish, cork, tree barks used for tanning purposes) circulated, together with dyes, sugar, silver, and slaves, with wheat forming a staple part of the return freight.

Furthermore, such flows were subjected throughout the sixteenth century to two interrelated tensions—the one that existed between the two Iberian empires, headed by Lisbon and Seville, and the other between the still dominant Mediterranean economies and the challenging centers bordering the Atlantic North Sea. Caught up in this changing world, Algarve's economic and social dynamics depended on the region's place and role within it as a producer and an intermediary, forever in search of the wheat that its growing population wanted so badly. For, besides the fact that the soils were generally very poor for growing wheat, export-oriented fruit farming—that is, a monetized economy and a budding agrarian capitalism—had all but taken over the agrarian landscape.

Therefore, “[t]he commercial Algarve lives within a greater whole, lying at the mercy of the conjuncture, sometimes Mediterranean, sometimes Atlantic, or both, within this developing world economy” (Magalhães 1970: 215). This situation provided opportunities for the formation of trading groups, export agriculture, and some resource-based industries (fishing, salted fish, dried fruits, and shipbuilding), as well as for the regional workforce eventually becoming based on slave labor. Magalhães conservatively estimated slaves at 10% of the population in the second half of the sixteenth century—a source of deepening social polarization between the richer strata who could afford slaves and a pauperized free labor force deprived of part of their potential wages, just as these were declining in real value because of the inflation caused by the abundance of Castilian silver.

In the early seventeenth century, the Mediterranean and Atlantic conjunctures began to change, together with the balance between them. On the one hand, the inroads

that Portuguese merchants, including those from the Algarve, had been making into the trade networks of the Spanish Empire since the merger of the two Iberian Crowns in 1580 were decisively blocked from the 1620s onwards and the Castilian silver routes became more strictly controlled. On the other hand,

[...] the economic recession of the Inner Sea, and the famines that accompany it, increasingly appeal to the Nordics. And their cargoes are never short of codfish, the fishing of which develops the western areas from Biscay to the North Sea. Now, in 1639, the tuna fisheries in the Algarve are given up for lost, and these were the same fisheries that had formed the core of the region's trade with the Mediterranean. Was this a result of competition? Or simply of changing fish routes? (Magalhães, 1970: 243).

Whatever the answer might be, it is hard to imagine a more striking example of the Atlantic supplanting the Mediterranean in economic terms than the replacement of tuna by cod in the Mediterranean diet—even more so when viewed from the perspective of the Algarve as a tuna supplier.

Coupled with the separation of the Portuguese Crown in 1640, the loss of its strongholds in Morocco, and the eventual distancing of the Andalusian trade, this leads us to the final questions of this first book:

Will an ever less Mediterranean Algarve be replaced, during the seventeenth century, by an increasingly Atlantic Algarve, less and less linked to Spanish and Moroccan trade, more and more Portuguese and Brazilian? Did the Algarve share in the growing fortune of small Portuguese ports from 1620 to 1640, or was it dragged down by the economic recession of the Mediterranean? This is a beautiful story yet to be written... (Magalhães, 1970: 243).

That beautiful story became his doctoral thesis, supervised by Magalhães Godinho, defended in 1984 and published in 1988 (Magalhães, 1988b). Before addressing this second Algarve book, though, I must make a brief digression relating to some relevant changes in its context. To begin with, a major political change had taken place in Portugal with the

overthrow of the Fascist regime in 1974. Politically laden intellectual sources could be openly used and issues freely discussed, new questions could be openly asked.

As far as concepts and analytical models were concerned, Magalhães Godinho had published his essay on *The Structure of the Old Portuguese Society* in 1971 and revised it in 1975 (Godinho, 1975), stating his thesis about contemporary Portugal as a “blocked society”: the social order of the *Ancien Régime* had taken hold of the resources of expansion and empire, and the structure that this created had blocked potential paths for change. In 1968, Braudel had published the book that became the first volume of his work *Material Civilization, Economy and Capitalism*, the third volume of which would be centered around the concept of *économie-monde* (Braudel, 1979). Largely influenced by Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein had published *Mercantilism and the European World-Economy*, the second volume of his world-system triptych (Wallerstein, 1980).

The above books are three out of the four that Romero himself ranked as “*obras de base*” (fundamental works) in the bibliography of his *Economic Algarve, 1600-1773* (Magalhães, 1988b: 432). The fourth is the one specifically dealing with regional history, the Marxist historian Pierre Vilar’s *Catalonia in Early Modern Spain* (1962), which had not featured in the first book and certainly helped in highlighting social power and domination in the portrait of the Algarve’s economic performance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As Romero explained in the introduction to his new book, the choice of terminus date for his study is emblematic. In 1773, the Marquis of Pombal—the Republican historiography’s epitome of an enlightened reformist despot—launched a project to recover the Algarve from its diagnosed decadence, a “regional action with national intentions” that had failed (Magalhães, 1988b: 12). The purpose of his research, he said, was not to examine its failure, but rather “[...] the previous reality, the economic and social structure that had led to a blockage” (12). As a result, the author concludes in the last paragraph in the book, he found that the Algarve

[...] grows modestly, from 1660 onwards, both in the countryside and in the ports, until it reaches the limits of a growth without development. Which, it is hardly daring to say, would not have been peculiar to the Algarve. It is only the great crisis of the 1760s and 1770s that imposes a serious reconsideration of Portugal as a country. And a diagnosis of its organic ills.

Was it not the case that Portugal was suffering from an ancient disease, which had only then manifested itself? (Magalhães, 1988b: 412-3).

With this narrative of the region's "general ankylosis" (Magalhães, 1988b: 403), Romero went much further than paying mere lip service to his mentor's theory of a "blocked society." The story he told is a painstaking operationalization of the theory, seeking to unveil the underlying mechanisms that caused this blockage in the region's social structure, power, and institutions, and in the correlated weaving of new dependency relations.

As the center of the expanding European *économie-monde* shifted northwards to Antwerp, on its way to London, and both Lisbon and Cadiz became the economic capitals of "[...] complexes that, in the course of this story, slid more and more towards the periphery of the European world-economy," the Algarve lost the positional advantage it had held in the sixteenth century, changing from a regional intermediary between two booming empires to a "[...]and at the margin of anemic semi-peripheries," "marginal to two margins" (Magalhães, 1988b: 282, 403). If, during the first decades of the seventeenth century, its traders and ports still participated in a fair amount of trade between Castile and the African west coast, maintaining an important role in the supply of slaves, they later suffered from both empires' crises at their intersection. "It ruralizes, closes itself into a shell. It grows entirely dependent on Lisbon for the South Atlantic trade" (285).

Zooming into the region, the book portrays a territory that was politically fragmented into largely autonomous municipalities with a wide-reaching and effective power over the economy and the economic lives of their populations, their autarkic mentality preventing any kind of higher-order coordination. Local aristocracies, increasingly entrenched and endogamic, in alliance with the clergy, occupied the top institutional positions. In a process that reflected the loss of urban relevance and the overall weakening of merchant groups, these petty oligarchies—"[...] there are no Greats, the great are small. And they command" (Magalhães, 1988b: 395)—gradually closed ranks and crystalized in the course of the seventeenth century, becoming a major factor blocking any possibility of regional development. Moreover, they were obsessed with honor, status, and the "purity of blood"—that is, remaining clean of the stains of manual or commercial work, and, most of all, of any hint of New Christian blood. "The New Christian came to play the social role of the anti-honor scarecrow, in a world-view that bound together the common people and those who dominated them" (345).

This set the stage for the Inquisition to enter the scene. Denunciations of Judaism targeted New Christians, particularly the merchant groups. The holes that the seventeenth-century persecutions plugged in the already weakened fabric of the merchant networks allowed the French to take over the slave trade, and the Catalans the fisheries, while also making it necessary for English traders and capital to come and take control of their fruit trade at its source. Traders from the region continued to operate, but no longer in that area—they had dispersed abroad.

One enterprising Algarve [...] is replaced by another, one that waits by the Mediterranean and Oceanic routes for the foreigners to take an interest in its products. And to take care of matters. [...] Paradoxically, the ferocious guardians of Roman orthodoxy were the most effective agents of the northern heretics. Even the first signs of renewal, such as the growth of sea trade in the Luso-Hispanic-Moroccan gulf, bear the English seal: Gibraltar. Dependency had settled in, it had structured itself (Magalhães, 1988b: 389).

Before bringing an end to this already overly long excursion, I would just like to point out that it is in the regional origins of Romero Magalhães's trajectory that we find, to begin with, many of the topics and problems that he developed in his historical travels across the empire: geographical descriptions, territorial organization and identity; the relationship between subsistence and monetized economies; local institutions in their relations with the monarchy, the fragmentation, distribution, and appropriation of power; slavery in trade networks and in the life and structure of society; and enlightened reformism. He smuggled all these topics and problems across from his Mediterranean beginnings into his subsequent Atlantic enterprises, and even further.

Like his fellow countrymen from the past, Romero Magalhães took his trade to distant shores. Fortunately, contrary to theirs, his kind of Atlantic trade promoted freedom rather than enslavement, and unlike those from the seventeenth century, he was able to carry out his enterprise without fleeing abroad. For this, we should all be grateful.

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