The Political History of Nineteenth Century Portugal

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Abstract

The political history of nineteenth-century Portugal was, for a long time, a neglected subject. Under Salazar's New State it was passed over in favour of earlier periods from which that nationalist regime sought to draw inspiration; subsequent historians preferred to concentrate on social and economic developments to the detriment of the difficult evolution of Portuguese liberalism. This picture is changing, thanks to an awakening of interest in both contemporary topics and political history (although there is no consensus when it comes to defining political history). The aim of this article is to summarise these recent developments in Portuguese historiography for the benefit of an English-language audience.

Keywords

Nineteenth Century, History, Bibliography, Constitutionalism, Historiography, Liberalism, Political History, Portugal

Politics has finally begun to carve out a privileged space at the heart of Portuguese historiography. This 'invasion' is a recent phenomenon and can be explained by the gradual acceptance, over the course of two decades, of political history as a genuine specialisation in Portuguese academic circles. This process of scientific and pedagogical renewal has seen a clear focus also on the nineteenth century. Young researchers concentrate their efforts in this field, and publishers are more interested in this kind of works than before.

In Portugal, the interest in the 19th century is a reaction against decades of ignorance. Until April 1974, ideological reasons dictated the absence of contemporary history from the secondary school classroom, and even from the university curriculum. The 19th century was viewed as the triumph, from 1834 onwards, of the suspect 'liberal State' which grew, in the first quarter of the twentieth century (1910-1926), into the despised Republic. It was against this regime that Salazar's New State, corporative and nationalist, affirmed itself. History degrees usually did not extend beyond a coverage of the 17th century thus focusing on the 'glorious' period of Portuguese maritime discoveries and imperial expansion.

Nevertheless, in the last decades of the New State's existence, from the 1950s onwards, some attempt was made to carry out a process of historiographical renewal, one which might include, for the first time, contemporary history. This process occurred, however, outside the context of Portuguese universities, and was clearly influenced by a Marxist current limited by its own ideological prejudices.

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