

Vitorino Magalhães Godinho and the *Annales* School: history as a way of thinking

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1. Introduction

Vitorino Magalhães Godinho (1918-2011) was one of the leading Portuguese historians of the 20th century. His books and essays, his devotion to the teaching profession and his civic activities, the influence that he left on many of his disciples and followers – both in Portugal and in Brazil – are lasting marks of a life that was dedicated to thinking and writing about Portugal, the Portuguese, their history and their coming into being as a nation. Students of his work have available to them the vast legacy of his writings, which cover a wide and diversified range of subjects: from the theory and methodology of history and the social sciences to the history of the Portuguese expansion and the discoveries; from the dissemination and analysis of sources to his essays speculating on the problems faced by Portugal as an Atlantic, Iberian and European country.

Among the many tributes that have already been paid to his work, special mention should be made of the book *Estudos e Ensaios (1988)*, published on the occasion of his retirement from the New University of Lisbon, which is a collection of papers written by some of the most prominent disciples and admirers of the historian's profession that Vitorino Magalhães Godinho had served for so long. More recently, there was also the special issue of the journal *Arquivos do Centro Cultural Calouste Gulbenkian* (2005), which was a collection of the papers presented at a conference held in his honor. Also worthy of mention is the special issue of the journal *Review, Fernand Braudel Center* (2005), in which it is expressly regretted that, because of language barriers, the work of Magalhães Godinho is so little known among Anglo-Saxon historians. In fact, this is a serious impediment to a wider dissemination and sharing of his work by modern international historiography, which is why it is always worth talking about his work when addressing a broader linguistic universe.

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In the collections referred to above, besides the sense of a tribute, we also find a clear presentation and analysis of the various themes and problematics that Vitorino Magalhães Godinho dealt with throughout his vast and fruitful career. Not forgetting the express intention of honoring his memory, this present text has a purposefully limited scope and only explores one of the various perspectives in which one can recognize the value of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho's contributions: his relationship with the historiographic current of the *Annales* School.

2. Vitorino Magalhães Godinho's links with the *Annales* School

Vitorino Magalhães Godinho's first contact with the *Annales* School came about after he had severed his ties to the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon in 1944, for reasons that were clearly marked by the political reaction of the official historiography and ideologues of the *Estado Novo* to the innovation that he brought to historical research into the overseas expansion and its economic significance. Vitorino Magalhães Godinho had dared to take his analysis beyond the spread of faith and the spirit of adventure that were conventionally associated with the heroic feat of the maritime discoveries.

The enforced silence led him to spend time in an academic wilderness, although this situation did, however, enable him to engage in an intense period of translation and publishing activity. Dating from this period are his first reflections on the Portuguese expansion, the discoveries and the world economy, both through the publication and organization of sources (Godinho 1943-46) and through essays that intelligently identify the problems of this period's multiple historical meanings (Godinho 1944). It was also during this time of withdrawal from university affairs that he published an important work of methodological reflection on history and its making (Godinho 1946), in which he reveals an indisguisable admiration for the work of Lucien Febvre and the first (and of course, at that time, the only) generation of the school or movement of historiographic renewal that was centered on the journal *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale*, created in 1929.

When, in 1947, after an exchange of letters that involved both Febvre and Braudel, he moved to Paris to continue his studies with a view to obtaining a doctorate, Magalhães Godinho set forth armed with the knowledge and anticipated sharing of a view of history that he would never again abandon. He was young, but he was no novice: he had developed, in a hostile environment, a solid adherence to the founding principles of the

Annales School. He was prepared to join a movement, and not to limit himself to being a mere spectator of the innovations already taking place.

This first phase of his stay in France continued until 1960. That year, he was to return to Portugal, and he would later head back to France once more, for reasons connected with his political dissidence, in 1970, remaining at the University of Clermont Ferrand until 1974. During his first stay (from 1947 to 1960), he was in close contact with authors such as Marcel Bataillon (whom he had met in Lisbon and who had played an important role in his move to Paris), Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, Ernest Labrousse, George Gurvitch, Carlo Cipolla and Frédéric Mauro, among others. He benefited from the atmosphere of the newly-created 6th section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, an institution that, as is known, allowed for a more fluid assimilation and reproduction of the historical knowledge disseminated by the journal of the *Annales* School and its mentors.

In 1955, he completed his postgraduate dissertation with a work that was greatly inspired and guided by the ideas of Labrousse (Godinho 1955), exploring a line of quantitative research that also characterized an important hub of activity at the *Annales* School. Four years later (in 1959), he presented the dissertation for his State doctorate entitled “The Economy of the Portuguese Empire, 15th and 16th Centuries”, later published in Portuguese with a different title (Godinho 1963), with Labrousse and Braudel acting as the examiners on his jury.

It should also be noted that it was during his stay at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* that Magalhães Godinho visited the University of São Paulo in 1954, as a member of the French mission that, in 1937 with Braudel, had initiated in Brazil the first of what were to become frequent contacts in the field of history. This mission played an extremely important role in the renewal of Brazilian historiography.

3. The messages drawn from the *Annales* School

3.1. Interdisciplinarity and total unified history

As is well known, one of the most distinctive features of the *Annales* School is the cross-fertilization that it has achieved between history and the subjects, theories and methodologies of the other social sciences. Without any doubt, this was also one of the most distinctive and recurrent (almost obsessive, I would say) aspects of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho’s way of understanding history, as we can see from his work.

Disciplines are useful because they define problems, procedures, solutions and specific audiences. However, when they are left to their own devices, they can lead to an excessive narrowing of the angles of perception. For this reason, interdisciplinarity is also a good thing, when practiced in an informed manner, and provided that it is not being used to shun the responsibility of not being a specialist in anything at all. It is not a question of denying the advantages of specializing in disciplinary fields, but rather of underlining the benefits of overlaps and complementarity in these fields.

In Godinho's work, interdisciplinary dialogue is not only called for in the exercise and practice of a total history in which there is a cross-fertilization between the approaches of geo-history, historical economics and sociology (expressions that he prefers to those of economic and social history), psycho-history and historical anthropology, to mention just the most relevant areas. In his view, it is also essential to break away from the static vision that characterizes each of these disciplines, which was the reason why he defended the teaching of social and human sciences without any artificial barriers being raised between fields of knowledge that mutually enrich one another. The following recent testimony provides a good example of the concern that always motivated him in his work:

Economics has ceased to be a scientific construction that is adapted to the different realities that we find in epochs and societies, politicology has shielded itself in the linking together of political facts with other political facts, anthropology delights in "symbolic representations" and has forgotten about watermills and ploughs, factories and coal, men and their ways of feeling, thinking and acting, the geographical space in which their lives are led, the dialectics between social roles and personality; sociology has become monographic and doesn't concern itself with long-term processes or complex structures. Multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity have been proclaimed, but will they be put into practice? (Godinho 2008, p.13)

3.2. History as a conceptual elaboration

Without ever losing his passion for the archives, his respect for the sources or his concern with taking great care of the documents, the history that Vitorino Magalhães Godinho pursued in keeping with the practices of the *Annales* School is particularly demanding in terms of the process of theoretical construction and the elaboration of

concepts that it requires, and which allow for a better understanding of the succession of events. Magalhães Godinho never made any concessions to the acritical positivism of many historians of his generation.

History cannot be reduced to a narrative sequence of facts that have been positively assessed and linked together without any causal explanation. Events that have been painstakingly reported and reproduced from secure and trustworthy sources have to be seen in a long-term perspective, and above all require an effort of interpretation that makes use of the capacity of rational understanding based on the construction of ideal types (in the best Weberian tradition) or on the formulation of problems that require the historian to provide both an explanation and a solution. Two examples taken from his work help us to understand his positioning and his close adherence to the spirit of the *Annales* School in relation to this matter.

The first example relates to the concept that he himself invented of a “historical-geographical complex”, through which he sought to discern the linking together of spatial or territorial structures located in space but defined in a time that has rhythms and cadences, allowing for the capture of both short and long terms (or, in other words, spaces that change to the rhythm of history). A complex where economic, social and political flows and relations are established in different spatial scales (local, regional, national, worldwide), where actors and institutions (with their own directions but joint dynamics) interact, where cultural and ritual practices are defined, affording specificity to the historical realities analyzed (cf. Godinho 1966). His study of the trading networks and commercial fleets in the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans, within the broader perspective of the study of markets at a worldwide level, allowed Vitorino Magalhães Godinho to develop the heuristic validity of this concept in which we find intertwined the dialectic relations and tensions between space and time, conjuncture and structure, short and long term, micro and macro analysis. It is, therefore, a concept that makes it possible for him to explore paths that lead to a better historical understanding of complex social phenomena.

In this sense, to take one of his more preferred themes as an example, merchant fleets are, above all, the group of boats of which they are comprised. But they are also the cargoes that they transport, the men that sail the vessels and the men that build them, equip them and fit them out, the institutions and powers that decide upon and pay for the voyages and trade, the science that helps navigation, the risks and insurance that make them either difficult or feasible, the markets that allow goods in and out, the currencies in

which goods are transacted, the bills of exchange that are in circulation, the myths that they are faced with, the purpose and the vision that motivate them.

The second example relates to the concept of Portugal as a “blocked society”, which Magalhães Godinho developed in one of his more remarkable (and also more controversial) essays (Godinho 1971). He was able to use this notion to coherently explore the vicissitudes of blockades at different moments in Portuguese history, which illustrate or provide a pretext for studying the problems of backwardness, dependence and decadence, wastage or misuse of resources, mentalities and cultures that are little given to innovation and the advance of knowledge. The analysis of particular moments and episodes is subject to a contextualization served by well-constructed hypotheses for reflection, even though they may be refuted.

In one of the last texts that he published, he had the opportunity, led by his analysis of Alexandre Herculano’s major work, to return to the ancestral dilemmas of the Portuguese economy and society, and not only during the *ancien régime*. And he summed up the question perfectly: “Our problem is the future, and the dilemma of freedom-inequality” (Godinho 2010b, p. 96).

3.3. Other constructions of history

Nowadays, are the methodological and theoretical guidelines of the *Annales* project still valid and deserving of unconditional approval? Do the teachings of the first generation (Bloch-Febvre) and the second generation (led by Braudel, but also enjoying the invaluable collaboration of Labrousse and Le Roy Ladurie) still remain intact and protected in the new history being produced by the authors of the third generation in the field of collective representations and mental representations (Jacques le Goff, F. Furet, Philippe Ariès, Robert Mandrou, Georges Duby, Daniel Roche, Roger Chartier, among so many others)?

Answering these questions in relation to the work of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho obliges us to focus on the prudent way in which he himself always regarded deviations from the initial trajectory that he had developed with Febvre, Braudel and Labrousse, his main references and mentors. And here it is also worth paying attention to two examples drawn from his reflections about objects of study that are ever present in his work.

The first example relates to the construction of the field of economic and social history (historical economics and sociology) and the clear affirmation of the vitality and defense of the primacy of the tradition of the *Annales* School as a counterpoint to an

economic history that is cliometric in nature. Without ever openly declaring his hostility to such a vision, Magalhães Godinho shielded himself in the practice of a quantitative and serial history that does not correspond to the vision that modern economic history has been constructing, being progressively transformed into a sophisticated branch of economic theory. Through the studies that he produced, it can be concluded that the use of price series or the use of instruments of quantitative analysis should not be confused with econometric techniques that are identical to the ones used in the calculations of economists. In keeping with his vision, which is, after all, the vision of the *Annales* School, economic history cannot be a mere rational reconstruction of the past, an analytical exercise based on stylized facts whose existence is proved only by its capacity to model variables, test hypotheses and prove pre-established certainties.

Another elucidatory example relates to the field of the history of mentalities and collective representations, which he clearly illustrated in many of his texts (Godinho 1990), or, in other words, his concern with the sphere of ideas and symbolic objects.

In the best tradition of the *Annales* School, there remains no doubt that the consolidation of history as an intellectual discipline implies a recognition of the importance of studying institutional, cultural, political, economic and social contexts for both material production and the production of ideas. However, for some historians who are more receptive to the postmodern message and its turning point, instead of making the history of “some thing” that they have always been able to clearly identify, it seems preferable to study the way in which that “thing” was transformed into a historical object, without a permanent and transcendental identity. Thus, everything becomes susceptible to isolated historical understanding, from the smallest and meanest individual motivation to the most noble and sublime demonstration of the human spirit.

The importance of analyzing symbols, rituals, writings, historical artifacts, social arrangements and systems of beliefs never ceased to be evident in the work of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, just as it has always been in the best tradition of the *Annales* School. But this clear presence cannot be considered to be equivalent to reducing these objects to simple “texts” that are only read and questioned in their semiotic structure and internal consistency. In other words, ideas are not mere linguistic, mental or social events, but instead complex intellectual phenomena.

4. History as a reading of the present and the future, in the light of the past

Besides the attributes highlighted earlier (history as a problem, history as a conceptual construction, history as a rigorous exercise of comparison and discovery), for Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, history was always a field that brought together disciplines and people from a wide variety of backgrounds, a center for interdisciplinary debates, a heuristic instrument for the study of the present and the past of human societies, always with an idea of the future in mind. History is a program that serves to strengthen citizenship.

History is also made through the retrospective projection of intentions defined for the present time that subtly imposes research agendas, rhythms of scientific production, and pretexts for a more in-depth study of specific themes. This is a particularly important aspect of the path followed by Magalhães Godinho, who never abandoned the civic purpose of his mission as a historian. Equally relevant is the transposition of interpretations from the past into the present, which is shown not to be immune to the influence of a historiographic legacy that is capable of renewing itself. In this incursion of his into history as a civic apprenticeship, he was greatly influenced by the generation that had helped to shape his thinking, namely by António Sérgio and Jaime Cortesão.

This means that our understanding of the past benefits from events that come after it, while at the same time we recognize that our vision of the present conditions our reading of the past. The overlapping of layers and interpretive restorations is in no way anachronistic. Nonetheless, it is essential to bear in mind that, in explaining the ideas of the past with our own ideas, used as instruments of retrospection, we cannot accept that the authors of the past might play a leading role in the world in which we live today. One thing that is acceptable is to gauge the potential provided by the arguments of past ideas through our present visions and ideas. But it is unacceptable for us to admit that we only understand the ideas of the past because they are the precursors of the ideas of the present or are contained in them.

Vitorino Magalhães Godinho always regarded this matter as the *raison d'être* of history itself, as part of a civic project that the authors of the *Annales* School had also made their own. The following and final excerpt, taken from one of the last texts that he bequeathed to us, clearly shows the consistency and coherence of his vision of history as a way of thinking about the human condition:

We have to be capable of seizing today's problems in order to be capable of seizing yesterday's problems or those from even further in the past, and we have to take those agitated times into account if we wish to penetrate into

the heart of those that we are living now. History is a way of thinking about all of mankind's problems and about what is the human condition. (Godinho 2010a, p.10)

“History is a way of thinking about all of mankind's problems and about what is the human condition.” Repeating these words is the best way of remembering and paying tribute to the project of History and life that was deeply ingrained in the academic and civic career of Vitorino Magalhães Godinho.

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