

## Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho and the crisis of the old colonial system

POMBO, Nívia. *Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho: political-administrative thought and action in the Portuguese Overseas Empire (1778-1812)*. São Paulo: Hucitec, 2015.

Felipe dos Santos Silva

To start this narrative, let us start with the title of the work in question, *Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho: political-administrative thought and action in the Portuguese Overseas Empire (1778-1812)*, by the historian Nívia Pombo, published in 2015, as a result of the research master's degree. Removing for a moment all bookkeeping content, otherwise, all historiographic work that orders chaos, the name *Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho* marks a period. For colonial historiography, especially that which focuses on the turn of the 18th to the 19th century, the name *Dom Rodrigo* refers to a series of events. The alphabetic codes huddled together forming the name of a subject, a unique sonority, surreptitiously transfers those who read it to an accelerated historical time, ruptures and continuities of a certain order.

The book “is, in this sense, a political biography of D. Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho, and followed in order to make the choice of surfaces and social relationships that could inform the main guiding question of the research: what are the foundations of his thought and of your political actions on the Portuguese Empire?” (Pombo, 2015, p. 27). The author's reflection is crossed by *Dom Rodrigo's* political action. In a dialectical game between subject (*Dom Rodrigo*) and social fabric, Nívia Pombo reconstructs the scenario of politics and administration in the Portuguese overseas empire, especially thinking about Portugal and Brazil. The time frame incorporated in the title, 1778-1812, are the years that marked the passage of *Dom Rodrigo* through positions in the Portuguese administrative structure until his death.

He began his career as a plenipotentiary ambassador in Turin, 1779. Between 1796 and 1801 he assumed the post of Secretary of State for Navy and Overseas Domains. In 1801 to 1803 he was president of the Erário Régio. Finally, after four years

of forced exile, *Dom Rodrigo* took over the Ministry of War and Foreign Affairs, between 1808-1812. However, the author did not follow, or better say, created and (re)created the *wrapped doctor's* steps from 1778 in a restricted way; disconnected from the multiple experiences that could have been experienced.

The author takes the reader to the time's hall. The halls, for example, of the Royal College of Nobles and the University of Coimbra, a "common to the training of men from Portuguese states" space (Pombo, 2015, p. 25) and which was part of one of the circuits frequented by *Dom Rodrigo*. The author points out that with the beginning of the reforms at the University of Coimbra, proposed by the Marquis of Pombal, the new students had contact with a new literature. Known as the "Enlightenment" century, the seven hundred in Europe was marked by the Enlightenment movement, which impacted literate minds. Thinkers of various shades such as Newton, Rousseau, D'Alambert, Laplace, Voltaire, Raynal and Adam Smith<sup>1</sup>, promoted a new *modus operandi* in the way of thinking of students. *Dom Rodrigo*, for example, had contact "with what was modern in 18th century studies, such as mathematical calculations and Newtonian physics" (Pombo, 2015, p. 39). However, even abandoning all "teleological statements such as 'Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho was prepared, from an early age, by the Marquis of Pombal<sup>2</sup>, to assume the role of agent of the Portuguese government'" (Pombo, 2015, p. 28), the author did not it ceases to profile its youth; to highlight his courteous education, where he was called several times to speak to the prince, son of monarch D. José I.

In his first chapter, Pombo disembarked in 1808, the year the royal family arrived in Brazil fleeing the Napoleonic troops that threatened to invade Portugal. (re)configuring the whole context, punctuating the diplomatic instabilities that surrounded Europe in that period, the author inserts the policies and solutions that

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<sup>1</sup> The changes in subjects' subjectivity was not a metropolitan exclusivity. In Brazil, at the end of the 18th century, Kenneth Maxwell identified a wide range of authors who were read by Brazilians, especially the literate cream of Vila Rica, in the Captaincy of Minas Gerais. According to Maxwell, the "cosmopolitan collection of books by Canon Vieira, which totaled six hundred volumes, contained Robertson's *Histoire de l'Amerique* and *Encyclopédie*, as well as the works of Bielfield, Voltaire and Condillac". (Maxwell, 1999, p.161); see The 1790 generation and the idea of the Portuguese-Brazilian empire. In: Maxwell, Kenneth. *Chocolate, piratas e outros malandros: ensaios tropicais*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Marquês do Pombal, prime minister of D. José I between 1750-1777, was godfather of D. Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho.

were adopted by Portuguese statesmen, including *D. Rodrigo*. It inserts it in palace intrigues, for example, in the choice between French and English, opposing poles in European war disputes.

The second chapter goes back in time, where it seems that everything started. Taking as a starting point the education reforms proposed by the Marquis of Pombal, 1776, the historian seeks the genesis of the way of thinking of the administrative agents of the Portuguese empire in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He tirelessly seeks *Dom Rodrigo's* influences, reinvents the minister's intellect, agitates his neurons and demonstrates his Enlightenment inclinations; breaking with speculative science, actively investing in scientific expeditions overseas, based on empiricism in scientific investigations. Having said all that, it seems that *Dom Rodrigo* was frightened by the enlightenment outcomes in France and, previously, in the independence of the thirteen colonies in England. In Portugal, the illustrious people who participated in administrative positions, such as *Dom Rodrigo*, sought at all times to reinforce monarchical power using all the liberal theoretical arsenal that had been apprehended in educational spaces; this to improve the functioning of the metropolis and colonies, especially Brazil.

In the last part, Nívia Pombo sought to examine the colonial issue by three biases. Contemporary historiography, 18th century thinkers and, not least, the colonial company designed by *Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho*. Once placed in the high posts of the administrative structure, *Dom Rodrigo* spared no effort to improve his majesty's business. At the end of the seven hundred years, it financed a range of thinkers, mainly naturalists, whose aim was to recognize, study, catalog and send to the kingdom, the new potential offered by colonial spaces. The world of fauna and flora has become, for the "illustrated-absolutist" politicians, a new way of capturing commercial resources, even reaching the debate on the idea of a Luso-Brazilian empire.

In this sense, since the second half of the 18th century with the Lisbon earthquake (1753), the Seven Years' War (1762-63) and the decline in gold shipments,

Portugal plunged into a crisis that dragged on until the 19th century<sup>3</sup>. Adding these factors to the dependency treaties with England at the beginning of that century and the diplomatic instabilities that marked its end, *Dom Rodrigo's* trajectory orbited this world and could experience it. A world that has not only marked its intellect; it also marked his body, in which it was a space of courteous postures. That said, Nívia Pombo's book cuts across the character's institutional writings. As in a puzzle, the author builds what *Dom Rodrigo* went through. Let the subject emerge and present itself; from his stare, his erect body as a daily rule, to his ideas that sought to recover the political and economic stability of the kingdom and its territories. Building, (de)constructing and (re)constructing a coalition between enlightenment and tradition, Nívia Pombo tells us the story of a man in an empire in the process of breaking up.



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<sup>3</sup> MONTEIRO, Nuno Gonçalo. As reformas na monarquia pluricontinental portuguesa: de Pombal a dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho. In: O Brasil colonial 1720-1821 (vol.3). FRAGOSO, João; GOUVÊA, Maria de Fátima (orgs). Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2019.