

## **The Paradox of the Enlightenment.**

Maxwell, Kenneth. *Pombal, Paradox of the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro<sup>1</sup>

Discussing what has or has not been said in the historiography written in English about themes from Portuguese history runs the risk of being transformed into a string of constantly repeated lamentations. As a general rule, there is almost always a tendency to fall back on a comment made by Laura de Mello e Souza in the first published review (1995) of Maxwell's book about Pombal: "peripheral, both in the past and in the present, Portugal has ended up being miniaturized by European historians, who have placed it well below its real dimensions or have simply ignored it."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the eighteenth century has a number of quite distinctive marks, which are best not forgotten.

Repeatedly seen as a key period in the gestation of so-called Western modernity, such a status is normally associated not only with economic change, but above all with the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment. And, although it is less and less evident what is understood by this title, there are two aspects that seem to be fairly indisputable. On the one hand, the eighteenth century did not only result in the economic and political predominance<sup>3</sup> of certain regions of Europe over others, such as the Classical nucleus that the intellectual thought of that time is reputed to have built up in part through its fierce criticism of the religious, social, and political models of certain European territories that thereafter began to be regarded as "decadent" and "backward."<sup>4</sup> Fundamentally, the critical thought of the territories that are now considered to belong to the center assumed as their absolute opposite the Catholic Iberian Peninsula and its colonial dominions, returning to and expanding upon the legacy of the so-called "Black Legend" generated in the previous centuries, among others by the Protestants and Jews, about the territories that had built the hegemonic political center in the early sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, this same critical diagnosis was partly incorporated by some Iberian

---

<sup>1</sup> Univeristy of Lisbon, Institute of Social Sciences, 1600-189, Lisbon, Portugal . *E-Mail*: nuno.monteiro@ics.ul.pt.

<sup>2</sup> Sousa, "Pombal, déspota ilustrado."

<sup>3</sup> "It is best observed in northwestern Europe: England, the Low Countries, and parts of France and Germany. The North American colonies share in these characteristics," De Vries, *The industrious revolution: consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present*, x.

<sup>4</sup> Poulot, *Les Lumières*, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Cárcel, *La leyenda negra: Historia y opinión*.

political thinkers and actors, inspiring countless reforms in the eighteenth century. And yet, the changes introduced as a result of these reforms did not normally serve to change the diagnoses made about Iberian countries, which were mostly recapitulated at the time of the Napoleonic wars in the early nineteenth century.

Although the histories of eighteenth-century Portugal and Spain differ from one another in many respects, the inclusion of the Catholic Iberian Peninsula (without regard for the diverse natures of each monarchy) under the general heading of Enlightened Europe has been questioned by many historiographers. It would therefore seem normal, from an intellectual viewpoint, for these political spaces to be included in the problematics of the Europe of the Ancien Régime. This is, however, frequently not the case. Significantly, in the recent Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Régime, edited by the renowned historian William Doyle, the benchmark territory is naturally France, but a part of the book is dedicated to discussing “how far other countries beside France had recognizable Anciens Régimes.”<sup>6</sup> The chosen geography does, however, end up being quite funny: “In its sheer heterogeneous variety, the Holy Roman Empire offers multiple areas for comparison. It has also been plausibly suggested that Great Britain in the ‘long’ eighteenth century, not to mention its North American colonies, had more in common with the French prototype than used to be thought credible.”<sup>7</sup> It may be asked whether these territories were chosen on the basis of some intellectual criterion or only due to the area of interests of the network of Anglo-American historians who have devoted themselves to the study of the French Revolution. By way of compensation, the history of the Iberian Peninsula in the eighteenth century is fairly well represented in other volumes from the same series, in particular, in the volume dedicated to the history of Latin America.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, whether included in the history of Europe or that of Latin America, by far the most frequently mentioned personality in Portuguese history continues to be the Marquis of Pombal. In fact, in many cases, he is the only person referred to in the international bibliography on the period and one of the few to emerge from anonymity after the great figures of the imperial expansion in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. It was already like this in the times when this

---

<sup>6</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Regime*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Doyle, *The Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Régime*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz, Stuart B., «The Historiography of Early Modern Brazil», in Moya, *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History*.

character embodied the royal power in Portugal,<sup>9</sup> and, with only a few rare exceptions, he has never been out of the spotlight since then.

*Pombal, Paradox of the Enlightenment*, the book that I have been asked to comment on, was published for the first time in its English edition in 1995, later published in Brazil in 1996, and in a Portuguese edition in 2001, which was a different translation from that of the Brazilian edition. Besides a number of additions and bibliographical updates, the subtitle was suppressed in the Portuguese edition, so that its title was just simply “The Marquis of Pombal.” The author, Kenneth Robert Maxwell (b. 1941), is a well-known British historian specializing in Iberian-American topics and themes from international relations who was, for a long time, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and later a visiting professor at Harvard University.

The English version of the book is frequently quoted. While Pombal and the time that he served in government are frequently the only reference to be found to Portugal in works written in English about the eighteenth century, Maxwell’s book is, as a general rule, the one that is most commonly quoted. Moreover, if we take into consideration the academic references made in general on the most frequently visited websites, it is also the most widely quoted book written by its author. But this is not all. Written seventeen years ago, it is still the most recent major biography of Pombal. And the previous one was published over thirty years ago! Or, in other words, no one else has ventured to write another biography of this kind. All that has been published is a biography in 2006 about Dom José, the king whom Pombal served, which is not exactly the same thing;<sup>10</sup> even so, this work inevitably contained a discussion of the figure of the minister himself.<sup>11</sup>

But it is not only for these reasons that Maxwell’s book is noteworthy. The author makes a considerable effort to use the Portuguese bibliography on the theme, comparing it with his own findings from documentary research, and seeking to insert Portuguese history into the context of a more general history. Although, for various reasons, Maxwell has become interested in other periods of Portuguese history, including the contemporary period, the fact remains that his earlier attention was directed above all to the subject of Brazil. He published some articles on this subject, most notably the one that he wrote in 1968 on “Pombal and the Nationalization of the

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Venturi, *The End of the Old Régime in Europe, 1776-1789. I: The Great States of the West*, 200-236.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Monteiro, *D. José. Na sombra de Pombal*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hespanha, “A note on two recent books on the patterns of Portuguese politics in the 18th century”; Subtil, “The Evidence of Pombalism: Reality or Pervasive Clichés?”; Monteiro, “The Patterns of Portuguese Politics in the 18th Century or the Shadow of Pombal. A Reply to António Manuel Hespanha.”

Luso-Brazilian Economy,”<sup>12</sup> and his major work, published in 1973, was *Conflicts and Conspiracies: Brazil and Portugal 1750–1808*,<sup>13</sup> generally considered to be a seminal work on eighteenth-century Brazil, and, in particular, on the region of Minas Gerais. In his contribution—with the same title as his later book—to Hamish Scott’s remarkable 1990 collection of essays on *Enlightened Absolutism*<sup>14</sup>, he had already announced the biography, published shortly afterward with the support of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.<sup>15</sup> In fact, many of his subsequent ideas and themes were already outlined in this essay.

In order to study the reception and impact that Maxwell’s book had, the first reviews are highly significant, initially, because they were written by prominent Brazilian, English, and Portuguese historians, and later because they immediately diagnosed the great themes that the book opened up for discussion. Laura de Mello e Souza, a professor at the University of São Paulo and a specialist in the history of Minas Gerais, published one of the first reviews as early as 1995. She states that “the book is simple and unpretentious, not seeking to be anything other than a good guide, written in English, for those who are interested in the period.” Stressing that it “is very well written,” she notes that “it is perhaps not very interpretive or innovative,” when compared with the author’s previous works. And she summarizes the biography of Pombal as follows: “profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment, he sponsored the reform of the University of Coimbra, created the College of the Nobles, rebuilt Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake, brought the Court of the Inquisition under state control; despotic, he expelled the Jesuits from Portugal, dismantled the old nobility, sentenced some of its more illustrious members by means of an absurd trial and tortured them in public, in one of the most terrible and bloody spectacles ever seen in Europe at that time.” Stressing the importance attributed to Brazil, she also accepted what is one of the book’s central ideas: the Portugal of Pombal as described by Maxwell would undermine the “certainty . . . that the Enlightenment and Constitutionalism came hand in hand.”<sup>16</sup> The other reviews did not repeat this equation so unreservedly.

Derek Beales published a very laudatory review of the book in the *New York Review of Books* in 1996. In fact, he wrote a magnificent summary of the book. He underlined that Maxwell “is entirely right to argue that enlightenment and despotism can, up to a point and with

---

<sup>12</sup> Maxwell, “Pombal and the Nationalization of the Luso-Brazilian Economy.”

<sup>13</sup> Maxwell, *Conflicts and Conspiracies: Brazil and Portugal 1750–1808*.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Scott, “Introduction: The Problem of Enlightened Absolutism”

<sup>15</sup> Maxwell, “Pombal: the Paradox of Enlightenment and Despotism.”

<sup>16</sup> Sousa, “Pombal, despota ilustrado.”, 145-146.

a certain definition of despotism, be compatible.”<sup>17</sup> But he added: “Yet Pombal does not fit perfectly into the eighteenth-century enlightened despotism. An enlightened despot would be despotic in the sense of possessing complete power, but he would exercise it according to Enlightened principles, which, varied though they could be in many matters, almost always included respect for laws and a refusal to seek personal profit. This was not true of Pombal.”<sup>18</sup>

More or less around the same time, Jorge Pedreira published his review of the book, which, generally speaking, was full of praise: “the recent work of Kenneth Maxwell on the Age of Pombal is undoubtedly the reliable study in the English language which had long been missing.” But his objections were also quite drastic. The “conflict between despotic means and enlightened objectives” highlighted by Maxwell<sup>19</sup>, merited Pedreira’s greatest reservations: in his view, “the paradox which gives the title to the book seems rather a rhetorical artifice.” Above all, he insisted on characterizing Pombal’s economic thought as mercantilist (and not “enlightened Iberian economic nationalist”, as Maxwell claimed<sup>20</sup>), but he also saw it as a form of censorship, in its aim of supervising the Church, based on the fact that the “*raison d’état*” was “the most valued principle” of Pombaline thought. His conclusion was decidedly limitative: “the paradox may simply lie in the fact that the government of Pombal should be classified under the Enlightenment.”<sup>21</sup>

In the period immediately after the book’s publication, a much more critical review was published by the prominent Canadian historian David Higgs. He states in the *Portuguese Studies Review* that “the lack of originality either in research or interpretation is the underlying weakness of this attractively illustrated book,”<sup>22</sup> discussing various partial aspects of the work.

I do not wish to provide a detailed assessment of the book but only to make some very brief remarks. The more strictly biographical data are brought forward and constitute almost the entire opening chapter. Moreover, little attention is given to either the period before Pombal’s rise to power or to his rivalry with Alexandre Gusmão. The internal aspects of Portuguese history are usually not discussed very much. The bulk of the book is devoted to the external politics of Pombal, in particular where this relates to Brazil, relations with England, and economic policies.

---

<sup>17</sup> Beales, “The Enlightened Despot.”, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Beales, “The Enlightened Despot.”, 34..

<sup>19</sup> Maxwell, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Maxwell, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Pedreira, “*Pombal, Paradox of the Enlightenment* by Kenneth Maxwell.”, 215-216.

<sup>22</sup> Higgs, “Kenneth Maxwell, 1995, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.”

The author relies primarily on the literature on the subject, but the information given is fairly complete, except for the absence of the work of Silva Dias. I would highlight as highly positive aspects the fact that Maxwell refuses to see Pombal as an opponent of the Jesuits before his rise to power, as well as the great prominence that is given to the propaganda that Pombal used in order to publicize his actions abroad. His central idea is still that “the story of Pombal’s administration is . . . an important antidote to the overly linear and progressive view of the role of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Europe and the exercise of state power.”<sup>23</sup> And this, after all, is the book’s most controversial point.

Outside Portugal, and continuing to quote almost exclusively from Maxwell’s book,<sup>24</sup> historians are still divided today about its subject matter, just as they were when the book was first published. To a large extent, their differences have nothing to do with Sebastião José de Carvalho (1699–1782, made Marquis of Pombal in 1770), but with what they mean by the Enlightenment. This is, after all, the central question. What is discussed, therefore, is not so much Pombal himself, what he did, or what he wrote, but more what each author understands by the Enlightenment. Thus, based on the same information, we can reach completely opposite conclusions. Evidently, the examples that are invoked are among the most significant.

The *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* is certainly one of the main works of reference published in the last decade. In the entry dedicated to Pombal (in which Maxwell’s work is the only recent bibliography referred to), Christopher Storrs states: “it is difficult to regard him as truly enlightened, particularly in view of his intolerance of opposition and his harsh treatment of his critics.”<sup>25</sup> In turn, in the overview that he provides of the work as a whole, Jonathan Israel stresses that “the Enlightenment conceived as a movement of ideas appears to be not just firmly in retreat and increasingly under siege but also fragmenting into disparate remnants with no coherent overall profile.” But he nonetheless has his own opinions about this subject and about Pombal himself. On the same book by Kenneth Maxwell, Israel wrote that “for all its anticlericalism, secularism, and willingness to emasculate the Inquisition, the officially sanctioned ‘enlightenment’ carried through in Portugal and Brazil by the Marquis of Pombal, the powerful chief minister of the crown who virtually ruled Portugal between 1750 and 1777, was not in any meaningful sense ‘enlightened.’ . . . Pombal’s Enlightenment . . . was primarily a mechanism for enhancing autocracy at the expense of individual liberty and especially an

---

<sup>23</sup> Maxwell, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment*, 161.

<sup>24</sup> Cf., for example, Vazquez, Lydia, “Espanne et Portugal.”

<sup>25</sup> Storrs, “Pombal.”

apparatus for crushing opposition, suppressing criticism, and furthering colonial economic exploitation as well as intensifying book censorship and consolidating personal control and profit.”<sup>26</sup>

Tim Blanning’s book *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648–1815* has been considered a benchmark about the period that it covers. Although not directly quoting Maxwell, he wrote in an opposite sense: “Once one expands one’s field of vision to embrace this wider constituency of policy-makers, however, the influence of the Enlightenment is next to impossible to deny. The achievements of the Marquis of Pombal (1699–1782) in Portugal as first minister to Joseph I (1750–77) provide an excellent example.”<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to find more contradictory statements than these about the same subject matter.

What has been written about Pombal based on Maxwell’s writing largely depends, therefore, on what is understood by the Enlightenment, whether it is considered that there was just one Enlightenment, or several, and how these are defined. For some, “the Enlightenment’s conception of the progress of society was intimately connected to a novel view of how men of letters should seek influence over it, by appealing to public opinion rather than to rulers and their ministers.”<sup>28</sup> According to this conception, Pombal cannot be covered by this definition, although the same cannot be said about Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho, the later minister, who claimed to have inherited a part of his legacy.

In order to write the political and intellectual history of eighteenth-century Iberian Europe, which so indelibly marked great swathes of the planet at the beginning of the following century, as part of a global history, perhaps the most interesting aspect is not to spend time discussing to what extent it was or was not “Enlightened.” It is not a question of ignoring the important role played by politics and diplomacy or the influences of intellectual models drawn from other territories. And much less of projecting nationalist and integrationist images of Iberian histories. Nor even of discussing the existence of a Catholic Enlightenment, although it is undeniable that there existed specific channels for its circulation in ecclesiastic anti-Jesuit circles<sup>29</sup>.

The most consistent alternative seems to be to discuss the specific forms existing for political communication and the circulation of ideas in the eighteenth-century Iberian monarchies, and the concrete scenarios in which they took place. Based on the premise that these

---

<sup>26</sup> Israel, “Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?”

<sup>27</sup> Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory. Europe 1648–1815*, 294.

<sup>28</sup> Robertson, *The Case for The Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760 (Ideas in Context)*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, *Portugal and Rome c. 1748-1830*.

forms had a specifically pluricontinental and Catholic dimension, and taking into account their diverse range of contexts in comparison with other models, such as those of the British monarchy and its colonial territories (which did not, in fact, serve as models for practically anybody in the early eighteenth century), basically this is what various historiographies have begun to do. These will be some of the requirements needed for the writing of a global history that does not assume from the outset that we already know everything there is to say about the subject.



## References

- Beales, Derek. "The Enlightened Despot." Review of *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment* by Kenneth Maxwell. *The New York Review of Books*, 18 April 1996.
- Blanning, Tim C. W. *The Pursuit of Glory. Europe 1648–1815*. New York: Penguin, 2007.
- De Vries, Jan. *The industrious revolution: consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Doyle, William, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of the Ancien Régime*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Cárcel, Ricardo, Garcia. *La leyenda negra: Historia y opinión*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1998.
- Hespanha, António Manuel. "A note on two recent books on the patterns of Portuguese politics in the 18th century." *E-Journal of Portuguese History* 5, no. 2 (2007). [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese\\_Brazilian\\_Studies/ejph/html/issue10/html/ahespanha\\_main.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/html/issue10/html/ahespanha_main.html)
- Higgs, David. "Kenneth Maxwell, 1995, *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press." *Portuguese Studies Review* 4, no. 2 (1996): 106–8.
- Israel, Jonathan. "Enlightenment! Which Enlightenment?" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 3 (2006): 523–45.
- Maxwell, Kenneth. "Pombal and the Nationalization of the Luso-Brazilian Economy." *Hispano-American Historical Review* 67 (1967): 608–31.
- Maxwell, Kenneth. *Conflicts and Conspiracies: Brazil and Portugal 1750–1808*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Maxwell, Kenneth *A devassa da devassa: A inconfidência mineira: Brasil e Portugal 1750–1808*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 1978.
- Maxwell, Kenneth "Pombal: the Paradox of Enlightenment and Despotism." In *Enlightened Absolutism. Reform and Reformers in Later Eighteenth-Century Europe*, edited by H. M. Scott. London: Macmillan, 1990: 75-118.
- Maxwell, Kenneth. *Pombal: Paradox of the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Maxwell, Kenneth. *O Marquês de Pombal*. Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 2001.
- Miller, Samuel J., *Portugal and Rome c. 1748-1830. An Aspect of the Catholic Enlightenment*. Roma: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1978.
- Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo, *D. José. Na sombra de Pombal*. Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 2006.
- Monteiro, Nuno Gonçalo, "The Patterns of Portuguese Politics in the 18th Century or the Shadow of Pombal: A Reply to António Manuel Hespanha." *E-Journal of Portuguese History* 5, no. 2 (2007). [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese\\_Brazilian\\_Studies/ejph/html/issue10/html/nmonteiro\\_main.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/html/issue10/html/nmonteiro_main.html).
- Pedreira, Jorge M. "Pombal, Paradox of the Enlightenment by Kenneth Maxwell." *Portuguese Studies* 12 (1996): 213–16.
- Poulot, Dominique. *Les Lumières*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000.
- Robertson, John. *The Case for The Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760 (Ideas in Context)*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Schwartz, Stuart B., «The Historiography of Early Modern Brazil», in Moya, Jose C., ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.: 98-152.
- Scott, H. M., «Introduction: The Problem of Enlightened Absolutism», In *Enlightened Absolutism. Reform and Reformers in Later Eighteenth-Century Europe*, edited by H. M. Scott. London: Macmillan, 1990: 1-35.
- Sousa, Laura de Mello e. "Pombal, déspota ilustrado." *Folha de São Paulo*, 8 May 1995.

- Storrs, Christopher “Pombal”. In *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, 4 vols., edited by Alan Charles Kors (editor-in-chief), Roger L. Emerson, Lynn Hunt, Anthony J. La Vopa, Jacques Le Brun, Jeremy D. Popkin, C. Bradley Thomson, Ruth Whelan, and Gordon S. Wood. New York: Oxford University Press. (2003): 323.
- Subtil, José, “The Evidence of Pombalism: Reality or Pervasive Clichés?”, *E-Journal of Portuguese History* 5, no. 2 (2007).[http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese\\_Brazilian\\_Studies/ejph/html/issue10/html/nmonteiro\\_main.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/ejph/html/issue10/html/nmonteiro_main.html).
- Vazquez, Lydia. “Espagne et Portugal.” In *Dictionnaire européen des Lumières*, edited by Michel Delon. Paris: Presses Universaires de France, 1997: 480-493.
- Venturi, Franco. *The End of the Old Régime in Europe, 1776–1789. I: The Great States of the West*, 2nd edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1991).