

# THE DOUBLE DRAMA OF ERNESTO MELO ANTUNES'

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At the Colloquium on Freedom and Civic Coherence: The Example of Ernesto Melo Antunes in Portuguese Contemporary History, which took place at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon in November 2009, I commented on the paper presented by Maria Inácia Rezola and noted that her excellent historiographic analysis of Melo Antunes' role in the Portuguese Revolution was a prelude for a first rate biography and that it was high time such a biography was written. Three years later, the biography has been published by Editora Âncora; it is of course a political biography.

The author did not know Melo Antunes personally and, in this case, the temporal and even affective distance prove an asset as they permit a more objective analysis. The lack of a personal interview with Melo Antunes has been overcome by drawing on the interviews he granted during his lifetime; the following interviews stand out in particular: with Maria Manuela Cruzeiro for the 25th April Documentation Centre; with Maria João Avilez for the Público newspaper; and with Fátima Campos for RTP television. In addition, the author had access to Melo Antunes' personal archives which are deposited in the Torre do Tombo and were made available by Fernando Melo Antunes.

MARIA INÁCIA REZOLA  
**Ernesto Melo  
Antunes,  
uma biografia  
política.**

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The author's in-depth knowledge of the history of the 25th April Revolution, of PREC and of the Revolutionary Council are, in fact, of greater importance than personal acquaintance, which the circumstances of life never permitted. It is this knowledge that makes the author particularly qualified for a work of such dimension and scope, even though the biography obviously spans the period from before 1974 and beyond 1976.

In fact, the historical biography is a historiographic genre that has regained strength in the last twenty five years and

become increasingly refined. It requires a dialectical interaction between the context of the era and the subject of the biography and it cannot be reduced simply to a chronological report of the facts of a life or limit itself to passively following the subject's narratives about him/herself or those of his/her contemporaries, no matter how important these are. The historian must complete these and even enhance them with new data and interpretations collected from the different sources: diverse archives, the press of the era and interviews with relevant participants in the historical transformations in which the subject of the biography played a leading role. Moreover, when the biographer is constructing the narrative, at the formal level it is necessary to be able to separate the essential from secondary information so as avoid going into excessive details that hamper the desirable fluency. It is also necessary to articulate the chronological thread with the thematic construction around the main dimensions of the subject's interventions, which sometimes entails advancing and retreating in time.

In doing this, the biographer should always strive to adopt a discursive style that is both rigorous and communicative, and this is no insignificant challenge. Another such challenge is finding the right balance between critical distance and empathetic intuition, else the biography may take the shape of a hagiography...

I finished reading Maria Inácia Rezola's book with the feeling that she was indeed up to the many difficult challenges that face the historian-biographer.

## **FROM MILITARY OFFICER, OPPOSITION MEMBER AND MAN OF CULTURE TO MFA REVOLUTIONARY**

The structure and content of the book are of course based on the different dimensions of Ernesto Melo Antunes' personality and interventions and these are interwoven throughout the biographical narrative.

The first part of the book covers the period up to 25th April 1974 and focuses on the military officer and member of the opposition, man of culture and MFA revolutionary. Here, the author presents Melo Antunes, part of the 1960s generation, passionate about the authors and works typically revered by this generation, attracted by existentialists and by Gramsci and Rocard Neo Marxism, a man who devoured novels and poetry, was in love with classical music and had a multiplicity of cultural interests. This period starts with his time at the Army School, where Melo Antunes emerged as an *avis rara* compared to others at the school. But he is also the Melo Antunes who, from a very young age, sought to reconcile militant opposition to the regime with a full military career because he also firmly believed from early on that the Army was key to the change required in Portuguese society. He expressed this clearly when he spoke to the Cooperative of Studies and Documentation in 1970 at the invitation of Francisco Salgado Zenha, as reported by a PIDE/DGS agent. In fact, it is worth noting here that the archives of the political police are a valuable source to accompany his activity for the opposition in the Azores where his candidacy for the Democratic Electoral Commission (CDE) in the 1969 elections

was rejected by the military hierarchy in what was blatant discrimination against the military candidates of the National Union. But this is also the period of the three commissions Melo Antunes served in Angola between 1963 and 1973, where he earned the praise and deep admiration of the men under his command. António Lobo Antunes testifies to this in the splendid preface he wrote for this book: “Contrary to what many believed, Ernesto was not a uniformed civilian: he was deeply military... in the sense of servitude, camaraderie and loyalty. In Angola, Melo Antunes was loved and respected.” Also for the extreme courage he demonstrated on the front lines of combat in particularly dangerous areas. This does not mean that he did not experience and confess to the trauma of feeling he was fighting on the wrong side, a trauma that was only overcome by the above-mentioned conviction that the revolution originates from within ...

Ernesto Melo Antunes made his cautious approximation to the Movement of Captains step by step. It was only in mid February 1974 that he set his doubts aside and became fully engaged; he made a point of transmitting this decision to me and Sotomayor Cardia at a meeting he requested at the editorial office of the *Seara Nova* journal. This was when he became involved in the drafting of the MFA programme (inspiration of the opposition experience), after the Cascais document (5th March 1974).

After 25th April 1974, Melo Antunes’ intervention as an MFA revolutionary and political strategist intensified. Firstly, in the immediate aftermath of the 25 April revo-

lution in the scope of the MFA/Coordinating Commission; as Minister without Portfolio in the II Provisional Government after Spínola opposed his appointment as Prime Minister; and in the III Provisional Government when he stood out for his presentation of the Economic and Social Policy Programme (PPES). In this period, it is important to stress his reservations about the MFA/Parties Pact, which he accepted as “the lesser of evils”, and the defence of the elections for the Constituent Assembly, opposing the blank vote.

After the elections for the Constituent Assembly (25th April 1975), he expressed similar reservations about MFA’s Political Action Plan (PAP), in which it is defined as a “movement for the liberation of the Portuguese people” (“I had nothing to do with the PAP», p. 299). This was followed by the drafting of the Document of the Nine (see below the Socialist ideologue model), the approximation to PS and the question of leadership of the resistance to *Gonçalvism*: who created the conditions for the leadership of whom? He accused Mário Soares of believing “he and PS were responsible for everything of importance that had happened” and did not hesitate in saying that “what happened in summer 1975 was driven by the so-called Group of Nine much more than by anyone else” (opinion also expressed in the Silva Lopes interview). At this point, the biographer assumes a critical distance and notes the importance of putting Mário Soares’ and Melo Antunes’ interpretations into perspective: “more than attributing a cause-effect relationship to these two processes («Socialist challenge-rupture of the nine)

one should refer to the development of two mutually reinforcing parallel projects” (p. 327).

Also of note in this period we find Melo Antunes’ confrontation with Vasco Gonçalves at the Tancos Assembly; his role in the attempt to form the Fabian Government; his opposition to the appointment of Pinheiro de Azevedo as Prime Minister, but also his role as mediator (together with Mário Soares) in the formation of the VI Provisional Government; the return to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (see foreign policy below); and, finally, the events of 25th November (opposing a retreat to the North and the self-suspension of the VI Provisional Government, but backtracking; meeting with Álvaro Cunhal at his own initiative; his declaration to RTP on 26 November defending the need to keep PCP in the revolution and the reactions). After the 25th November crisis, Melo Antunes was a key figure in some of the debates on the revision of the MFA-Parties Pact (for example, assuring that the Revolutionary Council (CR) would act as the Constitutional Court by means of the Constitutional Committee); he participated actively in the debate on the presidential candidacy when he supported Eanes (who was sensitive to his support), despite being in a position himself to run as the MFA candidate (cf. Eanes: “he was the one that was best placed to be candidate”).

Having revisited the *Processo Revolucionário em Curso* (PREC) (Ongoing Revolutionary Process) through the role played by Melo Antunes, the political strategist remained active and involved. He was President of the Constitutional Commission (his out-

standing role was acknowledged from various quarters), special advisor to the President of the Republic, Ramalho Eanes, within the CR, and an attentive and critical voice on the progress of Portugal’s young democracy. This was the time of his involvement in the institutional warfare between the Presidency of the Republic and the AD Government but also when he took his position on the 1982 constitutional revision, minimising the removal of the word socialism from Article 2 of the Constitution, and welcoming the creation of the Constitutional Court and the Council of State. When the Revolutionary Council was disbanded (1982), Melo Antunes moved to the Council of State where he remained until the election of Mário Soares as President of the Republic. The following are among his most noteworthy interventions in this decade: his support for the dissolution of the Assembly of the Republic counter to the opinion of the Council of State (1983); participation in PRD meetings and preparatory documents; support for the dissolution of the Assembly of the Republic following Mário Soares’ resignation from the Central Bloc Government; his support of Francisco Salgado Zenha rather than Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo in the 1986 presidential elections.

Finally, in the 1990s, Melo Antunes joined PS, then led by Jorge Sampaio, after the loss in the 1991 election (“manifestation of indignation and revolt to save what could be saved of the Socialist idea”, according to Jorge Sampaio); he was a member of the Honorary Committee for Mário Soares’ candidacy for a second term as President of the Republic, and, again,

of the Council of State (1996); he supported Alegre's motion at the PS Congress in 1999.

### **THE IDEOLOGUE**

Another key dimension of Ernesto Melo Antunes' profile is that of the ideologue who defined a model of society conceived on the basis of his cultural background in conjunction with his experience of political intervention throughout the PREC; one in search of a third way between bureaucratic collectivist socialism and neoliberal social democracy (influenced by PSU/Rocard and Gramsci Euro-communism), which granted the State a regulatory role without eliminating the market.

Melo Antunes played a decisive role in the drafting of the Economic and Social Policy Programme (PPES, December 1974-February 1975), working with an outstanding team (Rui Vilar, Silva Lopes, Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo); the decision not to nationalise private banking and to avoid State capitalism with the central direction of the economy led to the souring of relations with PCP and *Gonçálvism* (they accused him of being reactionary and an entrenched social democrat). Among the testimonies the author collected on this matter, those by Diogo Freitas do Amaral and Silva Lopes stand out; they state that the evolution of our economy would have been much better if the PPES had not been superseded by the nationalisations triggered by the events of 11th March.

Finally in this respect, mention must be made of the Document of the Nine, a national project for transition to a socialism based on pluralist representative

democracy that should take effect gradually and peacefully at a pace that was in line with the Portuguese social reality; it would be directed by the MFA, seen not so much as a revolutionary vanguard but as a catalyst and guarantor of this transformation project for Portuguese society. The proposal of the nine was presented as an alternative to the Guideline Document of the People-MFA Alliance, which was understood as defending a socialism based on popular and anti-democratic power; however, parties that had been legitimately elected expressed reservations and were suspicious of a supra-party military authority with purely revolutionary legitimacy setting itself up as the bearer of its own and autonomous project; for the socialists, such a conception came close to naivety.

### **THE MAIN ACTOR OF DECOLONISATION**

This is the third dimension of Melo Antunes' political intervention that Maria Inácia Rezola analyses in detail. From his immediate opposition to Spínola's federalist project to the very important role he played in the decolonisation of Angola. Special focus is given to his heading up the negotiations that led to the Alvor Accord and, after its failure on the ground, his assuming responsibility for not having foreseen the struggle for power between the three liberation movements. Maria Inácia Rezola closely follows Melo Antunes' desperate efforts to obtain an understanding between the three liberation movements and to avoid the exodus of the settlers, which in fact earned the praise of Almeida Santos. Efforts that did not stop him criticising MPLA for its dependence

on the USSR and that even made him encourage this movement's approximation to UNITA in order to ward off FNLA - a plan that only failed because of UNITA and pressure exerted by North America. Special attention is given to his argument to justify the need for the Portuguese State's rapid recognition of the MPLA government after the declaration of independence on 11th November 1975. An in-depth analysis is also made of the controversy of decolonisation triggered by the well known article written by António José Saraiva in the *Diário de Notícias* in January 1979, in which Melo Antunes is the target of brutal attacks. Throughout the controversy, Melo Antunes acknowledged mistakes - some of which were inevitable, others that arose due to the complexity of the PREC, and others due to human shortcomings - and he assumed his share of the responsibility (cf. interview with the *Expresso* on 17 February 1999). And he emphasised that "if a situation evolved in which the communist camp was favoured, it was against our will". However, according to Melo Antunes, decolonisation was not simply what could be done under the circumstances, as many began to say, but what had to be done; it was a historical obligation. This did not stop him recognising that it was a tragedy. Just as colonisation was a tragedy (cf. interview with RTP on 24th April 1999).

#### **CRAFTSMAN OF PORTUGUESE FOREIGN POLICY AND DIPLOMACY**

Minister of Foreign Affairs in the IV and VI Provisional Governments (year and a half), this is an area in which history did not do Melo Antunes justice even though

he was of crucial importance. He fought for a new vision for Portugal's place in the world; he presented it as a bridge between Europe and the Third World with priority for the Mediterranean (a naive notion according to Kissinger), that he shared with Jorge Sampaio and ex-MES (Movimento de Esquerda Socialista). He also defended: a) national independence in a world divided between two blocs of super-powers, in search of a third way and in the scope of a united Europe that counterbalanced the two blocs; b) an approximation to non-aligned countries without ever calling NATO into question, a standpoint Kissinger considered somewhat contradictory; c) the importance of diversifying external relations (Third World, East Europe, China); d) the importance of Western Europe and EEC support for the consolidation of Portuguese democracy, with praise for the role played by Mário Soares in the Socialist International (SI); e) a new and more just international order.

His foreign policy interventions were the butt of intense criticisms, notably in the context of the institutional warfare between Belém and São Bento (due to his role as Eanes' special envoy or the development of his own initiatives), notably by the right wing and Atlanticist sectors of PS.

His international career came about as a natural consequence of his experience as Minister of Foreign Affairs; special note here goes to his candidacy to Deputy Secretary General of the UN for Science and Technology (annulled by Diogo Freitas do Amaral, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the AD Government), and his appointment to advisor and Deputy General Director/Head

of Cabinet of UNESCO by Amadeu M'Bow. On finishing this book, I confess I felt an even greater admiration for Melo Antunes and his role in history, despite some critical reservations I have made in the past of positions he took, notably on the role of MFA. This biography clearly highlights the double drama Ernesto Melo Antunes went through and that led so often to his being misunderstood and even hated:

- the historical drama of tardy decolonisation with all its violence and injustice;
- the ideological drama of a democratic socialism that was able to combine not only the representative democracy of the parties and of Parliament with participative democracy, but also the role of regulating and distributing the State's wealth with the market's role of boosting growth.

Before concluding, I wonder what Ernesto Melo Antunes would have said of Portugal today and the world in which we live, at so many levels, quite different from when he left us fourteen years ago. His death certainly saved him from all the madness

we see today, and which would undoubtedly have led him to search for suitable alternatives as he always did and as so many of his MFA comrades do today. But I also believe that, wherever his spirit is, he would not be able to resist smiling somewhat ironically at a world where the emerging countries of his beloved Third World deal the cards on the international stage, inverting the old positions vis-à-vis the First World countries.

It would be unforgivable to end this review without making reference to the extraordinary preface written by António Lobo Antunes, in which he gives us a picture in words, as only he can do, of the magnitude of Ernesto Melo Antunes' character:

«A profoundly kind man who, largely through his own fault, was often misunderstood. He possessed a great capacity for tolerance and a genuine love for mankind that his stern posture and the austerity of his ways concealed.»<sup>11</sup>

TRANSLATION BY: RACHEL EVANS

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## ENDNOTE

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