

References, Responsibilities and Reading: *A Época Pombalina*¹

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Let us open *A Época Pombalina*, by Francisco Calazans Falcon. The book is as long as its importance is vast.² It teaches more than its contents express. It points back to the man who developed it. Knowing this book then presupposes accounting for a generation of historians.

Here I am thinking of a certain historical sensibility that is encouraged because of either one's interest or one's capacity for understanding. In this essay, the issue of the authorship of Falcon will be disclosed. I will center my essay on the conclusion of *A Época Pombalina*, quoting some passages from it. I will try to avoid obvious commentaries regarding the transcribed excerpts, for I refuse to reiterate what the author has already said. I wish to maintain the author's passages in their formal dignity, so to speak. In order to achieve this I will not try to uncover what lies beyond the text. Rather, I will set myself the task of reading in an essay style, hoping the reader will accept the path I have chosen.

I read the conclusion imagining a kind of man who is strongly attached to principles and aims, with little possibility of adapting himself to external circumstances. I attempt to write of a moral imperative, the responsibility of understanding, and of synecdochal force in the organization of his discourse. I venture, however, to give necessary attention to excerpts of the author's work, analyzing them with some care. This entails the same sensation of loneliness that we feel in front of images that we watch fixedly, or rather, images that we do not see any more precisely because we stare at them.

My choice of the conclusion of Falcon's book may be justified to begin with by having admitted previously that the conclusion is the textual space in

which moral imperative finds its most perfect form. I refer, then, to the synthesized outline of the research. Finally, I will suggest a reading of the “silence of the author,” especially important if one remembers the acclaim given to Falcon’s work.

Throughout this study we have used as basic references Mercantilism and Enlightenment, both in theory and in practice, from a general European point of view, as well as from an Iberian point of view, specifically the Portuguese. What is it now possible to conclude, in order to complete the analysis of the Pombaline era vis-à-vis these references? (483)

Falcon builds up cognition of the conceptual entities of “Enlightenment” and “Mercantilism.” The empirical formulation demands the possession of language as an attribute in itself. We no longer possess these certainties. We no longer count on the possibilities that once were available. Nonetheless, the duty to reference is compulsory, for between writers and their discourse what is essential is exhaustive research. The naturalness of the meaning of the concepts exempts them from the absence that all discourse suggests.

Two conclusions appear to stand out in the first place: the mercantilist character that is revealed in both theory and practice, and the enlightened character, somewhat imprecise in theory yet undeniable in practice, even if we consider the limits from which it has developed. A Mercantilism of a classical mold, but adjusted to the Portuguese society that was out-of-phase, adequate for reforming absolutism, for which it served as an instrument to increase changes... Enlightenment in a peripheral country, for many years closed in upon itself, and in which the enlightened movement was, fatally, something from outside, ‘foreign.’ (483)

The required presence at the ambivalent moment of the conclusion in *A Época Pombalina* and the interpretative movement of knowledge force the discourse to position itself as its own audience and to be conscious of its own ideal reader. As the indeterminacy of the referent was inadmissible, so the pertinence of the question is metaphorically conventionalized to the value of the synecdoche. The text therefore concocts a synecdochical representation of the moral sensation that resides beside the text, i.e., the responsibility of understanding.

As a consequence, diversity of discourses, eclecticism of forms of thought, a redefinition of practices vis-à-vis a type of reality that yields but continues to resist. It is the theoretically inexplicable encounter of two phenomena that ought in principle to spurn each other, namely, Mercantilism and Enlightenment. However, here they are together, articulated throughout the entire Pombaline period. It is at the level of the State where this articulation is processed, from which is supervised the 'modern,' learned image which characterizes the practice of Pombaline governing. (483)

Falcon's book suggests a desire to know, but to know qualitatively: to render phenomena intelligible. And to wait, convinced of what you say as an articulate awareness that claims to know well. Does it know well? Or could it be the outcome that one would expect of knowledge? This is the synecdochical duty of realism: the description of that property of understanding, providing meanings and emotions that function genetically as a reiterative point for their own reference.

To be truthful, what these images hide is the actual process of secularization, that passage from transcendence to immanence in which we place ourselves right at the start of our journey. It is the slow and difficult establishment of society finally free... of institutions and forms of thinking which no longer correspond to its actual movement. In this way individualism declared itself, while a new humanism and a modern rationalism conquered key positions at the level of ideologies. Seen through this perspective, with the most profound thoughts situated in this manner, the Pombaline period casts off its traditional Pombaline image—now, finally, a problem which no longer makes sense. (483)

This is justifiable. The author demonstrates a certain degree of impatience with the question that he had earlier considered. He escapes from historiographic premises without speculative fantasy. How can a responsible discourse narrate the responsibility of its own understanding? In other words, how to mold "historical organicities" by meanings that are interpreted and maintain the agreed intention of concepts? Thus, to expose the bases of a complex period is to absorb in writing the place of the shelves within the organization of some library. The writing is thus a place of formative reaction to everything that escapes the force of an organic narrative, so to speak.

At the economic level, it may therefore be asked, what is the actual balance? Let us proceed step by step. First, we will focus on the relations between Mercantilism and commercial capital, both mercantilist dynamism and the capitalist weaknesses. An entire series of incentives were put into motion. (...) Second, the relations between Mercantilism and industrial capital are the focal point where certain opportunities of a conjectural kind are found, but where structural obstacles may persist... The proof of these assertions may be given by means of a third and final focus, namely, the relations between Mercantilism and the primitive accumulation of capital. (484)

The possibilities of change function in the synchronic description. It is all there, on a responsible basis. Evaluation makes reading the recognition of a text exactly as it is, aimed at producing a total presence, whose meaning is always the same. As history becomes an organic element of the logic of writing itself, so the act of returning to the past is made possible through the knowledge of the specialist. "Capital," "opportunities of a conjectural kind" and "structural obstacles" are clearly interrelated within the summarized network proposed by the historian.

Given the lack of anyone more determined than the author himself vis-à-vis his book, the origins of understanding turn the conclusion of the book into a synthesis. As such, it is no longer heritage viewed as a task, in which the authorial voice itself becomes capable of giving life to the responsibility of understanding.

What is the conclusion at the political and ideological levels? Through various discourses that make up the 'enlightened discourse,' an entire rhetoric is revealed which is created from the repeated reference to those themes that can be identified as typical hypotheses and assumptions of the European enlightened discourse of that time... It is a desire to feel 'up-to-date,' without accepting different opinions. Is eclecticism also present in discourse? Perhaps. (487)

As the author is the owner of all his research acts, the truth requires that he forget the meandering, because without this act of forgetting one cannot achieve anything truly authorial. Thus, the author needs to be capable of demonstrating justice to inheritance, because he must not recognize any more than a single law of the craftsmanship itself: writing the book. Moreover, the only possible justice is the responsible act of understanding

what justice is, which protects the present from the insoluble bygone idiosyncrasies that, in turn, poison all historical discourses. Discourse finds all it needs within itself, and allows itself to be seen. It is seen and remains tormented by the healthy disposition that it requires. Thus nothing should be neglected.

There is, thus, clarity that is diffused, and obscurities that persist. The historian cannot fail to see in enlightened practice as a whole, an enormous variety of positive points, actual conquests, although the hesitations, the negative aspects are not lacking... A rejected piece of criticism and a restricted and restricting collaboration led, in the end, to a reality of the reforms that preserve. (488)

The organic support of contrasts provides the author with the self-confidence of writing, that is, organizing history through the very book: *A Época Pombalina*. Above all, authorship derives its consolation from having felt the need of victimizing contents. Once something is written, in a committed awareness of understanding, and a conscientious pairing of conflicts is presented in writing, it forms a single whole, a juxtaposition of ideas searching for balanced phrases and words.

The xenophile is someone who has distanced himself, in mind and body, from his own society. Keeping a distance, he nevertheless tends to grow nearer, in the spirit of many reforms, to the followers of these reforms. There were 'xenophiles' within and beyond Portugal; therefore, the Enlightenment favored these xenophiles by justifying many of their cutting criticisms and reformist suggestions. However, at the same time, it harmed them even more in the eyes of those who considered themselves faithful to traditional values. (489-90)

It seems valid, if for no more than proverbial inconsequence, that certain final phrases of the few conclusions reached should propel the author beyond the limits of authorship. If the organic illusion of knowledge is to be maintained, it will be done so by rendering authorship as a systemic curse of the author. Falcon's authorial silence after having written his book is praiseworthy for its intellectual generosity. If his book prescribes the maxim of being obeyed, in order to understand his responsibility as a researcher, any later reading must necessarily recognize that the definitive author of *A Época Pombalina* will only achieve this authorship without the

assumption of authority—for only he who does not claim authority is, in fact, a real authority.

Given that any work of authorship is an aggression against responsibility, a reading ought to mirror the author's individual perception. If the "xenophile" is someone who distances himself, in thought and body, from his own society, maintaining himself at a distance, then intellectual generosity requires the same act regarding something already written. This is something that is explained when the reading turns itself into an act of knowledge. And this is at the exact moment in which the author's generous mind acquires a wider dimension, becoming, in this way, an act of detaching oneself from praise. After all, he could have opted for no more than acclaim by the academic world. If ideas when written down, however, become public, then what is read is no longer only the author's shadow, even if authorship remains.

It is clear that this detachment has fallen into disuse. It is well known that academic authors feel the need to control the readings that may be made of their books. This is the basic function of seminars, conferences and contemporary collective publications. For an intellectual such as Francisco Falcon, the unbroken silence of production, stemming from misgivings regarding his own knowledge (his open generosity for differences of interpretation), is the best proof we have of his comprehensive responsibility. Indeed, *A Época Pombalina* is what we may call a classic. And, to plagiarize Harold Bloom, "it stands on its own feet," without the support of editorial marketing and without the "help" of graduate students.

If it is in this way that I reach the end of this essay, I do so because I have learned with Falcon that history does not bypass language; rather, it occurs within language itself. This lesson contrasts Falcon's works with that of other scholars. Whoever reads *A Época Pombalina* is amazed by the research involved and becomes aware of the range of the work and the depth of the author's commitment. That is why, at the very moment of writing, I can suggest that without authors such as Francisco Falcon we would not have the drive to devote time and study to those things which appear no longer to exist.

Notes

¹ A literal translation of the title is *The Pombaline Era*, which refers to the period in the eighteenth century when, in Portugal and in Brazil, the Marquis of Pombal was responsible for a series of economic, administrative and educational reforms. (Translator's note)

² Falcon's work was begun in 1967 and completed in 1975. It was presented as a thesis to the Instituto de Ciências Humanas e Filosofia of the Universidade Federal Fluminense as an academic prerequisite for the Chair in the Modern History division of the History Department.

Work Cited

Falcon, Francisco Calazans. *A Época Pombalina*. 1982. 2nd ed. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1993.