

**David Justino, *Fontismo. Liberalismo numa Sociedade Iliberal*. Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2016, 471 pp.
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In very different cultural, political, institutional, social, and economic eras – and given the traditional Portuguese tendency of identifying large chronological time-spans with key names that fostered and came to symbolize them – the Marquis of Pombal, Fontes Pereira de Melo, and Oliveira Salazar may have been the three most relevant Portuguese historical figures over the last three hundred years. This is undoubtedly an oversimplification, because no leader rules alone, and the complexity of societies (even in the first case, before the coming of the contemporary age) calls for a historical analysis that is broader than the mere identification of a given time-span with a single biography. But the fact that the nation’s collective memory, common sense, and historical discourse have indeed recognized “Pombalism,” “Fontism” and “Salazarism” (notwithstanding their effectiveness and their liberal or anti-liberal nature) as major ideological and political projects is important enough not to be ignored. And some other “isms” might also be referred to, having been overlooked either because they existed during shorter periods of time, or because they are much more recent and thus still lack the temporal distance that will eventually filter some of them into the pages of future history books.

António Maria Fontes Pereira de Melo (1819-1887) was the most important nineteenth-century Portuguese politician – and also the inspiration, the symbol and the essence of an era, a project, an ideology, and all other words describing the period of the so-called “Fontism”. Fontism is a key study theme, given its central place in the consolidation of the Portuguese state and society throughout the period of monarchical constitutionalism, and because it corresponded to one of the longest and most important national growth cycles until the present day. Despite this, the bibliography on the times and events of the four decades (c. 1850-c. 1890) during which Fontes was, according to Ramalho Ortigão’s famous characterization, a synonym of “Regeneration” and the “only ruling principle” in Portugal is not greatly abundant. There are, of course, several works,

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and not only the ones produced in recent years, that cover some aspects of the Fontist era, namely the capitalist economy and the bourgeois society and their effects on growth and national backwardness or on the political and party system of the Regeneration period, and even a biography on Fontes Pereira de Melo, systematizing the most decisive deeds of his political work. This said, though, Fontism and the Regeneration are still less studied than other periods and themes before and after those central years (such as the liberal revolution and the political struggle of the first half of the nineteenth century, and the crisis of the monarchy from 1890 until 1910). This is why the academic community should praise David Justino's most recently published book, bearing the provocative title of *Fontismo. Liberalismo numa Sociedade Ilíbera* [*Fontism. Liberalism in an Illiberal Society*].

David Justino needs no formal presentation, either in Portuguese academic circles, where he has made himself a longstanding authority in the fields of sociology and economic history, or outside them, because of the various public and political offices that he has held – ranging from member of parliament and spokesperson of the Social Democratic Party to adviser to the Presidency, and from Minister of Education to President of the National Council of Education. His PhD thesis, written between 1983 and 1985, publicly presented in 1987, and published in 1988 under the title *A Formação do Espaço Económico Nacional. Portugal, 1810-1913* (2 vols.), was a groundbreaking quantitative and qualitative research about the country's economic, commercial, and financial structure, and about society's characteristics and atavisms throughout the nineteenth century. This time covering a shorter historical duration, his new book on Fontism actually stems from some unexplored leads and unanswered questions kept on hold since *A Formação do Espaço Económico Nacional* –chiefly those that are more closely related to sociology. The years went by, however, and (as is revealed in the opening pages of the book, as a sort of motivational departure) Justino's ministerial work allowed him to detect and witness clearly Fontist-like behavior in several very recent Portuguese Prime Ministers, so that all the different circumstances came together to carry a decade-long reflection on that theme, which is now published in this new work.

The book is not a biography of Fontes Pereira de Melo, nor is it a historical description of the Fontist accomplishments and their positive or negative impacts on the country's social and economic development. Its central goal is simply to “understand and explain the general context of political strategies and actions, and not their consequences;” in other words, it aims to discover “why some political options were adopted and not others, why priority was given to specific investments and on what grounds there came to

exist the conditions that would allow for the continuity, for at least four decades, of a project of social change identified, for better or for worse, with that peculiar name Fontism” (p. 15). One of the distinctive and most positive marks of the book is indeed how the word and the thing “Fontism” have been made to enter into dialogue and to interrelate with two other contemporary words and things: “Regeneration” and “Liberalism.” Deeming any “excessive personalization between Fontes and Fontism” (p. 30) to be reductionist, Justino seeks to demystify the idea that Fontism was an all too sudden and original project, in an all too sudden and original era, unleashed by Saldanha’s 1851 military pronouncement. Actually, the ideological ingredients of Fontism, and even some unsuccessful early attempts to foster “material” or “moral” improvements, date back to the first half of the century and to a wider and yet to be fully recognized process for the “reconfiguration of the liberal ideology,” which dominated the Portuguese (and other) agendas between 1820 and 1851. What was this reconfiguration? Simply put, it was the replacement of the founding theory of liberalism, centered around the conquest of liberty, laicism, and the constitutional principles of national sovereignty, with an entirely new version, one that was in tune with the challenges put forward by the new post-revolutionary international capitalism: to guarantee the material and moral improvement of established liberal societies, heralding “progress” as the guiding principle of political options and as the leitmotif of the cultural construction of modernity (p. 82). This popularization of the ideology of progress was thus a true pre-Fontism, or a Fontism *avant la lettre* – meaning that Fontism was nothing more than the name and the content given by the Regeneration period to the era of economic progress and social stability that had been pursued even before 1851, only to become a reality after the middle of the century.

In the book, the time context is always more important than the specifics of the man who gave his name to it. Fontism, as a temporal synonym of Regeneration, was the Portuguese name for the “Age of Capital” started in the 1850s. The book unfolds, offering contributions to understanding the period’s conceptual density and complexity. David Justino links or includes with Fontism (or even includes within it) all manifestations and outcomes of the above-mentioned “ideological reconfiguration”: “Liberty,” “order” and “progress,” this latter idea encompassing “belief,” “science” and “teleology,” all forging a holistic project of “civilization” which signified the triumph of a (possible) “modernity” in the best years of the Portuguese nineteenth century (pp. 39, 45-46). The introduction makes it clear what the theoretical angle of the book will be (a “historical sociology of ideas,” pp. 18-19), as well as its central goal (to study Fontism as a by-product of the

reconfiguration of the liberal ideology), and even its key working hypothesis (to explore how there was always a “difficult relationship between the liberal ideology and the illiberal culture of Portuguese nineteenth-century society,” p. 18). But only in the last pages of the text does the author provide his own full definition of the book’s keyword: “Fontism, as a cultural political project based on a liberal ideology reconfigured by the idea of progress, represents the first expression in Portuguese society of an imagined modernity striving to contravene traditional atavisms and to demystify the ever-present idea of decadence” (p. 455).

David Justino attaches great importance to the concept of “ideology,” exploring it through various authors of historical sociology and also through eighteenth and nineteenth-century liberal writings, leading him to diverge from some existing appreciations of Fontism that refer to its “de-ideologizing” character (pp. 30-33). But if Fontism was more a case of a *reconfiguration* of an ideology, rather than simply a *new* ideology, maybe the controversy is non-existent. The “de-ideologization” invoked by some studies on the Regeneration period does not mean the *absence* of ideology, but rather the reduction (beginning in 1851) of what had previously been felt (until the 1840s) and denounced as an excessively ideological, revolutionary and overly noisy burden shared by political agents, and the ensuing search for a more pragmatic, realistic, utilitarian and progressive political mood, craving much more concrete steps on the road of progress, rather than any impalpable rhetoric about liberty.

While Fontism was ideologically liberal and programmatically set on achieving progress, the public policies of material improvement were its most visible aspect and instrument of action. A superficial analysis of the work and times of Fontes Pereira de Melo could well remain fixed only on this aspect – and it was, in fact, this rather simplistic outline that Fontism’s prime critic, J. P. Oliveira Martins, bequeathed to posterity. In its entirety, David Justino’s book is also a critical dismantling of Martins’ reading, using new materials and interpretations to go into greater depth about two key aspects that some more recent historiography has also been echoing.

The first aspect is that public works were not merely a materialistic end in themselves, but rather a means of increasing the speed of circulation, multiplying commerce and the general exchange of goods and ideas, making society more integrated and further broadening the territorial spread of the State. A civilizational project of modernity is much more than just the mere counting of railroad kilometers, however much Fontes used to be portrayed (as seen in the image chosen for the book cover) as a sort of

walking and indomitable locomotive! The second aspect is that Fontes – a man of action, more than a prolific writer – did think about liberal development and actually sketched out an integrated and wide-ranging ideological project, based not only on “material improvements,” but *also* on “moral,” “social” and “intellectual” ones, because, without the latter, no progress could ever be solid and durable. That is why the old dichotomy between “materialism” and “idealism” (pp. 66-68), introduced by Alexandre Herculano, made official by Oliveira Martins, and then repeatedly echoed by all the political purists and the intelligentsia criticizing Fontes, actually obscures our full understanding of the latitude of the Fontist progress ... and also makes it more difficult to identify the many reasons, societal or cultural, why in the end, after four decades, it ultimately failed.

After a first chapter, in which the general aspects and goals that characterized Fontism are presented, there are a further six chapters explaining and developing the book’s argument, with the seventh and last one being a conclusive recapitulation that opens up new and previously uncharted research paths. Fontism and its surrounding context (namely its progressive potentialities in relation to the question of social barriers) can best be understood by dividing it into smaller and more specific segments. David Justino chose to do this by exploring five specific questions, which correspond to Chapters 2 to 6 of the book.

Chapter 2 is the least innovative one, though its theme should never be neglected. Re-quoting two of his previous works and reviewing selected literature about a longstanding historiographical controversy, the author recalls and explains one of the leading contradictions of the Fontist model: the fact that it was, in theory a free-trade model, but yet protectionist in practice and in its concrete customs policy. In the nineteenth century in Portugal, at a time when the State was not only beset with a chronic financial deficit, and thus permanently in need of further fiscal revenues, but also encumbered with an uncompetitive economic elite, and thus always dependent on the domestic market, any lifting of customs barriers – theoretically defensible in richer countries like England – would have been disastrous. That was the reason why the protectionist option grew, pragmatically, as a sheer necessity and as a reflection of the many limitations emanating from a society and from an economy in which openness and progress reduced, but did not entirely suppress, the lingering insufficiencies in structural competitiveness.

Resorting to literary sources – contemporary authors such as Almeida Garrett, Alexandre Herculano, Camilo Castelo Branco and Júlio Dinis – Chapter 3 deals with the

romantic criticism leveled against Fontism. Contrary to what occurred in other countries in the nineteenth century, Portuguese romanticism was neither an exacerbated nationalistic ideology nor an expression of a revolutionary anti-capitalism, but rather a manifestation of a critical conservatism in the face of what was seen as the exaggerated materialistic and rationalistic face of progress. As such, this criticism denounced its turbulent whirlpool, its seemingly irreversible dynamics, and the way that the Fontist modernity affected an idealized *pax rustica*... which was actually the cause of much social immobility. The writers who criticized Fontes were not pure reactionaries, though. A well-balanced form of material development was desirable: the question thus lay in the “moral” counterparts to that “material improvement.”

One could imagine that the above-mentioned protectionism was the economic translation of a widely disseminated and well-grounded nationalist discourse – all the more so since the romantic intelligentsia strove to delve into and teach the founding myths and defining ingredients of the Portuguese nation. As is shown in Chapter 4, despite the fact that Fontism coincided with a period that lay in between imperial cycles (after the loss of Brazil and before the African adventure at the end of the century) and that could have led to a potential nationalistic shock, nationalism was very much absent from the Fontist set of ideas (p. 205). The exploration of this argument in the book serves to characterize the social and cultural faces of Fontism. The nineteenth century was an era of deep-felt nationalism all over Europe, resulting from the furious pace with which nations and states were being (re)constructed through revolutions, wars, territorial conquests, unifications and border transformations. Furthermore, there existed, in many regions of the continent, communities that were divided by religion, language, race, space, history or tradition. By way of contrast, Portugal was an old and homogenous nation-state, geographically peripheral, politically irrelevant and unthreatened by nineteenth-century international conflicts. That is the reason why, throughout that century, there never were any large nationalistic shocks – at least in those decades separating the struggle against the French during the Napoleonic wars from the anger against the British resulting from the 1890 ultimatum. If there was a problem in Portugal, as David Justino suggests, it was not one of “national unity” but rather one of “backwardness in comparison with the development displayed by the majority of the European countries” (p. 209). And it was in fighting backwardness that Fontism could afford to be cosmopolitan, since the urgent challenge was to let the Portuguese nationality grow stronger and converge towards the concerted identity of those more prosperous nations. Only such progress and such Euro-enthusiastic

aspirations could serve as the instruments and driving forces that would oblige the real country to shed its most typical structural characteristic – civic indifference, anomie and alienation.

It is by repeatedly addressing questions from this angle that Justino explores what is hinted at in the second part of the book's title – namely that Fontismo was a *liberal* project based on, or thrust upon, an “*illiberal*” society. Illiberal does not mean absolutist, though the “Miguelist” reaction was a powerful impediment to the country's modernization during the first half of the nineteenth century. The illiberalism of the liberal society lay in its persistent illiteracy, in the meager skills and education of its human resources, in the large pockets of poverty and in the insurmountable dualism, or separation, between rural and urban areas (or, more precisely, between Lisbon and all the rest of the country), all problems that no elite generosity and good will could solve by itself, since it required mobilizing and integrating the nation's peripheries.

Chapter 5 focuses on the failure of what was then deemed a key instrument for unleashing “moral” or “social” improvements, awakening a sleeping nation and equipping it with the required tools for understanding progress and becoming a collaborative part in it. That instrument was the school, the educational system, which was flooded with rhetoric and was as grandiloquent as it was lacking in results. Fontismo was very much in tune with the “trilogy of purposes” (pp. 327-328) that underlay all nineteenth-century pedagogies: public instruction meant individual freedom, a new moral order, and thus a renewed sustainability for liberal regimes based upon a strong middle class. The problem was, however, that the available money was always insufficient to satisfy the political will and to implement the somewhat excessive array of educational reforms. Good intentions came up against a poor, rural and illiterate society, for whom education and schooling was an option that meant fewer ‘assets’ being put to work in the domestic and family-based economy.

Though real – and constituting a genuine blockage to the full success of Fontismo – civic indifference or alienation were not total. At the various key moments in the nineteenth century studied by David Justino in Chapter 6 (the last one already during the Regeneration period, in the early 1860s), local people rose up, sometimes resorting to violence, against the modernity that was invading their rural households and their family life. Even though it remained incomplete, Fontismo did, nonetheless, implement large-scale reforms – in the areas of taxation, land ownership, real estate, weights and measures, military recruitment, and administrative and judicial centralization – setting in motion a long and multi-layered process for the “reconstruction and territorialization of the State.”

And this endeavor affected the very core of the relationship between modernization, conflict and protest, naturally meeting with popular resistance, since it “aimed at the safekeeping of traditional rights and institutions, while at the same time promoting potential and ever greater intervention in the life of local communities” (p. 390).

These reactions, while partly countering the idea of total civic immobility at the local level, were not just outbursts prompted by some economic crisis, sudden crop shortage or hunger, but genuinely critical stances taken against progress. This should mean that progress was, in fact, happening and that the influx of Fontist reforms was indeed changing the country. Without listing the numerical results of the 1851-1890 growth cycle – which was not the author’s purpose in writing the book – David Justino does, however, demonstrate in Chapter 7, how these four decades were crucial and positive in terms of national change. It just happens that the change was not greater (in fact it was cut short in some of its expressions) because of the deeper country that it was aimed at. That is why the book’s closing thesis, which the author promises to further explore in a future publication, states that the Fontist progress was, after all, the unfolding of a “confined modernity” – which meant not debating its existence, but rather enquiring into the reasons why it became circumscribed to “some social niches” and was unable to attain a “national scale” (p. 459). This situation is as pertinent nowadays as it was historically, because it continues to resurface among the concerns of many politicians and analysts to this day: has the Portuguese problem always been, from the nineteenth century onwards, one of having good elites and a bad society? Did society remain “illiberal”, and in many ways isolated and backward in relation to the more cosmopolitan, enlightened and enterprising political center, because Fontism did not change it, or was Fontism unable to change it because society had always been, and continued to be, isolated and backward? And in the end, in 1890, did the Fontist model go bankrupt because of this severe social and cultural dualism or because the financial mechanisms of Portuguese growth collapsed? Here are some questions requiring a more in-depth future study of that particular civilizational and modernizing project called Fontism – looking at what it sought to be, what it was and what it was unable to achieve.

David Justino’s work, stemming from four decades of research into the Fontist era (and into the nineteenth century in Portugal as a whole), is thus a very important and (from now on) an essential contribution to this theme. The exploration of the roots and effects of what he calls the “illiberal society” will certainly be on the agenda of much future research. Regardless of the book’s undeniably great merits, it should, nonetheless, be said that it

might perhaps have been fruitful to focus on one particular aspect that is absent here: the biography of Fontes Pereira de Melo himself. It is true that the author works on the premise that Fontism is not reducible to the figure of Fontes. No ideology or project can ever be attributed to just one single person. But if the reconfiguration of the liberal ideology (whence the impetus came for progress, together with the search for its appropriate instruments) had already happened before and without Fontes Pereira de Melo, the fact remains that it was him, and his specific and individual way of interpreting progress and of implementing policies accordingly, that molded the Regeneration and gave his name to the era. Some (or many?) characteristics of “Fontism” would not have been the same without Fontes. And the dialectics or interaction between the milieu and the man are not to be forgotten.

All in all, the reader is faced with a book that is filled with rich and dense information, in which every aspect of Fontism is covered in a suitably critical fashion, shedding light on how this particular project was both the heir of a reconfigured, post-revolutionary liberalism and the major expression of a top-down modernizing era, transforming the country for the better, even if the country remained aloof to, and largely unaware of, the work that was done. And while it is necessarily a history book – specifically one of historical sociology – this large volume is also a critical introduction to problems, tendencies and characteristics (such as the chronic national deficits, the State’s lack of authority, the rigidity of public expenditure or the budgetary shortages) that still condition the present and the future of Portugal, in its attempts to preserve (or search for) liberty, order and progress.