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Mario Del Pero. “‘Which Chile, Allende?’ Henry Kissinger and the Portuguese revolution.”

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Review by **Luís Nuno Rodrigues**, ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon

The military coup of 25 April 1974 –the so-called Carnation Revolution– paved the way for the process of transition to democracy in Portugal. The overthrow of the longest European dictatorship did not, however, mean the immediate establishment of democratic institutions. Portugal experienced a period of transition to democracy, which, for some authors, lasted until 1982, with the extinction of the Council of the Revolution. This process, however, had important milestones in 1975, with the organization of the first democratic elections in the country, and in 1976, with the approval of the new Constitution, the democratic election of the President of the Republic and the inauguration of the first constitutional Government.

The period from April 1974 to November 1975 was particularly agitated, both politically and militarily. Portugal knew six provisional Governments and two Presidents of the Republic, the creation of several dozens of political parties, great social and political activism, and growing military intervention in political life. Particularly sensitive was the period between the summer and November of 1975, when the country seemed on the verge of a Civil War, with the confrontation between two political, social and military blocks: the pro-democratic block, with the political parties and the military moderates defending the transition to a Western European model; and the Communist bloc, led by the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), with the support of some extreme-left militants, and with extensive and far-reaching ramifications within the armed forces. The impasse was finally resolved on 25 November 1975 with the triumph of the first of these blocks in a new ‘military coup’.

Building on his previous works on U.S. policy towards the Portuguese revolution¹, Mario Del Pero's article focuses on this particular period of Portuguese history, seeking to examine how the United States (U.S.) reacted to the events in Portugal and, in particular, how Secretary of State Henry Kissinger defined U.S. strategies for avoiding what he considered to be negative developments in Portugal. This article comes in a context of growing historiographical production on the Portuguese revolution and, in particular, on its external dimension². Although Del Pero does not enter into the debate about the comparative influence of domestic factors *versus* external factors on the Portuguese transition to democracy, his work and the studies of other historians remind us how developments in Portugal were being closely scrutinized by the most important international actors and how they did not hesitate in intervening when they believed their interests were at stake in the Iberian Peninsula.

Del Pero presents a superb and detailed account of the U.S. reaction to the Portuguese revolution of April 1974 and to the radicalization of Portuguese politics that took place in the following months, with special emphasis on the "risk of a Communist takeover" (626) felt in the summer of 1975. He takes into consideration not only the way Kissinger and other officials defined U.S. interests and priorities regarding Portugal but also pays attention to Western-European policies and integrates this particular problem in the broader and more general context of the Cold War and *détente*. This is one of the most important strengths of this article. The others are his account of Portuguese domestic political and military events, based both on primary sources and on the most recent secondary bibliography, and the extraordinary range of archival sources used by the author, including U.S. and UK national archives, and presidential libraries, both in the U.S. and Portugal. Methodologically irreproachable, Del Pero's article is an excellent example of how the field of 'diplomatic history' has tended to evolve in the last decades into a truly 'international history'.

Kissinger's main objective regarding the political and military evolution in Portugal was "to prevent Communist participation, in whatever form, in any Portuguese government." (646) This, according to Del Pero, was "the over-determining factor" in U.S. policy towards Portugal, but an objective frustrated from the very first days of the Portuguese

¹ Namely "I limiti della distensione. Gli Stati Uniti e l'implosione del regime portoghese", *Contemporanea*, 4, Dicembre 2005, 621-650; "A European Solution for a European Crisis: The International Implications of Portugal's Revolution", *Journal of European Integration History*, 15, 1, 2009, 15-34; and *The Eccentric Realist: Henry Kissinger and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

² Most recently Tiago M. Sá, *Os Estados Unidos e a Democracia Portuguesa (1974-1976)*, Lisbon: Instituto Diplomático, 2009; Pedro Oliveira, *Os Despojos da Aliança. A Grã-Bretanha e a questão colonial portuguesa, 1945-1975* (Lisbon: Tinta da China, 2007); Ana Mónica Fonseca, "The Federal Republic of Germany and the Portuguese Transition to Democracy (1974-1976)," *Journal of European Integration* 15:1 (2009): 35-56; and Thiago Carvalho, *Do Lirismo ao Pragmatismo. A dimensão Multilateral das Relações Luso-Brasileiras* (Lisbon: Instituto Diplomático, 2009.)

transition. In fact, the first provisional government in Portugal had two members of the PCP and this participation continued until the end of the fifth provisional government, in late August 1975 (although this fifth government was considered a “technical” government without party members or leaders involved). Faced with the increased importance of Communism in Portugal, not only in the government, but also in the military, the trade unions, press and TV, Kissinger devised a strategy of “ostracism” to the Portuguese government, “vaccinating Europe from leftist, neutralist and third-force viruses” (637).

Del Pero argues that European leaders had a much more adequate approach to the situation in Portugal: above all they wanted to prevent Portugal from becoming a “New Chile” (628) (not Allende’s Chile, but Pinochet’s Chile), to avoid a “reactionary counter-coup” (647) that could reverse the transition to democracy. According to Del Pero, this was the main reason why governments in countries like West Germany or Sweden and, above all, the majority of Socialist and Social-Democrat Parties from the Socialist International, supported Mário Soares and the Socialist Party (PS) during these turbulent months. This assumption might be debatable, however, if one considers that the essential objective for the European countries that led the effort for the establishment of a Western democracy in Portugal was very similar to Kissinger’s goal – to prevent Portugal from becoming a Communist regime and to avoid the possibility of an alliance between the Socialists and the Communists in Portugal. To West Germany, a communist regime or a PS-PCP alliance in a leftist oriented regime, and the kind of ‘ostracism’ defended by Kissinger, could only accentuate bipolar division, jeopardize European Economic Community enlargement, and hamper a long-term strategy of integration and reunification. Therefore, the major difference between Kissinger and his European allies was not in terms of objectives but rather in terms of strategy: Kissinger believed Portugal was ‘lost’ for Communism and that it was essential to isolate the country; led by a certain ideological blindness or “inability to fully understand the intricacies and peculiarities of Portuguese politics” (625), he called Soares a Kerensky and considered the PS to be a minor force ready to be subdued by the Communists; the European Socialists and Social-Democrats considered instead that Soares should be the focus of resistance to a communist take-over and they bet everything on the PS, a member of the Socialist International. Instead of giving up on Portugal, these governments and parties played a major role in the struggle for a democratic Portugal and in the end, Del Pero acknowledges, “the solution was mostly a Portuguese and European one” (648).

Regarding U.S. policy, despite the excellent analysis of Del Pero, he should have emphasized even more the role played by Ambassador Frank Carlucci in Lisbon, who frequently disagreed with Kissinger and was finally able to develop his own policy, similar to what the Europeans were following. There is a particular episode of great relevance that Del Pero does not mention in this article. In late August 1975, President Costa Gomes presented to U.S. Ambassador in Lisbon with a formal request for aid to transport approximately 300,000 Portuguese who wanted to leave Angola, where the civil war was developing. Ambassador Carlucci decided to establish a very direct linkage between the

request received and the political changes that, in the opinion of the U.S., should take place in Portugal, notably the fall of Vasco Gonçalves and fifth Provisional Government. This was a crucial moment in the “hot summer” of 1975: the fall of Gonçalves would mean the loss of Communist hegemony in the government and a new government reflecting the results of the elections of April 1975, where the Socialists obtained 38% of the votes, and the Social-Democrats 26%, against a mere 12% for the Communists. Carlucci explained his intentions the best he could to President Gomes: “our aid was for humanitarian purposes, and we did not want it to be interpreted as a form of political support for a government whose goals and general orientation were antithetical to those we support”³. In another conversation with a President’s aide, he added: the airlift “would be much easier if we had a new government”, because the “American people will look upon the airlift as aid to a communist government unless certain changes are made”⁴. Six days later, the President announced the new leader of the sixth provisional Government supported by the Socialists and Social Democrats.

Another strong point of Del Pero’s article is the way he integrates this whole episode in the context of Cold War and particularly in the different strategies of détente pursued by Americans and Europeans. Following recent historiography on the topic, Del Pero argues that the U.S. and Kissinger had a conservative vision of détente, considering it as a way to strengthen the bipolar division of the Cold War. That was the reason why Kissinger preferred a Communist Portugal, isolated, to serve as a vaccine for the rest of Europe, instead of a ‘third way’ or Yugoslavian-type of regime, or even an alliance between Socialists and Communists that could set an example for Italy or France. Kissinger, Del Pero wrote, “conceived détente not as the first step for the relaxation of bipolarism in Europe, but as a way to re-consolidate the Soviet – American bipolar condominium, putting under check the many centrifugal tendencies present within the two blocs” (648). The Europeans (and the Germans in particular) had a different view of détente, believing that the process should accelerate those same “centrifugal” forces. As Del Pero puts it, détente represented “for many Western European governments, and for Western European Socialists overall, the process that aimed at overcoming the bipolar division of Europe and not at propping up its shaky foundations” (649). Therefore, they were not interested in the establishment of a Communist, or non-aligned leftist regime in Western Europe which quickly could become, in their view, an obstacle to ‘their’ détente with Eastern Europe. Europeans were able to succeed in this goal and détente was not compromised by events in Portugal. Indirectly, however, the Portuguese revolution would be a major cause for the end of the ‘relaxation’ period between the United States and Soviet Union. The collapse of the Portuguese empire in Africa (a somewhat neglected dimension in Del Pero’s article), following the coup of 1974 in Lisbon, would bring a

³ “Meeting with President Costa Gomes on Current Political Situation”, 22 August 1975, telegram from U.S. embassy in Lisbon to State Department, in <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/>.

⁴ “Airlift From Angola To Portugal; Political Implications”, 23 August 1975, telegram from U.S. embassy in Lisbon to State Department, in <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/>.

violent civil war to Angola, leading to the involvement of both the United States and the Soviet Union.

Luís Nuno Rodrigues is an Associate Professor at the Department of History of ISCTE, University Institute of Lisbon, where he coordinates the graduate program on History, Defense and International Relations and conducts research at the Center for the Study of Contemporary History. In 2006 and 2008, he was a visiting professor at Brown University. A former Fulbright student, Rodrigues holds a Ph.D. in American History from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Rodrigues has published several articles and books in Portugal and abroad on Portuguese twentieth century History. The Portuguese version of his PhD Dissertation, on Portuguese-American relations during the Kennedy Administration was published in 2002 and won two national prizes in Portugal. His most recent book, *Spínola* (Lisbon: Esfera dos Livros, 2010) is a biography of the first Portuguese President after the revolution of 25 April 1974.

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