BOOK REVIEW


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This book narrates the history of the Experimental Phonetics Laboratory of Coimbra University (1936-1979), created and directed by Armando de Lacerda (1902-1984), through the reproduction of photos “explained” by means of extensive captions. The visual nature of the book (and its remarkable photographic selection) is reflected by its larger-than-standard size, along with a design style that succeeds in weaving together the wide variety of visual elements (photographs, instruments, books, letters, newspapers and diagrams) in a cohesive and immersive way.

The history of this laboratory, a research unit located in a peripheral country garnering international recognition by developing a scientific specialty that was sought for by international students and was subsequently widely adopted, contradicts—Quintino Lopes argues—the traditional historiographic narratives that classify Portugal as a scientifically inert country, passively adopting science from foreign places. Going beyond this (diffusionist) model and framing Portuguese science under a different lens is not new and has been central for the
advancement of history of science in Portugal but, nonetheless, this case further confirms the need to move historiographically forward from it.

The book is structured in eight short chapters (I) starting with Armando de Lacerda’s first instrument, which reached international recognition translated into financial state support and the necessary leverage to found his laboratory, then (II) exploring some backstage aspects of this process regarding the state actors interaction, (III) the circulation of researchers in a reverse flow from the traditional center-periphery conceptions, with a commentary on this process and science diplomacy, (IV) the implementation of Armando de Lacerda’s methods and instruments in laboratories across several countries, (V) the international networks created during the laboratory’s activity, (VI) the first steps on the creation of an archive of the Portuguese regional phonetics, (VII) Armando de Lacerda’s relation with the fascist regime (Estado Novo), and finally (VIII) addressing the demise of the laboratory following Armando de Lacerda’s retirement and his retrospective thoughts on the accomplishments of his laboratory.

The photographic selection is striking and the captions go well beyond a mere description of the images, offering relevant insights or contextual elements, connecting the image with the chapter’s theme, frequently complemented with quotes from various sources.

The chapters effectively demonstrate the argument in a succinct way. The reader should keep in mind that this book follows previously published research in which Lopes explored the Experimental Phonetics Laboratory more extensively and in a more traditional way—in written historical narratives. As such, this book, building on an extensive visual support, gives prominence to the images when compared with the text. The visual character further enhances the author’s intention to materialize the memory of Armando de Lacerda and the Experimental Phonetics Laboratory, dismantled after his retirement.

The thematic arrangement of the chapters most appropriately summarizes the relevant elements of the Laboratory’s activity that concur to Lopes’s argument. As a result, however, the reading becomes a bit confusing here and there due to the chronological back-and-forth movement implied by its structure. This by no means detracts from the effectiveness of this narrative form and might even be the result of one’s expectations of a chronological organization. The short final remarks sum up and neatly order what the reader was shown throughout the chapters. The three short introductory texts, one of them by Lacerda’s grandson, also offer some further insights on the subject.

Admittedly, this narrative device is not frequently used in the literature. A similar publication that comes to mind is the collection *Making Europe: Technology and Transformations, 1850-2000* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013-2019), which features a complementary narrative building on the many pictures and accompanying captions, conceived to be independent from the
chapters’ written texts. But Lopes goes a step further and privileges images by opposition to text, and his historical argument succeeds, I dare to suggest, thanks to the strict boundaries established between thematic structure and aim. Nevertheless, there are a few instances in which one craves for more accompanying text, for example regarding some scientific terms, instrument biographies and biographical information about main actors, like Armando de Lacerda himself. The book assumes itself as the biography of the Experimental Phonetics Laboratory, but Armando de Lacerda’s is omnipresent. This is not surprising as both biographies are so deeply intertwined that one wonders if they can be separated at all.

Some intriguing questions are raised but not fully answered. One is about the factors behind the demise of the laboratory, which coincides with the retirement of Armando de Lacerda without leaving any successors. Yet, since it is clearly demonstrated that this Laboratory became a top model across Europe and America, attracting a myriad of students, why did it remain locally so dependent on the agency of Armando de Lacerda? Why were there no disciples to continue his work in Portugal? These questions remain unanswered but, nonetheless, rightly point us to a historiographic conundrum. Recent case studies on the history of science in Portugal, including Lopes’s, clearly identified and analyzed several instances of scientific success, comparable with mainstream counterparts. At the current stage of Portuguese history of science it might well be that Lopes’s main argument is becoming a paper tiger, keeping us discussing the contrasts of Portuguese science vs. the “scientific main powers,” looking for instances of comparison, instead of going more deeply into the particularities in place. In Lacerda’s case, it is not only the existence of a clear scientific success (several other cases have been recognized and more will certainly come to light) that is of interest, but it looks more promising to go to the next step and understand how such a sustained case of success as Lacerda’s was unable to perdure beyond its founder’s retirement. Is this a pattern integral to Portuguese science? If yes, it certainly deserves more historical attention.

Beyond the former question, this book also deals with the issue of “invisible actors,” made visible by this amazing visual record—women from various nationalities are systematically present, including Berta Lacerda, various technicians and local people, including a speaker of Kimbundu language who was brought from Angola to be recorded at the Laboratory. The presence of these actors on record proves not only their existence and relevance, but also that there are sources available to receive significant attention in Portugal. This leads us to a final note, regarding photographic sources and Portuguese science: was the prolific use of photography characteristic only to this laboratory or was it a common practice with newly founded laboratories under the Estado Novo? If yes, then there are still untapped iconographic primary sources regarding scientific practice crying for attention of historians of science.

By its abundance of themes and sources this book goes well beyond its subject, calling for further research which I hope the author will have the opportunity to pursue and share.