

# The geographer of transience. Review of ‘Orlando Ribeiro: the training of a scientist (1911-1940)’ by José Vicente Braga Costa, 2023

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## Abstract

Doctoral theses on the History of Portuguese Geography are not common; neither are those who use a geographical approach to the History of Science. José Braga Costa did both, and so he presents the academic community with a ‘Geography of Portuguese Geography’: that in itself is noteworthy. But the author also elaborates on a portrait of the first years of Orlando Ribeiro scientific life that is both accurate and revealing, contextualising the geographer’s scientific practices in the various spatial and social contexts — the Polytechnic School neighbourhood, the old Faculty of Arts in Lisbon, the Infante de Sagres high school, the Geography Institute of the Sorbonne, in Paris... — that progressively define his position in society and especially in the University. At the end of reading this study, the reader better understands Orlando Ribeiro’s scientific temperament, and the main attributes of his ‘geographical commentary’ on lands and people. Personally, I was impressed by the clarity with which it is shown how Ribeiro’s temperament is not inconsistent with the Goethean genius (‘accompanied loneliness’) and how this translates, on multiple scales, into the themes of his future research.

**Keywords:** Geography of science, science of geography, biography, Orlando Ribeiro.

## Resumo

As teses de doutoramento sobre História da Geografia Portuguesa não são comuns; nem o são aqueles que utilizam uma abordagem geográfica da História da Ciência: José Braga Costa fez as duas coisas, e por isso apresenta à comunidade académica uma ‘Geografia da Geografia Portuguesa’: isso, por si só, é digno de nota. Mas o autor elabora também um retrato dos primeiros anos da vida científica de Orlando Ribeiro que é ao mesmo tempo preciso e revelador, contextualizando as práticas científicas do geógrafo nos diversos contextos espaciais e sociais — o bairro da Politécnica, a velha Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa, o colégio Infante de Sagres, o Instituto de Geografia da Sorbonne, em Paris ... — que progressivamente definem o seu posicionamento na sociedade e especialmente na Universidade. No fim de ler este estudo, o leitor compreende melhor o temperamento científico de Orlando Ribeiro, e os principais atributos do seu ‘comentário geográfico’ de terras e de gentes. Pessoalmente, fiquei impressionado com a clareza com que se mostra como o temperamento de Ribeiro não é inconsistente com o génio goethiano (‘solidão acompanhada’) e como tal se transcreve, em múltiplas escalas, para os temas de suas futuras pesquisas

**Palavras-chave:** Geografia da Ciência, ciência da geografia, biografia, Orlando Ribeiro.

## 1. Structure and contents

José Braga Costa presents us with a very important work on the scientific biography of Orlando Ribeiro (1911-1997), extensively characterising the various socio-spatial contexts that shaped the Portuguese geographer’s scientific personality in the first decades of his life.<sup>1</sup> The explicit use of a

geographical approach to the History and Philosophy of Science makes this work so much more important as this is an ‘idiomatic’ contribution that Geography can make to these fields of investigation and which is not always used by those who, in our discipline, they dedicate themselves to the same type of research as the author. I will try to do justice to this choice made by the author, articulating the contents that structure his thesis with its own geography, therefore configuring, as far as possible, what we could consider a ‘geography of the geography of Science’.

<sup>1</sup> José Vicente Braga Costa: Orlando Ribeiro: A formação de um cientista [Orlando Ribeiro, the training of a scientist], 1911-1940. PhD in History and Philosophy of Science, Faculty of Sciences of the University of Lisbon, supervised by Prof. Ana Simões and Prof. João Carlos Garcia.

In the same way that a geographer strives to precisely determine the limits of the significant area of the object of study ('region'), the historian also feels the need to precisely limit the significant time interval ('period') of an investigation. In this case, if the starting date of the period of analysis, corresponding to the year of birth of the biographee, is indisputable, the end of the defined period, 1940, may spark some conversation. Referring to the example of the geographer and the delimitation of the 'area' of investigation, it is well known that the task of delimiting the object of study is difficult, not only because of the existence of multiple nearby alternatives but also because the phenomena and trends that seem to draw with clarity, dissolve into unexpected causalities and influences as soon as a given framework contracts or expands. The author mainly justifies the year 1940 with the end of the biographer's postgraduate training.

The author's analytical temperament is revealed in the routine with which he organises the various chapters and the final conclusion. All of them end with a point of 'final reflections' that condenses the information presented; and which, all together, in turn, condense into the final Conclusion. In this, we believe, as useful or even more useful than presenting a 'conclusion of partial conclusions', would have been to identify the research that the study itself suggests (I will return to this topic at the conclusion of this review).<sup>2</sup>

1. *'Introduction'* – The first chapter of the thesis, despite not having explicit subtitles, can be divided into some main points: one of them is the aforementioned issue of the chronological delimitation of the period of analysis; the author also identifies the most important studies on the author's life, his direct interlocutors in the substance of his research, but which unfortunately he does not contextualise institutionally. The conceptual foundations of research are presented in an analogical way, using some examples of scientific biographies from the French School of Geography. But José Braga Costa, perhaps due to a markedly enumerative and analytical

temperament, does not dedicate a very in-depth discussion to it, which necessarily results in the absence of a critical presentation of the methodological procedures that the author will have used to 'attack' the enormous mass of texts that are the primary sources of his work. Regarding the sources of information, it must be recognized that the author 'leaves no stone unturned'. This wealth of information is certainly the most solid contribution of his work: future researchers will not be able to fail to consult this work by José Braga Costa, otherwise they will be forced to explore a path that is now already open. Thus, to a large extent, the author compensates for the parsimony with which he discusses the theoretical and methodological aspects of his research. The structure of the thesis presents some particularities that identify a work routine. The order of presentation of the chapters is clearly chronological – but it would make more sense for it to be 'chorological', if the author argues that he intends to make a geographical commentary on the history of science: later, in this report, I will try to demonstrate how useful this configuration would have been for the author's own epistemological interests.

2. *'Geography at the beginning of the 20th century in Portugal'* – The socio-spatial structuring of scientific practices in Portuguese Geography, especially in Lisbon, is an interesting and well-founded theme of José Braga Costa's thesis. 'Well-intentioned' republican Science, but confined to monastic or civil equipment inherited from the Monarchy – such as the National Library, the Geography Society, and especially, the Faculty of Arts... – the city is very present in the pages of the text, associated with a first intense reclaiming of peripheral areas at the time, clearly reflected in the 'rural' names of current places, such as 'campos' [fields] (of Santana, Ourique, Pequeno and Grande) and 'penhas' [rocky mounts] (of França). The author also masterfully evokes that (deceptive) breath of hope that, contradictorily, the beginning of the Dictatorship brought, well characterised in the innovative plan of the city, especially in the architectural and functional modernity of the Técnico Higher Institute (let us not forget that Ribeiro will base there the International Geography Congress of 1949), which would later be associated with, among many other facilities, the National Institute of Statistics. Later, but outside the period covered by this research, one could speak of the 'Belenization'

<sup>2</sup> The dispersion leads to countless information elements being repeated several times throughout the text, in an informative prodigality that, at times, discourages the reader a little. If the author intends to present a version of his work to a non-academic audience – which is strongly advised –, it is imperative that he remove a large part of these repetitions, so as not to allow the harmony of the whole to be hidden under a 'interrupted melody'.

[Tower of Belém vicinity] of 'tropical' scientific practices, which the Portuguese World Exhibition already anticipated. The author is, like no one else, perfectly qualified to offer an innovative synthesis of the socio-spatial evolution of Geography in Lisbon – from the last years of the constitutional Monarchy to the first years of the Estado Novo.

3. *'Orlando Ribeiro's first phase of education'*

– I have the greatest doubts about the legitimacy of the use of correspondence or other forms of intimacy recordings in historical and philosophical commentaries on Science, even though I recognise the way in which they allow access to the strictly psychological mechanisms that stimulate, guide and differentiate the scientific practice of researchers. Orlando Ribeiro made this embarrassment easier (and harder? I will return to this point) in some way, because he wrote a good number of memoirist pieces about his own scientific biography. José Braga Costa took advantage of that prodigality and tried to reconstitute the 'local' experience of the urban neighbourhood – along with other more rural geographies – where the geographer grew up, studied and matured his desire to dedicate his life to teaching and researching Geography. The family history and the web of personal relationships that the author meticulously indicates to us are sometimes lost in genealogical details that could, with enormous advantages for the fluidity of reading, be sent to footnotes. However, it is a very complete portrait of the childhood and youth of a researcher; and, above all, the socio-spatial structuring power of domesticity and Orlando Ribeiro's truly 'performative' mastery in the ineffable domain of affections is well identified. An analysis in a psychoanalytic or similar format (which the author evidently does not follow) would not fail to find clues of investigation in accordance with persistent configurations of 'desire' and 'desire' in Ribeiro's geographical thought.

4. *'Infante de Sagres high school and active pedagogy'* – The chapter on Orlando Ribeiro's years as a high school teacher at the 'new school' at Infante de Sagres high school, despite suffering from the same descriptive bias already detected elsewhere in the thesis, is a very important component of the dissertation, not only because it reveals connections with a group of personalities – among them, Agostinho da Silva (1906-1994) – who revolutionised Pedagogy

in Portugal, but especially allows us to clearly identify a profound change in the relationship with Childhood and Youth that the final Republic and the first years of the Dictatorship chose as its foundation of order and progress in society.

5. *'Education on the move: cruise to the colonies and holiday courses'* – Orlando Ribeiro's 'tropical' work will not begin until after the end of the Second World War and precisely because of the urgent challenges that the new geopolitical order places on the Portuguese Overseas. But it would not have been impossible for the author to fit the narrative of the Cruise to the Colonies and the Summer Courses with the incipient development of higher education and research in the Portuguese Overseas – and the desperate efforts to promote both in the following decades, when it became crucial to deal with the difficult relationship that Portugal had to face a progressively non-aligned international geography (see map of International Geographical Union conferences). The sub-chapter on the Cruise to the Colonies is, among all, the one in which the excessive weight of the enumeration is most felt and which raises the more difficulties to the reader in delimiting its 'centre of interest'. But this 'centre' exists and, in fact, it has a great potential. The author records day by day, almost hour by hour, the true '*heterotopia*' that the steamer *Mozambique* consists of, when, over the course of a fortnight, teachers, students and guests inescapably live with each other in this 'education on the move', suspending all the usual rules of the structurally more rigid coexistence of university education. José Braga Costa is very effective, at times, in asking the reader to 'board' *sulla nave che va...*

6. *'Reflections on paper: works between 1932 and 1937'* – José Braga Costa organises the critical assessment of all the primary sources of his research into two moments: 1932-1937, and 1937-1940. The choice of the year 1937 as the dividing mark of this chronology could not be more appropriate, because it coincides with the date of publication of a work of transcendent importance for the period under analysis – the regional part of the *Geography of Portugal* by Hermann Lautensach – which, it seems to us that, unfortunately, the author does not give it all the attention it deserves (I will return to this point later). From the first half (1932-1937) of the

primary sources José Braga Costa gives due emphasis to an unpublished piece on Goethe – which reveals more of Orlando Ribeiro's scientific temperament than much of the scientific work he produced: this must be interpreted light of the 'romantic scientism' of the German 'master'. Of equal importance is the characterisation of Orlando Ribeiro's personal relationship with Leite de Vasconcelos, a topic that, however, was already sufficiently clarified by recent works associated with the celebrations of the scientific biography of both scientists. The rest of the chapter is a descriptive enumeration, sometimes a little long and heavy, of Ribeiro's various works and all the biographical and institutional relationships that can be identified through them: as with other parts of the text, a lot of information could, without major disadvantage, having been organised into substantial annexes which, precisely because the author brings together all the information for the main text, are lacking in the organisation of the thesis.

7. *'Thesis: Arrábida'* – Orlando Ribeiro's 'Arrábida' is one of the first geographical monographs of scientific value produced by Portuguese Geography. With 'Vouga Basin', by Amorim Girão, 'Algarve' by Medeiros Gouveia, or 'Alto Trás-os-Montes' by Virgílio Taborda... these are the initial milestones of a tradition that will dominate the academic production of the discipline until the advent of Democracy. The Vidalian inspiration (because 'regional' Geography is not exclusive to France or Paris), emerges in all its originality in this chapter. It is not so much the 'Portuguese economic context' that is interesting to highlight (despite its obvious importance) but the way in which Orlando Ribeiro's initial regionalist formulation (accentuated by the 'Parisian experience' – see the next section of this review) comes to have such significant effects in the establishment of 'scientific' Geography in Portugal. At the same time that Orlando Ribeiro strengthened his survey of Portuguese territory, a German geographer – Hermann Lautensach (1886-1971) – chose Portugal as the stage for his 'travels and bibliographic consultations'. Both wrote excellent geographical syntheses and, through the relationship that grew stronger over the years, together they could have created a monumental work on the geography of Portuguese territory that at some point they intended to write. The unexpected interference of the war and its effects

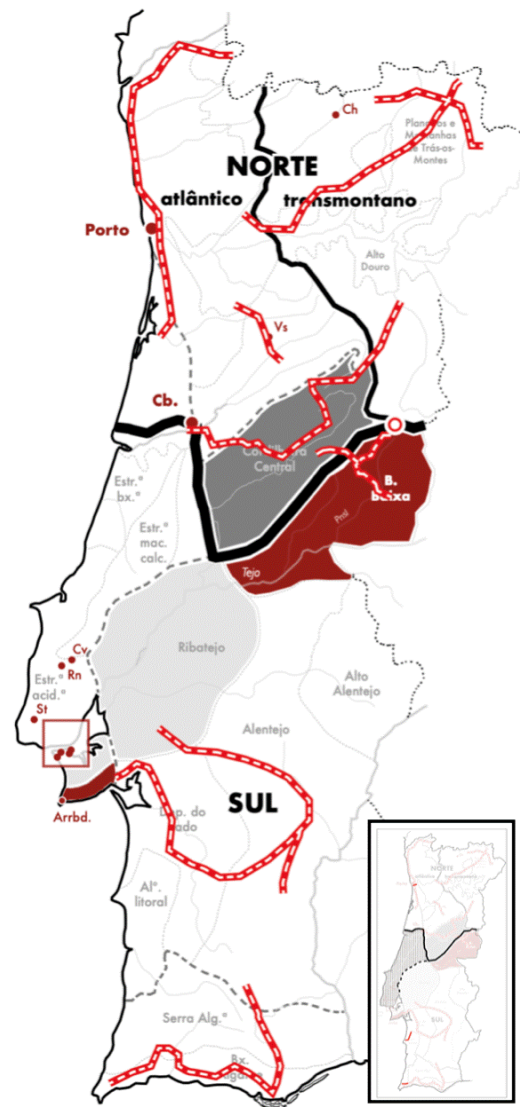


Figure 1  
Orlando Ribeiro's excursions and Lautensach's regional division of Portugal (own elaboration).

would only make it possible, much later, the synthesis prepared by Suzanne Daveau – a French geographer, professor at the University of Dakar, who had decided to live and work in Portugal in the 1960s.

José Braga Costa's work, however, raises important clues in this regard – this is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting contributions of his thesis to the History of Geography in Portugal: by mapping Orlando Ribeiro's excursions in the 1930s (Figure 1, large map), we realise that, with very few exceptions –and not counting 'his' Estremadura, which he certainly knew much better than his German

colleague—, Ribeiro's routes never fail to 'touch' all the regions that Lautensach had drawn in 1937. It does not seem possible that this is a coincidence, but rather that the Portuguese geographer determined his field work surveys based on the regional limits already proposed. As can be seen in the second map in the figure, the regional limits proposed by Orlando Ribeiro in 1945 follow, without any major changes, those that Lautensach had proposed almost a decade earlier.<sup>3</sup> The only really important difference between Orlando Ribeiro and Hermann Lautensach's regionalisation proposals involves the inclusion of Estremadura (considered from the lower Mondego valley to the Setúbal peninsula) in the 'North' or 'South' of Portugal (Figure 1, small map).<sup>4</sup>

#### 8. 'New Horizons: Lecturer at the Sorbonne'

— The simple chronological distribution of the nationality of the personalities who, according to José Braga Costa, influenced Ribeiro shows that if there are other 'national' clues to pursue (Germany and, worthy of attention, Switzerland!), it is France that gives Portuguese Geography and, particularly, Orlando Ribeiro all the conditions for its international affirmation. At the moment that Ribeiro decided to complete his education at the Institute of Geography on Saint Jacques, in Paris, at the same time that an official scholarship from the Portuguese Government gave him responsibilities in the Portuguese Lectorate at the Sorbonne, the fortunes of Portuguese Geography were cast in a definitive form. Once again we must warn the reader that the number of names of personalities and institutions listed can create discouragement; however, once this resistance is overcome, the prize is substantial: José Braga Costa demonstrates, beyond any doubt that, for Ribeiro, French based field trips, work experiences, interpersonal contacts, scientific influences... are of such magnitude that it is without surprise that we see him, in 1949 — in the context of a relatively fragile Portuguese academic Geography — taking responsibility for an International Geographical Conference! It is true to say that the Portuguese geographer

repaid in fair (or more than fair) measure the trust and investment that the then recently created Institute for High Culture placed in him.

#### 9. 'Publishing and disseminating: 1937-1940'

— We have already alluded to the dividing line that José Braga Costa implements in the critical presentation of Orlando Ribeiro's bibliography published in the period under analysis in his thesis. Between 1937 and 1940 Ribeiro presented several Geography works, supported by fieldwork and based on a conceptualisation that had been strengthened in Paris. The 'regional' and 'human geography' surveys bring to Portugal models that will be replicated time and time again; in the same way, urban studies began a tradition that the author, four decades later, still put into action when presenting at the colloquium in honour of Mariano Feio an in-depth study of Évora; of the importance of Geomorphology, especially that of the Beiras and Central Cordillera, it is enough to remember that Ribeiro invariably appears in the bibliographical references of Geology scholars in Portugal.

'Bibliographic references' — The organisation of bibliographic references into compartments according to their nature and the function they occupy in the body of research is undeniably useful for the reader. And, however, this commendable 'bibliographical essay' is not taken to its ultimate conclusion: if the author distinguishes between the primary sources (the works of the biographee) and the main interlocutors of his research (those who previously published works on the same theme),<sup>5</sup> the author collapses, in a comprehensive title, the voluminous body of 'reference works and studies', juxtaposing the *Correspondence* of Fr. António Vieira, the vignettes of the Portuguese World magazine, and the epistemological manifesto of D. N. Livingstone. Of course, the reader can decide the nature of these references based on the context in which they are mentioned throughout the text, but it would be undeniably useful for a researcher new to the topic if this information was systematised in the final bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> The exceptions are very small adjustments in the Southwest Algarve, in coastal Alentejo, in coastal Entre Douro and Minho.

<sup>4</sup> Later, Orlando Ribeiro would share some doubts about his own choice and reconnect with Hermann Lautensach on the issue of the division between North and South.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'Passive Bibliography' contains a semantic connotation that is far from doing justice to the critical work necessary to produce it.

## 2. Results: ‘Orlando Ribeiro: a transient geographer’?

It has already been mentioned that the conclusion of José Braga Costa’s thesis does not indicate any perspective for future investigations, merely condensing the partial conclusions that conclude each of the chapters. Without any intention beyond contributing to the enrichment of research, I propose to make some considerations on an important issue that the author’s work seems to suggest: the ‘frontier’ character that emerges from the portrait of Orlando Ribeiro that José Braga Costa here presents to his readers. The personality of the biographee is rich and complex, as much of previous historiography had already implied. What perhaps became clearer to me after reading José Braga Costa’s thesis is the way in which – *on different scales* – Orlando Ribeiro not only determines himself to avoid easy paths of research but also seems to seek, consciously or unconsciously, the areas of investigation that most require a meeting point between opposite extremes: when doing science, seeking to integrate nature and culture; between ‘races’ across the globe, through the affirmation of miscegenation; the preference for the Mediterranean, sandwiched between Europe and Africa, influenced by a climate regime that is also transitional; of the composition of Portugal at the meeting of North and South... – all illustrated in the choice of Beira Baixa, a region that touches all of Portugal’s geographical domains (Atlantic, Interior and Mediterranean, plains and mountains...) and which the author chose for a *doctorate d’état* to be submitted to Sorbonne University that he would complete because of the imposition of the brutal law of War – all of this is not inconsistent with the Goethean genius, ‘lonely among everybody’, made an orphan at the edge of himself.

It’s perhaps just an impression I get from reading this doctoral thesis, but it’s strong enough that I should follow with all my attention the work that, from now on, José Braga Costa will present to us.

## 3. Concluding remarks

The theoretical foundation is the least successful point of the thesis. Above all, there is a lack of a properly conceptual characterisation of the determining relationships at each scale of organisation and the effects of socio-spatial structures. From long-range structuring theories (‘à la Giddens’) to the micro-geographies of Goffman or Butler, the range of available theories is immense, and their critical discussion would have made it possible to assess the author’s critical position more clearly. The obvious familiarity of textual analysis with common reading and writing practices can easily naturalise aspects of method: perhaps this is why the author does not feel the need to explain to the interested reader the precise way in which he established the methodological routine of analytical coding and synthetic categorisation of data from source copies. The quantity and diversity of the information collected is the most solid component of José Braga Costa’s work: no investigation into the History of Geography, and especially the scientific biography of Orlando Ribeiro, can fail to consult him in the future. When processing information, the author establishes a relationship with the data that appears to be excessively ‘detailed’, as if what remains to be discovered is more important than the trends that can be detected in the material already collected; Now, from a certain degree of composition, one more element that was collected would certainly easily be integrated into the already articulated set of global interpretation. Despite a substantial panoramic view, in a sense the author was unable to overcome the enormous mass of information he collected.

As a result of the considerations referred to in the previous points, – which results in the *researcher’s voice being subjugated by that of the biographee* –, the discussion of the results of this investigation privileges the extension of information to the detriment of the multi-scale chronotopic demonstration of Orlando Ribeiro’s scientific personality. Returning to what was said in the introduction to this report, one of the most apparent weaknesses of the geographical commentary on the ‘Formative Years of Orlando Ribeiro’ is the absence of cartography that integrates and articulates – *across scale* – the geographer’s scientific biography. In addition to the important maps in which he condenses information related to the geographer’s excursions in Portugal

(and, even so, without relating them to the regional organisation that, a few years later, the geographer would present in *Portugal, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic*), José Braga Costa does without, incomprehensibly, diagrams and maps of treatment and illustration of the abundant data he has collected and the results he has achieved.

The final result is of great value. José Braga Costa's thesis provides an enormous wealth of thematic and bibliographical information; and, just as important, it opens up research perspectives of which we hope the author can present new interpretations to us in the future.

