

A Marxist view of ruination: José Saramago's fictional version of the construction of Dom João V's monastic complex at Mafra, Portugal

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The subject of this article is the monastic complex at Mafra, Portugal, commissioned by Dom João V (King John V, 1689-1750). An overview of the historical circumstances of the building project is followed by José Saramago's fictive version in his novel . Saramago describes the cause of the ruination of the Portuguese nation as the king's egotistical desire for the largest monastic complex in Christendom. Saramago's critique of the coerced labour required to construct the extensive edifice is discussed in terms of Marxist labour theory.

Key words: monastic complex at Mafra, Dom João V, Marxist labour theory, José Saramago

'n Marxistiese beskouing van ruïnering: José Saramago se fiktiewe weergawe van die konstruksie van Dom João V se monastiese kompleks by Mafra, Portugal

Die onderwerp van hierdie artikel is die monastiese kompleks te Mafra, Portugal, wat vir die opdraggewer Dom João V (koning Johannes V, 1689-1750) gebou is. 'n Oorsig van die geskiedkundige konteks van die bouprojek lei die bespreking in van José Saramago se fiktiewe weergawe daarvan in sy roman . Saramago beskryf hoe die koning se egotistiese begeerte om die grootste monastiese kompleks in die Christendom te besit, die Portugese volk geruïneer het. Saramago se kritiek op die aanwending van gedwonge arbeid vir die uitgebreide bouwerk word in terme van Marxistiese arbeidsteorie bespreek.

Sleutelwoorde: monastiese kompleks te Mafra, Dom João V, Marxistiese arbeidsteorie, José Saramago

This article starts like a fairy tale and ends with a harsh Marxist critique.

A long time ago, on the Iberian Peninsula there were two absolute kings who built themselves memorials in the form of monastic complexes cum palaces. The first was the sixteenth-century Spanish king, Filipe II (Philip II, 1527-98), who built the Monasterio del Escorial, and the second was Dom João V (King John V, 1689-1750) of Portugal who, in the eighteenth century, ambitiously rivalled the Spanish model by commissioning the largest monastic complex in Christendom at Mafra, Portugal.

The historical facts

King Philip's monumental monastic complex comprised a palace, a basilica, a pantheon for the Spanish kings, a library and an extensive monastery, situated in the town of San Lorenzo de Escorial, 40 kilometres outside Madrid (figure 1). It was designed by the Spanish architect Juan Battista de Toledo (1515-67) who was educated in Italy, in collaboration with the Italian architect Juan de Herrera (1530-97) who was previously employed at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The monastery of San Lorenzo de Escorial, constructed during twenty years from 1563 to 1584, was finished within the king's lifetime and occupied by him. It is designed in an austere late Mannerist style that suited the taste of the reclusive and seriously religious patron who nevertheless collected paintings by the Venetian painter Titian Vecellio's (1488-1576), as well as works by various other northern and southern Renaissance artists.



Figure 1
A view of the Monasterio San Lorenzo del Escorial, Spain
(photograph: the author).

The other king, John V of Portugal, endearingly called “The Magnanimous”, had vowed at the beginning of his reign in 1706 to fulfill his father’s wish that a basilica be built for the Franciscans, the most destitute of Portuguese friars. Furthermore, John’s desire for an heir motivated him to empty his kingdom’s coffers to build a basilica and convent at Mafra, intended to honour his superstitious vow to the Franciscans that if the seemingly barren Queen, Dona Maria Ana Josefa of Austria, bears him an heir he will reward them with a basilica and convent, as part of an edifice that would also comprise a palace and auxiliary functions. Eventually the lavish edifice, the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra, was built at a town north of Lisbon (figure 2). The construction was only completed in 1750, the year of the death of the king, while many details had to be finished by his successors and their architects and artists.



Figure 2
A view of the West facade of the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra,
showing the belltowers and turrets (photograph: the author).

It is on King John’s monastic complex at Mafra that this article will focus. First, an overview will be given of the historical facts regarding its design, construction and dimensions, as well as a brief description of its exterior and interior. This overview is followed by José Saramago’s fictional version and overt critique of the royal patron’s reckless megalomania to possess the largest and most elaborate monastic and palatial complex in Christendom.

The Portuguese crown, at the instigation of John V, spent a vast sum of money to purchase land east of Mafra at Alto da Vela, so called because it is situated at an altitude of 234 metres. It was clearly a hazardous building site for an enormous masonry construction in the time of unmechanised labour.

The plans for the monastic complex were drafted in Rome under the direction of the Marquis of Fontes by illustrious architects: Carlos Gimac, Carlos Fontana, Tomazzo Matthey, Filipe Juvara and Antonio Canevari. The resident architect-engineer was João Frederico Ludovice (died 1752), a Bavarian who had initially trained as a goldsmith but learnt the craft of building construction in Rome.¹ He needed fortitude to cope with the demands of his patron who continually changed his royal mind about the dimensions of the convent: from 13 friars it was upgraded to 40; then to 80, and finally, in 1728 Ludovice was ordered to expand the convent to house 300, plus the Patriarch with his ministry. The king was able to order the expansion since Portugal came into the possession of the riches from its colony, Brazil,² and his aim was clearly to rival the Escorial in size and architectural splendour.

When the foundation work for the monastic complex was complete the King, in the presence of the Patriarch and his court, laid the foundation stone on 17 November 1717. It is recorded that by 1729 47,836 men were working on the project to meet the deadline the king had set for the consecration of the basilica: on 22 October 1630, his 41st birthday. Unfortunately the work was behind schedule on the great day, but the king nevertheless consecrated it with his usual flair for pomp and splendour – obviously at great cost to the state. The same year the work force was enlarged to 52,000, comprising 45,000 civilians and 7,000 soldiers (Da Gama 1985: 15). The total construction that was an enormously labour intensive undertaking was basically completed after 33 years. The massive stone edifice, covering an area of four hectares was well built and resisted the 1755 earthquake. Structural materials included fine timber from Brazil, while marble was quarried locally at Pero Pinheiro. Between 1728 and 1735 the complex was lavishly decorated with works of art, mainly from Italian origin. Worth mentioning are the 58 Carrara marble statues embellishing the facade and the two carillions cast in Antwerp and Liège. The religious paintings, ceiling decorations, precious books, various artefacts and liturgical objects are too numerous to mention.

Like the Escorial the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra comprised a basilica, an extensive convent, a royal palace, a state room, a library and auxiliary functions, all in one almost square edifice covering an area of four hectares, comprising two sections and four facades (figure 3). The main facade that faces West, is 232 metres long (figure 2). Situated in the main section are the basilica (figures 4, 5 and 6), state room (figure 7), sacristy and vestry, the two belltowers, the royal palace with its two turrets, sick wards, the friar's refectory and antechamber, the cemetery chapel and two cloisters. The minor section comprises the main part of the convent, kitchens, library (figure 8), the boxtree garden and a part of the palace on the top floor. There are altogether 800 halls and rooms, 300 cells, 4500 doors and windows, 154 staircases and 29 patios.³

Was this monastic complex a gift to the Franciscans? To the Portuguese nation? Or a memorial to King John's megalomania? Different answers can be given, but José Saramago's was that the patron of the monumental building, King John V, caused the ruination of his nation by spending the state's wealth and labour force on a single project.



Figure 3
An aerial view of the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra
(photograph: free internet).



Figure 4
Facade of the basilica of the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra
(photograph: the author).



Figure 5
Interior of the basilica of the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra
(photograph: the author).



Figure 6
Dome of the basilica of the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra
(photograph: the author).

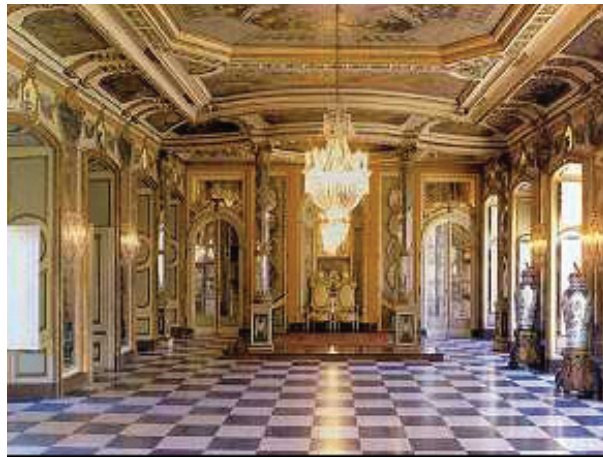


Figure 7
State room of the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra
(photograph: the author).



Figure 8
Library of the Real Palacio e Convento de Mafra
(photograph: the author).

José Saramago's Marxist critique

José Saramago, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998, died on 18 June 2010 at the age of 87. His novel, (1982), translated from the Portuguese as , is one of his major literary works.⁵ It deals with a wide ranging group of characters in early eighteenth-century Portugal, from the king, obsessed by his building project, the , to lowly labourers who are victims of the project.⁶ Saramago's version of the building of the Mafra complex is enlightening in its fictivity and clearly inspired by a Marxist ethic.⁷ He presents the construction of the Mafra complex as a tragedy for the Portuguese proletariat and the ruination of the country. As a communist and atheist Saramago was obviously an anti-royalist. Consequently, he represents the king as an immature idiot and the friars for whom the convent is built as undeserving immoral bigots.

According to Saramago's fictive version João V is a quintessential nincompoop who assumes that he is a great king because he wields power and possesses riches. Actually he spends his time on trivia. He routinely passes the time by assembling the blocks of a miniature Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome under the admiring gaze of his mindless courtiers. When not so occupied, he debauches his manhood by being unfaithful to his queen and impregnating countless nuns to produce a "horde of bastards" with his royal semen (Saramago 2001: 3). However, João's greatest desire is for an heir to his throne, which leads him to believe superstitiously that if he vowed to build a convent for the Franciscans who had been petitioning for it for almost a century, then his seemingly barren wife would become pregnant. Thus, it is Franciscan virtue and surely also their forgiveness for the king's "excessive self-indulgence" (Alves de Paula Martins 2001: 42) that "God rewarded by granting that the Queen should become pregnant". This weird logic motivates the narrator to conclude that "the Portuguese dynasty and the Franciscan Order will profit from the assured succession and the promised convent" (Saramago 2001: 42).

The king's sexual depravity and megalomania even find subconscious expression as a dream in which he sees "the Tree of Jesse sprout from his penis, covered with leaves and populated by the ancestors of Christ, and even of Christ Himself, the Heir of All Kingdoms, then the tree will vanish and in its place will appear the tall columns, bell towers, domes and belfries of a Franciscan convent..." (Saramago 2001: 10). The narrator cynically assesses the king's nocturnal heresy by stating that "Portugal has been well served by imaginative monarchs". While, in artists, imagination evokes creativity, João's carnally inspired imagination forebodes dire consequences for his realm.

The construction of the monastic complex in Portugal, inspired by the king's megalomania, changed his mentality for the worse. Instead of continuing to play with his building blocks like a child and visiting his wife twice a week "with burning zeal, eager and excited at the thought of this mystical union of his carnal duty" (Saramago 2001: 7), he becomes dissatisfied with the miniature of the Roman basilica that had been his plaything for many years and obsessed by a desire to possess a full-scale replica of St. Peter's in his realm, for his personal use. Even while the Franciscan convent is under construction at Mafra he summons his architect who is fully engaged there "and bluntly informed him, It is my will that a church be built for my court like that of the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, and as he uttered these words, he looked at the architect with the utmost severity" (Saramago 2001: 264). For once an underling confesses honestly that he cannot oblige the king: "I may be an architect of renown, and as presumptuous as the next man, but I know my limitations..." (Saramago 2001: 265). As the king's ambitious dream about a full-scale St. Peter's vanishes into thin air, he orders that the convent at Mafra be enlarged to accommodate not eighty, but three hundred friars, which means that another part of the mountain site has to be blasted away and levelled at enormous extra cost and obviously extra

labour. This new undertaking is ordered as the treasurer of the realm announces to João: “If Your Majesty will permit me to speak frankly, I am of the opinion that we are facing bankruptcy...” (Saramago 2001: 268). And worse still, it soon after transpires that the enlarged convent cannot be built without an enlarged workforce. The king’s solution to the problem is to order the rounding up of all adult men, the able-bodied, “or otherwise” (Saramago 2001: 279), throughout the country to join the already prodigious workforce of thirty thousand men. Fifty thousand more men, recruited from farms and other labours, are thus forced into slave labour.

His totally egotistical disposition motivates the king to bemoan the possibility that he may not be alive when the basilica is eventually inaugurated – regardless of the ruination he causes to his land. Somehow, a quotation from Solomon’s wisdom enters the king’s anguished mind when he meditates on his mortality: “Vanity of vanities, Solomon once declared, and Dom João V repeats these words, All is vanity, to desire is vanity, to possess is vanity.” The unenlightened king, however, solves Solomon’s dilemma by convincing himself that to overcome vanity “does not mean to have achieved modesty, much less humility, it is, rather, an excess of vanity” (Saramago 2001: 274). João’s megalomania as the patron of the monastic complex is self-defeating because “it seems incredible, that thirteen years of constant toil should have produced so little, the church unfinished, the convent rising to the second floor on two wings of the projected building, but the rest barely to the height of doorways, and only forty cells ready for occupation whereas three hundred are needed” (Saramago 2001: 315).

After scanning through Saramago’s narrative of the fictive king’s Mafra project, it is clear how profoundly the novelist despised the man for his stupidity and abuse of his absolute power. The novelist exaggerated John V’s failings, weaknesses and the ruination he wreaked. Why?⁸ The answer is that as a Marxist and self-declared communist he had a tragic view of royalty and religion. Furthermore, the novel reveals the profound Marxist insight that “Value in art [also architecture] for the enjoyment of a few rests on an extraction of value from the material livelihood of the great mass in society” (Harrington 2004: 18).

Marx’s critique of the “alienation”⁹ of the labourer a process of dehumanisation for the benefit of modern capitalism is projected back into history in Saramago’s novel.

Marxist labour theory

Karl Marx (1818-83) is best known as “a revolutionary communist, whose works inspired the foundation of many communist regimes in the twentieth century” (Wolff 2003: 1). The essence of his labour theory focusses on capitalist exploitation of the proletariat who are alienated from their creative, productive work and endeavour, which activity should be spontaneous and uncoerced. Alienation was, as James Scanlan (1976: 133) explains,

in Marx’s eyes a monstrous perversion of the true human essence. That essence, as we know from the , consists in creative, productive activity: the true life of man in a life of free production, of transforming or “working up” – to use a favourite expression of Marx’s –his environment in accordance with his own, conscious conceptions. Emanating from man’s own inner or natural needs, such productive activity is spontaneous and uncoerced.

However, it is precisely, according to Saramago’s representation of the construction of the Mafra complex, by means of forced labour and coercion that John V pursued his aim to immortalise his reign in a lasting monument. Saramago relates how the king ruthlessly exploited and alienated the proletarian labour force that eventually consisted of more or less all able-bodied Portuguese men who experienced the work into which they were conscripted for an indefinite

period of service as a curse – “a torment” in Marxist terms. Harsh treatment of the recruited workers obviously lead to abscondation or death. Consequently the king’s ambition to possess largest monastic complex in Christendom resulted in the ruination of Portugal – the state and its people.

Coda

After various vicissitudes since its inception, the well-preserved Mafra complex became a tourist attraction, now called the Palácio Nacional de Mafra. Few visitors may remember that João V emptied the state coffers to achieve immortality by means of architecture that was – besides promiscuous sex – his great passion.

Saramago’s version of Dom João’s architectural enterprise raises theoretical questions about great buildings dedicated to the rule of egocentric despots or tyrants that usually end in the ruination of the state and the death of many workers. The great wall of China is the supreme example. Two recent examples also spring to mind. First, Saddam Hussein’s 600 roomed palace built on top of the ruins of Nebucadnezzar’s Babylon. Second, the unfinished Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest, the largest public building ever built, that has 1,100 rooms, commissioned by the communist tyrant Nicolae Ceau_escu as the seat of his political and administrative power.

Finally, a recent quotation from the architect Renzo Piano (in Luscombe 2011: 52) sums up the contemporary assessment of past and present structures of megalomaniac proportions built for the glory of a ruler: “I never loved [the pyramids]. To kill people by making them work so hard just to celebrate one man? I admire them, but with a kind of sadness.” True, we may still admire the renamed Palácio Nacional de Mafra, but with a kind of sadness.

Notes

- 1 For information about Ludovice see Smith (1936) and Engass (1968).
- 2 Platt (2004:161) explains: “[T]he extraordinary wealth of John V (1707-50) ... originated in ... Brazil.” Platt (2004: 162) continues: “One consequence of ... absolutism – in Portugal as in Russia – was the launching of huge programmes of royal building. It was a Bavarian goldsmith-turned-architect, João Frederico Lodovice (d. 1752), trained in Rome, who built John V’s Convent-Palace at Mafra, north of Lisbon: ‘a second Escorial’, wrote the French physician, Charles-Frédéric Merveilleux in 1726, ‘[where] three-quarters of the king’s treasure and the gold brought by the fleets from Brazil have been metamorphosed into stone’.”
- 3 For the most complete description of the Mafra complex, see Da Gama (1985).
- 4 The English translation of the title of Saramago’s novel as misleads the reader to believe that it deals with the love story of two important but subsidiary characters and not with the construction of the *memorial do convento*, as implied by the Portuguese title.
- 5 When Saramago’s novel, was published in 1983, it was immediately acclaimed as one of his major works and received the prize of the PEN Club of Portugal. For an insightful analysis of the novel against the background of the history of Portugal, see Preto-Rodas (1987).
- 6 See Maré (2005).
- 7 This exceptional man’s novels, among which *Memorial do convento* (translated as *Baltasar & Blimunda*) is one of the most important, unambiguously express his view of life that he summarised in a few words: “I have leftist convictions.” Saramago’s pessimism and atheism have their roots in his severely deprived childhood. In 1967 he joined the Portuguese Communist Party to resist António de Oliveira Salazar’s totalitarian regime.

Without apology he remained a member of the Communist Party all his life, mainly because he recognised in globalisation a new totalitarian system. He was also convinced that the world would be a better place without religion. Christianity and communism alike were responsible for violence against humanity. However, Saramago repeatedly wrote about religion, as is evident also in the novel referred to in this article, especially in the case of the king and the queen's bigoted obsession with religion. Worse still, the king's megalomania

that caused the enslavement of his nation to accomplish the building project at Mafra may be interpreted as a symptom of capitalism that Saramago condemned as severely as religion.

- 8 See Maré (2010).
- 9 Marx first articulated his concept of alienation in his *Economic Manuscripts of 1844*, published in Marx (1975).

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