

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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MELLO, Evaldo Cabral de (Recife, 1936)

Evaldo José Cabral de Mello was born in Recife (Pernambuco, north-east region of Brazil) on 20 January 1936. A retired diplomat, he is the youngest of seven children born to Luiz Antônio Cabral de Mello (a law graduate and member of the *Associação de Imprensa de Pernambuco* [Pernambuco Press Association]) and Carmen Carneiro Leão Cabral de Mello. He has established a career of national and international recognition as a historian, particularly through his research on the so-called "Dutch Brazil" and the processes of independence and the creation of the Brazilian empire, all grounded in an analysis of regional history (north-eastern *Zona da Mata* [Forest Belt]).

He has been an emeritus member of the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* [Brazilian Historic and Geographic Institute] (IHGB) since 1987. Although he was an historian with no university degree, he was awarded the title of Notorious Expert in History by the University of São Paulo (USP) in 1992. In 2014, he was elected to the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* [Brazilian Academy of Letters] (ABL), assuming the 34th chair in 2015, succeeding João Ubaldo Ribeiro.

The unique and innovative narrative, along with its original contributions in works that span economic history, social history, and mentalities, were emphasised in the recommendation from the History Department of the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters, and Human Sciences to the USP [University of São Paulo] for granting him the title of Notorious Expert in History. At that time, the historian had already published four books and several articles in periodicals. This scientific recognition has conferred upon Evaldo Cabral de Mello the *status* of a Ph.D. holder, allowing him to teach postgraduate courses and serve on examination boards for master's dissertations and Ph.D. theses at the USP. However, the historian only served for a brief period as a visiting professor at that university. He chose not to pursue a teaching career as he did not feel comfortable in a classroom setting and saw little value in taking on additional academic responsibilities.

Regarding his social background, he comes from a lineage of large rural landowners in Pernambuco, often referred to as the "nobles of the land," which significantly influences much of the historian's work. Some of his family members received honours and held government positions in the Brazilian Empire. Evaldo Cabral de Mello grew up listening to stories about sugar mills. These conversations were filled with memories of Pernambuco's nativism, which was shaped by various events in the region, ranging from the occupation and



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subsequent expulsion of the Dutch (1630-1654) to the Confederation of the Ecuador (1824). It was precisely the sugarcane North-east — characterised by its vibrant figures embroiled in disputes and negotiations of political and economic power surrounding the wealth generated in the *Zona da Mata* of what was then Portuguese America from the 16th to the 19th centuries, intertwined with the complex European geopolitical dynamics — that became the primary focus of research for historian Evaldo Cabral de Mello.

Focusing on Pernambuco's *Zona da Mata*, a region that also encompassed parts of Alagoas and Paraíba, Evaldo Cabral de Mello reconstructed events that specifically involved the aristocracy of Pernambuco ("*açucarocracia*" [sugarocracy]). Drawing on local narratives without succumbing to provincialism, he challenged what he viewed as the "historiographical imperialism" of Rio de Janeiro and the Brazilian Centre-South. According to Cabral de Mello, this "Saquarema discourse" offered interpretations that were of interest to the power centre of the Brazilian empire, effectively marginalising other regions that would later contribute to the unity known as Brazil. His works positioned the North-east (formerly referred to as the North) as a focal point of study, expanding the examination of regional historical events that significantly influenced colonial Brazil within a much broader context. In this way, he examined the subject matter beyond the confines of what was then Portuguese America, revealing the conflict between the interests of the sugarocracy and those of other elites from the centre of the empire. Simultaneously, he dialectically illustrated the political instrumentation of Pernambuco's nativist discourse, which was crafted by local elites to secure favours and sustain regional power.

Evaldo Cabral de Mello has always lived in an urban setting, having resided only in Recife until the age of 18. Stimulated by the world of reading from an early age, he was captivated by *O touro Ferdinand* (translation of *The story of Ferdinand* by Munro Leaf, USA, 1936) at the age of four. Now a classic of world children's literature, the story would influence him throughout his life, as it helped him recognise the existence of two types of people: some who are agitated and others who are reflective and creative. He made this association in his twenties while reading the philosopher Ortega y Gasset (In M. Hélio, "*Eles se detestavam*" [They hated each other] 2002, p. 14). He was the only one of his siblings who did not experience the daily life of a sugar mill, which left him feeling frustrated. Perhaps this is why Evaldo Cabral de Mello was profoundly impacted as a teenager by reading *Fogo morto* [Dead fire] (1943), by José Lins do Rego, a novel depicting the decline of sugar mill owners — a reality that also impacted his family. The work sparked in him a passion for writing and even led him to consider pursuing a career as a fiction writer. (L.M. Schwarcz and H.M. Starling, *Três vezes Brasil* [Three times Brazil], 2019).

As a teenager, he read *Tempo dos Flamengos* [Time of the Flemish] (1947), by his historian cousin José Antônio Gonsalves de Mello. It was during this time, as he began to interact with this researcher — one of the foremost experts on the Dutch presence in the *Zona da Mata* of Pernambuco, who encouraged him to learn 17th-century Dutch — that he was fundamentally influenced to pursue historiographical studies and start publishing in the field. His interest in researching Brazil (particularly Pernambuco) and his appreciation for literature were also nurtured by other close relatives, including his cousin Gilberto Freyre, who wrote the



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preface for the essay *Aspectos da descaracterização do Recife* [Aspects of the de-characterisation of Recife] (1951), published by the Grêmio Literário Ruy Barbosa, when Evaldo Cabral de Mello was just 15. In this work, the young author expressed his concern about the rapid growth of the city without regard for preserving the architectural heritage and ecological aspects. The following year, another booklet was published in a similar tone: *Recife – uma introdução ao estudo das suas formas e das suas cores* [Recife — an introduction to the study of its shapes and colours] (1952), published by publishing house Região. These writings reflected Evaldo Cabral de Mello's alignment of ideas with Gilberto Freyre, an affinity that did not persist into the historian's later phase, as he himself noted in an interview (R. Bertol, *Peripécias de Evaldo Cabral* [Peripeteia of Evaldo Cabral], 2003). As for João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920-1999), the poet and diplomat who was Evaldo Cabral de Mello's older brother, he was more influenced by his decision to pursue a career in the civil service than by his interest in literature and the refined narrative style that would characterise Evaldo's career as a historian.

In addition to the environment in which he was raised and his familial connections with intellectual notables, his travels were pivotal to his development. He completed his secondary education at Oswaldo Cruz, Ginásio da Madalena, and Carneiro Leão schools in Recife. As a complement to his education, he attended the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Madrid in 1955, through a scholarship from the Institute of Hispanic Culture. A brief part of his stay in Spain was spent at the home of João Cabral de Melo Neto, who held a diplomatic position there. When the scholarship expired, he was able to spend an additional year studying in London with his father, where he encountered the works of English historians such as Arnold Toynbee. His experience in Europe led him to consider a diplomatic career as an alternative to professionalisation, which would mean following in his older brother's footsteps. To that end, in 1960, he enrolled in the diplomatic career preparation course at the Rio Branco Institute. After graduating in 1962, he embarked on a profession that provided him with financial stability and opened numerous opportunities to work as a researcher in his spare time. This role allowed him easy access to libraries and extensive public archives in the countries where he served as a diplomat, until his retirement, in 1995, in Rio de Janeiro. Evaldo Cabral de Mello is thus included in a select group of Brazilians who have held public diplomatic office while also being historians, such as Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen, José Maria da Silva Paranhos Júnior, the Baron of Rio Branco, Joaquim Aurélio Barreto Nabuco de Araújo — on whom he would later focus his studies and prepare a book — Manoel de Oliveira Lima, and the contemporary Alberto Vasconcellos da Costa e Silva.

After being appointed to a public diplomatic post in 1962, he worked in the United Nations Division of the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Itamaraty), serving as an advisor to the General Secretariat for Foreign Policy and as an official in the ministerial cabinet until 1964. Following the coup that established the civil-military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985), and due to his lack of political connections to left-wing organisations (unlike his brother, João Cabral de Melo Neto, who had temporarily lost his job a decade earlier for his ties to the Brazilian Communist Party), he held trusted positions, including serving as an adviser to the



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Minister of Planning, Roberto Oliveira Campos, until 1965. He left this ministry to serve as Vice-Secretary at the Embassy in Washington, D.C. (USA), for two years. Before leaving Brazil, concerned that life in the North American capital might be dull, he acquired several historiographical works on the presence of the Dutch in Portuguese America and on the Brazilian war that led to the restoration of Pernambuco. From Washington, he departed to New York, where he served as Vice-Secretary of the Brazilian Mission to the UN until 1970. In the meantime, he read *O Mediterrâneo e o mundo mediterrâneo à época de Felipe II* [The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II] (1949) by Fernand Braudel. The work undoubtedly inspired Evaldo Cabral de Mello in his pursuit to be recognised as a historian unaffiliated with any specific theoretical-methodological school: "For those who found themselves caught between conventional historiography, the Marxist vulgate, and sociology, reading Braudel was an authentic liberation. "Here, finally, was a historian who possessed neither the bitterness of the first, nor the reductionism of the second, nor the doctrinairism of the third; and who, equipped with the tools of the latest scholarship, was able, like the great historians of the 19th century, to devote body, soul, and life to vast sections of the past" (*Um imenso Portugal...* [A vast Portugal...], 2002, p. 302).

In Washington, he took advantage of the collections at the Library of Congress. In New York, he visited the New York Public Library and the Dag Hammarskjöld Library (at the UN headquarters). These libraries provided valuable sources for the writing of the historian's first major work of his adult phase: *Olinda Restaurada – guerra e açúcar no Nordeste* [Olinda Restored — war and sugar in the north-east], 1630-1654, published in 1975. The diplomat's posting to Europe was essential for completing this work. When he was assigned to the Brazilian Delegation in Geneva, in 1970, he used the month allocated for his relocation to conduct research on manuscript sources in Lisbon (*Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino* [Overseas Historical Archive], *Biblioteca da Ajuda* [Ajuda Library] and *Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa* [National Library in Lisbon]). In 1973, upon his return to Brazil, he researched Dutch-origin materials in the José Higino collection (from the *Instituto Arqueológico, Histórico e Geográfico Pernambucano* [Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Institute of Pernambuco]) and documents relating to the Dutch period belonging to the collection of the *Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro* [National Library in Rio de Janeiro].

Evaldo Cabral de Mello was 39 when he published *Olinda restaurada*. The work, published by the Publishing House of the University of São Paulo (Edusp/Forense), had a significant historiographical impact, gaining national recognition and winning the Joaquim Nabuco History Prize from the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* [Brazilian Academy of Letters] (ABL) in 1976. That same year, the book earned him international academic recognition, receiving positive reviews from esteemed historians such as Stuart B. Schwartz and Charles R. Boxer, published in Oxford University Press and Duke University Press, respectively. In the late 1960s, Charles R. Boxer, a British historian then regarded as the foremost expert on the Dutch in Portuguese America, even suggested a moratorium on research on the subject, feeling that enough valuable work had already been completed on the period, as noted in Stuart Schwartz's review (1976).

Olinda restaurada, in the eyes of American Brazilianist Stuart Schwartz, would be the first book by a



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"Pernambuco sextet" related to the colonial period (S. Schwartz, In L.M. Schwarcz, *Leituras críticas...* [Critical readings], 2008). This collection would be comprised by the following works: *Rubro veio - O imaginário da restauração pernambucana* [The Pernambuco restoration imaginary] (1986); *O nome e o sangue - Uma parábola genealógica no Pernambuco colonial* [Name and blood — A genealogical parable in colonial Pernambuco] (1989); *A fronda dos mazombos - Nobres contra mascates. Pernambuco, 1666-1715* [The Mazombo Revolt — Nobles versus Merchants Pernambuco, 1666-1715] (from 1995, winner of the José Ermírio de Moraes Prize from the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* the following year); *O negócio do Brasil - Portugal, os Países Baixos e o Nordeste, 1640-1669* (1998); and *A outra Independência - o federalismo pernambucano de 1817 a 1824* [The other independence — Pernambuco's federalism from 1817 to 1824] (2004).

Part of this sextet has been compared to Charles Boxer's trilogy on colonial Brazil, produced in the late 1960s, both for its historical time frame and its focus on the war against the Dutch: "Like Evaldo, Boxer also appreciated narrative style and believed it was possible to accurately reconstruct the past. On the other hand, he was less interested than his colleague in the creation of a historical consciousness, or imaginary, and in the capacity of such a consciousness to influence events and carry political implications" (*Idem*, p. 15).

French historiography influenced him through essential readings from the *Annales* and through direct contact with some of its prominent figures in the classroom. In the early 1980s, while serving as Minister Counsellor at the Brazilian Embassy in Paris (1979-1984), he took the opportunity to enhance his research training by enrolling in open courses at the Collège de France, attending classes by Georges Duby and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie. From Duby, for instance, he noted that he learned the concept of the imaginary in history (in *Três vezes Brasil, op. cit.*, p. 143). However, Evaldo Cabral de Mello consistently emphasises the importance of English historiography in his own work: "Despite the high quality of contemporary French historiography, we must be cautious of the French tendency toward over-theorising. As an antidote, there's nothing quite like reading a good English historian, like John H. Elliott or Charles Boxer, as the English have an empiricist vocation more closely aligned with the historian's craft. Deep down, whether they admit it or not, historians are nominalists, often reluctant to embrace their nominalism, rather than creators of grand explanatory theories of the past, as is so often expected of them" (E.C. de Mello, in T.C.P. Miranda, *Conversas do Recife, em Lisboa* [Conversations from Recife, in Lisbon], 1990, p. 142).

Evaldo Cabral de Mello has always sought to avoid labels and expressed a dislike for fashionable "isms". However, in the interview referenced above — one of the first he gave on his historiographical work while serving as Consul General of Brazil in Lisbon — he did not shy away from self-definition: "The historian is the innate saboteur of the sociologist, the anthropologist, the economist (...). If I had to define myself epistemologically, I would use the formula, now completely forgotten and out of fashion, coined by Georges Gurvitch in the 1950s: that of 'dialectical hyper-empiricism'" (*Idem*, p. 142).

Wary of interdisciplinarity in historiography, Evaldo Cabral de Mello questioned, upon assuming chair no. 34 of the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* (ABL) in 2015, whether "the very success of co-operation between



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history and the human sciences prompts us to ask whether it hasn't turned into an orgy. While interdisciplinary collaboration can enrich historical explanation and understanding, it may have side effects when pursued without a sufficiently critical approach. The difference between history and the human sciences also lies in their expressive resources, or rhetoric, to use the noble term that has been diminished by prolonged misuse. Narrativity and diachrony, as fundamental records of human experience, form the irreducible core of historiographical discourse. No matter how far the human sciences progress, there will always be an inherent need to approach the past in terms of what happened and not in terms of laws or general theories or grand theoretical concepts" (*Discurso de posse* [Acceptance speech], 2015).

After *Olinda restaurada*, Evaldo Cabral de Mello's most analytical work, he published *O Norte agrário e o Império (1871-1889)* [The agrarian North and the Empire (1871-1889)] in 1984, from that point onward, the author showed an increased concern with narrative. In his approach to writing history, and drawing on his synthesis of French and English historiographies, Cabral de Mello argued that, while history holds a scientific status, it is also a literary genre. He believed historians should strive to reach audiences beyond scholars and subject-matter experts.

This increasing emphasis on narrative led to the textual construction of *Rubro Veio...* (1986). Still a product of the intellectual discoveries he had made in Paris, this work was completed in Lima, Peru, during his tenure at the Brazilian Embassy (1984-1986). While serving as Consul General of Brazil in Lisbon from 1987 to 1991, Evaldo Cabral de Mello immersed himself in archival research, including at the Torre do Tombo, this research was essential to the writing of *O nome e o sangue...* (1989) [Name and blood... (1989)]. In this work, by exploring a genealogical forgery that concealed the New Christian origins of one of his characters, Cabral de Mello shed light on key aspects of the mentality of those who lived through the *Ancien Régime* in Portugal and Spain. In this work, the historian also provided clues into his writing process, describing how he organised and preserved relevant documents to allow for closer reference in the future. In *O nome e o sangue*, Evaldo Cabral de Mello illustrated how a certain New Christian aristocrat faced minimal interference from the Inquisition in Brazil by noting that this individual was not even summoned by the Holy Office to discuss a slave who was prosecuted for blasphemy. Only a few years later did Evaldo Cabral de Mello's audience learn more about the peripeteia and resistance of "José, *mulatto*, slave of Fernão Soares", the protagonist of his article *Como manipular a inquisição para mudar de senhor* [How to Manipulate the Inquisition to Change Masters] (1992), an essay that can exemplify the researcher's use of microhistory, drawing from a detailed study of a criminal case. Evaldo Cabral de Mello has not been immune to historiographical controversies. As a sceptic of historical commemorations due to their political uses of the past, he was one of the most vocal critics of the events marking the 200th anniversary of King João VI's arrival in Brazil. Evaldo Cabral de Mello's thesis asserts that the Portuguese Court's move to Rio de Janeiro in 1808 had little impact on the unity of Brazil, a view that contrasts sharply with the perspective of José Murilo de Carvalho (*D. João VI e as histórias dos Brasis* [King João VI and the histories of the Brazils], 2008). Above all, this event resulted in increased taxes imposed on the provinces, particularly Pernambuco, and this



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discontent was one of the factors leading to the Pernambucan Revolt of 1817. To celebrate the bicentenary, then, would be to participate in a "feast of spoliation" imposed on some provinces to sustain the Court's bureaucratic apparatus (M. Hélio, *A festa da espoliação* [The feast of spoliation], 2008). Opposing the "Saquarema view", which suggests that Brazil was destined for unity from the Independence process of 1822 onward, Evaldo Cabral's perspective takes an opposing stance, highlighting federalism, republicanism, and nativist anti-Lusitanian sentiment, all in contrast to Pedro I's centralisation project that ultimately prevailed. The creation of the Brazilian Empire following independence from Portugal encountered resistance, exemplified by the discontent of those involved in the Confederation of the Ecuador (1824). "What should have been our national revolution — Independence — was in reality a counter-revolution orchestrated from Rio by a prince and carried out by a high-ranking civil servant elite, whose very existence was threatened by the Lisbon courts", argues Evaldo Cabral de Mello (*Um imenso Portugal*, 2002, p. 171). This perspective aligns with Raymundo Faoro's argument in *Os donos do poder* [The Owners of Power] (1958) about the bureaucratic class's influence in the process of breaking with the Portuguese Empire. As is apparent, the work *Um imenso Portugal* (2002), which primarily compiles articles he published in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* from 2000 onward, consolidates arguments initially developed in *A ferida de Narciso – ensaio de história regional* [The Wound of Narcissus — a regional history essay] (2001) and others he would later expand upon in *A outra independência – o federalismo pernambucano de 1817 a 1824* (2004). This latter work serves as the historian's critical response to Saquarema historiography. Other topics explored in *Um imenso Portugal* are further explored in other works, such as *Nassau, governador do Brasil holandês* [Nassau, governor of Dutch Brazil] (2006); *O Brasil holandês (1630-1654)* [Dutch Brazil (1630-1654)], from 2010, *O bagaço da cana – os engenhos de açúcar do Brasil holandês* [The Sugarcane Pomace — Sugar Mills in Dutch Brazil] (2012) and *A educação pela guerra – Leituras cruzadas da história colonial* [Education Through War — Interwoven Readings of Colonial History] (2014).

Although, as already mentioned, he is not a fan of commemorative events, Evaldo Cabral de Mello was one of the historians honoured in Portugal in 2000 with the D. João de Castro Prize for his work *O negócio do Brasil - Portugal, os Países Baixos e o Nordeste, 1640-1669* [The Brazil business — Portugal, the Netherlands and the Northeast, 1640-1669]. The National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries, led at the time by Commissioner-General and historian Joaquim Romero Magalhães, reissued the work in 2001. *O negócio do Brasil* revisited the topic of the "sugar war" (a conflict both for control of sugar and financed by sugar). If *Olinda restaurada* focused on the war against the Dutch itself, detailing how the two opposing sides organised militarily and financed their efforts, *Rubro veio* explored the imagery and symbolism surrounding the war. In *O negócio do Brasil*, also published in Dutch in 2005, the author turned his attention to the diplomatic sphere of the conflict in The Hague, observing that historiography "lacked a significant analysis of the international negotiations." This emphasis led to a misunderstanding about the work, suggesting that the recovery of the Northeast was merely the outcome of a diplomatic agreement and a commercial transaction. This misunderstanding arose because, in the first edition of *O*



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negócio do Brasil, the Luso-Brazilian struggle on northeastern soil was scarcely highlighted. The author felt that it had been sufficiently covered in *Olinda restaurada* (*O negócio do Brasil*, 2011, p. 10-11). In fact, this willingness to adjust his analyses is a hallmark of the author, who, when releasing a new edition of a work, revises, rewrites, and sometimes even reorders passages "to enhance the flow and clarity of the text" (idem, p. 13).

For Evaldo Cabral de Mello, understanding the Brazilian war is impossible without first examining the Portuguese Restoration. He argued that any historian interested in researching the Brazilian colonial period must study Portuguese historiography. Mello has always critically analysed the relationship between metropolis and colony and even stated in an interview that the problems of contemporary Brazil could be largely explained by two issues that have been alive in public administration since the colonial period:

corruption and incompetence. In describing the Dutch period, he expressed admiration for the Batavian style of administration, which was more organised than the Portuguese approach at the time and more tolerant of religious differences. However, when asked if Brazil would have been better off as a Dutch colony, he did not rule out the hypothesis, but emphasised that former Dutch colonies were not free from socio-structural problems like those suffered by Brazilians.

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