

Jaime da Costa Oliveira, *Memórias para a História de um Laboratório do Estado*. Santarém: O Mirante, 2013. 189 pp. ISBN 978-989-98799-0-4.

By *Júlia Gaspar**

The author of *Memórias para a História de um Laboratório de Estado* is a retired physicist and former administrator of the State Laboratory created under the name Laboratório de Física e Engenharia Nucleares (Laboratory of Nuclear Physics and Engineering) (LFEN). This book offers a first-hand account of this institution, since its creation in 1959 until its extinction in 2012, and provides historians of science with a perfect example to reflect upon the virtues and pitfalls of personal institutional histories.

The author offers an explanation for the vicissitudes the Laboratory endured through five periods of crisis — 1962–1963, 1973–1978, 1992–1994, 2000–2005, 2009–2011, and five mutations — 1968, 1979, 1985, 1995, and 2007. The identification of crises and mutations are Jaime Oliveira's own interpretation: the first as perceptions resulting from his experience; the second as the consequence of legislation issued by successive governments.

Built in the Lisbon's outskirts at Sacavém, the Laboratory was born out of a proposal of Junta de Energia Nuclear (Nuclear Energy Board), to António de Oliveira Salazar, the dictator and president of the ministers' council, in December 1955. The Board's relevance was due to its commitment to uranium oxide production, exported under a contract to the USA, until 1962. The Laboratory was constructed for the purpose of housing the nuclear reactor offered by US Atoms for Peace Program, investing the income from the uranium oxide export. Its history is, therefore, closely intertwined with the Board's, until its extinction in 1979, but despite the troubled life of the Laboratory its essential premises at Sacavém have been kept to this day.

In January 1959, the Board comprised two technical departments, the State Laboratory (LFEN) and another department devoted to the geological survey of uranium ore, and uranium oxide production. According to Jaime Oliveira, the cancellation of the US uranium oxide contract gave way to the first crisis period, 1962–1963. The first mutation, taking place in 1968 is associated with the creation of the third technical department of the Board to supervise the nuclear power plants program, depriving LFEN from one of its previous main goals, and confining it to personnel training, and applied and technological research.

* Interuniversity Centre for the History of Science and Technology (CIUHCT) – University of Lisbon

The author claims that the second (extended) period of crisis, 1973–1978, began at the end of the rule of office of Marcelo Caetano, who succeeded Salazar in 1968, and ended in the first years of the democratic regime. Once again the crisis was associated with the supervision of the nuclear power plants program, in the end of 1973, meaning the loss of its relevance and leading to its extinction, in 1979. Meanwhile, LFEN was split into various departments, which were incorporated into the new Laboratório Nacional de Engenharia e Tecnologia Industrial (National Laboratory of Engineering and Industrial Technology) (LNETI) in 1979, giving way to the second mutation. Jaime Oliveira associates the third mutation, of 1985, with the reassembling of two departments previously split, under the designation of Instituto de Ciências e Engenharia Nucleares (Institute of Nuclear Sciences and Engineering).

The Laboratory's unstable tutelage under LNETI led Jaime Oliveira to identify a third period of crisis, 1992–1994, and a fourth mutation in 1995, emerging as Instituto Tecnológico e Nuclear (Technological and Nuclear Institute) (ITN), reintegrated most of the original departments of the Laboratory. ITN was put to the test in the fourth crisis from 2000 to 2005, coming out of it on a new track with the fifth and last mutation of 2007, when it was encompassed by a new law regulating the status of State Laboratories as public institutes, with indirect supervision by the State, and a specific juridical regime. Unfortunately, this arrangement did not survive the fifth period of crisis, 2009–2011, matching the financial, economic and social crisis which submerged Portugal.

Finally, on 1 March 2012, the autonomic status of ITN came to an end when the government, led by Pedro Passos Coelho, incorporated the once State Laboratory into Instituto Superior Técnico (Higher Technical Institute) of Technical University of Lisbon.

As a narrative on the life of LFEN based on the author's personal experience and recollections, this is not a book that one would expect to see reviewed in a specialized journal devoted to the history of science and technology. Addressed to the general public and younger generations, as well as to scientists and historians, its main virtue for the latter is undoubtedly its chronological data, the extensive compilation of primary sources and substantial transcription of documents and statements by politicians. Oliveira's book makes in this way easily accessible a considerable array of sources, which are an invaluable starting point for future fine-grained accounts based on more sophisticated interpretations of LFEN's institutional history.