

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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COELHO, Francisco Adolfo (Coimbra, 1847 – Carcavelos, 1919)

Some might consider Adolfo Coelho to have been less a historian and more an agent for change, as well something of a historical character. He was, after all, with his radicalism of anti-regime positions, directly responsible for the closure of the Lisbon Casino Conferences in 1871 and for the fame given to them as a turning point in the crisis of changing mindsets and forces in nineteenth-century Portugal, a fame that the conferences probably would not have acquired had they proceeded freely and according to schedule. In his other work promoting educational growth in Portugal and introducing new scientific perspectives in the study of language, Adolfo Coelho always laid his eyes firmly on the future he helped create, rather than the past which fuelled history. Given these caveats, how could we not acknowledge that, in his day and age, the ways of thinking and inquiring, the tools, references and programs were so deeply diachronic that it made of each person who ventured into producing science a historian *malgré lui*?

Francisco Adolfo Coelho was born in Coimbra on 15 January 1847 and died in Carcavelos on 9 February 1919. He lost his father very early and had a difficult childhood. When he was 15 years old he enrolled at the University of Coimbra to study mathematics, but abandoned regular studies midway through (1862-64), displeased with the education provided. Shortly after (1865), he attended the *Curso Superior de Letras* in Lisbon for at least one year, which also did not satisfy him. His criticism of the course, accusing it of imitating French faculties, when these were leaving that model behind, did not, however, prevent him from later applying for a professor's position there. With his sights set on German culture, he began his studies of philology, which at that time was, in the words of Leite de Vasconcelos, "a German science". He must have embarked on self-study, as we do not know of any Portuguese, or foreign, tutor. It was not long, however, before he received international recognition with the publication, at the age of 21, of his pioneering work – *A lingua portugueza: phonologia, etymologia, morphologia e syntaxe* (The Portuguese Language: Phonology, Etymology, Morphology and Syntax, 1868) – a short book, usually considered, following Leite, as the starting point for linguistic science in Portugal.

Ten years later, in 1878, he joined the *Curso Superior de Letras* as a professor, in the company of Guilherme de Vasconcelos Abreu, to assume the role of two new chairs, the first in modern linguistics to be taught in Portugal. Abreu, newly arrived from France and Germany, where he studied Sanskrit and Orientalism, held the position of chair of *Sanskrit, Vedic and Classical Languages and Literatures*, while



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Adolfo Coelho was assigned the chair of *Comparative Philology, or science of language*, created to satisfy a request from Portuguese academics and, as clear revelation of influences and alliances, of prominent linguists of the German school – Carolina Michaëlis, Adolf Tobler, Gustav Gröber, Karl von Reinhardtstoettner, Wilhelm Storck – who not only proposed the chair but nominated Coelho: "Foreign science, the most competent to judge the methods created by it, recognises in Portuguese linguist Francisco Adolfo Coelho the necessary capacity to profess that discipline". (*Manual de Filologia Portuguesa*, Manual of Portuguese Philology, 1977, p. 22).

Indeed, in 1878 the list of Coelho's published work was vast, almost entirely composed of linguistic research, but also on folk literature and anthropology. The decision on his competence for the university teaching position was based on the content of these works.

However one could already catch a glimpse of another side of Coelho, which would more immediately bring him closer to his contemporaries: an educator, both theoretical and practical, and an advocate of the essential cause of education for the people. As an educator, he was equally interested in the three classic levels of education (primary, secondary and university), about which he wrote abundantly, on everything from reading methods for children and collections of games and children's stories, to studies on the educational role of handicrafts and physical exercise and even reports, programmes and projects aimed at reorganising the national education system. He was primarily interested, however, in combating the ignorance and backwardness of Portuguese society, which fuelled the ideological debate of his generation. Singled out as a 'classroom' linguist, one could never call his work in this field sedentary, when theoretical observation was clearly superseded by prolonged and intensive practical intervention: among the administrative positions he held, in 1883 he founded the *Escola Primária Superior de Rodrigues Sampaio*, which he ran almost until his death, and where he taught all subjects except for drawing, supposedly working five hours there every day. He was also a professor at *Escola Normal Superior* (a teaching college in Lisbon), alongside his post at the *Curso Superior de Letras* and, after 1911, at the Faculty of Letters of Lisbon.

His path as an educator was plotted from 1871, when he took part in the famous Casino democratic conferences, held in the wake of the *Questão Coimbrã*, or controversy of 'Good Sense and Good Taste'. After Antero do Quental dealt with Portugal's decadence and Augusto Soromenho spoke scathingly on Portuguese literature, criticism reached its peak in the fifth lecture, given by Adolfo Coelho on 19 June 1871, on *A Questão do Ensino* (the Issue of Education). In it, he criticised the organisation, forms and types of education practiced in Portugal, in such terms that the authorities interdicted the continuation of the conferences, claiming they were introducing "doctrines and propositions that attacked religion and political institutions of the state" (*Manual de Filologia Portuguesa*, 'Manual of Portuguese Philology', 1977, p. 23). In fact, Coelho argued that the decline of education was due to the alliance between Church and State, which made imperative both the separation between them and the promotion of freedom of thought: "First, let us remember that we are in a country where Catholicism is the state religion imposed materially on the



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consciousness of all who are Portuguese: here the scientific spirit is thus driven out of everything under the immediate action of the state, chased out from it... In a word, the free search for truth is impossible in Portugal" (*A Questão do Ensino*. 1872, pp. 23-24).

Starting in the 1880s, an examination of his bibliography reveals a growing number of writings on the topics of education and children's literature, with emphasis on the dissemination of the ideas of German educator Friedrich Froebel, founder of Kindergarten. His relevant academic papers bore titles that speak for themselves on their content and the ideas engaging them in the programmatic concerns of the time: *Os Elementos Tradicionais da Educação* (Traditional Elements of Education, 1883), *A reforma do Curso Superior de Letras* (The Reform of *Curso Superior de Letras*, 1889), *Esboço de um programa para o estudo antropológico, patológico e demográfico do povo português* (Outline of a Program for the Anthropological, Pathological and Demographic Study of the Portuguese People, 1890), *Proposta relativa a um inquérito do estado físico, moral e intelectual do povo português* (Proposal on a Survey of the Physical, Moral and Intellectual State of the Portuguese People, 1890), *Pedagogia do Povo Português* (Pedagogy of Portuguese People, 1898), *O estudo da criança* (The Study of Children, 1913), *Cultura e analfabetismo* (Culture and Illiteracy, 1916). Alongside these are many writings that appeared in newspapers, revealing his desire to reach sections of the population quickly who did not have access to more specialised literature. Tellingly, many unrelated or anonymous writings were wrongly attributed to him, as shown by small corrections made by Rogério Fernandes to his bibliography (*Esboço bibliográfico da obra de F. Adolfo Coelho*, 'Bibliographical Outline of the Work of F. Adolfo Coelho, 1973, pp. 203-231), suggesting that Adolfo Coelho was considered the author 'by default' of anything written on education in Portugal. The official nature of much of his work, a sign of recognition by the state, certainly lead to these exaggerations of authorship. On the other hand, this does not prepare us to find, in a creator and agent of educational policies, insistent praise for traditional forms of transmission of popular culture as a substitute for the literacy in which modern regimes deposited hope for transformation and the promotion of society and the individual (materialised in 1876 in *Cartilha Maternal*, by João de Deus, received with widespread controversy). 'Illiterate people - states Coelho in *Cultura e Analfabetismo* (Culture and Illiteracy) - have their arts, industries, know-how, their education and even their pedagogy set to rules.' (*Cultura e Analfabetismo*, 1916, p. 20). Taking sides in this debate (carefully studied by Sergio Campos Matos, 2002, among others), he added that 'the idea of *homeland* is by no means strange to those who ignore the arts of reading and writing and cannot know the history of the country through books', an idea that was echoed later on in the image of the Portuguese people outlined by dialectologist Lindley Cintra.

Here we find a key to understanding Adolfo Coelho's investment in the field of popular culture; it was not a simple stroll through *folklore*, as a companion to the histories of language and literature that dominated the construction of nineteenth-century philological discourse, but a collection and utilisation of traditional documents that need to appear and be enhanced (but not surpassed and suppressed) by the advent of reading and writing. This project brings together systematic collections such as *Contos Populares*



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Portugueses (Popular Portuguese Tales, 1879), *Jogos e Rimas Infantis* (Games and Nursery Rhymes, 1883), *Materiais para o Estudo das Festas, Crenças e Costumes Populares Portugueses* (Materials for the Study of Popular Portuguese Celebrations, Beliefs and Customs, 1880), large-scale studies such as *Os Ciganos em Portugal* (Gypsies in Portugal, 1892), or the *Revista d'ethnologia e de glottologia* (Journal of Ethnology and Glottology) which he founded in 1871 to articulate the issues of language, ethnology, mythology and folklore. In this respect, Adolfo Coelho's work can neither be compared by the density of materials nor in the complexity of routes, with the achievements of Leite de Vasconcelos, but perhaps it is only fair to acknowledge Coelho's intuition and optimistic, forward looking thinking, which is absolutely absent from Leite's rich archaeology.

It is time to speak of Coelho the linguist, due to the large number of contributions made to that science in Adolfo Coelho's name. In his debut book, the first that Leite de Vasconcelos acknowledged reading on linguistics, on the recommendation of his professor Epifânio da Silva Dias (thus, double surety of authority), Adolfo Coelho studied 'the organism of language in its elements - the *sounds*, *forms* and set of processes by which words come together in simple sentences and simple sentences into compound sentences, *syntax*' (*A lingua portuguesa: fonologia, etimologia, morfologia e syntaxe*, 'The Portuguese Language: Phonology, Etymology, Morphology and Syntax', 1868, p. iii). He followed Diez's historical-comparative model and, more generally, 'work in Germany, Britain and France, but especially in the first of these nations, which founded *glottics*, or the science of language, works of which some results were revealed in this book, and that, because of their importance, for matters of primary interest upon which they cast an unexpected light, will garner more attention from the civilised world day by day' (*Idem.*, p. v). The youthful idealism of these words marries well with the scientific novelty and with the planned work it announces, but only partly fulfils: "A History of the Portuguese language, an etymological dictionary of this language, a glossary of archaic and provincial Portuguese shall complement our research in the field of the language we first spoke." (*idem*, p. iv). In this programme, one should not read solely a curiosity to acquire knowledge and to facet it with modern instruments. Adolfo Coelho's driving force lay in his convictions of social and cultural transformation, faced with a country of illiterate people, with schools that did not distinguish between secular education and religious education, with universities producing rhetoric and illusions. Thus, the justification for Adolfo Coelho's book (leading to the introduction of modern linguistics) is found in his urgency to combat the state of ignorance in which Portuguese philology found itself at the time: 'When we first began to be introduced to the work of modern foreign philologists, we sadly saw that Portuguese philology was completely oblivious to the progress that the science of language, or *glottics*, to use the best of the names it has been given, had made in those nations whose intellectual development we matched at other times. In the field of philology, Portugal is more or less at the point where these nations were at the beginning of this century.' (*Idem*, p. vii). On the pages that follow, as proof he unfolded harsh criticism of recent works, such as the *Dictionary* of D. José de Lacerda and *Génio da Língua Portuguesa* (Genius of the Portuguese Language) by Francisco Leoni, chastising the Celtic theories of António Ribeiro dos Santos and Cardinal Saraiva along the way, and



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insulting Inocêncio for the appreciation he displayed for Lacerda. In concluding the introduction of his book, on page xix, young Coelho had not only made clear what was to come, but had also made enemies of half a dozen scholars, both living and dead. For his scientific exigency, his arrogance and his lack of tact, he was consecrated as the just forerunner of a discipline that, in Portugal, abounds in these same virtues.

The arrival of modern linguistics cannot be fully appreciated, however, without epochal context: in 1887, the University of Coimbra approved, and its press published, the doctoral thesis of António Garcia Ribeiro de Vasconcelos, which contains statements such as this, certainly not ironic: 'the dispersion of Babel, having no nature of punishment, was nevertheless a most wise measure of Divine Omnipotence' (quoted *Filólogos Portugueses entre 1868 e 1943*, 'Portuguese Philologists between 1868 and 1943', 1996 p. 27).

The 1870s were a decade rich in activity for Adolfo Coelho. After a dispute with Levy Maria Jordão concerning the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* by Hübner, memorable only for the title of his pamphlet (*A Sciencia Allemã e a Ignorancia Portuguesa*, 'German Science and Portuguese Ignorance'), and from the remaining shrapnel of Casino conferences, in 1871 he published *Theoria da conjugação em latim e portuguez. Estudo de grammatica comparativa* (Theory of Conjugation in Latin and Portuguese. Study of Comparative Grammar), a title that echoes the Bopp treatise, who in 1816 compared Sanskrit with Latin, Greek, Persian and Germanic languages. An important linguistic introduction to the *Grande dictionario portuguez* (Great Portuguese Dictionary) by Domingos Vieira dates from the same year, and was reprinted three years later in *Questões da língua portuguesa* (Portuguese Language Issues, 1874). He was editor of *Bibliographia critica de historia e litteratura* (Critical Bibliography of History and Literature, 1873-5), a journal of book reviews, largely written by Coelho himself. He also became involved in numerous controversies and disputes, something for which he had an unashamed penchant: against Fausto de Castilho (*Sciencia e probidade...*, 'Science and Probity', 1873), against Inocêncio and a critique of his *Lingua portugueza* (Portuguese Language, 1870), in the *Dicionário da Academia das Ciências* (Dictionary of the Academy of Sciences, 1870), against Levy Maria Jordão in defence of *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* by the German Hübner (1870), about the *Historia da litteratura portugueza* by Teófilo Braga (History of Portuguese Literature, 1872).

In 1878 he began teaching at the *Curso Superior de Letras* and, from 1911, at the Faculty of Letters of Lisbon. Along with university teaching, which he continued until the end of his life, he intensified production of the aforementioned works on teaching. The studies that are primarily responsible for his lasting international fame also emerged at this time.

First and foremost are three essays devoted to Creole, sharing a common title - *Os dialectos romanicos ou neo-latinos na Africa, Asia e America* (Romanic or Neo-Latin Dialects in Africa, Asia and America, 1880, 1882 and 1886). They are truly comparatist works, rich in materials from Portuguese-based creoles, but also Spanish and French-based creoles, as well as *lingua franca*. Despite deriving from data collected by others, such as those of other major Creolists of that time, such as Hugo Schuchardt, these studies constitute one of Coelho's greatest works. A central issue of Creolistics is the origin of Creole languages, and there are two



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conflicting theories: one, proposed by Lucien Adam (1883), explains Creole as a substrate of the mother tongue, which remained in adult slaves upon learning the language of their masters; these slaves substantially retained the grammar of the language of their nation, which added to the lexicon of the dominant language of European contact, making Creole a hybrid language. Another theory attributes Creole to children born into slavery who, deprived of the language of their enslaved parents, created a new language from their innate language faculty, capturing the lexicon of the masters' language. This second theory was formulated by Adolfo Coelho (and seconded by W. Meyer-Lübke, H. Schuchardt and most modern Creolists) on the following principles: 1. Creoles 'represent the first or early stages in the acquisition of a foreign language by a population who speak or spoke another' and 2. 'they owe their origins to the action of psychological or physiological laws that are the same everywhere, and not to the influence of the former languages of the populations who speak these dialects.' (*Os dialectos romanicos ou neo-latinos na Africa, Asia e America*, 1880, p. 102-5). A Creole, by virtue of this, is a language, and not a dialect or variety of another language; it is autonomous both in relation to the native language of the ancestors of its speakers, and in relation to the colonial language of the owners of these ancestors; in appropriate political and cultural conditions, it can develop and reach the stage of a language of culture, with written literature and able to be taught in a classroom setting.

Another important work is the treatise entitled *Os Ciganos em Portugal* (Gypsies in Portugal, 1892), in which the wealth of historical, ethnographic and anthropological materials is surpassed only by its linguistic data, as it provides a very thorough study of the formation and structure of *calão* (slang or jargon from the Roma community).

His lengthy 1906 article entitled "Casos de analogia na língua portuguesa", ('Cases of analogy in the Portuguese Language' in *Revue Hispanique*, XV), leads from the assimilatory, phonetic and morphological processes connected with the suffix '-agem' to a theoretical discussion of the interference of analogy in language acquisition by children, a recurrent theme found in many of his works.

Other no less ambitious works include *Estudos sobre a influencia ethnica na transformação das linguas* (Studies on Ethnic Influences in the Transformation of Languages, 1901), of which he only wrote (or published) a first part of dizzying scholarship, *Diferenças foneticas das linguas e diferenças anatomicas dos órgãos da falla* (Phonetic Differences of Languages and Anatomical Differences of Speech Organs), leaving only promises of future essays on 'influences of languages on other languages', 'mixed grammar languages' and 'the formation of Creole dialects'. It is difficult to believe that these titles, and the planning they would entail, do not correspond to material that was actually written, noting moreover recurrent themes and research; this raises the question of the absence of an archive of Coelho's unpublished works, to be published posthumously. The whereabouts of these materials is unknown, as is their nature, if they were even preserved, which is another contrast with Leite de Vasconcelos, who saved and bequeathed everything. His library, however, was disseminated: its alleged donation to the Faculty of Letters would seem natural, since Coelho was a professor there, but the lack of identification of the books makes it difficult to



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assess the extent and nature of his bequest. The existence, in the personal library of Leite de Vasconcelos, of a small group of 30 books that belonged to Adolfo Coelho does not disprove that donation, but limits its scope.

To João da Silva Correia (*Adolfo Coelho*, 1933, p. 9) we owe the evocation of Adolfo Coelho's final lesson: 'It is not without emotion that I can still recall today his final class, given about eight days before his death, and in which, as if to close the circuit of his life as an educator by some noble indoctrination by which he began it at the Casino conference – he dealt with the subject of the need for tolerance, or rather, respect for all spiritual positions for scientific progress. I remember that, with utter and complete lucidity, Dr. Adolfo Coelho emphasised, on the one hand, the need for non-interference of any religious belief in formal education, and on the other, opposite side, the violence that the state committed in opposing religious instruction in private schools for those children whose parents wanted to educate in their faith – in light of which science, powerless to demonstrate the falsity of their belief, shall not, without contradicting itself, persecute or vex those who do believe.'

Works by Francisco Adolfo Coelho: *A lingua portugueza: phonologia, etymologia, morphologia e syntaxe*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade, 1868; *A Questão do Ensino. Conferencia publica feita no Casino Lisbonense em 17 de Junho de 1871*, Porto-Braga, Chardron, 1872; *Theoria da conjugação em latim e portuguez. Estudo de grammatica comparativa*, Lisboa, Tipografia Universal, 1871; «Os dialectos romanicos ou neo-latinos na Africa, Asia e America», *Boletim da Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa*, Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional, 1880, 1882 e 1886; *Curso de litteratura nacional para uso dos lyceus centraes: I. A lingua portugueza: Noções de glottologia geral e especial portugueza; II. Noções de litteratura antiga e medieval como introdução á litteratura portugueza*, Porto, Magalhães e Moniz, 1881 (2.^a 1887, 3.^a 1896); *Os Ciganos em Portugal, com um estudo sobre o calão*, Lisboa, Imp. Nacional, 1892; *Casos de analogia na língua portuguesa*, sep. *Revue Hispanique*, XV, 1906, 34 pp; *Cultura e Analfabetismo*, Porto, Renascença Portuguesa, 1916 (2.^a ed., com introd. de M. Viegas Guerreiro, Lisboa, I.P.P.C., 1984); *Alexandre Herculano e o ensino público*, Lisboa, J.A. Rodrigues e Cia, 1910; *Para a história da instrução popular*. Lisboa, I. Gulbenkian de Ciência, 1973; *Obra etnográfica* (org., pref. e notas de João Leal), 2 vols., Lisboa, D. Quixote, 1993.

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APOIOS:

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