

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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SÉRGIO [de Sousa], António (Damão, 1883 – Lisboa, 1969)

António Sérgio came from a liberal aristocratic family and both his father and grandfathers had been sailors and overseas governors. He was a student at the Colégio Militar and the Escola Politécnica de Lisboa later moving to the Naval School. He became an officer in the Navy and maintained a neutral political position between the monarchy and the republic. However, he resigned from the service following the 5 October 1910 Revolution. As he had to make a living, he worked for Portuguese and Brazilian publishing houses but also studied psychology and pedagogy in Geneva with Claparède. A writer and the first to use the “essay” genre in Portugal, he was a notable figure in various fields of knowledge ranging from economics to philosophy, literature to history. He failed in his application to become an Assistant at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon in 1912 – indeed he never taught in Portuguese universities. He was Minister for Public Education (*Ministro da Instrução*) in 1923-24, a resistance fighter opposed to the Military Dictatorship and a conspirator against the *Estado Novo*. As a result he was imprisoned and also exiled on two occasions. He ran various publications for *Renascença Portuguesa* (Portuguese Renaissance), collaborated on *Águia, Pela Grei* (which he edited), *Lusitania*, *Revista de Estudos Portugueses* and later *Seara Nova*, which he also edited.

António Sérgio wanted to be an educator and social reformer; however, he opted to study history because “to write history is a way to free ourselves from the past”, an expression taken from Goethe whom he frequently cites. He never said he was nor did he see himself as a historian although he always wrote about history and advanced some working hypotheses which had a decisive influence on his contemporaries. Supported by the work of Oliveira Martins, in 1913 he already considered that two major facts stood out in the study of the peninsula’s slide into decadence, facts that could be considered fundamental: “the warrior education and *purification*; or, in other words, the lack of any productive activity (agriculture, manufacturing) and systematic isolation” (*O problema da cultura...*, 1914 [The Problem of Culture]). This was a stance he would maintain.

For Sérgio, the concept of the nation’s past was always filtered through a critical view of the structure of the State and especially through highlighting the negative role the dominant social groups played. In the beginning the nobility, then the *bacharéis* (university graduates) and the wealthy bourgeoisie were indicated as taking advantage of the nation’s riches and scorning productive work. “In Portugal, the nobility (essentially knights as they were educated to carry out permanent forays against the Moor) far from accompanying and



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managing productive work exhausted the land and industries with parasitic serfdom (...) From time to time the monarch tried to alter this situation by introducing agrarian laws but nothing came of it. Thus, those who should have worked the land abandoned it and the rural exodus directed people's energies towards the maritime trade, a trade towards which the geographical situation of the country and later the economic needs of northern Europe in fact pushed us."

As a result of the triumph of the bourgeoisie in 1383, the literate class increased and became dominant, which was "at the same time both an effect and a cause of social parasitism". He went on to conclude about this period: "The nation, therefore, was not educated in the discipline of work, but very early on became absorbed and specialised in commercial speculation and trade, which was closely linked to the activities of the crusading knights; these facts, the ruin of the old nobility, the worsening of agricultural poverty and the related *bacharelesque* and bureaucratic parasitism, are the chief characteristics of the new regime brought in with the social revolution of 1383-1385". This he published in 1915.

In this same year Sérgio edited a collection entitled *Biblioteca de Educação* (Education Library) for *Renascença Portuguesa* in which he included his provocative *Considerações histórico-pedagógicas* (Historico-pedagogical considerations). He also proposed a section called *Biblioteca popular de história económica e social* (Popular Library of Economic and Social History) which "would consist of a series of interesting documents about our economic and social history." This was an idea *Renascença Portuguesa* would turn into the *Biblioteca de Estudos Económicos e Sociais* (Library of Economic and Social Studies), but Sérgio also kept it in mind, returning to the idea later in a volume that would come out in 1924 published by the Lisbon National Library Press: *Antologia dos economistas portugueses. I. Obras em Português* (Anthology of Portuguese Economists. I. Works in Portuguese, 1924). Sérgio's references reveal that he is already aware at that time of many works of history and in particular of sources, some as uncommon as Duarte Gomes Solis's *Discursos sobre los comercios de las dos Indias* (Discourses on the trading of the two Indies). They also reveal his relationship with David Lopes and the documental advice he asked him for and received. Sérgio always knew how to emphasise the importance of the study of history to gain knowledge of the present and to evaluate it prospectively.

The first moment of controversial historiographical and ideological tension occurred in the 1930s when António Sérgio published his first volume of *Ensaaios* (Essays). He included in this work *A conquista de Ceuta* (*Ensaio de interpretação não-romântica do texto de Azurara*) [The conquest of Ceuta (A non-romantic interpretation of Azurara's text)], an essay that is pivotal in explaining the beginning of the Portuguese expansion, which was traditionally seen as "that of a war operation waged by the nobility, the *gentes d'algo*, to strike a blow against the Islamist."

Starting from a critical reading of Gomes Eanes de Zurara's narrative of the taking of the Moroccan city on the Straits of Gibraltar by a Portuguese army commanded by the princes of Aviz in 1415, Sérgio postulates that the Portuguese expansion – the empire and colonisation – has to be viewed as a socio-economic reality. He denies that it must have been exclusively or even predominantly the product of religious motivation and the strategic-military intention of one or even several figures. As for the princes of this illustrious generation



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fighting for Faith and the destruction of the Moors (the normally accepted principal explanation), he replaces this notion with one claiming the war was motivated by the bourgeoisie of the European and Portuguese maritime ports wanting to divert the African and Eastern trade that reached Ceuta to their own ports. Sérgio further mentions the attraction of importing cereals which Morocco possessed and which Portugal had for a long time (since around 1290) been short of.

Furthermore, the essayist interprets the overseas Portuguese expansion as combining two concepts that he defines as “transport policy” and “settlement policy”. In his seminal text on this distinction, he considers that acts of conquest and the transport policy were in opposition to the colonisation policy. Thus, he attempts to demonstrate that the transformative activity that fomented the development of the colonial territories was a result of establishing a settled population and creating wealth through agricultural work, denying the primordial function of the transportation of goods for commerce which he said represented plunder. This remarkable thinker occasionally returned to this line of reasoning, always insisting on this interpretation. With his essay on the taking of Ceuta, Sérgio influenced the research of both David Lopes (1867-1942) and Jaime Cortesão (1885-1960). In the criticisms and objections they raised, he knew how to appreciate and highlight the differences and the originality of the explanations given, even when these went against some of the hypotheses he had put forward.

In 1923 he advances an idea that is very dear to him: “the location of our ports was the geographical factor with the greatest weight in the independence of Portugal”. The foreigners who used them contributed to the territory’s not being incorporated into Castile. Of the notable series of monarchs of the first dynasty, D. Dinis stands out as the model king with his development of the territory, in particular the protection of agriculture, revealing him to be so. This then ends with the 1383-85 crisis and the dynastic solution that followed the social revolt that took place. From this emerges the belief that the aristocracy who owned the hinterland were opposed to the merchant middle classes of the coast. The latter lent their revolutionary support to D. João, Master of Aviz, whereas the rural lords supported D. Fernando’s heir. “Aljubarrota, therefore, consecrates the independence of Portugal, a new orientation for society, and the fall of most of the old aristocracy who were replaced by new people.”

In 1415, “(with the intent of taking control of the trade that came through North Africa in caravans to Morocco, and to provide an outlet, merely by chance, for the scum of worthless rabble who had bubbled up out of the revolution), the bourgeoisie induced the King to take the city of Ceuta [...]” Sérgio then continues with a report of the advance of the discoveries along the African coast in which a prominent role is played by economic factors and especially by the arrival of “much gold and many slaves, who began to replace the white men in occupations throughout the southern half of the country, seriously prejudicing the stability of the common people.” And then later, this would open up the expansion to the East.

He always takes the same critical view: “We had no industrial activity that could be developed by this trade with the East.” And his conclusion was firmly stated: “We spread ourselves in this way all over Asia, as far as the Moluccas, in a prodigious and anarchic manifestation of energy.” On the other hand, the colonising effort based on sugar cane agriculture and sugar production in Brazil merited a positive mention. Moreover,

this is a Brazil that after the 18th century has the gold that, although contradictory, will become its “great fortune” and so “made reformation unnecessary”. But still, he claims, people persist with the same faults, with parasitism dominating. He then turns to highlight the attempts by Pombal, “an extremely energetic, but extremely tyrannical, man who proposed to carry out, albeit with some distortions, the reformist thought of the Portuguese elite of his time.”

To bring closure then comes the third era, “Attempts at internal remodelling”, which should by rights have followed the independence of Brazil. However, Mouzinho da Silveira’s reforms which sought to do this remained unfinished, and on them fell the external loans policy of the Fontism period (of Fontes Pereira de Melo) which blocked the necessary internal changes. The Republic too did not attack nor “did it resolve in any meaningful way the basic problem of the nation: to create work and jobs in the metropole for its citizens by changing the agrarian regime, by taking advantage of hydraulic forces, by modernising work methods, by importing scientific work, and by establishing a new pedagogy, essentially active and productive.”

On the contrary, the problems had become worse and it had also become necessary to combat the delirious romanticism that had established itself together with the inability to create that came with it – or caused it. “Such romanticism, making us incapable of changing the present and preparing the future, also prevents us from appreciating the past in any intelligent way.”

Sérgio did not ignore political history and its chronology, paying special attention to D. Sebastião and here adopting a controversial stance. He claims D. Sebastião was a “crazy young man, a simpleton and a braggart” and “the fanatics and lunatics of the time filled his head, through prose and verse, with the idea of becoming the defender of the Catholic faith against the Protestant and the Mohammedan”. However, it is the expedition to Africa and Ksar El-Kebir which lead the King, and the Kingdom, to perdition. But there is also the invented notion of D. Sebastião, ‘the Hidden One’, which Sérgio notes has become worn out “by the ideological anaemia of modern Portuguese letters.” As for the Sebastianists, he says they were but “a few harmless idiots, of whom their contemporaries made fun”. At this point, he was already preparing an attack on irrationalism and patriotic sentimentalism which he would unleash a short time later, the pretext being Carlos Malheiro Dias’ *Exortação à Mocidade* (Exhortation to Youth), and which culminates with the exquisite *Tréplica* (Rejoinder). This was a controversial debate which, like so many other positions adopted by *Seara Nova*, aimed to provide the “slow work of collective education”.

This was to become a remarkable controversy, not about the historical D. Sebastião but about the inconsequential sentimentalism that was settling into society, to a large extent generated by anti-rationalist philosophies, but also by imported political nostalgic longings, primarily integralist. The polemical debate ended without Sérgio responding to other attacks that the integralists and others similar continued to plague him with.

Closer to a polemical disagreement with a historical topic was the one he started with *Seiscentismo* (17th century Portugal) although this was interrupted by the death of António Sardinha, one of the contenders. These were disagreements lateral to the central objective which was to provoke society into carrying out indispensable reforms: “Economic and pedagogic reforms, linked and interwoven amongst themselves like



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threads in a single piece of cloth” and this always “subordinating to the eternal values of freedom and morality all problems from the major cases of individual or collective conscience to the smallest incidents of social life”.

In 1928, *A Sketch of the History of Portugal*, a translation by Constantino José dos Santos of Sérgio's *Bosquejo* published in 1923, came out in English. Then in 1929, a Spanish translation entitled *Historia de Portugal* (History of Portugal) was published by Editora Labor in Barcelona. Almost the whole of this book follows the original text very closely, thus showing that the main ideas as well as their development and articulation had been previously decided. This was the arrival point of those first years spent constantly labouring in support of reforms in Portugal where history occupied a central position as an intellectual instrument for acting upon society. For Sérgio, however, who did no archive research, history was a mere reflection on matters that had been disparagingly handed over to investigative history and often simply led to archival erudition.

Nevertheless, his essays and controversial discussions would have a positive impact. We know that right from the start they motivated João Lúcio de Azevedo (1845-1933) to write his *Épocas de Portugal económico. Esboços de História* (Ages of Economic Portugal. Sketches from History, 1929).

Although not a historian, Sérgio never abandoned the writing of history, nor did he desist from what he called the application of the rationalist method. In 1941, he planned to publish a *História de Portugal* (History of Portugal) and the first volume sub-titled *Introdução geográfica* (Geographical Introduction) did indeed come out. However, the political police immediately appeared to hurriedly withdraw it from the market – an official euphemism to say that the censor had banned its sale. There was no shortage of critics - once again, Sérgio had become polemical. The issue this time was the designation ‘agrarian monarchy’ being given to the first era of Portuguese history and this would become one of the main battles he had to fight. It involved convincing readers that fishing and salt were the triggers that started the main maritime commercial activity in Portugal – and that it was not agricultural products that had determined that the bourgeoisie in the ports would devote themselves to transactions with other regions of Europe. Fishing and salt must, therefore, assume a major importance in the explanation of Portugal's past. It was through these activities that Portugal “expanded” in international trade, wrote Sérgio. However, the dominant official ideology, centred on Portugal as an essentially rural nation, sought to refute such a reality - the reality of a trade in products originating on the coast - which had charted its collective destiny. Later the designation ‘agrarian monarchy’ that Lúcio de Azevedo had coined and given to the 12th-14th centuries would become official.

However, the polemical debate with those who attacked Sérgio was above all political: the major defects they accused his *História de Portugal* of having were due to the fact that Sérgio never ceased to show how badly the *Estado Novo* ruled the country. For him, even the “empire” was only acceptable if its aim was to free the people from poverty through technical improvements, the redistribution of property and economic planning. “For an impoverished people such as ours, the first task of ‘imperialism’ should be to rescue its economy from the backward quagmire in which it has lain, thereby freeing the people from their poverty and giving them a new conception of life, a new organic of progressive cooperation.” And he made it very clear



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he defended cooperativism (which he fought for) leading to a liberating socialism without authoritarianism. On the path leading to this future a knowledge of history would serve to free us from the weight of the past. It was necessary to awaken the Portuguese people “from their historical sleep, showing them the reality of economic conditioning and convincing them of the urgency of a critical examination of all the customs they had inherited from their grandparents, in this decisive moment for the human species which requires men to profoundly modify the production regime and the distribution of goods”.

This liberation, refusing respect for tradition and even suggesting the need to eliminate it, was enough in itself to profoundly irritate the grandees of Salazar’s regime. This was because it was not a good idea at all for people to read such things as: “since the end of the Middle Ages the common people working in our fields have led a life of the greatest poverty forced to content themselves with an extremely poor diet [...]” And also: “One of the reasons for this ancient misery [...] is that the upper classes of our country were never an elite in the true sense of the word, that is, they never organised the work of the labourers, they never made an effort to help them progress, they never encouraged them by setting any useful example, they never practised any form of social management.” And, quoting Garrett, then comes the famous question to economists and moralists in which he asks “whether you have already calculated the number of individuals who must be condemned to misery, to disproportionate amounts of labour, to immorality, to infamy, to depraved ignorance, to inescapable misfortune, in order to produce just one rich man”.

A short time later, in 1945, Sérgio penned the beautiful preface to Fernão Lopes’s *Crónica de D. João I* (Chronicle of D. João I). Here he provides clear evidence for the bourgeois leadership of the 1383 revolution (thereby following Cortesão) even if some from, or influenced by, the Marxist left, for example, Álvaro Cunhal (1913-2005) and Joel Serrão (1919-2008), attempted to refute what Sérgio’s analysis of Fernão Lopes’s text now proposed. They defended an interpretation that emphasised the popular nature of the revolution, while Sérgio highlighted the bourgeoisie’s leadership of the movement. The revolutionary drive had come from the ordinary people, the plebs, and not from the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie of the Portuguese ports. However, what they agreed about was that it involved a deep social conflict and was not just one more war between Portugal and Castile. Sérgio’s polemical disagreements about *sebastianismo* and D. Sebastião, the king, the debate about *Seiscentismo* and 17th century Portugal, his comments about António Vieira and the Enlightenment, and many other subjects and issues emerge from his intellectual teachings. He frequently became involved in controversies that he himself largely sought. One critic came to label this permanent disposition of his as “controversy-inspiring pedagogy”, whilst others spoke of his “controversial capriciousness”.

In his last works he returned to historical subjects: the re-edition of Gomes de Brito’s *História Trágico-Marítima* (Tragic Maritime History) and an anthology of naval disasters to which he gave the title *Navrágios e combates no mar* (Shipwrecks and Sea Battles). In the last volume of *Ensaios*, 1958, he even explains why he was so interested in writing the boycotted *História de Portugal*. It was a question of “acting on the minds of my younger fellow-countrymen, leading them to face the country’s successes not as artists of fine ‘resurrections of the past’, nor with the vanity of historical patriotism, but in the manner of an observer-cum-



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sociologist, of a man who fights for the emancipation of the people - with the spirit of those who understand that the human value of an era is not measured by the splendour of its deeds of war, by the luxurious ostentation of the lifestyle of the rich, by the buildings, by the magnificence of the State, but by the effort made to seek justice towards the vast majority of the people; and that benevolent politicians were those whose aim (whose immediate goal) was ‘that each peasant could put a chicken in the pot on Sunday’, as the great French king Henri IV had wished, and here in Portugal a Mouzinho”. It was necessary to shake off the injustices of earlier times that remained to oppress the poor, “an evil tradition”. This was an “educational and pragmatic” task which led him to write about topics of a historical nature where once again he endeavoured to show how improvisation and a lack of rationality could lead to everything being lost – just as the accidents caused by badly stored cargo in the ships coming back from India led to them sinking and the loss of both goods and men: “a financial, social and moral failure”. And thus the Asian empire was lost – always a result of the irresponsibility of the rulers who did not know how to prepare nor impose the necessary professional skills.

Sérgio reasoned using a knowledge of history and he opened up pathways that historians today can still travel down to discover new routes, try out new interpretations and attempt new explanations.

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