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**BOMFIM, Manoel José do** (Aracaju, 1868 – Rio de Janeiro, 1932)

Manoel Bomfim was a Brazilian essayist, born on 8 August 1868 in Aracaju, Sergipe, and died on 22 April 1932 in Rio de Janeiro. The son of Paulino José do Bomfim, a merchant and plantation owner, he received his early education in his hometown. In 1886, he enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine in Bahia. Two years later, he moved to Rio de Janeiro, then the federal capital, where he completed his medical degree with a thesis titled *Das nefrites* [On Nephritis] (1890). However, he practised medicine only briefly. The early death of his daughter during a typhus epidemic profoundly affected him, leading him to abandon his medical career and dedicate himself to education and social studies.

Bomfim became an advocate for popular education and entered the teaching profession, where he taught Moral and Civic Instruction, Portuguese Language, Pedagogy, and Psychology Applied to Education at the *Escola Normal do Rio de Janeiro* [Rio de Janeiro Normal School]. He also held various public positions, including serving as the general director of *Pedagogium*, a public institution established after the proclamation of the Republic in 1897 to coordinate pedagogical activities nationwide. Shortly thereafter, he was appointed head of *Instrução Pública do Distrito Federal* [Public Education of the Federal District] (1898). On behalf of the *Prefeitura do Distrito Federal* [Prefecture of the Federal District], he undertook an internship at the Sorbonne University, studying under the distinguished professor Alfred Binet in the chair of Experimental Psychology (1902–1903). Upon his return to Brazil, he resumed his work at the *Pedagogium* and established the country's first experimental psychology laboratory.

In addition to combating illiteracy, the doctor and pedagogue was dedicated to instilling in children the principles of civility and patriotism. In 1905, together with Luís Bartolomeu and Renato de Castro, he co-founded *O Tico-Tico*, Brazil's first educational comic book for children. The publication ran until February 1962, achieving an impressive total of 2,097 issues. Manoel Bomfim proposed to the mayor of the *Distrito Federal* [Federal District], Pereira Passos, the idea of composing an anthem to honour the *Bandeira Nacional* [National Flag], to be sung daily by students in Rio de Janeiro's public schools. The project came to fruition with lyrics by Olavo Bilac and music by Francisco Braga, culminating in the official adoption of the *Hino à Bandeira* [Brazilian Flag Anthem] by the Republic on 19 November 1906. Around the same time, Bomfim formed a close relationship with Pinheiro Machado, one of the most influential political leaders of the era. This connection

facilitated his election as a federal deputy for the state of Sergipe (1907–1908). However, his attempt at reelection was unsuccessful, prompting him to abandon his political career. In 1911, Bomfim was reappointed as director-general of the *Pedagogium*, a position he held until the institution was closed in 1919. Following this, he devoted himself exclusively to working in journalism and producing literary works. After his death, friends and followers established the *Sociedade Manoel Bomfim* [Manoel Bomfim Society] on 21 April 1933 to carry forward his educational legacy. Although it brought together prominent figures in literature and education, the *Sociedade Manoel Bomfim* was short-lived, ceasing to exist around 1935.

Manoel Bomfim left behind a vast body of work spanning education, psychology, pedagogy, and history, as well as numerous didactic and paradidactic publications. Among these, the book *Através do Brasil* [Through Brazil] (1910), co-authored with Olavo Bilac, stands out as a landmark in Brazilian school literature, achieving 66 editions. This reading book for elementary school students was perhaps inspired by the 19th-century classic *Le tour de France par deux enfants*. In their work, Bilac and Bomfim narrate the adventures of two brothers traversing Brazil in different directions in search of their families. The story begins along the São Francisco River, described as "the great river that is uniquely and essentially Brazilian," and introduces children to a nation of vast contrasts and continental dimensions. The book aims to provide young readers with "a general and concrete view of Brazilian life—its people, customs, landscapes, and distinctive features" (*Através do Brasil*, 2000, p. 46). Its objective was both pedagogical and patriotic, aiming to instil in children a sense of national unity.

Bomfim's continued work in pedagogy and his advocacy for popular education, combined with his strong nationalism, naturally extended into the field of history. This shift began with his influential book *América Latina. Males de origem* [Latin America: Evils of Origin] (1905). In this work, he sought to challenge the "(...) perversely malevolent reputation of which South America is a victim [in Europe]" (*América Latina...*, 1993, p.35). Nevertheless, the author acknowledges that "(...) the South American peoples are today in a state that barely entitles them to be considered civilised peoples" (p. 49). This admission sets the stage for the two central questions the essayist seeks to address: "(...) How, then, can this delay be explained—of new nations, certainly lively, established in favourable, fertile, and forgiving territories? (...) These are people who have all the elements to be advanced and happy, and yet they lead a painful and difficult life: why?" (p. 50). Indeed, these questions had been troubling intellectuals and politicians in the former Iberian colonies of the Americas since the 19th century. In Brazil, they gained prominence during the various adverse historical contexts the country faced, such as the crisis of the early 20th century. This period revealed the disillusionment of the literate elite with the artificiality of the newly established republican institutions. Proclaimed on 15 November 1889, the Republic had failed to resolve the country's pressing issues, contrary to the expectations of its most fervent advocates. The economy remained predominantly agrarian, sustained by coffee exports, despite some urban-industrial growth. The majority of the population continued to live in poverty and ignorance. Electoral processes lacked legitimacy, as the central government was controlled by oligarchic groups from the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo, which alternated in power. At the same time, following the First World War, a nationalist

sentiment of diverse ideological hues began to flourish within intellectual circles. Its ultimate aim was to promote a sense of "national regeneration." For the traditionalist sectors, still rooted in the rhetoric of constitutional idealism, this entailed exalting the homeland while adopting foreign liberal models. Conversely, for progressive groups, regeneration meant rejecting these external formulas and seeking practical solutions to Brazil's unique challenges—solutions that could only emerge through a thorough investigation of the nation's realities. It is precisely this diagnosis that Manoel Bomfim seeks to undertake in *América Latina. Males de origem*. According to Bomfim, the genesis of the struggles and violence afflicting the peoples of Latin America lay in the process of conquest and exploitation to which their territories had been subjected. This premise serves as a foundation for his analysis of the domination imposed on Latin American countries by their Iberian colonisers. The doctor from Sergipe employs the notion of parasitism as a "metaphor-concept" (Sussekind, "Manoel Bomfim. A América Latina," 2000, p. 609) to explain the causes of the atavistic backwardness and the myriad "evils" that plagued South American nations.

In his analysis of Brazil, Bomfim's starting point and principal source for understanding Portuguese colonisation is undoubtedly the work of Oliveira Martins (Matos, "Manoel Bomfim e Oliveira Martins...", 2015, p. 57). Following the perspective of the Lusitanian historian (*América Latina...*, p. 88), Bomfim extols the heroic Portugal of the Age of Camões and the overseas expeditions while condemning the Bragança dynasty, particularly King João VI. He argues that the degeneration fostered by Bragantine colonisation resulted in the political and moral degradation of Brazil. The "parasitism" of the former metropolis not only led to the expropriation of wealth and labour but also profoundly influenced the social and psychological fabric of the people. It cultivated an absence of initiatives aimed at the common good and fostered "(...) the perversion of the moral sense, the disdain for free labour, hatred of government, distrust of authority, and the growth of aggressive instincts" (*América Latina...* pp. 158-159). But that is not all. Bomfim argues that Brazil, whose independence had been proclaimed by a Portuguese prince, had inherited a conservatism from the Kingdom that perpetuated privilege, fostered a love of rhetoric, and relied on written formulas, decrees of salvation, and overly theoretical solutions.

While Bomfim aligns with Oliveira Martins in his analysis of Portuguese and colonial history, he decisively diverges on the theory of superior and inferior races. He rejects the prejudiced, pseudo-scientific ideas prevalent in Europe at the time, which linked *mestiçagem* (racial mixing) to supposed physical, intellectual, and moral inferiority. These notions were widely accepted and propagated by many Brazilian intellectuals of the era. In contrast, Bomfim champions *mestiçagem*, emphasising the significant contributions of Indigenous and African peoples to the formation of the Brazilian population. He offers a positive perspective on the effects of this ethnic and cultural blending, praising the Lusitanians' capacity to assimilate other races—an idea later expanded by Gilberto Freyre (Matos, "Manoel Bomfim e Oliveira Martins...", 2015, p. 50). At the conclusion of his diagnosis, the doctor and pedagogue prescribe a remedy for eliminating the "evils of origin" that plagued Brazil: the adoption of a national programme of popular education. This programme would not only provide formal instruction but also prepare the people for the exercise of citizenship, empowering them to bring about

radical political change.

Manoel Bomfim was not a historian *avant la lettre* like other contemporary authors, such as Capistrano de Abreu and João Ribeiro (Gontijo, "Manoel Bomfim, 'pensador da História...'", 2003, p. 134). This becomes clear in the last book he published during his lifetime, where he defines himself as "someone who only wants a lesson from the past that will be useful for the future" (*O Brasil Nação...*, 1931, p. 9). Indeed, his historical reflection does not constitute "a theory of history or a historiographical project organised around systematised methodological propositions" (Gontijo, "Manoel Bomfim, 'pensador da História'...", 2003, p. 130). His arguments are supported by historical essayism. He operates with a pragmatic conception of history, whose instrumental value expands as the interpretation of the past can help in understanding the present (Matos, "Manoel Bomfim e Oliveira Martins", 2015, p. 47).

It is undeniable that *América Latina: males de origem* was an original work, as it presents a new interpretation of the colonial past of the continent's nations. In the case of Brazil, rather than identifying the colonization process as the primary cause of the country's backwardness, Bomfim argues that the nation was shaped by the contributions of the three races that formed its population. He also contends that the feeling of independence was already evident in the nativist movements of the 18th century and the Pernambuco revolution of 1817. This interpretation challenges the historical tradition established in the 19th century by the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* [Brazilian Historic and Geographic Institute] (IHGB), with its most prominent work being *História geral do Brasil* [General History of Brazil], written by Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen. According to the Institute, the independent state that emerged from the former Portuguese territories in America was the direct heir to the Lusitanian overseas empire— a legacy perpetuated by the presence of a representative from the House of Braganza on the Brazilian throne. In this context, Manoel Bomfim became a staunch critic of 19th-century Brazilian historiography (Rebeca Gontijo, 2003, p. 130), particularly targeting Varnhagen, whom he referred to as a "Bragantine reactionary" and "the author of a history for the throne" (*O Brasil na história...*, 1930, pp.122-125). In Bomfim's view, true historians should break away from the "perverse genealogy" of Brazilian historiography and recover nationalist values, which would form the foundation for the struggle for Brazilian emancipation. (Reis, "Civilização brasileira e otimismo...", 2006, p.193).

Despite the favourable reception from the press upon its release, *América Latina: males de origem* was discredited by critic Silvio Romero, Bomfim's compatriot and a leading figure in Luso-Brazilian literary circles. Romero, a staunch proponent of Aryan or Germanic racial superiority, often privileged debates on racial theories over other aspects of intellectual life. This polemic has been frequently highlighted by commentators, who either focus on the racist theories or the rivalry between the two intellectuals for prestige in the intellectual field (Aguilar, *O rebelde esquecido...*, 2013, p. 17; Sussekund, "Manoel Bomfim. A América Latina...", 2000, p. 609). Romero's critique, however, extended beyond Bomfim's contradictory views on *mestiçagem*. In the critic's assessment, Bomfim excessively relied on metaphors, and his historical references were largely limited to the works of Rocha Pombo and Oliveira Martins. Romero accused Bomfim of

"parasitizing" Oliveira Martins' ideas, noting that, out of the 2276 lines in the third part of Bomfim's book, 1144 were directly borrowed from the Portuguese historian (Romero, 1906, p. 52). Romero even went further, arguing that Oliveira Martins should be credited with the theory of Iberian "parasitism" (Romero, "Manoel Bomfim. A América Latina...", 1906, p. 95)—a point revisited a century later by Sergio Campos Matos (Matos, "Manoel Bomfim e Oliveira Martins...", 2015, p. 61).

The concepts presented in *América Latina: males de origem* were further developed by Bomfim in his later works, including the trilogy *O Brasil na América* [Brazil in America] (1929), *O Brasil na história* [Brazil in History] (1930), and *O Brasil nação* [Brazil the Nation] (1931). Despite this, his bibliography faded into obscurity for decades (Alves Filho, "Pensamento político no Brasil..." 1979). Some attribute this neglect to the fact that Bomfim was "ahead of his time," proposing an analytical perspective that sought to "reconcile nationalism with socialism" (Leite, "Manoel Bomfim: ensaio...", 1983, p.276).

Nonetheless, Bomfim's work was rediscovered during the 500th anniversary of Brazil's discovery. Along with a comprehensive biography, *O rebelde esquecido* [The Forgotten Rebel] (Aguiar, *O rebelde esquecido...*, 2000), several of his most notable works were reissued, sparking new studies on the essayist from Sergipe. Once rehabilitated, Bomfim was recognised as one of Brazil's key intellectual figures. Modern commentators have described him as "one of the rare radical thinkers" of his era (Aguiar, *O rebelde esquecido ...*, 2000) and "a pioneer of national ideology" (Nunes, "Manoel Bomfim: Pioneiro...", 1997, p. 13), whose analyses offer a portrait of Brazil from a left-wing perspective (Reis, "Civilização Brasileira e Otimismo...", 2008, p. 21).

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