

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>



CUNHAL, Álvaro Barreirinhas (Coimbra, 1913 - Lisboa, 2005)

Born in Coimbra into an urban bourgeois family, son of lawyer, writer and painter Avelino Cunhal (1887-1966), Álvaro Cunhal graduated in Law from the Universidade de Lisboa [University of Lisbon] with a thesis on the decriminalisation of abortion (1940). A communist political leader and intellectual, he became secretary-general of the Portuguese Communist Party (1961-1992), member of parliament (1975-1992), minister without portfolio in the provisional government (1974-1975) and state councillor (1982-1992). He was an active contributor to newspapers such as *Avante!*, *O Militante*, *Seara Nova*, *O Diabo*, *Sol Nascente* and *Vértice*.

For Álvaro Cunhal, historical knowledge was not simply a specific disciplinary field, but rather the primary and general source of meaning in which understanding of the world and the determination of duty found their foundation. It was in the dialectical link attributed to becoming that Cunhal, as a Marxist, glimpsed the thread of intelligibility that allowed him to discern the meaning of the human condition and evolution, while at the same time subordinating, as a communist leader, each of his actions to the purpose of contributing to the era of collective emancipation that the times would bring. Thus, historical consciousness as the ultimate frame of reference does not emerge in his writings as a distant backdrop, but rather as a presence so constant that past, contemporary and emerging figures and circumstances appear arranged in a single scenario, which can be expressed in the same language and understood according to a single logic.

On the one hand, the broad categories that would allow us to think about power and collective life – the state; classes and class struggle; modes, relations and forces of production; revolution; among many others – would not be rooted in considerations of strict rationality, but would present themselves as expressions of fundamental historical constants that would run through different eras and, as such, also through the very long duration of capitalism. On the other hand, each of the phenomena of social reality is interpreted in the light of the general historical meaning attributed to it, which proves to be as valid in political analysis as in the understanding of legal provisions or even in polemical, critical and essayistic activity of an ideological, literary and artistic nature.

However, the historical matrix of Álvaro Cunhal's thinking does not give rise to a historiographical vocation, since, in his view, making history was far more important than writing it, a field in which the historian plays a



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

clearly subsidiary role, albeit one with intrinsic merit.

It was the vicissitudes of clandestine political struggle, namely imprisonment throughout the 1950s, that ultimately created the conditions that led the communist leader to engage in regular and varied cultural and research work, which took the form of drawings and paintings, literary narratives, essays, translations, controversial plays and even in a study leading to a doctoral dissertation.

Álvaro Cunhal's historical writings were written at the beginning of this period. The first version of the only truly historical study he authored, *As Lutas de Classes em Portugal nos Fins da Idade Média* [Class Struggles in Portugal at the End of the Middle Ages], dates from the second half of 1950, as do the *Notas à margem do Prefácio de António Sérgio à Crónica de D. João I* [Notes on the Preface by António Sérgio to the Chronicle of King João I], while, on a more limited level, in the review of *Herculano e o Liberalismo em Portugal* [Herculano and Liberalism in Portugal] by António José Saraiva (written in 1951), he considered that the lack of context for Herculano's thinking in the evolution of the social life of his time prevented the formulation of any general judgement on the merit attributable to the work, and indicated that it had been written on 22 March 1951.

After circulating as political training material and being published in French (1967), *As Lutas de Classes em Portugal nos Fins da Idade Média* [Class Struggles in Portugal at the End of the Middle Ages] saw three Portuguese editions during the author's lifetime (1975, 1980 and 1997) with significant variations and additions. While the 1967 French version and the 1975 Portuguese edition do not differ significantly from each other, as the changes introduced were few and minor, the content of the subsequent editions, revised and expanded, goes beyond the original schematic tone through a thorough reworking of the text, with a colloquial tone, which gives the work the fluency and rigour necessary to reach a wide audience. The 1997 edition also includes notes by the author dedicated to António Sérgio's preface to the edition of Fernão Lopes' *Crónica de D. João I* [Chronicle of King João I].

The content of Álvaro Cunhal's work on the crisis of 1383-1385 is not distinguished by the use of new sources or any first-hand research, as it is based on Fernão Lopes' chronicle of King João I and on a review of existing medieval historiographical literature, with emphasis on the works of Alexandre Herculano and Gama Barros, as well as on António Sérgio's interpretation of the "revolution of 1383-85".

As Lutas de Classes em Portugal nos Fins da Idade Média [Class Struggles in Portugal at the End of the Middle Ages] is a work with simultaneous epistemological, historiographical and practical significance, that is, as the application of Marxist intelligibility to a period of sudden change in the history of the country, which at no point distances itself from the ideological and political scope it sets for itself.

Cunhal's historiographical incursion highlights, first and foremost, the theoretical model he adopts, based on the writings of Marx and Engels, masters who are frequently quoted and paraphrased. The confrontation between the new productive forces and the feudal order, the analysis of the interests of different social classes and the conflicts arising from them, the assessment of the balance of power between the parties and the systems of alliances that bind them, the social and political determination of discourse and the



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

legitimisation of power are conceptual representations and interpretative procedures that would be valid in themselves, as they constitute the entire body of the historical approach adopted. To the persuasiveness of a reading with its own philosophical basis and method, which would allow the researcher and reader to approach the historical object as an expected dialectical reality, and thus dissolve accidental fortune, is the example of the coordination of each of the facts present in the dramatic evolution of the period under consideration in a global and coherent vision, particularly those aspects that had resisted other interpretations, such as the unstable character of the monarch, the unusual effect of the epidemic, the eloquence of the tribune or even of the chronicler.

On a strictly historiographical level, Álvaro Cunhal sets out and substantiates the thesis that a bourgeois revolution took place in Portugal in 1383. Although this interpretation had already been defended, notably by António Sérgio, the communist leader distances himself from the arguments put forward by the latter, which he criticises vehemently.

Cunhal methodically characterises the different social classes of the time, which he conceives as structural historical characters, and then describes the dramatic process that led successively to the state of crisis during the reign of King Ferdinand, the bourgeois revolution and the acclamation of the Master of Avis, as well as the subsequent aristocratic counter-revolution (and, later, its own expansion). Against a backdrop of economic and social rise of the bourgeoisie, primarily the urban bourgeoisie, but also the men of influence in the municipalities and the incipient proletariat, the confluence of efforts would have brought about, in a revolutionary manner, the common interests, while the subsequent breakdown of this alliance would provide the conditions that allowed the landed nobility to regain a status similar to that which it had temporarily lost.

On the immediate practical, ideological and political level, the historiographical incursion at the end of the 14th century never strays from the revolutionary designs of the 20th century: in the doctrinal sphere, it recapitulates the principles and corroborates the universal validity of Marxist codification; in the realm of the battle of ideas, it contrasts a dialectical view of the years 1383-85 and the foundations of expansion with monistic and nationalist historiography and mythology; in the party arena, it constitutes an exercise in the application of a revolutionary social theory and a warning against conciliatory strategic or tactical deviations; in the symbolic register, it guarantees the success of proletarian political action with the example of the bourgeois revolution, both progressive, patriotic, popular, with urban leadership and a rural front, equally subject to sudden and contradictory developments. In *As Lutas de Classes em Portugal nos Fins da Idade Média* [Class Struggles in Portugal at the End of the Middle Ages], one cannot fail to see an indication of cultural policy.

A simple appreciation of the schematic layout of the original edition makes the message controversial, tending to divide opinion and constitute a clear Marxist historiographical trend. On the side of the supporting quotations, we find only those of Marx and Engels, the historiographical knowledge that the communist leader takes for granted is evoked generically, while the refuted authors not only see the passages chosen as emblematic formally transcribed as they appear, as a rule, accompanied by ideological epithets, Antero and

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

<http://dichp.bnportugal.pt/>

António Sérgio are classified as reformists, Jaime Cortesão is considered liberal, and Torquato de Sousa Soares is treated as a fascist.

It is assumed that historical interpretation is an image that reflects the worldview of the historian and his social condition, and as such is necessarily ideological, limited and distorted in the case of bourgeois authors. The illusory bourgeois “science” of history must be countered by the Marxist objectivity of the study of Portuguese history, a perspective that the communist leader reiterated throughout his life, as he clearly emphasised in the opening of the long-awaited *Cinco conversas com Cunhal* [Five conversations with Cunhal], reported by Catarina Pires.

Bibliografia activa: *As Lutas de Classes em Portugal nos Fins da Idade Média*, Lisboa, Editorial Estampa, 1975 (2ª. ed., 1980; 3ª. ed., Lisboa, Editorial Caminho, 1997); *Les Luttes de Classe au Portugal à la Fin du Moyen Âge*, Paris, “Les Cahiers du Centre D’Études et de Recherches Marxistes”, nº. 56, 1967; *Obras Escolhidas*, Lisboa, Edições “Avante!”, 2007.

Bibliografia passiva: NEVES, José, *Comunismo e Nacionalismo em Portugal. Política, Cultura e História no Século XX*, Lisboa, Edições Tinta da China, 2008; PEREIRA, José Pacheco, *Álvaro Cunhal. Uma biografia política. O Prisioneiro (1949-1960)*, Lisboa, Temas e Debates, 2005; PIRES, Catarina, *Cinco conversas com Álvaro Cunhal*, Porto, Campo das Letras, 1999.

Luís Crespo de Andrade

This work is financed by national funds through FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P, in the scope of the projects UIDB/04311/2020 and UIDP/04311/2020.



UNIVERSIDADE
DE LISBOA



FACULDADE
DE LETRAS



CENTRO
HISTÓRIA



Fundação
para a Ciência
e a Tecnologia



REPÚBLICA
PORTUGUESA

SUPPORTED BY:



BIBLIOTECA
NACIONAL
DE PORTUGAL

FUNDAÇÃO
LUSO-AMERICANA