

# DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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**HOLANDA, Sérgio Buarque de** (São Paulo, 1902 – São Paulo, 1982)

Sérgio Buarque de Holanda is one of the most renowned interpreters of the formation of Brazilian society. His works, published in books, articles, and prefaces, continue to spark debates among sociologists, political scientists, ethnologists, literary critics, and historians from various specialisations and theoretical traditions. Alongside Caio Prado Jr. and Gilberto Freyre, he is considered one of the founding figures of Brazilian historical sociology, although such classifications often fail to fully capture his contributions to Brazilian historiography and the intellectual and cultural history of Luso-Brazilian society in particular.

The historian was born on July 11, 1902, in the traditional Liberdade neighbourhood of São Paulo, into a modest middle-class family. His father was an employee in the state Sanitation Service and a professor of botany at the School of Pharmacy and Dentistry, and was also one of its founders. During his childhood, Holanda attended the *Escola Modelo Caetano de Campos*, and during his teenage years, the *Ginásio de São Bento*. At the Benedictine school, he was a student of historian Affonso d'Escragno Taunay (1876–1958) and frequently visited the Public Library of São Paulo, where he discovered the works of Portuguese chroniclers and became familiar with Portuguese historiography from the medieval and early modern periods. At the age of 18, he published his first chronicle, *Originalidade Literária* [Literary Originality] in the *Correio Paulistano* (24 April 1920), in which he debated the existence of an authentically national literature—an issue that had captivated the minds of writers and historians since the late 19th century.

From 1921, Sérgio lived in Rio de Janeiro, then the federal capital of Brazil, graduating in Law and Social Sciences from the Faculty of Law of Rio de Janeiro in 1925. However, he chose not to pursue a legal career, instead working as a journalist, translator, and literary critic until the mid-1950s. He was an early member of the Modernist movement, serving as the Rio de Janeiro correspondent for the *Revista Klaxon*, a journal founded by the Modernist group in São Paulo, led by figures such as Mário de Andrade, Oswald de Andrade, Rubens Borba de Moraes, Alcântara Machado, Sérgio Milliet, Manuel Bandeira, Raul Bopp, and Tácito de Almeida.

In this engaged cultural environment, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda collaborated on and undertook avant-garde editorial projects, such as the journal *Estética* [Aesthetics], among many other initiatives. In 1927, he served as editor of the local newspaper *O Progresso* in the small town of Cachoeiro do Itapemirim, in the



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state of Espírito Santo. He worked as a literary critic for over a dozen newspapers, including *Correio Paulistano*, *Diário Carioca*, *Folha de São Paulo*, *Rio-Jornal*, *A Manhã*, and *Diário de Notícias*. He also contributed to numerous journals, such as *A Cigarra*, *Fon-Fon*, and *Revista do Brasil*. Over more than two decades, he worked for various telegraphic agencies, including Harvas, the United Press, and the Associated Press, where he became editor-in-chief in 1939. He also directed the Rio de Janeiro branch of the *Jornal de Minas*. Thus, it is impossible to understand his development as a historian without considering his trajectory as a journalist and literary critic, deeply engaged with the debates and controversies shaping not only Brazilian but also international cultural spheres.

Between 1929 and 1930, he was sent to Europe as a correspondent for the *Diário de São Paulo* and *O Jornal* for a two-year stay, settling in Berlin and visiting other cities in Germany and Poland. During this period, he attended Friedrich Meinecke's lectures at the University of Berlin, became acquainted with Georg Simmel's intellectual circle, and immersed himself in the works of Max Weber and other authors from the Frankfurt School. It was here that he drafted the first version of his seminal work, *Raízes do Brasil* [Brazil's Roots] which was published in Rio de Janeiro in October 1936 by Livraria José Olympio Editora, inaugurating the *Documentos Brasileiros* [Brazilian Documents] series, then edited by Gilberto Freyre.

This book examines the marks of Portuguese colonisation on Brazilian society, comparing it with other historical experiences in Spanish America. In contrast to Gilberto Freyre's approach, which emphasised the successful transplantation of European civilisation to tropical climates in *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (1933), Holanda highlighted the transformations of metropolitan institutions and culture in the New World. He considered not only the differences in geographical settings but, more importantly, the tensions, violence, and accommodations between the settlers (Portuguese colonisers) and the indigenous populations. While Freyre's interpretation placed the patriarchal family and miscegenation at the centre of his understanding of Brazil, Holanda sought to identify the continuities, transformations, and ways of overcoming the Iberian legacy in the formation of Brazilian political culture. In this respect, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda aligned more closely with Caio Prado Jr.'s interpretation, viewing agro-export mercantile colonisation as a key factor in the formation of Brazilian society.

Indeed, the divergence between Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Gilberto Freyre's perspectives became more pronounced with the second edition of *Raízes do Brasil* in 1948. In this edition, Holanda identified the class ambiguities structuring the imagination of Brazil's elites: "Bringing from distant countries our ways of life, our institutions, our ideas, and insisting on maintaining all of this in an often unfavourable and hostile environment, we remain, even today, exiles in our own land." (*Raízes do Brasil*, 1982, p. 3). His emphasis on this sense of exile reflected the dissonance between the lived experience in the colonial world and European civilisational models. At the time, Holanda directed his criticism toward Brazil's ruling elites and intellectuals for adopting lifestyles disconnected from the daily realities of the majority of the Brazilian population.

In *Raízes do Brasil*, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda identified the archaic legacies of colonisation and envisioned ways to overcome the colonial condition, paving the way for political emancipation. In many

respects, his interpretation aligned with António Sérgio's, as he saw mercantilist practices as one of the primary obstacles to the development of a fully capitalist economy in Portugal. Holanda attributed the expansion of the maritime empire to the hypertrophy of the monarchical state, which was unable to foster an autonomous bourgeoisie or establish a robust domestic market. In his view, Portuguese colonial presence resembled a string of trading posts along the Atlantic coast rather than a deliberate project of territorial occupation and planned urbanisation, in stark contrast to the imperial model implemented by Castile in the Indies during the 16th century. For Holanda, it was mineral exploitation, and particularly the relocation of the royal court to Rio de Janeiro, that ultimately consolidated metropolitan domination in South America.

A close reader of Alexandre Herculano's work, Holanda also attributed the structural impediments to Brazil's modernisation to the mental legacy of the Inquisition. Echoing António Sérgio's perspective, he rejected the veneration of old or new pantheons, famously remarking, "Those who see their past through mirages will build their future on mirages" (António Sérgio, *Ensaaios* [Essays], IV, 211). Holanda was well-acquainted with the works of the *Renascença Portuguesa*, many of which were published in Rio de Janeiro by Tipografia Anuário do Brasil. In 1920, this press released the first volume of António Sérgio's *Ensaaios*, along with other titles from the group.

Holanda drew extensively on António Sérgio's interpretations of the socioeconomic conditions that hindered the development of manufacturing and agricultural activities in Portugal. In *Raízes do Brasil*, he directly cites Sérgio's essay published in the 1920 Rio edition, *Ensaio de interpretação não romântica do texto de Azurara* [Essay on a Non-Romantic Interpretation of Azurara's Text], where Sérgio critiques Joaquim Pedro de Oliveira Martins' exaggerations regarding the conquest of Ceuta. In the same work, Holanda also refers to Sérgio's preface to Gilberto Freyre's book, *O Mundo que o Português Criou* [The World the Portuguese Created], (1940).

Thus, the Brazilian historian was deeply engaged with key strands of Portuguese historiographical thought, with which he both dialogued and debated, as was his custom. Among the Portuguese authors he most frequently referenced were Gama Barros, Alexandre Herculano, Oliveira Martins, João Lúcio de Azevedo, Damião Peres, Veiga Simões, Duarte Leite, António Baião, Jaime Cortesão, Virgínia Rau, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, José António Saraiva, Joaquim Barradas de Carvalho, Alberto Iria, and Luiz Ferrand de Almeida. It is no coincidence that the complete works of these historians are part of the special collection at the Rare Books Library of the University of Campinas. Holanda's critical irreverence extended even to his Modernist comrades, whether from São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro. He found the movement's efforts to construct a truly Brazilian identity through the rejection of or distancing from the Portuguese legacy to be artificial—particularly resisting Mário de Andrade's proposal to adopt a new grammar. He wrote: "If the form of our culture still remains largely Iberian and Lusitanian, this is due primarily to the deficiencies of 'Americanism,' which, so far, has largely amounted to an exacerbation of foreign manifestations and decisions imposed from the outside, detached from the land. The American still lacks an inner existence" (*Raízes do Brasil*, 1982, p. 127).



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The coup d'état led by Getúlio Vargas in 1930, along with the rise of Nazism, heavily influenced the writing of *Raízes do Brasil*, a work published a year before the establishment of Vargas's dictatorship in November 1937. In this book, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda sought to explain both the crisis of the liberal democratic system in Europe and the challenges faced by Ibero-American countries in freeing themselves from *caudilhismo* (strongman rule) and local authoritarianism. Subject to ongoing debate, the author himself later tempered and disavowed some of the claims made in the original text through its numerous editions: "I wrote that book partly in Germany, the classical land of historicism and anti-positivism: positivism as it was understood in the last century" (*Centro de Estudos Históricos Afonso de Taunay*, in *Sistema de Informação e Arquivo-Fundo SBH*, 17p.).

Indeed, studies of the book's publication history highlight significant changes made by the author in the 1948 and 1956 editions, where the psychosocial approach to the coloniser was softened. However, the work became a publishing phenomenon, especially after the 1969 edition, which featured a preface by Antônio Candido de Mello e Souza titled "O significado de *Raízes do Brasil*" ["The Meaning of *Raízes do Brasil*"] (*Raízes do Brasil*, 1982, pp. XI–XII). This new edition coincided with the removal and exile of Holanda's friends and colleagues from Brazilian universities following the Institutional Acts that marked the escalation of Brazil's Military Dictatorship.

Holanda invokes the wanderlust, spatial awareness, attachment to the tangible, and mercantile pragmatism of the colonisers to characterise the Iberian legacy. However, he identifies slavery as the defining feature of Brazilian society. The reliance on coerced labour and the violence of social relations undermined solidarity among individuals and groups. Slavery also devalued manual labour, fostering a society dominated by domestic life, which hindered the development of a public sphere that could transcend patriarchal and personal interests. Within this framework, Holanda contrasts Anglo-Saxon and Iberian colonisation. The predominance of primary or communal relations in the latter shaped what he termed the *ethos of cordiality*, a behaviour antithetical to the liberal bourgeois social contract. Relationships of intimacy and affection between individuals in asymmetrical positions created complex chains of dependence but also fostered insubordination.

Upon his return from Germany in 1936, Holanda was appointed assistant professor to Henri Hauser (Modern and Economic History chair) and Henri Tronchon (Comparative Literature) at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of the Federal District. After the departure of the French professors, Holanda became an associate professor, teaching courses on the History of the Americas and Luso-Brazilian Culture. However, his tenure was short-lived, as the Federal District University was abruptly closed by the Vargas government in 1939. Despite the tightening of the dictatorship, Holanda continued to work in Rio de Janeiro as head of the Publications Section of the National Book Institute. In this role, he had the opportunity to collaborate with prominent figures of his generation, including Augusto Meyer, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and Manuel Bandeira.

In 1941, at the invitation of the Division of Culture of the U.S. Department of State, Sérgio Buarque de



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Holanda delivered lectures on Brazilian history at various North American universities. In 1944, he became head of the Consultation Division at the National Library of Brazil, where he also taught Brazilian history courses to Library Science students. From this point onwards, a noticeable shift in his focus can be noted towards historical and historiographical studies, particularly after the publication of his book *Monções* (1945). This work reflects his experience as an editor, translator, and preface writer for rare and unpublished manuscripts. During this period, Holanda also established contact with Lewis Hanke, director of the Hispanic Foundation, and collaborated on significant bibliographic projects, such as the preparation of the *Handbook of Brazilian Studies* (1949). Co-organised by his friend Rubens Borba de Moraes and William Berrien, the handbook included Holanda's bibliographic essay on the colonial period.

A critic of Vargas's authoritarian regime, Holanda openly opposed the *Estado Novo* and was involved in founding the *Esquerda Democrática* [Democratic Left] in 1945, which later became the Brazilian Socialist Party in 1947. While still in Rio de Janeiro, he joined the leadership of the *União Brasileira de Escritores* [Brazilian Writers' Union], advocating for copyright legislation. In 1946, upon returning to São Paulo, he officially began his work as a historian at the *Museu Paulista*. He also assumed the chair of Brazilian Economic History at the *Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política*, succeeding its founder, economist Roberto C. Simonsen. During his tenure as a lecturer and researcher at the *Museu do Ipiranga*, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda worked alongside a distinguished group of ethnologists, including Herbert Baldus, Harald Schultz, and Egon Schaden. During this period, he prepared lectures that would later form the basis for several chapters of his books, *Caminhos e Fronteiras* [Paths and Frontiers] (1957), and *Visão do Paraíso* [Vision of Paradise] (1959). The latter was presented as part of his public examination for a teaching position at the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters, and Human Sciences at the University of São Paulo.

Amid preparations for the IV Centenary of the City of São Paulo (1952–1954), Holanda sparked an intense debate in the pages of the *Diário Carioca* (6 April, 13 April, 15 June 1952) in response to arguments by Jaime Cortesão published in the *Diário de Notícias* in Rio de Janeiro (4 May 1952). The controversy centred on the role of the *bandeirantes* (São Paulo frontiersmen) in territorial expansion. Holanda argued that the expeditions of São Paulo's *sertanistas* (backwoodsmen) into the interior of the continent were unlikely part of a policy to expand Portuguese domains in the Americas, as these ventures often countered the Crown's interests. In his view, the indigenous enslavement expedition led by Raposo Tavares was never a "*bandeira* (expedition) aimed at territorial expansion", as nationalistic and regionalist Paulista historiography—particularly during the 1940s—had claimed. Instead, Holanda sought to expose the ideology behind *bandeirismo*, which justified the occupation of indigenous lands in the Midwest (Mato Grosso) and Amazon regions, a process referred to at the time by the government as the "March to the West."

Within this historiographical context, Jaime Cortesão argued that Portuguese expansion was guided by geographical reasoning (*Alexandre de Gusmão e o Tratado de Madrid* [Alexandre de Gusmão and the Treaty of Madrid], 1952). While exiled in Brazil, Cortesão relied on historical maps that depicted a lacustrine formation connecting the Prata and Amazon basins. In his view, this geographical evidence was sufficient to



delineate the territorial boundaries between the Portuguese and Spanish empires. The debate between Cortesão and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda involved multiple exchanges, but in essence, Holanda accused Cortesão of glorifying the actions of the *mamelucos* (mixed-race Paulista *sertanistas*) to romanticise the coloniser's role. According to Holanda, this intellectual manoeuvre fused two nationalisms: the Lusitanian and that of Brazilian Modernists.

It is worth noting, however, that Holanda opposed not only Cortesão's position but also the geographical ideology of the Paulista historiographical school. Promoted by his former mentor Affonso Taunay and other historians from the São Paulo Historical and Geographical Institute, this school played a prominent role in organising the grandiose celebrations of São Paulo's IV Centenary. Holanda repeatedly criticised these currents for their veneration of the *bandeirantes* and their portrayal of São Paulo as isolated and peripheral to the Atlantic trade system. Drawing on the most advanced ethnographic and anthropological theories of his time, Holanda sought to explain the foundations of Paulista expansion by examining material evidence, forest-gathering techniques, cultivation methods, food preparation, the production of clothing and tools, and the population movements across the São Paulo plateau.

Between 1946 and 1967, Holanda's career as a historian became firmly international through a network of connections with colleagues in France, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Mexico, Uruguay, Peru, Chile, and the United States. From 1949, he strengthened ties with French universities, delivering lectures at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (invited by Fernand Braudel) and the Sorbonne (invited by Lucien Febvre). From 1948, he participated in various UNESCO committees, contributing to a significant post-war inquiry into the concept of democracy and attending international colloquia on the originality of civilisations.

In 1950, Holanda returned to the United States as part of the Brazilian delegation to the *First International Colloquium on Luso-Brazilian Studies*, held by the Library of Congress in Washington, where he presented his research on 18th-century Brazilian agricultural techniques. During the same visit, he participated in seminars at Columbia University at the invitation of Frank Tannenbaum (1883–1969), a prominent historian of American slavery. From 1952 to 1954, Holanda held the Chair of Brazilian Studies at the University of Rome, attended UNESCO-organised meetings, and was elected to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), participating in meetings in Paris, Geneva, and Rome with curators of historical collections. Upon his return to São Paulo, Holanda became director of the *Museu Paulista* in 1955 and deputy director of the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art in the same year. By this time, *Raízes do Brasil* had been translated into Italian (*Fratelli Boccia Editori*) and Spanish (*Fondo de Cultura Económica*), incorporating revisions and an expansion of approximately 100 paragraphs compared to the original 1936 edition.

After teaching at various universities both in Brazil and abroad, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda finally joined the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences, and Letters at the University of São Paulo (USP) as a full professor in November 1958, following a public examination. Responsible for the Chair of *General History of Brazilian Civilisation*, he also coordinated the editorial project for the *General History of Brazilian Civilisation Collection* from 1957 to 1972. Holanda was among the founders of the Association of University History Professors,



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which would later become the ANPUH. At the USP, he established the Institute of Brazilian Studies in 1962, an interdisciplinary research centre where he played a pivotal role in building international networks for Luso-Brazilian studies in Europe, the United States, and Latin America.

The publication of *Visão do Paraíso: Os motivos edênicos no descobrimento e colonização do Brasil* [Vision of Paradise: Edenic Motifs in the Discovery and Colonisation of Brazil] in 1959 coincided with two other seminal works: Antonio Candido de Mello e Souza's *Formação da Literatura Brasileira* [Formation of Brazilian Literature] and Celso Furtado's *Formação Econômica do Brasil* [Economic Formation of Brazil]. During this period, Brazil emerged as a cultural powerhouse on the global stage. In the arts, it was propelled by the rhythms of *bossa nova*, the innovations of *cinema novo*, the literary boom, *concretism*, and architectural experimentation. The nation seemed to be finally emancipating itself with the consolidation of a network of public and state scientific institutions.

The launch of the first artificial satellite by the USSR, the Cuban Revolution, and Brazil's victory in the FIFA World Cup renewed hopes of overcoming the social inequalities and economic disparities inherited or exacerbated since independence. However, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda remained consistently critical of the developmentalist utopia, as he perceived no real resolution to the typical obstacles of economic and political underdevelopment: "We shall also have our own El Dorados. Those of the mines, certainly, but also of sugar, tobacco, and so many other agricultural goods taken from fertile land, as fertile as gold extracted from gravel, until exhausted, without redistributing benefits. The procession of miracles will thus continue throughout the colonial period and will not be interrupted by Independence, nor even by the Republic" (*Visão do Paraíso*, 2010, p. 469).

During this period, Holanda had the opportunity to visit and conduct research in Portuguese archives and libraries, where he formed close friendships with Joel Serrão, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, and Joaquim Barradas de Carvalho, with whom he exchanged correspondence. A fierce critic of the Luso-tropicalist ideology, he supported resistance against the *Estado Novo* and celebrated the Carnation Revolution. In February 1973, Barradas de Carvalho thanked Holanda for signing a petition in support of Mário Soares during his imprisonment in São Tomé.

In protest against the forced retirement of colleagues under Institutional Act No. 5 in December 1968, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda voluntarily retired from the University of São Paulo. A founder of institutions and numerous political associations in defence of democracy, he was one of the signatories to the creation of the Workers' Party (PT) in 1980.

Throughout his lifetime (1902–1982), various political ideologies and social utopias prevailed—from Nazi totalitarianism to the Cuban Revolution and colonial liberation wars in Africa and Asia. From the Cold War to cultural and sexual revolutions, these movements undoubtedly influenced his work and shaped his worldview.

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