

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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SERRÃO, Joel (Funchal, 1919 - Santana, 2008)

Joel Serrão was born on 12 December 1919 in Santo António, Funchal, where he completed his secondary schooling. Little is known about his social background other than that his family was not wealthy. Sensitive to the role of geography in the understanding of societies, he reflected on his own youth in Madeira. He felt he had been subjected to a two-sided insularity, not only physical and social but also a “psychological insularity” (Jornal de Letras, 31-01-1989, p.16), which had sparked his interest in reading, and his initial contact with the work of António Sérgio as a young adult. Joel Serrão was drawn into the apostleship of António Sérgio as a young disciple who, in a period prone to despair and anxiety – against the background of the Spanish Civil War and a time when the ideological tentacles of the Estado Novo [New State] had also begun to entangle the young – encountered “the path towards hope” in *Antigone* and the *Essays* (Portugueses somos [Portuguese we are], 1975, 75-76).

In Lisbon, his period at the Faculdade de Letras [Faculty of Arts] (1939-46) was “devoid of hope”, a waste of time, save for very few exceptions such as the teachings of Vieira de Almeida, Delfim Santos and Magalhães Godinho (Os anos 40 na arte portuguesa, [The 1940s in Portuguese Art] vol. 6, 1982, 14-15; Portugueses somos, 77). This negative view of the Faculty was shared by other students such as Mário Soares, José-Augusto França and Magalhães Godinho. To the detriment of the “old Convento de Jesus [Convent of Jesus]” he frequented the “autodidactic university of café tertulias” where António Sérgio’s pedagogy marked its presence. Once again, António Sérgio represented hope in the face of another type of insularity; in Serrão’s words, he “leavened our dreams and life projects” (Portugueses somos, 77).

It was within this context of rejection towards the university institution that *Horizonte*, a university journal, emerged in 1942, of which Joel Serrano was both director and active collaborator. It was, according to Mário Soares, a vehicle for “genuine cultural aspirations” (Portugal Amordaçado [Gagged Portugal], 1974, 43), led by young people with a new vision for national culture. Serrão’s participation was noteworthy for the diversity of the themes he broached: literary criticism, short essays on poetry, pedagogy, the state of Portuguese intellectuality, etc. Of particular note is an article entitled “Carta a Antero de Quental» [Letter to Antero Quental], in which he unveils to the author of *Causas da Decadência dos Povos Peninsulares* [Causes of the Decadence



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of Iberian Peoples] the path taken by philosophy since his death, and how 19th-century idealism had been vanquished by “a serenely scientific attitude” to reality which he associates with Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch, among others (Horizonte, no. 5, April 1942).

At the time, his main interests lay more in literature and philosophy than in history. His graduate dissertation on History and Philosophy of Science attests to this: *Ensaio sobre a unidade do real objecto* [Essay on the unity of the real object]. It was during this initial stage of his academic life that Joel Serrão laid the foundations for the reasoning that greatly influenced his historiographical works. His work was therefore a fruitful osmosis of his literary, philosophical, and historical interests.

Serrão’s thinking was influenced by a wide group of Portuguese intellectuals (Antero de Quental, António Sérgio, Jaime Cortesão, Vieira de Almeida) in addition to the French historiography of the *Annales*, passed on to him by Magalhães Godinho, one of his professors. These influences may also be observed, overall or partially, in other historians who attended the Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa [the Lisbon Faculty of Arts] around the same time. A. H. de Oliveira Marques referred to them as “the 1939-45 generation” or “the Lisbon school” in view of this new message they had brought to national historiography and also since they were of approximately the same age (*Ensaio de Historiografia Portuguesa* [Essays on Portuguese Historiography], 1988, 49 and ss). According to Oliveira Marques, this generation also shared a Marxist background (a debateable characteristic, one might add). Undoubtedly, some of its leading figures favoured a kind of history that was more attentive to social and economic phenomena over history in its entirety, based on interdisciplinarity and a comprehensive vision of social phenomena. They were steeped in the need to reconcile history with civic action, in line with António Sérgio’s theory.

Joel Serrão partook of these ideas, as attested by his initial publications. The vicissitudes of life coupled with a keen interest in Fernando Pessoa led to his publication, in 1945, of the letters Pessoa had written to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues, who Serrão had met in the Azores. In the preface, Serrão revisits some of the ideas he had already advanced in *Horizonte*, that is, the need for Portuguese intellectuals to adopt a scientific approach, including an analysis of the author of *Mensagem* [Message] as being far too apologetic (*Cartas de Fernando Pessoa a Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues* [Letters of Fernando Pessoa to Armando Côrtes-Rodrigues], 1985, 10). This path on which he embarked with Fernando Pessoa – a poet he continued to study -, among a large group of Portuguese intellectuals, may be considered a milestone in Serrão’s historiographical trajectory. He wished to understand the renowned figures of Portuguese contemporary thinking in their complex interconnection with their surrounding social, cultural, technical, and mental environment - Man in his environment, of course, but also with particular sensitivity to the psychological profile of those figures, which endowed them with a specific hallmark in their understanding of their time and the ability to gauge it (*A emigração portuguesa – sondagem histórica* [Portuguese emigration – a historical survey] 1977, 219). Joel Serrão proceeded thus, in the wake of advances in the biographical studies of new French historiography, of which Lucien Febvre is an example. It was precisely from Febvre that Serrão took one of his favourite concepts – mental set of tools (*outillage mental*)



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– which per se accounts for this affiliation. Concepts such as conjuncture and structure are equally frequent in his work and, as an object of study, he pays particular attention to the concepts of revolution, social class, people, bourgeoisie, Sebastianism, etc. Besides Pessoa, and to name but a few, Antero de Quental, Sampaio Bruno, Manuel Laranjeira and Cesário Verde were also the target of attention of this Madeiran historian.

Ultimately, his urge to understand the correlation between man and his environment from the perspective of sociology of literature, which structured Serrão's historiographical trajectory, resided in his belief in the absolute value of the human being as the defining element of the present and future; a constant struggle to understand and control the conditioning factors of life in society, albeit not in absolute and mechanistic terms. Only by knowing our dependencies can we aspire to the awareness and control of our freedoms. (*Emigração portuguesa – sondagem histórica*, 13; *Temas de cultura portuguesa [Themes of Portuguese Culture]*, 1960, 19).

In the year following the publication of *Cartas*, his first historiographical work entitled *O carácter social da Revolução de 1383 [The Social Character of the 1383 Revolution]* was also published (1946). Serrão's interest in this topic is likely to have been sparked by his attendance of Magalhães Godinho's classes at the *Ateneu Comercial de Lisboa [Lisbon Commercial Athenaeum]* (following his controversial exit from FLUL) and one of those classes was actually dedicated to this topic). It was Joel Serrão's intention to bring a new social and economic interpretation of this central process for the formation of Portugal to the historiographical arena. António Borges Coelho, a scholar in this field, highlighted Serrão's work as being highly innovative for the period (*Jornal de Letras*, 12-25 March 2008, p. 9). In short, Serrão argued that two revolutions had occurred: 1) in 1383, the revolution of the “povo miúdo” (“common people”) who protested against the precarious living conditions of the time; 2) in 1385, the «revolution-organisation» when the bourgeoisie appropriated the inadequate movement to fight for their own aspirations. Therefore, he openly criticized António Sérgio's theory that bourgeois aspiration and Aljubarrota had been a class struggle right from the inception of the Revolution. António Sérgio replied to this criticism and even though he remained steadfast in his interpretation, he acknowledged Serrão's worth as a young historian. (*Ensaaios [Essays]*, vol. VI, 1980, 3-10). In order to reinforce the arguments of his theory, he tried to frame the 1383 Revolution within a broad European spectrum where several social revolutions had erupted; in the second 1976 edition, he also underlined the importance of national integration in a demographic and social context of 16th century Europe. This attempt to understand national problems in a European light reflected the new desires for a renewal of historiography in Portugal, one that until then had been too centred around the singularity of the homeland.

Between 1948 and 1972, Joel Serrão taught at primary and secondary schools in Funchal, Viseu and Setúbal and from 1954 onwards at the Liceu Passos Manuel in Lisbon. Following the recreation of the Faculdade de Letras do Porto [the Oporto Faculty of Arts], he applied for a position as teacher, along with Benard da Costa and Barradas de Carvalho, but their applications somehow “vanished into thin air” (J. Barradas de Carvalho, *O Obscurantismo Salazarista [Salazar's Obscurantism]*, 1974, 25). Between 1972-75 he taught at the Instituto



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Superior de Economia [the Higher Institute of Economics], then at the Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa (1975-79) and pursued his academic career at the Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa [the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of the New University of Lisbon], until he retired in 1989. He also collaborated actively with several cultural and scientific institutions: the Sociedade Portuguesa de História da Civilização [the Portuguese Society for the History of Civilisation] (1949-53); the Centro de Estudos do Século XIX [Centre of 19th Century Studies] (1970), which he co-founded with Vitorino Nemésio, José-Augusto França and José Tengarrinha; he was member of the Board of the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian [Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation], where he was responsible for the area of Science (1975-1995); Chair of the Centro de Estudos de História do Atlântico [Centre for the Study of the History of the Atlantic] (1992-97). He also wrote for numerous newspapers and journals (Diário de Lisboa, Análise Social, Vértice, Seara Nova, O Tempo and Modo, Annales, etc.), and translated some works.

From the 1950s onwards, in addition to his teaching, he began to publish historical studies, first on the Middle Ages, then briefly addressing the Modern Age to finally focus almost exclusively on the Portuguese 19th century, which constitutes the bulk of his work. What then, one may ask, prompted his interest in the 19th century, so chronologically remote from his initial studies? First of all, his studies tackled a wide range of the themes: beyond his interest in Portuguese intellectuals, as has already been mentioned, he was also interested in contemporary political thinking, historiography (with a special interest in Alexandre Herculano, Oliveira Martins, António Sérgio and Jaime Cortesão), innovation and technical implementation, emigration and demographics, the development and ambiance of Lisbon's daily life, Sebastianism, the situation of the Portuguese woman, without forgetting themes such as «on the experience of 19th-century boredom» (1962). These multiple interests are patent in another work that fell under his supervision and to which his name is indissociable, thus projecting him far beyond the academic world. The work in question was, of course, the Dicionário de história de Portugal (DHP) [Dictionary of the History of Portugal], published in 4 volumes between 1963-1971, with subsequent editions containing an addendum with a greater focus on the 20th century (coordinated by António Barreto and Maria Filomena Mónica). The DHP is to this day regarded as innovative and useful by historians. In fact, these were the guiding objectives of the project as is clearly described by Serrão in the preface to the DHP in 1963: to provide readers with trustworthy and updated information on the history of Portugal; to foster the opening of new innovative perspectives for historical research.

This work sought not only to examine more traditional historical themes, but also to bring the dissemination of research findings on Portuguese history conducted under new approaches to national historiography. It was indeed surprising, as he also admitted himself, that he had been chosen to coordinate such a pivotal work on 20th-century historiography, which crystallised all the progress made by historiography in the last decades but, above all, which constituted a point of departure for a new history of Portugal. To this end he gathered a large number of researchers, among whom the following names featured: Magalhães Godinho, Barradas de Carvalho (who was appointed project coordinator together with Joel Serrão), António José Saraiva, Oliveira



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Marques, Borges de Macedo, Veríssimo Serrão, Torquato de Sousa Soares, Jorge Dias, Luís de Albuquerque, C.R. Boxer, Frédéric Mauro, Charles Verlinden, Orlando Ribeiro, Rómulo de Carvalho, etc.

Without underestimating the considerable number of collaborators-almost 140 in all - a sign of the extent to which the historiographical community was behind this new venture, Serrão's collaboration was highly relevant as he alone authored over 80 dictionary entries on a variety of themes: «Alexandre Herculano», «Oliveira Martins», «historiografia – na época contemporânea» [«historiography – in the contemporary era»], «Sampaio Bruno», «Antero de Quental», «Decadência» [«Decadence»], «burguesia – na época contemporânea» [«bourgeoisie – in the contemporary era»], «povo – na época contemporânea» [«the people - in the contemporary era»], «emigração» [«emigration»], etc. Joel Serrão was fully aware of his own «complex, apparently disjointed evolution» (Jornal de Letras, 31-01-1989, p. 19). “Apparently”, since he also stated: «partial studies [...] are part of a context without which partial things are meaningless». What then is the context that renders his varied work understandable in light of a single purpose? What did he seek to construct around the study of the 19th century in Portugal?

To answer these questions, one must go back to the text that appears to have been the starting point of Joel Serrão's study of the 19th century: «Por uma história cultural do século XIX português» [«For a cultural history of 19th century Portugal»], published in *Temas oitocentistas I* [19th-Century Themes I], resulting from a conference delivered at the Institut Français au Portugal in 1952. It would first be necessary to list the theoretical and methodological assumptions to assist anyone wishing to “hoist the sails” and navigate through such a clouded period. It would also be necessary to bear in mind not only the changes that abounded in this century, but also the constancies. And it is by interweaving these two perspectives that the societies of a given period may be understood. As in *O Carácter social da Revolução de 1383*, he believed that the study of 19th century Portugal should be guided by a comparative analysis of several distinct geographical components; the national scene against the Western European context, thus distinguishing genuinely national phenomena from those that were no more than the extension of a global process, with some Portuguese nuances. He further claimed that, to solve the issue of excess documentation, which usually goes hand in hand with the research on contemporaneity, a collective approach needed to be adopted, which was something he sought to apply to “his own” works.

The wide range of themes he covered with his 19th century research, in addition to his multiple interests, may be justified by the holistic vision that ought to be applied to historical understanding. Without resorting to oversimplifications and distorted views, it would be impossible to fully grasp the complexity of historical issues without at the same time considering and comparing mental, technical, economic, and political perspectives. The reality that was to be objectively reconstructed was one, and all these perspectives were mutually influential (*Do Sebastianismo ao Socialismo* [From Sebastianism to Socialism], 1969, 20-21); to divide them into impervious compartments without acknowledging the existence of other perspectives would be to further narrow the understanding of this past which, in its entirety, was already unintelligible. It should be noted that



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not much research had been done on this period, and the dispersion of Serrão's work may be justified by the need to branch out into different directions in order to attain an all-encompassing understanding. Unfortunately, he failed to realize his plan to build a history of 19th century Portuguese society. (*Crítica [Criticism]*, no. 4, Feb. 1972, p. 7).

Portuguese university historiography was traditionally not particularly inclined towards philosophical reflection on its own science. This tendency became more accentuated during the Estado Novo [New State] and not even the creation of a degree in history and philosophy (1930) solved this problem (L. Reis Torgal, *História da história em Portugal [History of the History of Portugal]*, 1996, 258). However, in the 1940s, the influence of António Sérgio, Vieira de Almeida, Sílvio Lima and of French historiography, which was making significant progress in the renewal of historiographical thinking, contributed to a relative understanding of the issue by the academy. Magalhães Godinho was particularly noteworthy in this process as this problem was addressed in his graduation dissertation and he continued to publish work related to historical theory and criticism in the 1940s.

Joel Serrão was part of this renewal process and his historiographical trajectory was guided by a specific interest in reflection on history: «As for history, it should be noted, without mincing words, that it serves the present and the future – and not the past! If we study the past, it is only because our own time demands that we do so. It is because we need to understand it – to position our action within it. » (*Temas de cultura portuguesa [Themes of Portuguese culture]*, pp. 17-18). This was the keystone of his coherent and virtually unchangeable historical thinking.

The influence of António Sérgio's anti-specterism is clearly identifiable, characterised by the idea of being free from the past to freely embrace present problems and shape a desirable future. However, Joel Serrão was fully aware that we cannot free ourselves entirely from the past: «it is becoming more and more clear that all efforts to set aside a people's traditions are useless. Nothing can be built on a vacuum. If we search for a solution to national problems, they must first be faced as objectively as possible for if we dismiss them, we may mastermind solutions that are absolutely worthless [...]. We must continue the past, albeit dialectically, on the basis of the present and the future, which will be shaped by our efforts in the amorphous darkness» (*Temas de cultura portuguesa*, 34-35). Having acknowledged the value of tradition in the present, scientific criteria must be used as objectively as possible to understand it. This search for objectivity was always present in his research: «the dignity of history is simply the search for objectivity» (*Temas oitocentistas, [19th century themes]* 13). It is with this premise in mind that his "criticism" of António Sérgio must be understood, even though Sérgio never sought to be a historian and frequently acted on the basis of controversial and civic intuition. His «evaluative history» frequently bore a criticism of past events instead of an attempt to understand them objectively (*Homenagem a António Sérgio [Tribute to António Sérgio]*, *Colectânea I [Compilation I]*, 1976, 48).

A significant part of Serrão's reflection on history is centred around the relationship between the historian's



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craft and the exercise of citizenship. To what extent are these two activities reconcilable? In other words, to what extent can they be untangled? His interest in 19th century Portugal was grounded on the need «to trace the roots of what I felt, at several levels, was the dead end in which we had found ourselves» (Jornal de Letras [Journal of Letters], 31-01-1989, p. 18) or, with reference to the Estado Novo, «the roots of the phenomenon to which the Portuguese people had, after all, fallen victim » (Os anos 40 na arte portuguesa, [The 40s in Portuguese Art], vol. 6, 15). Yet this did not mean that he had succumbed to militant historicism for, as noted above, the search for objectivity and a “serenely scientific approach” were values he defended in his works.

The interconnection between historiography and citizenship may be found, for example, in his studies on emigration, an endemic problem of the Portuguese society that was incapable of “promoting its people”; or even as editor of the Coleção Horizonte [Horizon Collection] – a publishing house for works on history, philosophy, geography and sociology and where most of his works were published. Serrão's aim was to disseminate his major works in this collection to a larger audience, at an affordable price, thereby contributing to the “development of the country by equipping it with cultural and mental resources»

In short, in his own words, «ideology is the tacit or effective negation of a scientific approach and methodology [...] history, as a science, negates that which is contained by ideology; the historian, however, coexists with the citizen – and how can the latter, as such, escape influences and options of an ideological nature? » (Emigração portuguesa, 19). An aporia, as stated by Serrão, which is nevertheless a challenge to critical thinking and problematisation that the historian, condemned to citizenship, cannot avoid.

By way of conclusion, the prominent role played by Joel Serrão in the Portuguese culture of the second half of the 20th century may be highlighted in his opening of new approaches both in history and in literary studies. Pioneer in the study of a variety of themes and writers of contemporary history, his work was marked more by the opening of new paths than by a historical overview; this may be why his work, to some extent, has fallen into oblivion, partly also due to the maelstrom of historical studies in recent decades. Nevertheless, his role in the training of several historians in the 1970s and 1980s (not to mention his influence on secondary school education) is particularly worthy of note as is the launch, with A. H. de Oliveira Marques, of the first master's degree in contemporary history in Portugal,.

Joel Serrão died on 5 March 2008, following a prolonged illness that had already removed him from cultural circles in the years leading up to his death.

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