

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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NEVES, José Acúrsio das

(Fajão, Pampilhosa da Serra, 1766 - Sarzedo, Arganil, 1834)

José Acúrsio das Neves was undoubtedly one of the most energetic personalities favourable to the industrialisation of Portugal in the context of the economic hardships the country faced between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. He was son of António das Neves, who had a degree in Canon Law from the University of Coimbra, and Josefa da Conceição. His family's wealth would enable him to enter the University's Faculty of Law in 1782, where he completed his studies in 1787. He then began an ascending career in the judiciary, to which he would devote almost his entire life. At the same time, José Acúrsio das Neves is today considered to be one of the forerunners of economic and social history in Portugal. His deeply-rooted political convictions will be forever a part of his character — he confessed his desire to be "useful to the Homeland and to my Sovereigns by following the path of the Humanities".

He completed his apprenticeship as a magistrate at the *Desembargo do Paço* and started working at the *Casa da Suplicação* and in the opposition to the *Lugares de Letras*, where he published his first panegyric booklet (1794), which was addressed to the president of the Council of the *Desembargo do Paço*, Count Luís de Vasconcelos e Sousa (1740-1807). Appointed as a judge for Angra do Heroísmo, a post he would hold from 1795 to 1799, he remained on Terceira Island, and was promoted to chief magistrate from 1799 to 1802, taking part in the executive government of the Captaincy. After finishing his commission in the Azores, he married Delfina Maria das Neves, the widow of one of his uncles, who was born in Sarzedo, in the municipality of Arganil, and had a considerable income. He returned to mainland Portugal in 1807, after witnessing the departure of the Royal Household and the Court to Brazil, on the verge of the first invasion by the Franco-Spanish armies led by Marshal Junot (1771-1813). Facing the gravity of such events, José Acúrsio das Neves reacted stormily to the weakness and defeatism of the Regency and the pessimism of a large part of the intelligentsia and the military classes — he decided to launch an energetic pamphlet activity to counter these tendencies.

After returning to his homeland, he wrote several "patriotic works", which were booklets designed to strengthen popular resistance against the French, *Manifesto da Razão contra as usurpações francesas oferecido à Nação Portuguesa, aos Soberanos e aos Povos* [Manifesto on the Reason against French usurpations offered to the



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Portuguese Nation, Sovereigns and Peoples] (1808); *Observações sobre os recentes acontecimentos das províncias de Entre Douro e Minho, e Trás-os-Montes* [Comments on recent events in the provinces of Entre Douro e Minho and Trás-os-Montes] (1809); and *Reflexões sobre a invasão dos franceses em Portugal* [Reflections on the French invasion of Portugal] (1809), among other works. Some of these were translated in Spain, where they achieved some notoriety.

After the first invasion was repelled and the national sovereignty was re-established to a limited extent, the patriotism and loyalty shown by José Acúrsio das Neves were honoured and he was selected for several posts. On 27 August 1810 he was elected a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of Sciences in Lisbon. Later that year, he was appointed judge the Oporto Court of Appeal, a post he would combine with the functions of deputy and secretary of the Royal Board of Commerce, Agriculture, Factories and Navigation, as well as deputy of the Royal Silk Factory, the Free Water Works and the Liquidation Board of the now-defunct General Company of Commerce of Grão-Pará and Maranhão. In recognition of his commitment, he was awarded the Orders of Christ and Our Lady of the Conception. These appointments in the fields of economics were decisive in consolidating his economic and political thinking, which was why he began publishing his thoughts on Political Economy in 1814, which included a contribution of lessons and examples taken from history, which was another of his great literary passions.

His most important work in the historiographical circles is, of course, the *História Geral da Invasão dos Franceses em Portugal e da Restauração deste Reino* [General History of the French Invasion of Portugal and the Restoration of this Kingdom] (vols. I-V, 1810-1811), which is still today an essential reference in any bibliography available on the French Invasions, with reissues up to the present day (1984/2008). As in all of his writings, his patriotic inclinations and defence of national independence are clear and obvious: "Force often, but not always, dictated these speeches; however, whether it was force, fickleness of character, treachery or cowardice, the effects were always the same. It is only right that the timid should find a forgiving mother in their homeland — one who will forgive them for their weaknesses when they come to her in repentance. However, the insolence of those who cover their infamy or their cowardice with the pretence of doing good for their homeland, and even describe their crimes as services and declare these are virtues — is beyond the most basic decency! These virtues are indeed very common in the unfortunate century of the Napoleons and the Godoys, but they would have found their reward on the gallows in the centuries of the Epaminondas, the Aristides and the Brutes! Virtue never supports crimes. The true good of the homeland demands its sons that, instead of joining the murderers who are tearing it apart, they should bravely expose their chests to bullets in order to save it" (*História Geral da Invasão dos Franceses... Reino*, vol. III, 1811, pp. 13-14). The guiding lines set in this work, which was still highly controversial, showed a view of history with key concepts that called for a revolution against the decadence of Portugal, with a need to rescue the country through progress and the strengthening of convictions about the homeland. Boldly published during the French Invasions, this work denounced, from the author's point of view, the betrayals and collaborationism of



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many important individuals, which, given the proximity of these events and the fact that those individuals remained in government positions, led to fiery controversies, of which we highlight, among others, the quarrel with Lieutenant General and academic Francisco de Borja Garção Stockler (1759-1829), which dragged on for more than a decade, with the publication of denials and justifications from both sides.

From 1814 onwards, *Variedades sobre objectos relativos às Artes, Comércio e Manufacturas consideradas segundo os princípios da Economia Política* [Miscellany on topics relating to the Arts, Commerce and Manufacturing considered according to the principles of Political Economy] (vols. I-II, 1814-1817, 1987) was published and, as part of his duties at the Board of Commerce between 1818 and 1820, he was one of the first ideologues to promote the use of the steam engine to consolidate the industrialization of the country.

With a literary culture grounded in the classical canons — one of characteristics — the critical thinking of José Acúrsio das Neves was extremely diversified, involving the fundamental areas of politics, economics and history, and also the defence of freedoms and fundamental rights in those tempestuous times, like he stated in *Cartas de Um Cidadão Português a seus Concidadãos sobre Diferentes Objectos de Utilidade Geral e Individual* [Letters from a Portuguese Citizen to his fellow Citizens on Different Objects of General and Individual Utility] (1822): "Well-defined liberty and equality are precious rights of mankind and can be lost due to the excess with which they are intended to be enjoyed. Ill-defined freedom and equality are the greatest of the scourges that plague the human race. Read the history of the French Revolution and you will be convinced of this truth: facts persuade more than speeches" (Letter VI, *A Tática dos Revolucionários* [The Revolutionaries' Tactics], p. 48).

At the end of the liberal revolution of August 1820, the political-ideological struggle continued. Dismissed from his main duties, he was nevertheless elected to the Courts in 1822 for the Arganil constituency, and maintained a diligent parliamentary activity. After the *Vilafrancada* (27 May 1823), he was readmitted to the Board of Commerce, from which he was dismissed again in 1824, after being arrested as a suspected participant in the *Abrilada* (29-30 April 1824). After the death of King João VI and the consolidation of King Miguel's power, he was reinstated to his duties in 1826. With a passion for scientific and technological progress, and grounded on the teachings of history, he published *Entretimentos Cosmológicos, Geográficos e Históricos* [Cosmological, Geographical and Historical Remarks] (1826/1987) and *Noções Históricas, Económicas e Administrativas sobre a produção e manufactura das Sedas em Portugal...* [Historical, economic and administrative insights into the production and manufacture of silk in Portugal] (1827).

After the absolutist government of King Miguel was installed in the country, he was appointed Prosecutor of Lisbon in the Board of Three States (1828), and played a very active role in legitimising King Miguel. During his renowned speech at these Courts, he explained the reasons why, according to the laws of succession and the stipulations of the apocryphal *Cortes of Lamego*, King Miguel I should be legitimised and Pedro IV considered a usurper, even though they were brothers.

Shortly afterwards, he published his last work, *Considerações políticas e comerciais sobre os*



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descobrimientos e possessões dos Portugueses na África e na Ásia [Political and commercial reflections on Portuguese discoveries and possessions in Africa and Asia] (1830). During the civil war between the liberals and the absolutists (1832-1834), he hastily left Lisbon due to an outbreak of cholera. He lived for some time in Caldas da Rainha, where he wrote *Boletim do Exército* [Army Bulletin] for King Miguel, and then returned to Sarzedo (Arganil). He died under circumstances that are not entirely clear, on 6 May 1834, alone and abandoned in a hayloft where he had taken refuge from the persecutions carried out against King Miguel's supporters.

In arguing strongly for the cause of King Miguel, José Acúrsio das Neves would refuse to accept the directives of the liberal revolution, and called for a return to the social and political models of the *Antigo Regime* (Ancien régime) while fighting all forms of despotism, even though he recognised the need for force to preserve social order and cohesion. Despite his brilliant political career and his superiority as an economist, decades passed until his work was rediscovered: "A firm believer in the absolutist political ideology, a factious liberal in his economic views, and a strong defender of colonisation, Acúrsio das Neves felt the need — at a time when ideas were paid for with alternating persecutions — to take refuge from the political liberalism (which was then about to become a reality) so that he could survive the dangers of a regime which took so long to define itself and therefore still listened to him, not only accepting his bibliography, but also allowing it to be published in the "Impressão Régia". However, since history is the best court in which to judge any person, he was forced to die a refugee — from the same liberal system of which he claimed to be a defender economically, but of which he was a fierce ideological opponent" (Luís Marques Alves, "José Acúrsio das Neves, o 'Liberalista' colonizador", 1978, pp. 358-359).

Despite his often contradictory discourse, which reflected the context of that era, two fundamental characteristics of his thinking stand out: the liberal impetus in his economic thinking and the absolutist character of his political convictions. These ambiguities were also apparent in his historiographical writing, but they must be interpreted in a natural manner in the light of the events of the century. A declared reformist, he staunchly defended the strengthening of the state apparatus and the creation of basic structural conditions that would allow for the sustained development of national agriculture and industry. Although he is a personality often forgotten today, we must emphasise the strong interest in reprinting some of his historiographical works, since he was one of the most visionary Portuguese thinkers from the beginning of the 19th century, and a true forerunner of modern economic theories in Portugal.

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