

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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SIMONSEN, Roberto Cochrane (Rio de Janeiro, 1889 - Rio de Janeiro, 1948)

Roberto Cochrane Simonsen was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1889, the son of Sidnei Martin Simonsen, a British citizen residing in Brazil, and Robertina da Gama Cochrane, a descendant of a Scottish family. He grew up in Santos, where he attended primary school at the Tarquínio da Silva School. At an early age, he moved to São Paulo to live with his maternal grandfather, Inácio Wallace da Gama Cochrane, who exerted a strong influence on him and played a key role in his future career choices. In the capital of São Paulo, he attended the Colégio Anglo-Brasileiro High School. At the age of 14, Roberto Simonsen entered the Escola Politécnica de São Paulo [Polytechnic School of São Paulo], an institution created in 1893 with the aim of providing technical training in line with the modernisation project of the São Paulo elite. He completed his Civil Engineering degree there in 1909, the year in which he began his professional career at the *Southern Brazil Railway* one of the most important railway companies of the time. In 1911, he married Raquel Cardoso and, in the same year, began working for the Prefecture of Santos Prefecture, becoming chief engineer of the *Comissão de Melhoramentos* [Improvement Commission]. In 1912, he retired from the Prefecture of Santos to found the *Companhia Construtora de Santos* [Santos Construction Company], a pioneering company in urban planning, paving works and the construction of public buildings. In the years that followed, Simonsen significantly expanded his business, becoming involved in major projects such as the development of the working-class neighbourhood of Vila Belmiro and the construction of military establishments across various regions of the country.

His greatest intellectual concern during this period was associated with the issue of work organisation, emphasising the importance of collective, organised and collaborative work. In the debates at the time, he opposed wage cuts, arguing that production costs should be reduced by rationalising production. He was an important promoter of Taylorist principles in Brazil, and in 1931 he was one of the founders of the *Instituto de Organização Racional do Trabalho* [Institute for the Rational Organisation of Work] (IDORT), an institution dedicated to promoting studies on the general organisation of production, professional counselling and work hygiene.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, in addition to his successful business career, Simonsen became one of the country's main industrialist leaders. His projection on the national public stage began in 1919, when, at



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the invitation of the then Minister of Agriculture, he was part of the trade mission sent to England in June of that year. On this occasion, Simonsen became actively involved in the debates, gave speeches asking for technical support for the Brazilian economy and wrote articles for the *Times Magazine* disseminating business opportunities in Brazil. Throughout the 1920s, Simonsen took part in the industrial diversification movement then underway, becoming president of the *Sindicato Nacional dos Combustíveis Líquidos* [National Liquid Fuels Union] in 1923. In 1924, he was the director of Cerâmica São Caetano [São Caetano Ceramics] and, in 1926, he organised the national rubber and copper artifacts campaigns. A landmark moment in his career as a business leader dates back to 1928, when, faced with disagreements between industrial and commercial interests within the *Associação Comercial de São Paulo* [São Paulo Trade Association], he took part in the founding of the *Centro das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo* [São Paulo State Industries Centre] (CIESP, later named FIESP) and became its vice-president. The speech he gave at the founding of CIESP, published under the title "Orientação Industrial Brasileira" [Brazilian Industrial Orientation], is regarded as a milestone in Simonsen's political and intellectual career. On that occasion, he introduced a series of topics that would be explored in greater depth throughout the 1930s and 1940s, particularly the assertion of industry's indispensability for the country's economic and political independence, the challenge to the concept of "artificial industry" (which was used to dismiss protectionist policies), and the advocacy for more extensive protectionist measures.

In the 1930s, Simonsen's involvement in the public sphere became more and more prevalent. In 1932, he became actively involved in the creation of the Frente Única de São Paulo (FUP), which demanded political autonomy for the state and the immediate reconstitutionalisation of the country. Once the armed struggle broke out in July of that year, he was one of the main people responsible for adapting São Paulo's industrial park to the war economy. Once the civil war was over, the Vargas government was forced to convene a Constituent Assembly, which led Simonsen to be nominated as a member of parliament, and he was reappointed to the same position in 1934. Between 1935 and 1936, Simonsen chaired the *Centro Industrial do Brasil* [Industrial Centre of Brazil] (CIB) and, in 1937, was elected president of FIESP, consolidating his position as Brazil's main industrialist leader.

His rapprochement with the Vargas government dates from this period. In 1937, he was appointed a member of the *Conselho Federal de Comércio Exterior* [Federal Foreign Trade Council] (CFCE), a body directly linked to the Presidency of the Republic and tasked with establishing the government's economic policy. This movement was not without its challenges. As he got closer to the State apparatus, Simonsen lost the support of some industrial peers, as was seen in the protest that led to almost 300 companies leaving FIESP as a result of his re-election as president of the organisation in 1938. During the Estado Novo, he joined the *Conselho Econômico do Estado de São Paulo* [São Paulo State Economic Council]. In 1942, he was appointed to the *Conselho Consultivo da Coordenação da Mobilização Econômica* [Consultative Council for the Coordination of Economic Mobilisation] (CME), responsible for organising the war economy. That year, he also took part in the *Comissão de Imposto Sindical* [Trade Union Tax Commission], linked to the



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Ministry of Labour. In 1944, Simonsen became a member of the *Conselho Nacional de Política Industrial e Comercial* [National Council for Industrial and Commercial Policy] (CNPIC), where he was part of the commission responsible for drawing up a paper on the principles that should guide Brazil's commercial and industrial development. This document proposed greater planning of the Brazilian economy. This initiative gave rise to the well-known debate between Simonsen and the liberal economist Eugênio Gudin, who was part of the newly created Planning Commission of the National Security Council and was responsible for evaluating the report, rejecting its interventionist and planning proposals.

The author of a limited body of work spread across speeches, technical publications, and various media, Simonsen built his intellectual career around topics such as the role of the State in the economy, the defence of industrialisation as a strategy to overcome backwardness, and the importance of State planning and protectionist measures for economic development. Unlike many of the economic readings in vogue at the time, Simonsen favoured historical interpretation as the key to understanding contemporary problems. Historical analysis as part of economic argumentation is one of the characteristics of his writings, already present in *As crises no Brasil* [The crises in Brazil], a book published in 1930, in which he tried to assess the impact of the 1929 crisis on the Brazilian economy. In this work, Simonsen realised that the Brazilian crisis was the result of external factors combined with a lack of internal productive and administrative organisation, pointing to an interdependence between the direction of public affairs and the course of the private economy. This book can be seen as representative of the shift from a focus on productive organisation, a topic present in his work since the 1910s, to a more historical-structural approach to the Brazilian economy, which would come to define his writings in the 1930s.

Simonsen's most far-reaching work was *História Econômica do Brasil (1500-1822)* [Economic History of Brazil (1500-1822)] written as a result of the author's teaching activities, which took place in 1936 as part of the course of Economic History of Brazil part of the Bachelor's Degree in Political and Social Sciences at the *Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política de São Paulo* [Free School of Sociology and Politics of São Paulo] (ELSP). The ELSP, an institution created in 1933 in the wake of the Constitutionalist Movement, with the mission of qualifying São Paulo's elite in "affairs of State", had Simonsen as one of its most important founders. *História Econômica do Brasil* stands as one of the most prominent essays on the understanding of the country, aligning with the contemporary trend of attempting to develop an understanding of Brazil that could shed light on the obstacles to modernisation and the historical roots of its backwardness. Like other authors of his generation, Simonsen found the origins of the problems to be overcome in colonial history. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, he understood that the specificity of Brazil's economic evolution was that of a colony geared towards developing capitalist dynamics, since it was already possible to observe the mercantile concern for profit since the arrival of the first Europeans on the American continent. Simonsen aligned himself with the thesis that the Portuguese monarchy established a strong central government organisation from an early stage. At the beginning of its history, Portuguese sovereigns were able to secure the largest sums of land and wealth for the Crown, but the Portuguese agrarian monarchy did not prevail. The



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expansionist tendency by sea seemed to be the only viable solution for the small kingdom, squeezed between the sea and the territories that would later form Spain. Although he acknowledged that maritime trade had existed since the late 13th century, with fishing, as Lúcio de Azevedo would describe it, being the first nautical school, it was only after the victory of the Master of Avis and the founding of the Sagres School that the Portuguese expansionist drive began to take more concrete form. This policy was not the result of a need to migrate, but of a government plan that aimed to conquer wealth, expand the faith and satisfy an increasingly restless and turbulent nobility. The Portuguese pioneering spirit in nautical matters is emphasised by the author as an extraordinary service rendered by Portugal to the world. However, like Spain, Portugal would profit little from the riches conquered by maritime expansion, as they suffered, among other factors, from competition from much more organised and active countries such as England, Holland and France.

Simonsen structured his *História Econômica do Brasil* based on the theory of economic cycles and organised his chapters as to highlight each of Brazil's economic activities in the colonial period and their social and demographic effects. The author argues that, as a colony, Brazil was established to supply primary commodities to the metropolis, leading to successive periods of accumulated wealth that were subsequently wasted. The main diagnosis was that the wealth generated by primary export cycles was not permanent, because it was largely susceptible to fluctuations in the international market. Starting with an economic analysis of Brazil's colonial history, Simonsen was able to illustrate how economic dynamics were related to population movements and the territorial processes that shaped and defined Brazil. In order to assess Brazil's economic history according to the theory of economic cycles, he used the work of the Portuguese historian João Lúcio de Azevedo as his main reference. According to the author, "Lúcio de Azevedo, in his *Épocas de Portugal Econômico* [Epochs of Economic Portugal] shows the successive cycles in which the Portuguese economy gravitated from then on. The sugar cycle in which Portugal was able to breathe new life into itself (...), the gold and diamond cycle in the 18th century (...), Pombal's nationalist reaction, and finally, the attributions coming from the Napoleonic wars that had disorganised the old Portugal for so long. These phases will be examined in conjunction with the corresponding stages of the Brazilian economy." (R. Simonsen, *História Econômica do Brasil*, 1978, p. 41). Simonsen's assessment of the economic periods sought to challenge the colonial logic that relegated Brazil to the role of a mere supplier of primary commodities. This view contradicted the entrenched perception of Brazil's agrarian vocation and supported the argument that overcoming the country's underdevelopment and achieving autonomous development would require massive investment in industry. This topic is further explored in works such as *Evolução Industrial do Brasil* [Brazil's Industrial Evolution] (1939). Although less celebrated than works such as *Casa Grande & Senzala* [The Masters and the Slaves] (1933), *Raízes do Brasil* [Roots of Brazil] (1936) and *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo* [Formation of Contemporary Brazil] (1942), *História Econômica do Brasil* became one of the first essays to highlight the importance of recognising the roots of Brazil's contemporary economic problems in its colonial history. The book has been read by important authors in Brazilian economic



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historiography, such as Caio Prado Junior, Celso Furtado and Fernando Novais, and has been recognised as one of the main references in the debate on Brazilian "backwardness".

In the period following the end of the Second World War and the exhaustion of the Estado Novo, Simonsen concentrated on the debate about the role of planning and Latin American economic development, topics that the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) would later take on as an object of more systematic assessment, which led many analysts to place Simonsen as one of the forerunners of the developmentalist theories in vogue in the 1950s. In the process of re-democratisation, Simonsen collaborated with the creation of the *Partido Social Democrático* [Social Democratic Party] (PSD) and was elected senator for São Paulo in 1947. His short parliamentary experience included voting in favour of the removal from office of parliamentarians elected by the *Partido Comunista Brasileiro* [Brazilian Communist Party] (PCB). In 1946, he became the first economist to occupy one of the chairs of the *Academia Brasileira de Letras* [Brazilian Academy of Letters] (ABL). It was at the ABL headquarters, in May 1948, when he was greeting the Prime Minister of Belgium, Paul van Zeland, that the businessman, economist, leading industrialist and historian died. The image of a man of action, focused on work, as portrayed in the articles reporting his death, appears to have been solidified by the historiography surrounding his thought and actions.

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