

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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DIAS, José Sebastião da Silva (Arcos de Valdevez, 1916 - Lisbon, 1994)

J. S. da Silva Dias can be considered one of the most important historians of the 20th century, especially at university level, at a time when historiography and the teaching of history were going through uninteresting times. There was a notable institutional straitjacket imposed by the Estado Novo regime, but also the persistence of a factual and “narrative” historiography (usually classified, in a simplistic and ambiguous way, as “positivist”) of an “academic” type, which did not seek to integrate historical events into the complex economic, social, political and cultural reality, nor to interpret them with the support of new concepts from the social sciences. A directly or indirectly ideological historiography also emerged, either “pro-government” or “opposition”, a form of self-censorship that excluded certain areas from university history (for example, social history in its global perspective) and more recent periods (from liberalism to authoritarian/totalitarian states and modern democracies). Suffice it to say that history students at Portuguese universities did not normally learn history beyond the 17th century, or at most the 18th century. Silva Dias broke down these barriers, albeit with the difficulties and contradictions inherent in anyone who seeks *to change* from within the “system”.

His place of birth (in Arcos de Valdevez, on 9 February 1916), his origins and his education are, in the traditional order and, curiously, his entire life as a student, historian and university professor of history (and philosophy) developed more slowly than he would have liked and even, so to speak, in a “delayed” manner. The son of a veterinarian, António Cândido Machado da Silva Dias, and on his mother’s side, Angelina Maria de Araújo Dias, from a noble family, the House of Amiosa, in Valadares do Minho (according to the autobiographical data he wrote in his *Curriculum Vitae*, in 1969), after completing his primary education, which he began late in his hometown, he only continued his studies “at the age of 16”. However, as he completed his secondary education in three years, he enrolled in law in 1934, at the normal age of a student entering university, i.e. 18.

He finished his degree on 29 June 1941 with a dissertation entitled *Da letra em branco* [From the blank page]. His student life already revealed his initial ideology and even traces of his idiosyncrasy. He was a militant Catholic in the Centro Académico de Democracia Cristã [Academic Centre for Christian Democracy] (CADC), of which he was president in 1939-1940 and 1940-1941, and a contributor and editor of its journal, *Estudos*. But he also contributed to the newspaper of the Academia de Coimbra [Academy of Coimbra], *Via*



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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

Latina, sometimes in a controversial manner (“violent and impetuous”, as the monarchist Henrique Barrilaro Ruas said in 1946, in a controversy with Henrique Beirão – see *Carta-Aberta de Henrique Barrilaro Ruas a Henrique Beirão*, Coimbra, 1946, p. 23), as when, on 30 April 1941, he attacked António Sérgio’s *História de Portugal* [History of Portugal]. But he also considered Marxism (as Barrilaro Ruas sought to defend it) “an attitude as legitimate as any other”, while judging inadmissible the “mystification of facts and ideas” to which it could lead. It thus seems that Silva Dias, even as a young man, already tended towards a critique of an “essayistic history”, where theoretical prejudices arose, far removed from the methodology of document analysis, which he considered to be the foundation of history. He also criticised António José Saraiva’s *História da Cultura* [History of Culture] in conversations with his disciples because of these “flaws”.

He followed Catholic thinking, which led him to publish pages by Jaime Balmes and Ramiro Maeztu, emphasising the importance of Jacques Maritain’s neo-Thomist philosophy, defending political ideas always based on Christian concepts (see, in particular, *Estudos Políticos* [Political Studies], Coimbra, 1948), writing in the newspaper *Novidades*, and participating in various Catholic meetings, such as the Marian Congress of Évora in 1946 (16 to 18 October), of which he was one of the rapporteurs. He remained essentially Catholic, although with a shift towards progressive Catholicism, participating, during the Marcelist period, in meetings at the Torre da Marca promoted by the newly arrived bishop of Porto, exiled during the Salazar regime, António Ferreira Gomes, and, for example, writing in the daily newspaper *O Jornal* (14 March 1980) the article “Ser cristão e ser de esquerda” [Being Christian and being left-wing].

However, as time went by, his tendencies moved closer to a secular ideology of a democratic socialist nature and even to a certain scepticism appropriate to his temperament. In any ideological or professional context, he was always involved in a (sometimes healthy) controversial attitude. This is evident in many of his writings from his youth and maturity, whether in periodicals, such as the article “Toque de clarim” [Bugle call] (in *Acção. Semanário da Vida Portuguesa*, Lisbon, 4 September 1941), or in the book *Escândalo da Verdade* [Scandal of Truth] (Leiria, 1943), or in the discussion on Europe at the end of the war (*O problema da Europa*, Lisbon, 1945) with Abel Salazar, author of a complex book entitled *A crise da Europa* [Europe’s crisis] (Lisbon, 1945), or in the debates on education and the university during the Marcelism period (in this case with links to Miller Guerra, from the “liberal wing”, who had also been a member of the CADC in his youth) and after 25 April 1974. However, the controversies were sometimes also personal in nature. Silva Dias displayed a temperament that oscillated between a “professorial” attitude, which led him to some tension with his disciples, peers and other scientists – as is now clear (perhaps too clear) in the (in)confidences of Rómulo de Carvalho published posthumously (*Memórias*, Lisbon, 2010, pp. 245-257) – and an openness to new academic and scientific perspectives, which earned him great respect even among those who did not always have friction-free relations with him.

His career as a historian therefore came late, following a brief stint as a lawyer in his native Minho region and a period in the civil service in Lisbon. Here he held such diverse positions as Assistant to the Social Services



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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

of the Instituto Nacional de Trabalho e Previdência [National Institute of Labour and Welfare] from 1942 to 1946, a role that stimulated his interest in social issues and led him to join the founding group of the newspaper *O Trabalhador* (in which Abel Varzim wrote articles criticising the “situation”, which led to his exile to the parish of Minho where he was born, Cristelo, in the municipality of Barcelos and the diocese of Braga); Secretary of the Court of Criminal Enforcement (from 1949 – the year he was reinstated in the civil service – until 1953); Inspector of the Judicial Police (from 1953 to 1956); director of the Instituto de Assistência a Menores [Institute for Assistance to Minors] in 1956, and in the same year he was appointed Ombudsman of the Casa Pia de Lisboa.

However, he did not remain in this position for long, as the reform of the Schools of Arts and Humanities courses and the introduction of new subjects (Decree No. 41,341 of 30 October 1957) took him back to Coimbra and the University where he had graduated in Law. This was aided by his research work in archives and libraries and the subsequent publication by the journal *Biblos*, of the Faculdade de Letras de Coimbra [School of Arts and Humanities of Coimbra], in 1952, of his first historiographical work, which was as long as many of those he would go on to publish: *Portugal e a Cultura Europeia. Sécs. XVI a XVIII* [Portugal and European Culture. 16th to 18th centuries] (1952 and 2006). In November 1958, the School Council of the Faculdade de Letras [School of Arts and Humanities] invited him to take up the chair of Portuguese Cultural History, created by the aforementioned 1957 reform, which was followed by the subjects of Modern Cultural History and History of Philosophy in Portugal (the latter belonging to the Philosophy group).

Thus, at the age of 36, Silva Dias truly began his career as a historian, and at 42 as a university professor of History (and History of Philosophy), although his courses in Cultural History were part of the so-called “ungrouped subjects”. In fact, he emerged outside the context of a typical university career, which normally began as a second assistant and continued with subsequent doctoral exams. He would eventually succeed one of the greatest masters of the Faculdade de Letras [School of Arts and Humanities], Joaquim de Carvalho, who had died on 27 October 1958. At a meeting on 5 May 1961, the School Council of the Faculdade de Letras [School of Arts and Humanities] awarded him a PhD in Philosophy, which he would receive in a formal ceremony, in accordance with Coimbra tradition, on 20 March 1966. In 1969, he took the exams to become an associate professor and, the following year, he took up the position of full professor. However, his activity was not limited to teaching and research. He exerted a great fascination over his students, which was characterised both by their respect for his high standards and by their desire to explore new paths in the courses they were taking, particularly in the History course.

Having been created in 1961, what was called the Portuguese Culture Seminar, which he directed, proposed to guide the 5th year degree seminar on the theme of Liberalism and the Counter-Revolution. It can be said that this 1964-1965 seminar (preceded by a pre-seminar experience the previous year) constitutes one of his most mark y pedagogical experiences. For the first time, the 19th century was taught and learned in a methodical way in history courses. This led to the publication, years later, within the framework of the Seminar on Portuguese Culture and the research project on “The History of Ideas in Portugal in the 18th and



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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

19th Centuries”, subsidised by the then Instituto de Alta Cultura [Institute of High Culture] (IAC), of degree theses on this subject by some students of history, but also of philosophy. In fact, his philosophical background and the fact that the courses he taught on Modern Cultural History and Portuguese Cultural History were not strictly part of a defined course, but were open to students of History, Philosophy and Romance Philology, meant that he also attracted students of Philosophy (and even of literary and linguistic studies), who, alongside graduates in History, were among his first disciples.

Naturally becoming involved in the political and university controversies of the post-25 April period, he was briefly president of the Management Committee of the Faculdade de Letras de Coimbra [School of Arts and Humanities of Coimbra] (1974-1975). Around this time, he founded the Institute of History and Theory of Ideas and coordinated the then newly created Centre for the History of Society and Culture (1976), linked to the Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica [National Institute for Scientific Research] (INIC), which succeeded the IAC. Only then did the chairs of Cultural History and the aforementioned Institute and Centre, which still exist today, now linked to the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), move to the History group. In 1977, he founded the *Revista de História das Ideias*, which has been published for over 30 years and has dedicated two volumes to him (vols. 8 and 9, 1986 and 1987). In 1979, he was invited to teach at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa [NOVA University Lisbon], where he was president of the committee that set up the Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas [School of Social and Human Sciences]. A new research centre was then created, the Centro de História da Cultura [Centre for Cultural History], with some teachers from Coimbra who accompanied him and joined the teaching staff of the new university, as well as others who joined later. Another journal appeared under his direction, entitled *Cultura, História e Filosofia* [Culture, History and Philosophy], which also dedicated a volume to him (vol. V, 1986). In this way, Silva Dias created, so to speak, a “school”, which split into two, one in Coimbra and the other in Lisbon.

After a few more years of teaching and research, sometimes with some internal controversies, especially regarding the organisation of courses, he retired on 9 February 1986. On 28 June, he was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Public Instruction. He continued to work in research, but published little else, mainly due to family problems that accompanied the end of his life, which ended on 23 November 1994. His wife, the researcher Graça Silva Dias, who accompanied him in his work and collaborated directly with him and some works, died in December 2006. The Institute of History and Theory of Ideas of the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra [School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra], which continues to exist, albeit without institutional status, posthumously paid tribute to him by naming the room where it is located “Sala Silva Dias”. The main part of his private library was acquired in 2004, for a symbolic price, by the Faculdade de Letras de Coimbra [School of Arts and Humanities of Coimbra], where it is stored and awaiting a place that will do justice to the master and bibliophile who built it.

J. S. da Silva Dias published an extensive body of work. The complete bibliography up to 1986 can be consulted in one of the volumes cited (vol. 8) which, as mentioned above, the *Revista de História das Ideias* dedicated to him on the theme “The Sacred and the Profane”, chosen because it was considered to be in line



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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

with one of Silva Dias' fundamental concerns in the field of philosophical thought and historiographical practice. His published works mainly refer to the Modern Era. Among his many historiographical articles, his studies on Pombalism and some referring to the Liberal Era are particularly noteworthy. He also contributed several articles to the *Dicionário de Literatura Portuguesa, Galega e Brasileira* [Dictionary of Portuguese, Galician and Brazilian Literature], edited by Jacinto Prado Coelho (Porto, 1957-1960, and 1969), and to the incomplete *Grande Dicionário de Literatura Portuguesa e Teoria Literária* [Great Dictionary of Portuguese Literature and Literary Theory], edited by João José Cochofel (Lisbon, 1972). He wrote more than 30 reviews of Portuguese and foreign books, an activity that also demonstrates Silva Dias' critical sense. On the subject of the university and teaching, in addition to articles on the history of institutions, he wrote, as suggested, several articles on current issues, including the following: "A reforma da Universidade e os seus problemas" [The reform of the university and its problems] (*Brotéria*, vol. 93, 1971), "A reforma do sistema educativo" [The reform of the education system] (*Expresso*, 31 March 1973), "A reforma e as reformas na Universidade" [Reform and reforms at the University] (*Diário de Lisboa*, 2 July 1974), "Políticas de educação" [Education policies] (*A Capital*, 3 December 1974), "A Universidade de ontem e de hoje. O poder da rotina contra o poder da lucidez" [The University of yesterday and today. The power of routine against the power of lucidity] (*Crítério*, no. 7, October 1976), "A Universidade que temos, a Universidade que queremos" [The University we have, the University we want] and "Uma Universidade competente, uma Universidade eficiente" [A competent University, an efficient University] (*Expresso*, 3 and 9 September 1976, respectively), "I. Que ensino superior? Universidade e cultura. Regime de austeridade, mas não de pobreza" [I. What kind of higher education? University and culture. Austerity, but not poverty] and "II. Que ensino superior? Democracia na Universidade: em defesa do diálogo e da participação" [II. What kind of higher education? Democracy at the University: in defence of dialogue and participation] (*Portugal Hoje*, 26 and 27 May 1981), "Da carreira universitária à carreira da Universidade" [From a university career to a career at the University] (*O Jornal*, 28 May 1981) and "Uma Universidade para o Portugal de hoje" [A University for today's Portugal] (*Diário de Notícias*, 17 June 1981).

However, Silva Dias' activity should not be restricted to his writings. As mentioned above, his significant work in supervising theses should also be highlighted. It can be said that his work as a historian and professor of contemporary history stands out in this area, which was one of the highlights of his career. If we wish to characterise more explicitly the main lines of his historiography and his theory of history, we could say that Silva Dias, who was mainly concerned with the history of ideas, does not fit into any specific school. What should be said is that he sought to open himself up to all types of historiography that sought to be based on documentation, rigorous and interpretative (with an "open problem" logic). Thus, at a time marked (sometimes as a "fashion") by Marxism and the influence of the "French school" of the *Annales* and "New History", although he never disregarded any of these lines, he did not allow himself to be dazzled by them, expressing, however, a strong opposition to systemic Marxist interpretations, which is evident in his reflection on liberalism, in which he opposes the readings of historians who made their career outside the university (or



DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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

entered it after 25 April), where the strength of the Marxist school's ideas was evident, as was the case with Victor de Sá, Fernando Piteira Santos and Armando de Castro. Above all, he wanted his disciples to have a critical understanding of the historiography that was being published – hence his challenge to read works critically and the remarkable library he built up at the Instituto de História e Teoria das Ideias [Institute of History and Theory of Ideas] at the Faculdade de Letras de Coimbra [School of Arts and Humanities of Coimbra], and to write an objective history, regardless of the influences they might express.

Can we therefore infer that his own historiography does not reveal any ideological influences? That cannot be said. Expressing himself through writing and words that were sometimes difficult to interpret (particularly in his “master classes”, as he himself said, but not in his seminars, where he simply sought to sow the seeds of knowledge that each student was discovering), his vision of the university as situated between a logic of competence and a logic of intervention, his religious tensions that came from a neo-Thomist and social Christianity that later turned to a social and progressive Catholicism, and even his shift towards a political conception of social democracy were still evident. But the presence of ideology emerges more as a cultural sense than a ‘partisan’ one, since no historian can free himself from ideology as a form of culture. And this culture was always the idea pursued, sometimes contradictorily or in an apparently contradictory way, by Silva Dias. He never managed to stop interpreting history as a science that presupposes a complex cultural background, just as he never stopped thinking of the University as a space for communication, based on science but also, in a very broad sense, on culture.

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DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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

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