

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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SILVA, João Serras e (Alcaravela, 1868 - Lisbon, 1956)

Born in the municipality of Sardoal (district of Santarém) on 15 January 1868, he was a member of the 'Catholic Action' — one of the patrons of the creation of the Academic Centre for Christian Democracy in Coimbra (CADC de Coimbra) — and professor at the Faculdade de Medicina [School of Medicine] of the University of Coimbra (FMUC), specialising in the areas of hygiene and 'social medicine'. He was also a guest lecturer at the Faculdade de Letras [School of Arts and Humanities] and the Higher Normal School of the University of Coimbra (FLUC and ENSUC). Between 1933 and 1938 (the year he retired), he held the position of Director-General of School Health at the Ministry of Public Instruction — since 1936, the Ministry of National Education. He died on 8 April 1956.

After attending the School of Natural Philosophy at the University of Coimbra with distinction — later the Faculdade de Ciências [School of Sciences] and today the Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia [School of Science and Technology] — João Serras e Silva enrolled at FMUC (1891), where he graduated in 1896. After obtaining his bachelor's and doctoral degrees, he successfully applied for a teaching position at that School of the University of Coimbra in 1898. He defended his dissertations entitled "The heredity of syphilis", "Alcoholism" and "The high altitude climate and pulmonary tuberculosis". In 1895, he collaborated with Augusto Rocha — professor at FMUC and Director of *Coimbra Médica* — and António Leite de Faria in organising the 1st National Tuberculosis Congress in Coimbra.

A defender of João Franco in the final phase of the Constitutional Monarchy and of Sidónio Pais during the First Republic, João Serras e Silva was part of the support base for the Military Dictatorship and the Estado Novo, having been a member of the Corporate Chamber. He was active in various organisations, including the Central Committee of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul, the Association of Portuguese Catholic Doctors and the National Crusade of D. Nuno Álvares Pereira. He was one of the mentors of the generation of leaders of the CADC in Coimbra, symbolised by Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira and António de Oliveira Salazar.

He contributed to newspapers such as *Novidades* (of the Patriarchate of Lisbon), *Correio de Coimbra* (of the Diocese of Coimbra), *Diário da Manhã* (of the National Union) and *Voz*; the journal *Estudos* (published by the CADC in Coimbra) and in scientific and/or technological periodicals (*Coimbra Médica*, *Higiene e*



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Hidrologia, Biblos, Arquivo Pedagógico, Saúde Escolar). He also edited monographs on hygiene and epidemiology, 'social medicine' and school health, religion and 'moral hygiene', sociology and pedagogy, history and the teaching of history. Of particular note are *A hereditariedade da sífilis* (The Heredity of Syphilis, 1897), *O alcoolismo* (Alcoholism, 1898), *O catolicismo e a higiene* (Catholicism and Hygiene, 1918), "*A história à luz da ciência social*" (History in the Light of Social Science, 1926), *Social Science in Education and History* (1926), *A Good Education Must Be National* (1928), *The Study of History* (1929), *National Education* (1938), *Questions of Education* (1949), *Fundamental Ideas on Primary School* (1952).

He sought to promote the dissemination of "experimental sociology" in Portugal, and was associated with the studies carried out here by Léon Poincard and Paul Descamps. Even with this background, in the 1930s and 1960s, the Salazar dictatorship viewed this area of knowledge as a threat and excluded it from the research and higher education system. Perhaps because he adopted an essayistic approach resulting from his self-taught background (), both in sociology and historiography, João Serras e Silva was mainly influenced by authors and works published in French — of French, Belgian and Polish origin — and in English.

Having reached intellectual maturity at a time when, in Portugal as in more developed countries, a socio-professional group of researchers and/or history teachers, mostly with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in history, had not yet been established, João Serras e Silva taught at FLUC from 1920/1921 to 1932/1933, the core subject of Portuguese Discoveries and Colonisation. He always defended an interpretative and structural historiography – research, teaching and dissemination – that was globalising but 'enlightened nationalist', influenced by the epistemological and theoretical assumptions of 'Catholic positivism' and even critical idealism. He did not advocate – or even refused – the adoption of neo-methodical historicism as the official historiographical trend of the Estado Novo.

In the words of João Serras e Silva, as "in sociology, in history intuition and common sense often lead to absurd explanations. Social laws, repercussions, coexistences, social formation provide means of interpreting historical facts that historians do not usually possess. It is not enough to have the fact; no science is satisfied with facts alone; an operation of the mind is needed to connect and explain these facts. Facts are necessary, indispensable; no science can be constituted without them. But, although necessary, they are not sufficient [...].

"History does not give us an exact reconstruction of a society or an institution, it does not describe the evolution of that society or institution because it lacks the means; there are no documents. The best documents are those concerning private life, and these do not exist. That is why history will always be an imperfect science, inferior to the natural sciences. However, social science, taking advantage of what exists and applying its discoveries — causal laws and laws of coexistence — obtained from the observation of present-day peoples, can considerably advance our knowledge of the past." (SILVA, João Serras e, "*A história à luz da ciência social*" [History in the light of social science], Biblos, vol. II, 1926, pp. 486 and 528.)

Like António Sérgio and Jaime Cortesão, for example, João Serras e Silva proposed a sociological reading



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of the “Portuguese expansion” — its antecedents and corresponding implications — both in the “Metropolis” and the “Adjacent Islands” and in the “Colonies”. He compared the virtues and limitations of Iberian developments with the successes of the British, French and Dutch models. He used concepts such as “transport policy” and “settlement policy”, “responsibility of the elites” and “education of the working classes”. After 1932/1933, the History of Portuguese Discoveries and Colonisation returned, for many academic years, to being studied as a collection of empirical information, “personalities”, “events” and value judgements on the “glory” or “decline” of Portugal.

João Serras e Silva’s contribution to ENSUC stemmed both from his training and work as a doctor — he taught School Hygiene in the first year of the Teacher Training Course at the three levels of non-higher education — and from his commitment to debates on the evolution and social function of historiography. He considered it essential that, both in terms of the configuration of programme content and in terms of teaching methodologies (which should be active and empower students), the teaching of history should contribute to the education of adults who are aware and capable of acting more autonomously.

In his view, only a scientific history that was sociological, simultaneously materialistic and “spiritualistic”, corporatist and “lucidly nationalist” would guarantee young people and the country an “objective” understanding of their past, which was essential for building a future in which the positive aspects would be maintained and the negative characteristics abandoned (replaced by valid solutions already tested in other states). Using examples from the history of European colonial expansion, he sought to show how the ‘national crisis’ of the second half of the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century had resulted from Portugal’s continued status as a noble and warrior country, lacking a strong commercial and industrial elite; and from its inability to consolidate favourable relations with societies that had civilisational levels superior, similar or inferior to its own.

On historiography and the teaching of history, João Serras e Silva stated that in a “synthetic formula we could say: it was the cavalry that gave us India and it was the cavalry that made us lose it. We knew how to conquer, but we did not know how to retain and preserve. This is why India was lost. Once again, the facts show us that chivalry does not build anything solid and lasting; the patriarchal system of exploiting and dominating people, rather than things, is a system doomed to sterility. A history of the Discoveries that ignores this determinism, this chain of events, this predominance of social formations, may be an erudite history [...], but it is not a scientific history, capable of enlightening us about the mechanism of human evolution.” (SILVA, João Serras e, “O estudo da História” [The Study of History], Pedagogical Archive, no. 4, 1929, pp. 430/431.)

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