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TELES, Basílio (Massarelos, Porto, 1856 - Matosinhos, 1923)

Little or nothing is known about Basílio Teles' family and social origins. He attended Porto National High School (LNP, 1868 - ?), Porto Polytechnic Academy (APP), and then the School of Surgical Medicine (EMC, 1874-1879). Following a disagreement in the final year with one of the lecturers, Urbino de Freitas, he did not complete the medical course. After taking part in the failed revolt on 31 January 1891, he lived in exile in Galicia and Madrid, in the company of Sampaio Bruno. He also spent some time in Brazil (Rio Grande do Sul), from where he returned in 1896. In the 1880s he gave classes in literature, philosophy and natural sciences at the Porto Academic School (EAP). Throughout his professional life he worked essentially as a publicist. He never occupied any public position, nor was he ever employed by private companies. Republican with a revolutionary vein, he belonged to the Northern Democratic Propaganda Club (CPDN), and was secretary of the ephemeral Northern Patriotic League (LPN, 1890). He was also a member of the Directorate of the Portuguese Republican Party (PRP) in 1897-98. He sporadically wrote articles for a number of publications, including among others: *O Debate* (1911-1912); *A Pátria* (1910-1911); *A Alma Nacional* (1910); *A Luta* (1907-1908); *A Voz Pública* (1899, 1905, 1907); *República Portuguesa* (1890); *Revista de Estudos Livres* (1884, under the pseudonym Silva Teles); and *Pantheon* (1880, also as Silva Teles). He was around forty-three when he published *O problema agrícola (crédito e imposto)* (The agricultural problem [credit and tax], 1899) – the first of a set of studies on the Portuguese social situation.

Teles' writings reveal the influence of the main currents of thought of his time: Comte and Spencer's positivism governed his conception – which was a biological one – of society, the idea of the primacy of reason, the belief in science and the notion of progress (seen as the continuous, inexorable march of events). The stamps of determinism/evolutionism are present in his adherence to the "law of the strongest" and in his idea of race and the ethnic differentiation of peoples. In his works there is also a clear sense of pessimism – which he shared with a substantial number of Portuguese intellectuals of the late 19th century – in the face of what he saw as the symptoms of his homeland's decadence and the weakness of the character of the Portuguese people.

Teles was not a historian in the literal sense of the term, but he reflected on Portugal's past and its effects on contemporary society. In harmony with the prevailing positivism, he believed in history as a science,



making a case for modern scientific methods, emphasising the importance of documents found in archives and displaying a great concern for truth and exactitude. To his mind the narrative-construction process entailed observing and analysing the facts while subjecting them to in-depth critical examination, with the goal of validating or refuting an initial thesis that served as a starting point from which to interpret events. Using the experimental method, Teles looked for causes, effects and explanations; his analyses sought to arrive at a general understanding of the history of Portugal, with a political and ideological purpose in which the past could be used to explain the present and permit glimpses of the future. Like so many others of his generation, who also espoused the theories of scientism and evolutionism, Teles saw the nation as a living organism – subject to cyclical periods of apogee and decadence – and looked to the study of its origins in order to find the intrinsic characteristics that defined its historical individuality and moral personality, in the belief that therein lay both the solution for the future and the way to resolve the present crisis.

Following in the footsteps of Alexandre Herculano, Teles admired the Portuguese Middle Ages, highlighting what he saw as the rural and noble nature of a population that devoted itself to agriculture and a salutary small trade, living in a frugal and healthy self-sufficiency under the aegis of an organic municipalism that respected local freedoms. Like that first historian (Herculano), he believed that this was the period that best substantiated the nation's soul and represented the authentic, unique Portugal rooted in its origins (*Estudos históricos e económicos* [Historical and economic studies], 1901, p. 21). Teles also shared with Herculano the idea that this period of apogee was followed by one of decline, based on a mercantilism that was "calamitous, because it was adventurous and exotic" (*O problema agrícola*, 1899, p. 259), and on an all-absorbing centralism, which had caused the generalised desertion of the land and the loss of the best elements of Portuguese society. In line with the anthropological, ethnological and geographical arguments that were current at the time, Teles felt that this change of course also represented a struggle between populations with different ethnic characteristics and ways of life – the Arian peoples of the north and the Semite (Mozarab) peoples of the south of the country. In his view the former were the representatives of the original peninsular communities – folk whom he thought of as credulous and rough, but imbued with a deep connection to their native soil and thus deserving of his affection; while the others, from beyond the Tagus, were "tainted with Semitic blood" (*Estudos históricos...*, p. 19). Although he said that they were more cultured and progressive, he clearly harboured ill feelings towards the latter population, seeing them as foreigners "with a Euro-African, mixed and indefinable essence" (*Idem*, pp. 19 and 47). The divide between Arian North and Semite South is a key element in both Teles' thinking and his interpretation of the history of Portugal. This belief distinguished him from other contemporary authors – Téofilo Braga, for example – who also attached value to the ethnic factor.

Teles was of the opinion that the original cause of the country's decadence – the moment at which Portugal broke with its medieval roots – arose out of the 1383 revolution, which signified the triumph of the mercantilist, cosmopolitan Lisbon bourgeoisie. In his view the preponderance of this social group and the

adoption of a new economic strategy, which took the shape of a policy based on trade and transport to the detriment of agriculture, was to mean the end of the thus far predominant sober, honest way of life, which was replaced by dissolute customs and laziness (*Idem*, p. 346). This primordial mistake, as Teles called it, was then added to by other factors: monarchical despotism, religious fanaticism, and the obsession with forms of greatness. He believed that these were the causes of the decadence of the Portuguese people – reflected in the bastardisation of their character and the acquisition of numerous vices – which had in turn led to the lack of a common objective with the capacity “to impose direction and convergences on uncoordinated individual energies” (*Do Ultimatum ao 31 de Janeiro* [From the Ultimatum to the 31st of January], 1905, p. 163). To those who exulted in a glorious past of discoveries of islands, continents and new peoples, Teles replied: “Let us all stop fooling ourselves, however much the truth may rumple our pride: what we gave – or more exactly, what we sold – to civilised Europe was brazil-wood and pepper” (*Estudos históricos...*, p. 58).

Teles shared the sentiment of an end-of-century decadence to which a significant proportion of his contemporaries adhered. He believed the Portuguese possessed a weak, cautious, timid and slow temperament – so different from strong races like the German and British – and showed themselves to be people without speculative or abstractive capabilities, lacking in creative capacities or the talent to synthesise ideas. He thought that there were no daring individuals, or a single illustrious name in the sciences; and that, with the exception of the first kings and the Marquis of Pombal, rulers were a bunch of incompetents who couldn’t put an end to the disorder in the country’s public finances. However, despite this clear despondency, Teles did not believe in a *Finis Patriae*. The way in which he repeatedly evokes the past in his writings possesses a civic/political dimension that it is important to note. The fact that he listed the causes of decadence did not mean he was resigned to it, but rather reflected his intention to offer a response to the questions public opinion was asking as it looked for solutions to the crisis. Seen in the light of the ideological framework of the republican movement to which Teles belonged, the existing situation was the result of the Bragança dynasty’s inability to foster a spontaneously collective movement that would be reflected in the revival of the homeland. To Teles this lack of capacity announced the end of the monarchical regime and not the dissolution of the nation.

The book *Do Ultimatum ao 31 de Janeiro*, in which he set out his theories on Portugal’s destiny, provides us with elements that are precious to an understanding of his thinking on this subject: the determination to leave a testimony of his participation in the events that led up to the 1891 revolt in Porto is an unequivocal declaration of his belief that the insurreccional movement would be the best solution to the state of affairs the country was experiencing at the time (*Do Ultimatum...*, p. 166). Indeed, prior to this, in his *Memórias Políticas* (Political Memories), Teles had already developed this question of the revolution, which he saw as the inevitable fight between two ideals: conservatism and democracy, from which the latter would inevitably emerge the winner because “all democracy, wherever and whenever it exists, marches unconquerably towards the complete fulfilment of its programme” (*Memórias Políticas*, 1895, 127). Hence the challenge he

threw down to his fellow-believers: “the Republican Party in Portugal, today, is either revolutionary or it is nothing” (*Idem*, 116). He thus repudiated any other political solution – above all the proposals that entailed reaching an understanding with the monarchical forces (the “Progressives”). Although he was sceptical about the revolutionary instincts of the Portuguese people (as a result of the disillusionment he had suffered in 1891), Teles had nonetheless not stopped believing in the inevitability of the democratic process, and consequently in the need for the members of the party (especially his contemporaries from Porto) to begin to act. From a doctrinal point of view, as postulated by political progressivism, the idea that the Republic was a higher (and better) step in the process of progress than the Monarchy justified any attempt to speed that process up, legitimising the coup d’état that Teles recommended with an eye on the example of the 1889 Brazilian revolution (Macedo, 1990, 195). These two works by Basílio Teles – *Memórias Políticas* and *Do Ultimatum ao 31 de Janeiro* – have been seen as being written with the same objective: “that of offering Portuguese republicans a useful guide to the revolutionary action they would sooner or later have to unleash anew” (Domingues, 2007, 53).

The priority he attached to safeguarding the revolution and its most immediate consequence – the implementation of a republican regime – led Teles to contradict the position taken by the moderate wings of the republican movement (that represented by Manuel de Arriaga, for example), which proposed a republic that was open to all, and to say that only true republicans would be capable of defending the regime. He felt that participation by (converted) monarchists would only help taint and corrupt it (*Memórias Políticas...*, 126). This gives us a better understanding of the position he took and explained in *I - As ditaduras, II - O regime revolucionário* (I – Dictatorships, II The revolutionary regime, 1911), in which he argued for the adoption of an authoritarian solution – a “dictatorship by consent” – that would ensure the transition (by implementing a set of revolutionary decrees) between the monarchy and a radical democratic republic based on the popular will. Predicting the problems of the post-revolutionary period and determined to preclude the unforeseen and guarantee stable governance, Teles chose to save the Republic to the detriment of the (democratic) programme (Leal, 2008, 16-17).

In addition to the political question and to that of replacing the regime, when looking at Teles’ thoughts on this subject we should also note the importance he attached to the economic factor in Portuguese history, in that “these two analytical paths” supported one another “in such a way as to clarify the causes of the country’s problems” (Almodóvar, “*O pensamento económico...*” [Economic thinking], 2007, p. 63). In Teles’ opinion the crisis was also explained by the fact that Portugal had pursued a commercial economic policy that was not very suited to the country’s characteristics; he felt that this meant that overcoming it entailed a development based on a physiocratic ideal in which agriculture was seen as the best way to produce wealth that would in turn free the country from dependence on foreigners. At the same time Teles advocated the creation of a state that would weigh up and regulate social justice along the lines of a “lectern socialism” (*Kathedersozialismus*) and would be “the inspiring soul and vigilant will of tomorrow’s Portugal” (*O problema*



agrícola..., p. 259). He believed that although the Portuguese were precluded from playing a leading (or hegemonic) role in Europe's future, they could perform the mission of being transmitters of civilisation to the more backward peoples of the world. Even though communicating and disseminating were modest functions, they would give Portugal the right to its own place in the moral confederation composed of the peoples of Europe (*Do Ultimatum...*, pp. 162 and 36.).

From a historical point of view, Teles' main studies were the ones he published between 1899 and 1905. We do not know much about the way in which his thinking evolved after this. We are above all unaware of his opinion about the events that followed the 5th of October 1910 – the date of the official creation of the Portuguese Republic and the implementation of the regime on which he had pinned all his hopes. For instance, we do not know why he turned down an invitation to be Minister of Public Works, Trade and Industry in the recently formed Provisional Government. In 1918, speaking about the economic situation and the moral state of the country, Teles referred to the hardships of life and the existence of a depressing and depressive feeling that had dominated people's minds since 1911. He also added that, as a republican, he was not interested in factions, programmes or flags: "ideas and not phrases, work and not promises: it is only this that today may perhaps be able to move us and perhaps also persuade us" (*Na Flandres* [In Flanders], 1918, p. 81). This testimony seems to reveal a certain disillusionment in relation to the Republic.

During the First World War Teles published a set of didactic studies on the conflict and the powers involved in it. Without taking a stance in favour of any of the latter, Teles displayed a deep feeling of sympathy for the peoples of the north – British and German – to the detriment of the Latin peoples. He praised the former's desire to raise themselves up by merit; and pointed to the latter's faults, such as political servility, the lack of true leaders, and the profound ignorance of the masses (*A França e a guerra de 70* [France and the war of 1870], 1916, pp. 60-63). In these opuscles we can also clearly see Teles' conviction of the superiority of European culture, with the argument that Europe had imposed itself on the world because it possessed a human elite that was admirable for its intellectual and moral skills (*Acquaviva*, 1917, p. 78). This was why he considered the US entry into the war an intolerable foreign intrusion, inasmuch as he was afraid that, as the fratricidal struggle weakened the European powers, America would affirm its hegemony over Europe.

Finally, in looking at Teles' historiographical thinking we should also note his view of collective movements and the role of "Great Men". Following the path of positivist scientism, Teles felt that it was an unequivocal truth – corroborated by both history and the laws of biology – that, in order to be fecund, all collective transformations had to arise out of a slow process, or at least be based on pre-existing germs or deep aspirations on the part of the collectivity. He thought that history was made of great social energies, and that "great men" played a minor role in it. In the Portuguese case it seemed clear to him that the leaders did not have the capacity to influence the crowd and had proved themselves to be mere occasional instruments who symbolised the goals, desires and aspirations of the group they represented (*Figuras portuguesas*

[Portuguese figures], 1961, pp. 80-81).

A recent study on the philosophical thinking of Basílio Teles highlights his “unconscious but incoercible affection for human beings” (A. Braz Teixeira, “O pensamento filosófico...”, 2007, p. 13). To some authors this explains why, despite his belief in the presence of evil in nature and in men, he was a civic/political voluntarist, interested in historical and economic and social questions, and eager “to study, and contribute to, the solution to the country’s problems” (Domingues, 2007, p. 53). Having said this – and unlike some of his fellow republicans, such as Manuel de Arriaga, Teófilo Braga and Duarte Leite – Basílio Teles preferred to entrust the implementation of his ideas to others and to keep his distance from active political life. Teles cultivated a certain social and political isolation and appears to have chosen the role of a critical observer of society, rather than that of a man of action. There is no information to suggest that he belonged to any cultural or scientific societies in Portugal or abroad – an unusual absence for a man of his standing at the time.

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APOIOS:

