

DICIONÁRIO DE HISTORIADORES PORTUGUESES

DA ACADEMIA REAL DAS CIÊNCIAS AO FINAL DO ESTADO NOVO

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VARNHAGEN, Francisco Adolfo de

(Sorocaba, Brazil, 1816 — Vienna, Austria, 1878)

In 1802, the Portuguese government engaged Friedrich Ludwig Wilhelm de Varnhagen, a German-born military officer and engineer, to oversee the São João de Ipanema ironworks in Sorocaba, São Paulo, working under the authority of the intendant José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva. In 1806, he married Maria Flávia de Sá Magalhães, whose nationality remains uncertain. It was in this town that, on 17 February 1816, Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen—later known as the most important Brazilian historian of the 19th century—was born, and his life proved extraordinarily eventful from beginning to end. At the age of seven, he left for Portugal with his family. At the end of 1825, in Lisbon, he enrolled at the *Real Colégio da Luz*, where he received his foundational education. He advanced his military and scientific education at the Navy and Fortification Academies, as well as the Polytechnic School. In July 1833, he became involved in the Portuguese Civil War, siding with Don Pedro's forces. As a reward, he was awarded the rank of artillery officer. However, according to a letter he wrote to José de Sousa Soares de Andréa, he had neglected to request the requisite licence from the Brazilian government to serve in a foreign army. This delayed the process of recognising his nationality, which was only granted to him by the Brazilian Emperor in 1841. By then, he was already a member of the *Academia Real das Ciências de Lisboa* [Lisbon Royal Academy of Sciences], the *Conservatório Real de Lisboa* [Lisbon Royal Conservatory], and the *Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* [Brazilian Historic and Geographic Institute] (IHGB), founded in 1838 in Rio de Janeiro. In 1842, he was appointed first-class attaché at the Brazilian Legation in Portugal, with the primary mission of researching documents related to the history, geography, and legislation of Brazil. In 1847, he was transferred from Lisbon to Madrid. During this period, he travelled across numerous European countries in pursuit of archives and libraries, and during this time he published his most renowned work: the *História geral do Brasil* [the General history of Brazil] (1854-1857). In 1858, he was appointed as resident minister in Paraguay. In 1864, he married the Chilean Carmen Ovalle y Vicuña, who was from an aristocratic family. After a decade in Latin America, Varnhagen was transferred to Austria in 1868 as resident minister at the court of Francisco José I, Baron of Porto Seguro, in 1872, and then elevated to Viscount of Porto Seguro in 1874. Varnhagen died in Vienna in 1878.



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Who was Varnhagen? A follower of Ranke, the positivists, the methodists? Could it be that there are practically no references to Ranke in his works? What positivism or methodical principle should we fit him into? Comte and Monod are also authors absent from his work. Didn't Capistrano de Abreu, in 1878, regret that Varnhagen "ignored or disdained the body of doctrines that in recent years have become a science under the name of sociology"? (*Necrológio* [Necrology], 1878, p. 507) and didn't Gilberto Freyre, in *Casa Grande & senzala* [The masters and the slaves], consider it "childishly simplistic when it left pure historical research for the philosophy of history"? On the other hand, he did not fully engage with the epistemological movement that gained prominence in the 19th century, influenced by Voltaire's philosophy of history, which rejected traditional erudition, particularly its antiquarian aspects. Without attempting to situate him within a complex and ambiguous history of influences, it is reasonable to assert that Varnhagen embodies a set of general and widespread principles of modern 19th-century historiography, which appear ubiquitously without aligning with any specific theoretical school: i.e., the establishment of historical truth through archival research, the pursuit of original documents, narrative objectivity, and the impartiality of the historian. These characteristics reflect clear traces of the scholarly and documentary tradition of the Lisbon Royal Academy of Sciences. As he states in the preface to *Historia das luctas com os Holandezes no Brazil* [History of the struggles with the Dutch in Brazil]: "The historical school to which we belong—as we have sometimes said—is far removed from that which is overly sentimental and, in its attempt to provoke emotion, strays from the truth" (1871, p. XXV). Of these prescriptions, the most decisive for 19th-century historical epistemology was the question of the historian's impartiality. And in it, despite his rhetorical efforts, Varnhagen completely loses his way. The distinction between subject and object of research, the theoretical foundation of the emerging science of history, was a premise that he found very difficult to respect. He overlooked it more frequently than he realised, and more often than we might initially assume. The author's presence within his compositions is impressive. "We will narrate—explains the historian in the first chapter of his *Historia geral do Brazil* [General History of Brazil]—the events as they have been presented to us, in view of the documents, the reflection, and the study; and some other time, without abusing, we will take it upon ourselves to make those considerations to which we are led by intimate convictions; because it is sad of the historian who does not have them in relation to his country, or who, having them, does not dare to present them" (1854, p. 12). Even in his most thoughtful work, closer to what the science of 19th-century history was capable of, he can't hide in the text. He doesn't even try to conceal his presence. For this reason, an attentive reader like Capistrano de Abreu already warned us: "Varnhagen's temperament must be defined in order to properly understand his *História geral* [General History]", the "cyclopean mass of materials he had accumulated". (*Sobre o Visconde de Porto Seguro* [About the Viscount of Porto Seguro], 1882, p. 441; *Necrológio*, 1878, p. 505).

Varnhagen was a monarchist. Yes, definitely. And in his own way, he was also a patriot. He was a Catholic, as he never tired of saying. His belief, however, did not prevent him from ruthlessly criticising the Jesuits and, above all, the Inquisition. Self-centred and career-driven, though anachronistic in the given context, are not unreasonable characterisations. Ambitious? He even had an explanatory theory for his and



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other people's ambition. Anti-Indianist and Hobbesian are adjectives that perhaps fit him equally well, although he was a critic of Rousseau rather than a supporter of Hobbes. Anti-romantic? Certainly not at the beginning of his intellectual career. His relations with Alexandre Herculano, Almeida Garrett, and historians such as Cardinal Saraiva and Joaquim Heliodoro Cunha Rivara, director of the Évora Library, with whom he exchanged numerous letters, in addition to his collaboration with the *Panorama* and the *Revista Universal Lisbonense*, are sure indicators. Later, his critical stance towards the Indians of the Romanticism movement. Despite this, he seems to retain precepts of the romantic atmosphere, from, for example, the search for the original and the national to a passion for travelling. In addition, he maintained a close relationship with Brazilian and Portuguese men of letters through an intense correspondence until the end of his life, which did not necessarily break with the romantic conception of history and literature. Varnhagen is, above all, the author of an immense body of work that, although from a certain point onwards it favours history, crosses several domains, from Brazilian and Portuguese literature to literary criticism, biography, ethnology, politics and diplomacy, economics, architectural heritage, especially that of Portugal, and even philology. Various fields of knowledge written (in different languages) in roughly the same way: without style or elegance. It's almost a consensus that Varnhagen is not a good writer. Whether in history or any other genre. In this case, he faces the opposite dilemma to Michelet, who was accused, Roland Barthes reminds us, of being a bad historian *because he wrote* instead of simply redacting. Varnhagen did not *write*; he *redacted*. This criticism arises more from a significant aporia in the historical culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries—its roots perhaps traceable to the Aristotelian principle of the superiority of poetry over history—than from any theoretical framework on how history ought to be written. Similarly, the IHGB, frequented by an abundance of literati, serves as a platform where the blurring of boundaries between the modern narrative—scientific, neutral, and objective—and the literary narrative—always influenced by the author's subjectivity—is also evident in the works of Alexandre Herculano, Almeida Garret, Oliveira Lima, and Tristão de Araripe, or even Capistrano de Abreu and José Veríssimo. No matter how much they strive to distance themselves from it, they remain immersed in the same regime of historicity as Varnhagen, leaving the matter unresolved and maintaining the value of the classic style as a significant attribute.

Furthermore, like the Michelet presented by Charles Péguy, Varnhagen is a solitary historian. He doesn't share his work with anyone. He ends up in the archives, where he compiles, collates, copies, and finally leaves his "mark". He subsequently organises the material, disseminates it, and publishes what he chooses, but not before undertaking a theoretical analysis—in his own words, "uniting and combining them into doctrines that make such and such a body," as he explains in a letter. This fondness for archives is clear in an anecdote told in 1903 by Oliveira Lima: he recalls that as a young student of palaeography at the Torre do Tombo and a student of José Basto (who had been one of Alexandre Herculano's assistants on the great *Portugalice Monumenta Historica* [Portugal's Historical Monument]), he used to scrutinise old manuscripts in search of documents that, in his "youthful pretension", he thought could unravel some of the enigmas of Brazilian history. It was with surprise and disappointment that he spotted a small "V" on almost every paper,

written discreetly in pencil by a researcher who had preceded him: Varnhagen. Although the IHGB had urged teamwork since its foundation, in practice individual research prevailed. Varnhagen's isolation from his peers was not a specific feature of his intellectual personality, if it weren't for the fact that we could relate it to a certain need to be the first, the initiator, the one credited with laying the foundation. The epithet of *Heródoto brasileiro* [Brazilian Herodotus] will not be attributed to him by modern historiography by chance. It hardly seems coincidental that Robert Southey, who at one point envisioned his work serving Brazilians as Herodotus' did for Europeans, was severely criticised by Varnhagen. *History of Brazil*, published in three volumes in the 1810s, would be, according to the commentary found in the first edition of the *Historia geral do Brazil* published in 1854, unrelated, disorganised, repetitive, and tiring, characteristics responsible for its fragile reception (the lack of a Portuguese translation at the time was simply overlooked by the Brazilian). It's understandable, because Southey, before being a good historian, was, according to Varnhagen's not uninterested precision in the second volume of the *História geral do Brasil* [General History of Brazil], 1857, an "illustrious poet laureate". At most, the Englishman's work could aspire to the status of a *memoir to write the history of Brazil and the Prata countries*. Almost a source in and of itself. Maybe that's why he found it so difficult to distance himself from it. It seems that the first history of Brazil should be his, and the first Brazilian historian should be him. It is not that Varnhagen held this view from the outset of his career. *Historia geral* [General history] was initially thought of as a *Geographia Physica do Brazil* [Physical Geography of Brazil]. The Herodotean temptation gradually took shape as his research grew increasingly professional, keeping pace with the rhythm of his movements. Therefore, in order to understand Varnhagen, through his works and his copious correspondence, we must not lose sight of the fact that this is a discourse that comes from the past rationalised by the author; there is no carelessness in it, his controversies, sometimes acrimonious, are mostly contained to academic disputes. Even when control over his words seems to slip, his attacks reveal themselves as defences of his character. Perhaps it's no exaggeration to say that much of what we know about Varnhagen from his writings is a bit of what he wanted us to know about him. He was concerned about his life and his posterity. This caution, however, was not only insufficient to prevent the creation of an unfavourable image around him but seems to have exacerbated it. Yet, despite his personality's lack of charm, he succeeded in asserting himself, making himself indispensable and irreplaceable. Even for those who dislike him (and they do not seem to be few, either in the past or present), he has become an indispensable figure for understanding the history of historiography in Brazil and its connections with Portugal.

Thus, after various visits to libraries and archives, at the beginning of 1877, Varnhagen

finally published the second edition, revised and expanded, of the *História geral do Brasil*. An episode narrated in it is, in a way, responsible for his last trip to Brazil. In the chapter dedicated to the occupation of Rio de Janeiro by the troops of the Frenchman Duguay-Trouin, the historian states that "the first lesson we should learn" is that the capital of the empire could no longer be based in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Since its *Memorial orgânico* [Organic memorial], 1849, the subject had been on his mind. In order to resolve the problem as quickly as possible, he asked the government for a six-month leave of absence and left for Brazil. On his return



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to Vienna, he writes a specific booklet on the subject: *A questão da capital: marítima ou no interior?* [The issue of the capital: maritime or inland?] In this short text, Varnhagen takes up the considerations he had made on the subject in the new edition of the *História geral* [General history]: "When these lines were published, the very tone of conviction they conveyed caused our timid conscience to tremble at the weight of the responsibility assumed in such a work before posterity. It dawned on us that we wouldn't be reassured until, through *our own eyes* and to posterity itself, whether or not we were right in all our plans and proposals drawn up on paper in the silence of the office." In Brazil, he travelled once again to the region where he was born. Afterwards, he headed towards Goiás. Work and sacrifice dictated the pace of the intrepid researcher's activities: "We undertook (taking with us the competent instruments, including no less than three barometers) a painful journey on horseback, no less, to the province of Goiás, along our primitive roads, to *by sight* and as a former engineer, to recognise this remarkable stop that contemplation and study of the best maps had revealed to us". (*História geral* [General history], 1877, pp. 12-13) In order to know, recognise, and thus replenish one's descriptive capacity, it is first necessary to see, but with sharp, judicious, we could say scientific, eyes, like those of an "old engineer", trained in the former metropolis. The result is explanations that show how the situation in deep Brazil had not changed much since the journeys of John Mawe, Spix and Martius, Neuwied, and Saint-Hilaire, among others, during the years 1810-1820. Despite the difficulties of the itinerary, the historian assessed its results as fruitful. He not only affirmed the favourable location for the establishment of the new capital, which he believed was "well supported by geographical data", but also deemed the region suitable for European colonisation, a cause he tirelessly promoted. Before returning to Europe, he travels through Bahia. Varnhagen wanted to visit Porto Seguro and Ilhéus. In these cities, he carried out research in order to find the sources of their respective foundations. He found some documents but was disappointed by the terrible state of preservation they were in. The trip, however, had not been in vain but rather "of great advantage", as the "personal knowledge" he had acquired of "these two localities, the nuclei of two of our early captaincies", would enhance his ability to write history: "I will be better equipped to describe it for the future." This is not merely a compensation for the absence of accessible or reliable documents but a cognitive tool: in other words, vision emerges not as a fallback option but as an instrument of knowledge; thus, not as an alternative methodology but as the epistemological foundation of research. In other words, he doesn't search for traces of the past in the present in an instantaneous and unreflective way; the autopsy, the methodology of the ancients, in which the eye functions, according to François Hartog, as a "mark of enunciation, of an *I saw* as an intervention by the narrator in his narrative to prove it" (*Le miroir d'Hérodote...* [The Mirror of Herodotus...], p. 272). What he says, is not an immediate fact of consciousness for Varnhagen, but an intellectual labour that requires prior knowledge and a constant exchange between the past and the present. His intention was that one day "after completing our *História da Independência* [History of Independence]," to publish the diary of this trip—during which he believed he had found the precise location of Cabral's landing and the place where the first mass was held. The travelling historian didn't have time to write it down. The hardships of the journey led to him falling gravely ill. On 29 June 1878, at the age of 62, the Viscount of Porto



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Seguro died in Vienna, as far away as ever from his homeland. His will states that a monument to his memory should be erected on the site of his birth. Four years after his passing, on the grounds of the *Real Fabrica de Ferro de São João de Ipanema* [The Royal Iron Factory of São João de Ipanema], his wish was granted. One side of the pedestal bears the following inscription: "To the memory of Varnhagen, Viscount of Porto Seguro, born in the fertile land discovered by Columbus, guided by his father into great and useful pursuits. He shook his homeland and wrote its history. His immortal soul gathers all his memories here." It is not known who wrote this epithet. It could have been a friend, an admirer, someone from the family, or even Varnhagen himself. Be that as it may, the historian's request should not be regarded merely as an egocentric reflection but rather as a potentially precautionary measure. Everything suggests, from what is known about his life, that Varnhagen had a feeling that he wouldn't be very popular in his own country and that he distrusted the loyalty of his colleagues in preserving his memory. He always demanded that his country recognise its great men. It seems he hasn't changed his mind, even after his death! This is one of the limits of Varnhagen's paradox: the nation's greatest historian struggled to gain the recognition he sought, particularly within the IHGB, the devoted patriot who was seldom in his homeland. It is evident, both in his correspondence and in his work, that Varnhagen devoted a significant part of his life to attempting to resolve this ambiguity, or at the very least, to overcome the sense of dispossession he experienced. He attempted to forge a constant connection, an intimate coherence, between the discordant aspects of his existence, both as a Brazilian and as a historian of the nation. Wasn't his immense work dedicated to Brazil and its links with Portugal a way for him to always be among Brazilians and Portuguese readers? "All modesty," he wrote in a letter to King Pedro II in 1854, "is not enough for me not to recognise that the *Historia do Brasil* [History of Brazil], at least in many of its periods, remains with my work once written, and that it (the work) will live on eternally and will do eternal honour to Brazil and to the reign of Its Protector." Like the work of Thucydides: a possession for all time. It seems to me that all the works and what is known about his life can be interpreted as attempts to organise two distinct and simultaneously intertwined temporalities: the history of Brazil and his biography. He takes the same care to give meaning to the nation's history, its past, present, and future. History is an instrument of this double recognition. With it, one can gain knowledge and understanding. With it, Varnhagen proved his nationality and that of the country itself. Varnhagen's historiography thus wraps up a drama of a particular psychological order, where everything is constantly confused: at the same time, an answer to an existential question and an attempt to explain the needs, conscious or unconscious, of Brazil: who are we? Where did we come from? His work, his diplomatic career, his abundant epistolary writings, and his will, which are constituent elements of this discourse of the 19th century that I call the *rhetoric of nationality*, participate in a logic that is both retrospective and prospective, enabling the perception of the consistency and constancy he sought to impart to his existence. A strategy of action that is nothing more than a biographical illusion? I'm not sure. It seems to me that, rather than being a mere figment of the imagination, the traces of Varnhagen's life and his body of work reveal, if not a definitive belief in who he was, what he truly represented, and what he might come to represent, then at least a resolute intention not only to craft a biography but also to safeguard it—a profound desire, ultimately, to care



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for himself.

The legacy of Varnhagen's work, especially his *História geral do Brasil*, to Brazilian historical culture and relations with Portuguese historiography produced a lasting impact. Transformed into a history textbook by Joaquim Manoel de Macedo for the students of the Colégio Pedro II [Pedro II College], *História geral* now has ten editions. To those that were published by the author himself, we should add the third, which began in 1906 with Capistrano de Abreu but was interrupted. Rodolfo Garcia resumed the project and, in 1928, published the third/fourth complete edition in five volumes, incorporating Capistrano de Abreu's work into his own commentaries. The following editions reproduce the latter. The critique reception of Varnhagen's work, notably his *História geral*, has perhaps been surpassed by the great *História geral da civilização brasileira* [General History of Brazilian Civilisation] from the early 1960s, by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda. But let us not be mistaken: even if Varnhagen loses his centrality, his work and his *História geral* remain, if not as the "iron frames" of Brazilian historiography, as Capistrano de Abreu described them, then certainly as a foundational source.

Varnhagen left his wife and two sons, Xavier and Luis (the firstborn died aged just three). Xavier, born in Lima, died in 1894, aged 29. His mother published her memoirs, originally written in French, in 1896. Luis was born in Vienna and adopted his mother's nationality. Like his father, he became a diplomat for the Chilean government. His last role was as Minister Plenipotentiary in Berlin. He died in Rio de Janeiro in 1939. Varnhagen's children left no descendants. Before the middle of the 20th century, the Porto Seguro ceased to exist.

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