

Curto, Diogo Ramada.

Cultura escrita: séculos XV a XVIII

Maria Renata da Cruz Duran*

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Diogo Ramada Curto's book *Cultura escrita: séculos XV a XVIII* is categorical in its proposal: "analytically orientating... challenge all and any form of modeling of systems of communication, aiming to bring to the center of the analysis the creative instability that is present in the intervention of each agent (authors, printers, patrons, censors, readers, etc.)" (p.12).

Its author, a professor in the School of Advanced Studies, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences in Lisbon's Universidade Nova, and in Brown and Yale Universities, King's College and the European University Institute, bases this proposal on the prerogative that "these structures can be seen as defining places where regimes of practices were enrooted" (p.14). This construct is presented to us in 12 chapters, according to a logic in which research sources, the concept of history, agents in the process, their mode of producing and their type of production are concatenated in texts already known by the European public, through talks and articles. Separated in his writings by about ten years, the essays are approached in a timely fashion.

In the first chapter, entitled "Engraving and knowledge of the world at the end of the fifteenth century," Curto seeks to abstract from the study the mode of production of books which circulated in Germany and in the Iberian Peninsula the longevity of the combination between printed texts and images and the interferences between the form of transmission of a message and the meaning of the content transmitted.

In the second chapter, "Language and literature in the long sixteenth century," the focus is the "questions which suppose the possibility of determining the vitality of the social use of a language" (p.58), through a study of the establishment of hierarchies of study in conflict over the imposition of legitimate discourses.

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In the third chapter, “Historiography and memory in the Sixteenth century,” the author returns to the court of João II, proposing a survey of the genealogy of the works in the daily and ordinary auspices of their existence.

Curto intends in the fourth chapter, “Orientalists and chroniclers in the 1500s,” to demonstrate the ties between deeds and works through a common meaning, fixed by him in the logics of family and parenthood.

In the fifth chapter, “A translation of Erasmus: *Os louvores da parvoíce*”, Curto reproduces a talk given in May 1987 to the colloquium ‘Erasmus in Portuguese Culture,’ in the Academy of Sciences of Lisbon.

The author in the sixth chapter, “An autobiography of the 1600s: The *Fortuna* of Faria e Sousa,” looks at the figure of the *bricoleur*, illustrating autobiographic registers, confessional discourses, picaresque reports and service memorials as interesting sources of research for the study of men of letters. Furthermore, he resorts to the concept of conscience to trace the route and distinguish the consciousness men like Faria e Sousa had of themselves.

Chapter seven, “Groups of boys, violence and educational models”, looks at de-centering in relation to social organization processes, the valorization of the private sphere and the end of “a determined conception of public space.”

In chapter eight, “The market and people of the book in the eighteenth century,” Ramada Curto is diligent, searching in notary, commercial and religious archives for the personal references of the ‘people of the book’ living in Portugal. What the author, formerly editor of Difel’s collection “Memory and Society”, accompanies are changes in the form of work of the western writer, and what he finds is the establishment of a relationship with an expanded public with new types of patrons.

The presence of the Portuguese court in the dominions of written culture allows him trace in chapter nine his notion of the Enlightenment. With “D. Rodrigo and the Literary House of Arco do Cego” he presents “in a logical of clearly courtly relations” the tensions of the epoch in which figures such as D. Rodrigo and Pina Manique cohabited, the protagonists of the excerpt.

“Popular and widely circulating literature,” the tenth chapter, continues in the company of notary document, but now the Portuguese historian leaves the house and goes to the street, seeking to valorize the urban space “through the meanings attributed to each private space, as well as their respective relations” (p.299).

In “Notes for a history of the book in Portugal” and in “The bibliographic tradition of the history of the book” the author problematizes research in Portuguese about the book. First, he points to the subalternization of

production and the dissemination of new knowledge in function of the crystallization of some explanations; afterwards, he states that his observations have “the sole ambition of being able to function as a critical guide for future investigations” (p.414).

In this construction of a “history of systems of imperial knowledge” taking into account how it triggered “new perspectives in relation to the study of written culture” (p.17), Curto seeks to orientate his thought through two historiographic models: that of Lucien Febvre, with his Rabelais “living in an epoch where mental structures did not allow him even think of the problem of disbelief,” and that of Carlo Ginzburg, with his Menocchio “who, when interrogated by inquisitors, demonstrates his originality in building his own vision of the world” (p.14). Nevertheless, this does not involve choosing one of these directions, but rather “reinforcing a point of view capable of exploring different social dynamics present when dealing with high hierarchical and characterized societies – as suggested by Vitorino Magalhães Godinho – through various blockages” (p.15).

Furthermore, that Ramada Curto brings new questions and new sources to enrich the study of the dominions of written culture is as certain as his proposal to shake up Lusophone historiography. In relation to these provocations and the launching of *Cultura imperial e projetos coloniais (séculos XV a XVIII)*, edited by Unicamp in 2009, on 23 October 2009, an event was held in IFCH, Unicamp, described here to better clarify the place of the author in contemporary historiography.

In this event Silvia Hunold Lara presented and Alcir Pécora debated a text of Ramada Curto based on the discussion of the baroque, lettered culture and period between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth. In his text the Portuguese historian asked whether the assistance had contact with a foreign vision of his land and then announced the intension to analyze a “set of attitudes” capable of drafting a self-representation of the time of the enlightenment of its “various relevant contexts.”

Alcir Pécora’s argument highlighted Curto’s ruse: the creation in his type of historiography of a calculated inventory that dissolves common places, but at the same time avoids controversies. Ramada Curto responded mentioning the need of the historian to seek new sources and to take from the most common the absolute status that they had been given, not to delegitimize them, but to advance with the research – in which he evokes Irving Leonard, stating the prerogative to flee from totalities in order not to lose distinctions.

Pécora’s reply was emphatic – “In your text you do not answer what you

ask!” –, to which Curto replied, describing his own background: he taught Sociology of Brazilian Literature in US universities; learned in his youth the idea of mosaic; participated in the French effervescence of the study of the fragment (which he considered a privilege). In Portugal, he attended classes on Neo-lusotropicalism and learned to maintain the discourse on colonies ‘calm. After this Ramada Curto stated that his intention was not so much to write a proto-history, but rather to emphasize the contrasts of each epoch to give an idea of its dynamics, taking into account that “a culture should be seen from its fragments and in relation to a set of practices that involve concrete people.” Alcir Pécora did not show himself to be either in agreement or convinced. The audience, restless, began to ask questions.

Laura de Mello e Sousa was the first, asking about his proximity with Nathalie Zamon Davies in the work “The fiction in the archive” and about his opinion of a literary construction that allows the type of history she detected in the books of the Portuguese historian.

To answer, Curto cited Naipaul, distanced himself from Davies and affirmed his position as someone who looks for his resources in reality and not in fiction. He concluded his answer by recommending that the younger people in the audience read Pierre Chaunu.

Silvia Hunold Lara, joking with Pécora’s expression about Curto’s text – ‘a wall’ –, referred to him as a sea, whose large waves come in the form of footnotes and where the currents have greater importance than the mouth of the river. For her, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda is an underground current in this sea, in response to which a gesture Ramada Curto leads us to believe that she was correct.

Iris Kantor emphasized that not only do Portuguese historians not know Brazilian bibliography, but Brazilians do not know Portuguese historiography; and that although this might be a generational problem, but it is increasing. She also mentioned the idea of a political geography of intellectuals and asked Ramada Curto to locate himself in it.

Ramada Curto enunciated Pierre Vilar in order to ask one of his principal questions: “How to think the nation?” Afterwards, he described his concerns about the lack of knowledge of historiography and, above all, of historical sources, reluctantly stressing that libraries and archives held much more manuscripts that were catalogued and of the latter “all it takes is for the record to be stolen to lose its memory forever.”

I asked: from where does the idea of becoming conscious in his work come and to where does it go? He answered: it came from a Marxist tradition

and from the need of the moment we are living to resurrect ideas such as these. After this, between dispersed fragments, such the impossibility to classify the past, but seeking to check if its agents are doing this, Ramada Curto, answering a point made by Pécora about his methodology, stressed: “I did not say this in the text because I cannot always be stating the rules of the game I am playing.”

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