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Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen: The Man and His Times

The new work *Varnhagen no Caleidoscópio* [*Varnhagen in the Kaleidoscope*] was edited by Professors Lucia Maria Paschoal Guimarães and Raquel Glezer and published by the Miguel de Cervantes Foundation. It is a collection dedicated to the life and work of the historian Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen (1816-1878), from the Memory of Knowledge [*Memória do Saber*] project, funded by the CNPq. In addition to the articles written by the organizers of the volume, there are other important contributions by Lucia Maria Bastos Pereira das Neves, Guilherme Pereira das Neves, Arno Wehling and Themistocles Cezar, in addition to some previously unpublished or little-known texts by the nineteenth-century historian.

Knowledge of the “minor” Varnhagen texts that are explored here provides readers with a twin benefit: on the one hand, it describes the historical context and circumstances surrounding the life of the first Brazilian historian to produce a systematic history of Brazil, guided by documentation and scientific method, as well as offering a taste of the century of Leopold von Ranke; on the other hand, it allows us to understand the political agenda of the Empire, through the pen of Varnhagen, an educated man devoted to the consolidation of the country's unity and a diplomat in the service of Pedro II. Varnhagen's work – somewhat comparable in style to that of his contemporary Alexandre Herculano (1810-1877) – occupies a canonical position in Brazilian historiography, which is only now being studied more systematically.

A biographical introduction – written by Raquel Glezer and Lucia Maria Paschoal Guimarães – is an effective prefatory note. Varnhagen's parents – his father a German military man based in Portugal and his mother Portuguese – arrived in Sorocaba, in the heartland of the captaincy (now state) of São Paulo in 1809 to work in the existing regional

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iron mine and later returned to Portugal at the beginning of the 1820s, where the young Francis grew up. In Lisbon, he attended the Royal Military College in Luz, beginning his military career by participating in the fight against the absolutist forces of Dom Miguel. His liberal involvement is somewhat surprising in view of the widely recognized conservatism of the mature historian.

This biographical journey certainly does not explain the work, but it helps us to understand the monarchism and Lusophilia in his writings, which were produced at a time of anti-Lusitanian nativism and clearly left their mark on some of his contemporaries, such as Gonçalves Dias or even José de Alencar. Incidentally, it is important to remember that in 1844 the Emperor Dom Pedro II had converted Varnhagen's legal status (who was a Portuguese citizen, although born in Brazil) into that of a Brazilian with full rights. The exceptional nature of this act made it possible for him to join the diplomatic service, which opened the door for his activity in Europe, especially in Lisbon and Madrid, and enabled him to access books, old maps and documents. His research and scholarship culminated in his *General History of Brazil*, published in 1854 and 1857, securing Varnhagen an important place in the Brazilian literature of the nineteenth century.

The historiographical operation—as Michel de Certeau says – presents the historian as an agent who manipulates selections (from different sources, episodes, and newspaper clippings, according to his focus and perspective, etc.), in order to generate meaning and intelligibility for his narrative. *Varnhagen in the Kaleidoscope* has the merit of investigating the conditions of the historian. If we look beyond the *General History of Brazil* and contemplate “minor” texts, there emerge clear perspectives that enliven the whole of his work, marked by the circumstances of the nineteenth century, including one of his greatest obsessions: the construction of the nation-state. The book provides a glimpse of the links between the historiographical work and the route followed by the individual who wrote it, ranging from the author's youthful interests—his jobs, his prestige, and his subsequent appointment – to more substantive issues, such as his political beliefs. Varnhagen wanted to tell the history of Brazil, the State and the Brazilian people as much as possible, whose risk of breakup was uppermost in the minds of those who lived through the consolidation of the Empire.

Raquel Glezer explores Varnhagen's epistolography, in particular the letters exchanged between him and Cunha Rivara. This was a time marked by an awareness of

Portuguese decadence and the deep political and economic crisis that affected the first half of the nineteenth century. In her article, we are introduced to a young man with liberal tendencies, a reader of Herculano and then Cardinal Saraiva – an ecclesiastical liberal interested in historical documents and the Portuguese past. All were members of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Lisbon, including Varnhagen, who was accepted into its fold in 1839, just one year before crossing the Atlantic. Glezer notes that “after experiencing the political and economic chaos of a kingdom in turmoil, public employment seemed the best opportunity for him to be able to do what he liked most—reading manuscripts, visiting archives and libraries [...], traveling the world” (pp. 53-54). The author suggests that while there was a shrewd sense of timing in his application for public employment in Brazil, there was also legitimacy in the request that he made.

Resident in Madrid between 1847 and 1858, Varnhagen acted more as a scholar and an historian than as a diplomat. The same did not happen in subsequent years, when he held diplomatic posts in Paraguay, Venezuela, Peru, and especially Chile. In looking at Varnhagen’s South American years, Lucia Maria Bastos das Neves Pereira and Guilherme Pereira das Neves insist on the difference in perspective between the Brazilian and Spanish-American scholars, including Diego Barros Arana in particular (1830–1906) – the author of the 16-volume *General History of Chile* – with whom Varnhagen exchanged letters and publications, and commented on the work in question. While the Brazilian historian – a *Pombalino* and an opponent of the Jesuits, with whom Brazil had joined forces against the Braganças – gave no importance to Independence, the break with Spain was the climax of the Chilean’s work. Varnhagen did not see the need for an absolute break with the colonial past, unlike the Spanish-American liberals, who were ardent critics of Spanish despotism (p. 95). The reason for this was that Varnhagen defended a monarchic liberalism that was at odds with the hegemonic republican traditions of Hispanic America, as in the case of Arana, but also of the Argentine Bartolomé Mitre and many other intellectuals involved in the public debate at the time. More than mere intellectual disagreement, the divergence illustrates the particularities of the Brazilian experience, which Varnhagen assumed the task of narrating (and defending).

Lucia Maria Paschoal Guimarães comments on a previously unpublished text, entitled “Great Journey by Steam – Fifteen States Traveled in 14 Days.” Found at the Historical Archive of Itamaraty in 2005, the handwritten text reports Varnhagen’s impressions of a quick trip (for the time) to the United States in 1867, when he left

Guayaquil and headed for Rio de Janeiro. The journey was not sanctioned by his superiors in the Brazilian government, and perhaps this is why the text was never published.

Engaging in a dialogue with the work of de Tocqueville, Varnhagen was stunned by the “progress” of American cities and the freedom that people displayed in the clothes they wore, including women. He made clear his fondness for the wide avenues of New York, the organized nature of the hotels and the efficiency of a shipping company that connected the city to Albany. But he was not embarrassed to express his shock at learning that single women could be by themselves on the streets and at the theater, and that they could even travel alone with a single man. Youths were forced to “migrate to the Far West or California,” since the boys could face the “father’s revolver or her brother,” Varnhagen records. With a decidedly professorial tone he did not fail to prescribe changes:

Lately many mothers have educated their daughters in a manner that is inappropriate for patriarchal times, but not for our time [...]. It is necessary, however, to better introduce this reform in order to slightly change the educational system for girls, to prevent them from entering boarding houses, and from doing so before they have begun to learn how to be modest and religious, and to be good housewives rather than fanciful ladies, thinking only of the apparatus of knowledge and languages, displaying the rudiments not only of physical and natural science, but also of mathematics, and becoming slaves to extravagant ways of dressing as extreme as the North Americans, and always in need of more from their husbands than the dowry that they brought with them. (p. 147)

Varnhagen’s perception, which was conservative in comparison with the general morality of the liberal elites of his time, is a striking feature of his personality. On another topic, Lucia Maria notes how his antipathy toward the Indians, which is evident in the *General History of Brazil*, reappears matter-of-factly on the trip, when he criticizes tobacco shops for their “display of cigar store Indians,” their extravagance and their bad taste in representing “wild Indians” with “stern faces and colored feather headdresses” (p. 123).

In one of the finest sections of the book, Arno Wehling explores *Memorial Orgânico* (*Organic Memorial*), the text that Varnhagen published in Spain in 1849, with a slightly altered second edition in 1851, and which was also published in the magazine *Guanabara*. In *Memorial Orgânico* – published here with Wehling’s notes – Varnhagen proposes political and economic reforms in order to ensure progress and nationality, two of the most desirable agendas of the nineteenth century, even suggesting the transfer of the capital to a

place in the center of Brazil. Despite the reformist tone—evident in his criticism of the slave trade – the political direction of Varnhagen's work is always toward “order,” social stability and ethnic homogenization. The issue of slavery is paradigmatic. He refers to the defenders of slave trafficking as:

Selfish fools! And sacrificing the future of your country for a bag of change for the taxman! [...] Do you want your Brazil, centuries from now, to be equal to the frontier of an African continent, and your grandchildren reduced to the condition of the grandchildren of African slaves? (p. 254)

It is not the fate of the Africans that matters, but Brazil. The maintenance of slave traffic would conflict with a desirable future, in line with modern western civilization. Varnhagen does, however, consider slavery in some cases to be legitimate, backed by the Gospels and by classical authors, and he criticizes the “philanthropists,” a term that historians identified, politically, with Robespierre and Marat, and in a philosophical sense with Voltaire and Rousseau.

From his conservative liberalist viewpoint, the problem is less the institution of slavery and more the presence of Africans. He wants to see them replaced by European immigrants, because, he argues, “the European worker dares, not without shame, to take up the hoe beside the slave” (p. 255). To Varnhagen, the issue of slaves should be viewed not “out of sentimentality, but out of patriotism; not because we think the traffic infamous, but because we fear for the future of Brazil [...]” (p. 257). In keeping with this view, he defended the temporary enslavement of “wild Indians” through a “targeting system.” The capture of the Indians “does not have to be at the expense of the government,” but should be undertaken by private agents, who would be rewarded for supervising the work of the captives for a specified period:

Now, to preserve the land already won from barbarism, it is necessary to take prisoners of its inhabitants and, since the government cannot take charge of their education and maintenance, this should become the basis for rewarding the services of the leaders of the bands (and of their partners), providing them, as their prisoners, with mentoring and protection for 15 years, being forced to treat them well, indoctrinate them in our religion, etc., etc. (pp. 261-262)

The proposition behind this obviously “colonial” tone was harshly criticized by João Francisco Lisboa and Gonçalves de Magalhães, who called him “a pseudo-philanthropist” and a “Tapuia lover.” Varnhagen was fully aware that what he was proposing amounted to

criticism of the legal rationalism imported from France in support of the inherited legal experience of the colony. He cites the United States as an example of “cruelty” through its “extermination of the red race.” His proposal would be more lenient, he brags, and would therefore not result in a physical extermination but rather a cultural one. In keeping with the ideals of nineteenth-century nationalists, Varnhagen pleaded in favor of the homogeneity of the population, arguing that the existence of different unassimilated “races” weakens national unity and the homogeneity of the population. The “whitening of the race,” which was the subject of scientific forums in the late nineteenth century, is already perfectly evident here.

Besides his support for the “reform” of the population, another set of proposals outlined by Varnhagen’s liberal-conservative reformism was the restructuring of the state and government. One of his most significant proposals was for the complete reorganization of the provinces, with the creation of new units and the merger of others, redesigning their entire administrative and political organization, so that in terms of their size, population and economies they would be minimally comparable. At the southern end of the Empire the “Department of the Southern Border” would be created, with its capital in Bagé, separating it from Rio Grande do Sul. São Paulo would be divided, and its southern part would be replaced by a department that could be called “Curitiba,” whose capital would be in Ponta Grossa (the only proposal that roughly materialized, albeit with another name and another capital). The department of San Sebastian would join the department of Rio de Janeiro with the “former district of the Rio das Mortes,” extending from Guanabara to Goiás. What was at that time Northern and Northeastern Brazil would also be reorganized. This would lead to the creation, for example, of the “department that we propose be called the Star of the North,” and the joining together of Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba, centered on the “well-situated village of Souza (Paraíba)” (p. 243). In the Amazon, there would be the “Department of Greater-Pombal” in “memory of the statesman, to whom Brazil, and especially Greater-Pará, are both in debt.” These were just some of the nineteen departments proposed by Varnhagen.

Another proposal was to build a “new capital,” which should be built from scratch (and, Varnhagen specifies, not in an existing place). It would be called Imperator, located in the geographic center of the country, where “the sources of the Tocantins and Parana rivers can be found, two of the major rivers that embrace the Empire.” He makes it clear that the new capital should be linked to the coast by railways and serve as a defensive strategy, leading to the movement of the population inland. This was reminiscent of the

example of Philip II, who, in the sixteenth century, established the capital of Madrid in the center of Spain.

In the mid-nineteenth century – when Varnhagen wrote *Memorial Orgânico* (1849-1851) and was preparing to write his *General History of Brazil* (1854-1857) – the idea of Independence was still very much alive in the memory of the men of that time, as was also the memory of the various European revolutions – particularly the French Revolution. The liberal paradigm and a nationalist perspective were both flourishing in the West. Varnhagen interpreted the present and the past from a modern standpoint. Therefore, his commitment to facilitating the development of the national identity – not only in literature and the arts, but also in individuals' minds and consciousness – was linked to his efforts to contribute to the formation of a people identified with civilization, hence his opposition to everything that seemed either Indian or African. It is worth remembering that, in Europe at that time, evolution and scientific discourse were directed toward justifying the supremacy of the European man. In the United States, the campaigns against the Indians were in full swing, and, in Argentina a few years later – in the name of progress, civilization and nation – the Conquista del Desierto took place (1878-1885), led by General Rocca. It was the National State mobilized against the indigenous American, in order to impose Western temporality. It was also this that Varnhagen proposed, although his ideas retained a colonial tone.

Varnhagen advocated a “compact population,” a single, integral, and ethnically homogeneous nation, or at least one that was hegemonically white and western. As Brazil would later be the face of modernity (the idea being deeply identified with the notion of progress, it would be necessary to avoid the outright copying of British laws and French ideas, and instead emulate “the measures of the age in which there came into being [...] the civilization that carried the Orb. We study the progress of the peoples of Europe from the ninth to the fourteenth century, since this was when their various nationalities, and different languages and literatures were constituted and hardened in such a way as to endure until now” (p. 313). This is a liberal and historicist consciousness that, deep down, seeks to accelerate the pace of Brazilian history, whose teleological destiny is modern, white, and Western civilization. Although a liberal and a reformer, Varnhagen is conservative, identified with the constitutional monarchy and partisan order, proposing reforms led by the patrician class, in which the fear of the “case of Haiti” inhabited the conscience of a country with a long slave tradition. The *Memorial Orgânico* – Arno Wehling emphasizes – should not be understood as a government program but as a work wherein it is “the perspective of the state and the definition of public policies that transcend the

cyclical character of governments” (p. 197). It is a work that deals with a project for society, that is to say, one that has already largely occurred.

Themistocles Cezar analyzes “The Turanian origin of the Tupi and the ancient Egyptians,” Varnhagen’s text that was originally published in French in 1876. Here the old historian explores the question: are there “savage” offspring from older times? Did the ancients know America? Were the Indians indigenous? The question, Themistocles demonstrates, occupied the attention of scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Similar intellectual explorations also appeared in the nineteenth century. Carl Friedrich von Martius returns to this issue, as well as that of the romantic writers of the mid-century Brazil. Incidentally, Varnhagen received much criticism and antipathy from writers who identified with the literary Indianism, due to his pronounced anti-indigenous sentiment, in keeping with his image of being “less Brazilian and very monarchist.” The historian himself confessed: “the horror of savagery, and its presence in the middle of our hinterland, gave birth, let us say, to this same savagery in me” (p. 327). This is a reference to the threat of an attack he suffered in 1840, in the province of São Paulo, while traveling to Sorocaba. A fierce critic of the Enlightenment, especially Rousseau (and of revolutionaries like Robespierre and Marat), he also – from the 1840s onwards – bitterly criticized Indian romanticism, or, as he preferred to call it, the “Brazilian mestizo.” Not only in *Memorial Orgânico* (1849-1851), but also in his *General History of Brazil* (1854-1857), he had referred to the Indians as “false and unfaithful; fickle and ungrateful, and rather suspicious [...]; endowed with an almost stupid brutality, and difficult to shake from their phlegmatic nature.”

Themistocles Cezar explores the terminology of “old,” “modern” and “savages.” Nineteenth-century Brazil, where the opposition between “modern” and “wild” was a prevailing concern, the debate was intertwined with the rhetoric of nationality. It was necessary to find a place for the Indians, so that the Brazilians could convince themselves of their common past (and future). Were they indigenous or “immigrants”? Themistocles cites the response of the historian Gonçalves de Magalhães, in “The Indians Prior to Brazilian Nationality,” a text published in the second volume of the *General History of Brazil*, 1857: “The Tupi were only the last people to invade the territory that is today Brazilian” (p. 329). Basically, Varnhagen wanted to question the argument that the Indians were the rightful owners of the land.

In “The Turanian origin of the Tupi and the ancient Egyptians,” the historian presents the Amerindians as “invaders,” i.e. remote immigrants originating from the old

world. The Tupi, like the Basques, Turks, Hungarians, and Egyptians, were descendants of “the Ural-Altai,” or “Turanian,” peoples. The Tupi therefore had their origin among the old Mediterranean peoples and were also invaders in America (just as the Portuguese and the Spaniards would later be):

In the Tupi language, there are a large number of words originating from the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean, which could only be the consequence of immigration, other than a belief in a miracle, or an impossible competition of articulated dead ends that have induced mankind to error. (p. 447)

[¹ VARNHAGEN, Francisco. Adolfo de. *História Geral do Brazil*. Madrid/España: Imprensa da Viúva de Dominguez, 1854.]

The savagery of the Indians—by which Varnhagen meant that he couldn’t understand how sympathy for “philosophers” and “poets” could be awakened—would have to be faced by the State, a vision arising from his interpretation of the history of the country, as Themistocles summarizes very clearly:

Brazil is thus the inheritor of the civilization translated from the Portuguese empire, whose civilizational origins can be found in the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans. Civilization was not exactly an option for society, but the effect of a long journey that has been passed on as a mnemonic heritage of human beings, as a cultural and political heritage, without which it could not live. (p. 324)

It is not easy to assess a collective work that, for obvious reasons, is not stylistically and conceptually unified, a situation that is, simultaneously, both a liability and an asset. If the cost is a certain imbalance between the parts, the benefit is a plurality not only of objects, but also of ways of looking at questions. *Varnhagen in the Kaleidoscope* is a remarkable contribution to the understanding of the political, institutional and existential conditions that led to the development of the *General History of Brazil* (1854-57), and therein lies the best contribution of the book under review. The historian, by definition, speaks from a variety of positions – political, cultural, institutional, national/regional, class, gender, ethnicity – issues that are compared in this set of texts and which illuminate the *unsaid* [the implicit] (Michel de Certeau) that inhabits any text written under the auspices of Clio.