

## OBITUARIES

### Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1902–82)

RICHARD M. MORSE\*

Sérgio Buarque de Holanda died peacefully at his home in Pacaembu in the city of São Paulo on April 24, 1982. Had he lived until July 11, he would have turned eighty years. While his mature career brought him international recognition as a historian, the União Brasileira dos Escritores characterized his achievement more comprehensively when in 1980 it named him “Intelectual do Ano.”

While still in secondary school, Sérgio's interest in history was kindled by his teacher Afonso d'E. Taunay, who helped him publish his first newspaper article at age eighteen.<sup>1</sup> But his early inclinations were more literary or broadly cultural than historiographical. In São Paulo and, after 1921, in Rio, he shared in the *modernistas'* iconoclastic rediscovery of Brazil. Paying only casual attention to his law studies, he plunged into literature, journalism, and *la vie bohème*. Then at the insistence of Assis Chateaubriand he went to Germany in 1929–30 for *O Jornal*, where he supplemented his modest income by interviewing writers (including Thomas Mann) and composing Portuguese subtitles for *The Blue Angel* and other films. Rio had prepared him well for what he called “the worldly bohemian euphoria” of the late Weimar Republic. Yet by now he was ready to absorb history and sociology from Meinecke (whose lectures he attended) and the work of Kantorowicz, Sombart, and Weber. Like Mariátegui in Italy less than a decade earlier, Sérgio could now place his native country in the larger perspective that was to orient his life work. He returned home with four hundred pages for a book grandly titled *Teoria da América*. Although it was never published, two chapters did appear in *Raízes do Brasil*, and its themes probably informed a UNESCO paper published in 1955 as “Le Brésil dans la vie américaine.”

\* Professor of History, Stanford University.

1. Sérgio recalled his life and intellectual growth in the interview conducted by Richard Graham on May 17, 1981, and published with a partial bibliography in *HAHR*, 62 (Feb. 1982), 3–17. See also the prolog to his collectanea, *Tentativas de Mitologia* (São Paulo, 1979).

Sérgio's first major work, and still his most widely read book, was *Raízes do Brasil* (1936), now in its fourteenth edition. In his preface to the fifth, Antônio Cândido compared it with two other interpretations of Brazil that had lit the intellectual horizons of his own post-Modernist generation as it prepared to move from the incandescent *prise* of 1922 to a more sober and critical agenda. First came *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933) of Gilberto Freyre, who paved the way from fin-de-siècle "naturalism" to modern sociology yet whose entropic view of social change implied a *saudosismo* that Antônio Cândido himself was prompt to criticize in the early 1940s. The other book was *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo* (1942) by Caio Prado Júnior, who construed Brazil's past as an evolving product of economic functions, an unsentimental, transparent interpretation that would find favor during the 1960s and 1970s when it helped to regularize the unhallowed liaison between Anglo-American empiricism and subequatorial Marxism.

Of the three books only *Raízes* escaped translation into English, although it has appeared in Italian, Spanish, and Japanese. Because it is a complex, thoughtful book and has the rare merit of assimilating cultural sensibility to analytical grasp, it is a difficult one to "sell" to an American academic publisher, as I discovered on two occasions nearly twenty years apart. The Weberian influence is clear and, at a time when Weber was scarcely a name in Latin or North American academe, included the studies on bureaucracy and cities as well as the more obvious *Protestant Ethic*. Yet Sérgio was not a Weberian *au pied de la lettre*. Once more Antônio Cândido puts us on track in noting that whereas Weber relished multiple typologies, Sérgio built on a series of antinomies that broaden and deepen "the old dichotomy of Latin American thinking"; this dichotomy he converts into a dialectic, neither term of which he is willing to suppress.

What *Raízes* achieves is to relate institutional process to cultural ethos. Sérgio's often misunderstood "cordial man" is not an amiable *patrão* who oils the gears of oppression in the interest of "peaceful" accommodation. Rather he opposes the encroachment of Weberian rationalization and "disenchantment." He is not a buffer against violence or tyranny, but an impediment to liberal democracy. "Cordiality," Sérgio argued, necessarily dictates preferences. Love, or affect, challenges the neutral, juridical assumptions of liberalism. Democratic benevolence, a form of mere politeness, is behavior in search of guidance for balancing egoisms. Its humanitarian ideal is impersonal because in preaching that the greatest love embraces the greatest number it subordinates quality to quantity. On the other hand, a "cordiality" that loses force beyond a narrow circle will never cement extended forms of social organization. Nor is cordiality per

se a source of good principles. For “social crystallization” one requires “a solid normative element, innate in the people’s soul or even implanted by tyranny.” That tyranny achieves no lasting change, Sérgio believed, is another illusion of liberalism, although this in itself neither discredits liberalism nor forecloses remedies other than tyranny to consolidate a national society.

I summarize the reasoning because it is consonant with certain currents of vanguard social thought in contemporary Brazil. Only now, after the lessons of the 1960s and 1970s, can Sérgio’s vision and Tocquevillian nuance be deservedly appreciated, although explicitly political implications of his thinking have been clear all along. In 1945 he was a founding member of the Partido Socialista Brasileiro and, in 1980, of the Partido dos Trabalhadores directed by Luís Inácio da Silva (“Lula”).

After *Raízes*, Sérgio moved on many fronts to institutionalize and internationalize Brazilian academic and cultural life. In 1936–39 he assisted Henri Hauser at the Universidade do Distrito Federal, and then was appointed professor of the History of the Americas. He held positions at the Instituto Nacional do Livro and the Biblioteca Nacional. His literary criticism of 1940–41 was collected as *Cobra de Vidro* (1944; 2d enl. ed. 1978). In 1945 he became president of the Rio section of the Associação Brasileira de Escritores and also published *Os Monções*, his first documented work in colonial history that, with subsequent studies, counterpoised an image of penurious, expansionist, *mameluco* Brazil to that of coastal, seigneurial Brazil. In 1946, as his interests were centering on Paulista history, he was named director of the Museu Paulista, where, as I discovered from visits in 1947–48, he swiftly professionalized both the exhibits and the publications. He was soon teaching at the Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política and then, in 1957, left the Museu for the chair of History of Brazilian Civilization at the University of São Paulo, which he resigned in 1969 to protest the government’s mass dismissal of faculty.

These years like the earlier ones were many-faceted for him: participating in UNESCO meetings (1949, 1963–64); giving courses in Italy (1952–54), Chile (1963), and the United States (1965–67); serving as vice-president of the São Paulo Museum of Art (1955–61); founding and directing (1962–64) the Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros at USP. Yet with all this deployment of energy, Sérgio continued to deepen and particularize his understanding of Brazil’s history. In *Caminhos e Fronteiras* (1957) and *Visão do Paraíso* (1959) he examined the sociology of culture contact during inland expansion and the “baroque” mind-set of the Portuguese explorers and settlers. His introduction to the *Obras* of Azeredo Coutinho (1966) led him to review economic antecedents to Brazilian

independence. His editorship of the first seven volumes of the *História Geral da Civilização Brasileira* (1960–72) allowed him to assemble a composite account of Brazil's history from Iberian and Amerindian origins to the advent of the republic. Volume 7, *Do Império à República*, he wrote himself, and at the close of his life he was expanding it into a two-volume study on the late empire and the rise of the military in modern Brazil. It was to be, he told Richard Graham, his “most important” work, presumably because he was now placed to substantiate the long-ago conjectures of *Ruízes*. There were other projects as well: another book on the Second Empire, an expanded edition of *Monções*, and, what most intrigued him (though it was never more than a gleam in his mind), “a history of Brazil through the prism of the lower classes.” With patience, his widow Dona Maria Amélia has written me, some portions of this work in progress may perhaps be salvaged for publication.

From facts and hints dropped above one might surmise something of Sérgio's personality. By accident of chronology and gift of character he was providentially placed to navigate a coherent transition from ram-bunctious Modernism to intellectual serenity. I think of Sérgio as Rabelaisian, with his zest for life and its absurdities, his tumultuous curiosity, his delight in sheet factuality—and a seriousness too deep to permit of solemnity. It is said of Flaubert (who in his dour fashion aspired to be a Rabelaisian encyclopedia of his own place and time) that he enjoyed repeating the same joke twenty times a day for weeks on end. Sérgio, too, had a vast repertoire of anecdotes, which bubbled forth with similar frequency, often on the most unlikely occasions. I recall one that originated on a stroll through Greenwich Village in 1950 when Sérgio, puzzled by the ubiquitous groceries and delicatessens, inquired, “O que é que tem esta cidade com tanta grosseria e delicadeza?” Or, years later came the moment when an elderly cleaning lady entered a Yale guest room and recoiled in horror on encountering an eminent historian from an exotic land who, by way of introducing the tropical “hammock culture” to Puritan New England, was perusing a learned tome while stretched out in unmitigated dishabille. Of those who depart, we piously say that they linger on in their works and in our memories. Of Sérgio, one feels that he leaves the living impress of his person, such was his humor, his compassion, his sheer humanity.