

Medicine and history

About 50 years ago, there was in Portugal a illiteracy rate just above 40%. Not a very prestigious situation for the government of the time who decided to start a literacy campaign adults. The target was not only to read, write and count but also to induce in the students the respect for traditional values – God, country and family – in the way of purest Lusitanian Integrationism.

Evil spirits with access to the final exams, organised small collections of texts written by the students on proposed subjects and made them circulate clandestinely. This is how some of those texts arrived to us, some of which on the History of Portugal and are real precious. Just see this example:

The 1640 revolution was discovered in Philip III reign. The 1640 revolution was discovered by the Portuguese. The 1640 Revolution lasted for many years because it has been under the Phillips. Philip II has found out the war of Independence. I do like the 1640 revolution. The 1640 revolution happened to find out Miguel de Vasconcelos who was in a paper cupboard”.

After all this time with an April Revolution plus the “cultural dynamization campaigns”, plus the democratisation of education – has the knowledge of History improved?

Everything leads one to think not. Interviews made on television channels to younger graduates convey an embarrassing image of ignorance, random small surveys directed to our middle classes reveal astonishing results. An example, to the question “Who was the first president of the Portuguese Republic” the range of replies included Ramalho Eanes, Salazar, Mario Soares and even Kaulza de Arriaga

But the problem we have today is the following – does History have a purpose or is it just a sterile hobby of some cultural fanatics spending public money while acquiring allergic rhinitis in the dust of our archives?

George Santayana (1863-1952) has on this a milestone answer “*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*”. This means that besides the intellectual pleasure matter, the study of History is essential if at all one wants to avoid the mistakes

of the past to be repeated in the future. This problem became even a current event, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of Spanish Civil War. For some commentators, the white washing that has been done in the name of technocratic efficacy on the horrors committed then, opens the doors so that the “devil of History”, one of these days runs lose again.

All this emerges from an article published in this Journal issue on the social impact of syphilis, by our colleague Germano de Sousa.

Five centuries ago, the society Europeans had created lived an era of happy sexual euphoria. Public baths, prostitution and adultery were scoring high leaving iconographic unmistakable traces by the end of the 15th century. Suddenly, syphilis appearing without anyone really knowing wherefrom, brought this situation to an end, made people change their behaviour plunging Europe in a religious asceticism and in the cult, not always achieved of conjugal fidelity.

The road, until identifying the cause – *Treponema* – and the discovery of an effective treatment, penicillin, was long and hard. But after that, mankind, more self-confident, convinced it could control nature and prepared to go until the end of History, surrender to the sexual permissivity of the 60ties.

It was then that a minuscule virus, which not even had DNA, also emerging from nowhere, created the confusion again, leading to a full review on everything: habits, behaviour and ethical principles.

The resemblance between these two eras, separated by around five centuries, is unsettling. Mainly when we become aware that after a surprising period of technological advances, seeming to propel Man to the boundaries of the great mysteries, what we can offer to stop the endemics is still the same: chastity and condoms.

It's almost certain that this time there will be need for five centuries to stop the damned AIDS. But the lesson from History is stated here. Each one of us will deride the conclusions they find the best. ■



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