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Feeding utopia: food and nutrition in the utopian educational publications of Agostinho de Silva

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Abstract: Published in 1942, Human Nutrition is one of the 96 volumes of the multidisciplinary collection Initiation/Cultural Notebooks, entirely conceived and produced between 1940 and 1944 by the Portuguese philosopher and utopian pedagogue Agostinho da Silva (see Reis, "The genealogy of the Utopian Millenarianism of the Oporto philosopher Agostinho da Silva" in Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal, 2nd series). The announcement on the back cover of the first issue of this collection, states that the collection has been launched "without any kind of commercial purpose" so as to help to "popularize the knowledge that is indispensable for a broad and solid culture". With this encyclopedic project, Agostinho da Silva aimed to provide, at a modest price, a course of general knowledge to a large public deprived of advanced levels of schooling, without, however, ruling out the possibility of further in-depth studies of the themes addressed. Our essay aims to assess the extent to which Agostinho da Silva's visionary reasoning allowed philosophical issues regarding food to be raised from a utopian perspective - for example, of what does food actually consist, what can and should be eaten, how we know what is safe to eat, what constitutes good food, and how food is distributed.

Keywords: Utopia; Encyclopedism; Human Nutrition.

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O tópico da alimentação humana no projeto enciclopédico-utopista dos Cadernos de Informação Cultural de Agostinho da Silva

Resumo: Na sua multímoda expressão e conceptualização, o pensamento de Agostinho da Silva (1906-1994) exibe um traço comum ou uma orientação motivante que pode ser reconhecida pela sua explícita qualidade pedagógica e pelo seu ativo magistério em prol quer da elevação cultural da comunidade falante em língua portuguesa, quer, numa perspetiva ética-sapiencial e utopista, do aperfeiçoamento da condição humana. Na primeira década dos anos 40 do século XX, Agostinho da Silva foi excluído da sua função de professor do ensino liceal português por se recusar a pactuar com uma medida política e administrativa de teor coercivo, inibidora da liberdade de associação e de pensamento. Para assegurar a sua sobrevivência e a da sua família, empenhou-se num projeto pessoal de pendor enciclopédico-utopista escrevendo breves monografias de âmbito temático diversificado que intitulou Cadernos de Iniciação Cultural. A par de outras iniciativas editorias que concebeu e executou, quer como tradutor – Antologia. Introdução aos Grandes Autores (60 textos) –, quer como divulgador polímata de tópicos e assuntos destinado a um público jovem – Coleção À volta do Mundo (13 monografias) –, este conjunto de 63 pequenos volumes dos Cadernos é revelador de uma singular energia intelectual e de generosa militância em prol da difusão do saber, num tempo histórico e numa sociedade estratificada e politicamente fechada, refratária à formação cívica dos seus cidadãos. O nosso ensaio consiste numa leitura hermenêutica, devidamente contextualizada, de um desse Cadernos dedicado ao tema da Alimentação Humana.

Palavras-chave: Utopia; Enciclopedismo; Alimentação Humana.

El tema de la alimentación humana en el proyecto enciclopédico-utópico de Cadernos de Iniciação Cultural de Agostinho da Silva

Resumen: En su múltiple expresión y conceptualización, el pensamiento de Agostinho da Silva (1906-1994) exhibe un rasgo común o una orientación motivadora que puede ser reconocida por su cualidad pedagógica explícita y por su enseñanza activa en favor de la elevación cultural de la comunidad hablante en lengua portuguesa, o, en una perspectiva ético-sapiencial y utópica, la mejora de la condición humana. En la primera década de los años 40 del siglo XX, Agostinho da Silva fue excluido de su función como profesor de enseñanza secundaria portuguesa por negarse a pactar una medida política y administrativa de carácter coercitivo, inhibiendo la libertad de asociación y de pensamiento. Para asegurar su supervivencia y la de su familia, se comprometió con un proyecto personal de tendencia enciclopédico-utópica, escribiendo breves monografías de diversificado alcance temático que tituló Cadernos de Iniciação Cultural. Junto a otras iniciativas editoriales que concibió y ejecutó, tanto como traductor – Antología. Introducción a Grandes Autores (60 textos) – o como polimático promotor de temas y temas dirigidos a un público joven – Colección La Vuelta al Mundo (13 monografías) –, este conjunto de 63 pequeños volúmenes de Cadernos revela una energía intelectual única y de generosa militancia a favor de la difusión del conocimiento, en un tiempo histórico y en una sociedad estratificada y políticamente cerrada, refractaria a la formación cívica de sus ciudadanos. Nuestro ensayo consiste en una lectura hermenéutica, debidamente contextualizada, de uno de estos Cadernos dedicado al tema de la Alimentación Humana.

Palabras clave: Utopía; Enciclopedismo; Alimentación Humana.

Alimentação Humana, dated 1942, is the first of six Notebooks (*cadernos*) that form the ninth in a total of sixteen series collectively entitled *Iniciação* / *Cadernos de Informação Cultural* [Initiation / Notebooks for Cultural Information],this collection was entirely conceived and executed between 1940 and 1944 by Agostinho de Silva. On the back cover of the very first *Notebook*, published in Lisbon, the author states that his encyclopaedic project is being "launched without any kind of commercial purpose" and aims to "popularize the knowledge that is indispensable for a broad and solid culture". In keeping with the overall title of the collection, *Initiation*, the author explains the mainly preparatory [introductory] nature of his pedagogical project:

> [t]he information provided in these Notebooks will permit a serious and truly productive reading of more advanced texts without great difficulty.

Emphasising that his form of exposition "As far as possible, simple and direct […] requires no specialist knowledge on the part of the reader". De Silva's brief explanatory note suggests that his main purpose was rather to provide, at a modest price, a course of general knowledge to a wider public largely deprived of the benefits of advanced schooling, while conceding that the same material might also serve as a basis for the in-depth study of any one of the themes addressed[1].

[1] In his biography of Agostinho de Silva, to which he gives the camonian title *An Odd Colossus*, António Cândido Franco describes the form these publications took in intimate detail and with undisguised admiration for their author: "Very large, 24 by 16 [centimetres], but thin, usually consisting of [only] 24 [folded] sheets, sometimes rising to 28 or falling to 16, stapled [down the middle]. There is no [stiffened] cover of any kind, the title page being of uniform appearance, always with the same typeface and printed on paper of the same weight and yellow tone as the pages. Thus each [publication in the series] has an identical graphic design, simple, sober, even poor, but elegant nonetheless. At the top of the title page, the name of the collection, *Initiation – Notebooks on Cultural Information*; halfway down, where it was published - invariably 'Lisbon' - and the year; the entire publication, cover to cover, is printed in a single colour, black. On the back page, the general plan of the collection, with the Notebooks divided into 16 series [...]. At the foot of the page, in smaller print, is the price, publisher (in this case, the author himself), distributor, frequency ('fortnightly') and address" (Franco, 2015, p. 267).

With his freedom of thought severely limited due to state persecution, da Silva was obliged to interrupt this pedagogical project and opt for self-exile in Brazil. His original plan had envisaged the publication of a total of 96 volumes, divided into 16 "Series", each comprising 6 notebooks addressing a specific theme. As a result of his exile, only 64 volumes were distributed, consisting of 10 completed series, and four *Notebooks* from the eleventh series[2]. The thematic approach adopted in the *Cadernos de Informação Cultural* succeeds in being simultaneously multifaceted and illuminating, focusing on such disparate domains as philosophy (e.g. *The Thought of Epicurus*), history (e.g. *The History of Japan*), literature (e.g. *Russian Literature*), art (e.g. *Prehistoric Art*), religion (e.g. *Buddhism*), economics (e.g. *Cooperatives*), education (e.g. *The Winnetka School Plan*), biography (e.g. *The Life of Pierre Curie*), entomology (e.g. *Bees*), astrophysics (e.g. *Stars*), geography (e.g. *The Sahara Desert*), biology (e.g. *Transformist Evolution*) and mineralogy (e.g. *Bituminous Coal*), it is even possible to discern the contours of an idiosyncratically interdisciplinary concept of knowledge from not only in da Silva's attitude of inquiry, but also in his fascination for the complexity of the vast and interdependent world of nature, and the ingenious creativity of animal and plant life and of the human spirit in its various historical, aesthetic, religious, scientific and cultural manifestations. In fact, the symbolism in the title of the first *Notebook*, historical and geographical in its focus, cannot be ignored: *The First Voyage around the World*, recounts the adventures of those

[2] Cândido Franco has calculated that, between 1940 and 1944, da Silva took "around 25 days to poduce each Notebook." In parallel, and in addition to this collection, Agostinho produced, two others - one aimed at the very young (*Around the World – Texts for the Young*), of which seven of the 16 Notebooks he had planned were published, while another, comprosing 48 volumes of translations (entitled *Anthology - An Introduction to the Great Authors*) was completed in its entirety. Taking into account the fact that over the same period Agostinho also completed six substantial biographies (viz. the lives of Robert Owen, Benjamin Franklin, Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, the French social catholic philsopher Lamennais, and the Italian poet and philosopher Leopardi), Cândido (2015, p. 271) concludes that our estimate of "the time necessary to prepare each Notebook should be reduced to only 15 days".

who took part in the pioneering sea voyage between 1519 and 1522, conceived and led by the Portuguese navigator Fernando Magellan and completed by Sebastian de Elcano – aiming to circumnavigate the world of knowledge, the inaugural Notebook seemed to promise a veritable voyage of discovery that would transcend the frontiers between the discrete disciplinary territories into which specialized knowledge had hitherto been divided, giving its readers access to something akin to a *global* knowledge no longer in thrall either to epistemological functionalism or to the artificial dichotomy between the humanities and the natural and exact sciences. However, there are two key conjunctural factors without which any explanation of the origins of this comprehensive initiative in cultural apprenticeship would be incomplete. One is on the prosaic urges of da Silva to find a viable alternative means of subsistence after refusing to sign a sworn declaration required by of all public officials the Salazar regime that he did not belong to any secret political organizations, da Silva was dismissed from his post as a high school teacher and had. The other factor can be seen as more ideological in character: as António Cândido Franco has shown, da Silva's publishing project was just one individual strand in an ambitious collective plan of civic intervention conceived by a group of intellectuals organised around the essayist, thinker and activist António Sérgio[3]. This group of intellectuals, in homage to the 19th century Portuguese philosopher Antero de Quental and in commemoration of the centenary of his birth in 1942, sought to formally transform themselves into a structure with a defined cultural mission, adopting the designation "The Antero de Quental Educational Centre" for its public interventions. Ultimately, the publication aims of its programme of action, explicitly educational in nature, would to a great extent be pursued by da Silva alone, occasionally assisted by Fernando Rau in performative and public events. Inspired by the greatness of Antero Quental as an intellectual,

[3] In addition to António Sérgio and Agostinho de Silva, the group included Fernando Rau, José Castelo Branco Chaves, Álvaro Salema de Araújo and Pedro Nascimento.

teacher and civic activist, the pedagogical aims included in the *Centre's* founding statement emphasise both the scope of its intended public intervention and the utopian principles that were to underpin it. Among other initiatives, it aimed to:

> Carry out cultural missions in towns and villages, giving lectures, readings with commentaries, film projections, concerts, theatre, and exhibitions of art and science; organize pedagogical conferences to address the problems related to the education of children and adults: promote the publication of preparatory cultural material for children and adults; to establish experimental schools in which to study the adaptation of more modern methods to our country; organise an educational lending library; create in selected small population centres libraries capable of awakening and cultivating a taste for reading; organise cultural programmes to be transmitted by radio (Franco, 2015, p. 255-256).

The vast and diverse editorial work that da Silva devised, wrote and published is best understood, in general terms, as the most visible and tangible illustration of the aims of the civic intervention proposed by the *Antero de Quental Educational Center*, and, in particular, his booklet entitled *Human Nourishment* provides a prime example of the educational purpose that prompted its founding, namely to provide people with practical guidance on how to improve and enrich the material conditions under which they existed individually and socially. A detailed reading of this booklet reveals a trait common to all of da Silva's writings, an anthropologically optimistic vision of human progress and accomplishment over historical time. In this sense, his strategy is to begin with an evocation of the human condition as experienced in an inhospitable and austere past, and subsequently to demonstrate that its historical development bodes well for the fuller realisation of its potential in the future. Though the thematic thread of the booklet is not made explicit either by recourse to numbered or subtitled sections, it is nevertheless possible to identify its constituent parts. Da Silva adopts a

diachronic approach, beginning with food in prehistoric times, briefly summarising the practices of and transformations in human nourishment associated with each era, before focusing on the description of its geographical diversity. The author's list of the exotic constituents of this food diversity has the value of demonstrating how the environment is affected by the ways in which local resources are used in the preparation of food[4]; he puts this dependence on local resources into its wider perspective by way of an axiological judgment that "The general organisation […] of the population of the globe", remains too poor to overcome the geographical distance between communities, and to "Establish the exchange of goods that would permit the composition and nutritional value of their diet to become more equal" (Silva, 1942, p. 5). Subliminally, this conclusion underpins what seems to us to be the main thesis of this *Booklet*, the recommendation that "a rational diet" be adopted (Silva, 1942, p. 10) based on nutritionally well-founded principles, the description of which occupies the final part of the essay. Da Silva's brief history of food, in addition to describing changes in the diet and nutrition of communities over time, also pinpoints the key advances made by scientists in the fields of chemistry, genetics, human physiology and in the identification of the nutritional origins of lethal diseases. While the enunciation of these discoveries conforms to the pedagogical aims of his entire project, it also emphasises da Silva's insistence that "The human economy needs to be reorganised" (Silva, 1942, p. 11) in line with ethical principles guaranteeing that when humans learn about the act of eating, they do so in accordance with rationally established nutritional principles. Da Silva is convinced that "It is possible to extract from the earth or to manufacture all that is necessary for all of us" (Silva, 1942, p. 11) and that "Therefore, the existence of the poor is an absurdity" (Silva, 1942, p. 11). Da Silva,

4. "In the Northern regions […] an almost exclusively carnivorous diet is found, […] while in Siberia they eat onion soup, willow bark and the roots of wild plants, [...] whereas in Equatorial Africa […] abundant fruit is available. […] In East Asia, the diet is based on rice" (Silva, 1942, p. 5-6).

while proclaiming his utopian aspiration that the material conditions of economic and social development of his day will eventually permit "The poor to rise to the level of the rich", he also voices his realism by identifying "the distribution of products" as "the essential problem" underlying the "absurdity" of the persistently upward parallel trends in both food production and world hunger. It is with the same utopian vision of the future that de Silva suggests a worldwide body be created to regulate agricultural production, stating that "The problem of feeding humanity cannot be solved unless we learn how to make agricultural production rational" (Silva, 1942, p. 12), prefiguring the foundation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) two years after the publication of his booklet. The final part of the *Booklet* is of a more technical nature, and contains da Silva's statement and defence of the three norms that he believed should guide the conception of an organically healthy diet – a food "ration", in his somewhat utilitarian words (Silva, 1942, p. 12-13).

These norms prescribe the consumption of specific quantities of calories; however, according to da Silva, these precise values cannot be universally applied, since they have to be adapted in line with each person's distinct "individual constitution". Nevertheless, he believed that to completely ignore them would be tantamount to civic and cultural disengagement and "potentially fatal" to the health and homeostasis of the human organism. However, it seems that da Silva's decision to first address the theme of food in this series of his *Cultural Notebook* had less to do with the pantological aims of his collection than his resolve to compensate for the generalized lack of information, guidance and regulation, manifest in both the private and public spheres, regarding the health implications of our feeding habits. Basing his recommendations on highly specialized bibliographical references – as a rule, the author provided bibliographical references ("Reading guide")[5], on the inside

[5] In this particular monograph, the reading guide consists of 6 specialised publications, one by a Portuguese author, Ferreira de Lima, and the rest by foreign authors written originally (or translated into) French: K. Sapper, L'alimentation de l'humanité (1942), Raymond

back cover of each Notebook, not only to identify the sources he had consulted, but also to stress the pedagogical aims of introducing his readership to each of the wide range of subjects he proposed to address. Da Silva then sets forth those dietary norms, using for that purpose a scientific nomenclature applied to nutrition and indicating the exact values of energy, measured in calories, that the chemical compounds contained in food supply to the organism. According to his explanation, an individual's "ration" should be regulated and calculated on the basis of three factors: (i) the amounts or "calories" of the components providing energy, namely proteins, fats and carbohydrates – basal metabolism, that is, organic exchanges for the proper functioning of the organism; (ii) dietary principles not directly related to energy provision, such as vitamins, pro-vitamins and mineral elements ("used for the construction of organic tissue and to regulate the alkalinity of liquids"), vegetable cellulose and water; (iii) the maintenance of a balance between all those compounds so as to ensure an ideal consumption of 2,400 calories per man, 2,200 per woman ("due mainly to the weight difference"), 4,000 by "workers engaging in manual labour", and an "energy supplement" for intellectual workers. By identifying these rational dietary guidelines, based on a precise indication of how many calories is provided by each gramme of proteins (4.1), fats (9.3) and carbohydrates (4.1), and by detailing and explaining the organic function of each non-energy-producing mineral component (including sulphur, phosphorus, calcium, chlorine, sodium, potassium, magnesium, iron, zinc and iodine), da Silva enables the non-specialist reader not only to grasp the importance of the basic organic processes involved in the vital act of feeding, but also to understand that the number of calories to be consumed should vary depending on the physiological constitution, age

Lalanne, L'alimentation humaine (1941), Bigwood & Roost, L'alimentation rationelle (1934), Maurizio, Histoire de l'alimentation végétale depuis la préhistoire jusqu'à nos jours (1937) and L. Randoin, L'alimentation et la vie. Les problémes actuels de l'alimentation (1940). A comparison of the publication dates of da Silva's references and that of his Notebook (1942) provides a clear indication of how up-to-date and how recently undertaken his background research had been.

and type of work done by each individual. This description also serves to explain the main nutritional value associated with the combination of energy-producing and other elements in our food. For example,

> Carbohydrates are found in various types of sugars [...] butcher's meat contains 18 to 20% protein and more or less abundant fats, depending on the quality of the animal and the [geographical] region under consideration (Silva, 1942, p. 15).

By quantitatively specifying the constituents of our main foods meat, fish, dairy eggs, cereals and vegetables, da Silva is able to propose what he calls a "ration" – a balanced diet he presents in a table containing recommended portions of protein, fat, minerals, vitamins as well as the "Energy supplements […] provided by bread, jams, potatoes and honey" (Silva, 1942, p. 18). To conclude his highly original multidisciplinary introduction to the theme of human food, da Silva provides brief "economic" advice on food production, based on the most up-to-date knowledge on nutrition available at the time. Focusing on the stage of maturity at which vegetables should be harvested, methods of preparing foodstuffs and food without loss of quality, and how to establish an appropriate balance between the monetary and nutritional values of food.

In summary, then, this edition of Agostinho de Silva's *Cultural Information Notebooks* begins its discussion of food with a brief etiological and archaeological overview of the human act of feeding, briefly alluding to its diversified geographical and cultural evolution, highlighting the technical progress made in the first decades of the 20th century in the industrial production of food, and deploys contemporaneous scientific knowledge on the biochemistry of nutrition in order to define an optimal human diet. In line with the millenarian conception of Joaquim de Fiore, da Silva's monograph adopts a secularizing metaphorical reading in which human history is both gradual and progressive and in which science performs a heuristic function as a mode of knowledge rationally conducted in the unveiling of truth and in

the explanation of the intelligible nature of phenomena, but also as a support of technological inventiveness for the welfare of humanity. Thus, *Human Nutrition*, by positing that hunger could be eliminated if an ideal diet founded on nutritionist principles were adopted, forms part of a paradigm that can be considered utopian from the perspective of the European Enlightenment's humanist doctrine. Some of the key principles adumbrated by da Silva continue to be as relevant, timely and desirable today - in particular, the system-wide application of science to meet the basic subsistence requirements of a growing world population. In addition to its linear view of history, optimistic gradualism and implicit scientific determinism the general tone of this work is also rooted in a vision of anthropocentric hegemony or, to use terminology more in line with today's ethical debates on animal rights, a speciesist position. When da Silva was writing about human food and nutrition, under the conditions of material and cultural development applying at the time, and despite his own conscious personal choice to adopt a frugivorous diet, he probably believed that if the best possible conditions of production, distribution and information were developed, basic and healthy nutrition could be assured on a global scale. It can be concluded therefore that, in the context of Portuguese culture in the first half of the 20th century, this example of da Silva's *Notebooks* - and presumably, due to its wide thematic coverage, the collection in general - can be considered not only part of a situated utopia but also as a text that methodologically and conceptually anticipated the multidisciplinary approach to human nutrition that today we referred to as "food studies".

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