

Bento de Jesus Caraça – The Man and his Time

We will not be talking about Bento de Jesus Caraça *the mathematician*, who is sufficiently well-known.

We will be talking about Professor Bento Caraça *the man*, who, from his birth in 1901, fought for survival and was only saved by a miracle. A life which only lasted 47 years, but which was enough to enrich his era and to bequeath to us a cultural and ethical legacy of the highest and incomparable value.



Bento Jesus Caraça

Of the many great personalities who marked national life over the last century, Bento Caraça was particularly noted for the greatness and universality of his messages and for his courage, even his spirit of sacrifice, in defending them.

He was made to pay dearly for this defiance, respectable though it was. Bento Caraça was mercilessly persecuted by the police under the dictatorship: he was imprisoned at Aljube, he lost his professor's chair where he was a teacher like no other, and he suffered much economic hardship, whilst his health was at risk.

But the ultimate shock for the Professor was his expulsion from his university teaching post, in 1946, when he was professor at the Instituto Superior de Ciências Económicas e Financeiras, an institute for which he had so much affection and which owed so much to him.

On his own merit and as an exceptional measure, Bento Caraça was appointed 2nd Assistente of the 1st Group

of Chairs of Mathematics at the ISCEF at the early age of 19, and when he was only 23 he was appointed *Professor Extraordinário*. Five years later, in 1928, he was appointed *Professor Catedrático*.

As a result of his training, he was particularly interested in economic issues and introduced methods of Econometrics in Portugal. In 1938, with his fellow professors Mira Fernandes and Beirão da Veiga, he founded the *Centro de Estudos da Matemática Aplicados à Economia*, of which he was President and immediately afterwards, with other mathematicians, he launched the "*Gazeta de Matemática*".

Following these efforts to provide and innovate economic knowledge in Portugal, Bento Caraça, in the final period of his life, encouraged a group of young economists, all of whom were his ex-students, to launch a specialised publication, in a country in which information and knowledge were notoriously scarce and mishandled.

Hence the appearance of "*Revista de Economia*" in 1948, in which the opening article in the first issue "*Sobre o Espaço de Capitalização*" was written by Bento Caraça.

A cultured and very sensitive man, the author of a book as up-to-date and inspired as "*A Cultura Integral do Indivíduo*", he lived the problems which affected Portuguese society as if they were his very own. The fact is that this society, which cultivated obscurantism and anti-democratic ideas which he deplored, was the same society which was at the basis of his own humble origins, as the son of poor farm workers from the Alentejo region.

A feverish worker - as if he foresaw his early demise - he faced all manner of adversities and disenchantment, without ever wavering, because reason was on his side, together with the love and satisfaction at having fulfilled his duty.

This position as citizen, master and friend, lover of Nature and all that is beautiful, combining reason and heart in an exceptional manner, was a constant in the life of the Professor.

In his modest life, rich in moral and cultural concerns, teaching and mathematical research occupied a special place. In his classes, which he gave in a unique style and which were revolutionary in educational terms, he captivated his students through his fascinating way of

presenting subjects. This soon transformed Professor Caraça into a great idol, beloved not only among his students but among the whole academic community.

This general feeling can be observed, for example, in the commentaries of Professor Sebastião e Silva, another great mathematician, on his book *“Lições de Álgebra e Análise”*: “For the first time, mathematics has been presented by someone who lives the profession with the soul of an apostle and of an artist.”

As a writer, communicator and polemist, he favoured biographies of great, universal names, of inspiring examples and acts, such as Romain Rolland, Rabindranath Tagore, Evariste Galois, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo Galilei and others. He also maintained a notable polemic with António Sérgio, another great name of the 20th century, in the magazine *“Vértice”*, conducted by both with utmost elegance.

On another level of his activities, involving cultural, civic and political institutions and undertakings, Bento Caraça was unable to remain indifferent the existing socio-political situation, marked by odious dictatorship.

The overt politics of Professor Caraça in this context were, as we have seen, focused mainly on the culturalisation of the individual, on teaching and on the defence of major democratic values.

To promote this political and cultural process, there were social and artistic meetings, conferences and debates, most of which took place at the *“Voz do Operário”* and, in particular, at the *“Universidade Popular Portuguesa”*, which was a meeting place for the city “intelligentsia” at the time, and of which Bento Caraça was the President for many years.

On a similar level, another prodigious activity, due to the responsibility it demanded, was his commitment to the project *“Biblioteca Cosmos”*, undoubtedly one of the finest and most significant cultural achievements of this century and which was conceived and organised by Bento Caraça.

Over a period of less than eight years, this publisher brought out over 114 titles, of great cultural interest and unique in Portugal, agitating and mobilising the best collaborators in Portugal.

Bento de Jesus Caraça died on 18 June 1948. It was astonishing to see the crowds of people of all social classes who joined together spontaneously in the streets of Lisbon to pay their last heartfelt respects to the Master, to the citizen, to the great Friend.

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