



Affonso d'Escragnolle Taunay and History as building materials of national identity.

Kelly Keiko Koti Dias - Mestranda em História – IFCH – UNICAMP

The beginning of the 20th century was notably a time of cultural, political, social and artistic processes that contributed for the construction of a Brazilian identity and national memory. History and literature played an important role in the identification of the so-called “Brazility”, that is, the creation of bonds that united Brazilians throughout the country. Among all these processes, the historian Affonso d'Escragnolle Taunay (1876-1958) was a major actor who sought to emphasize the importance of the state of São Paulo in the history of the nation's constitution as such (BREFE, 2005).

Affonso Taunay was the son of Alfredo d'Escragnolle Taunay, the Viscount of Taunay (1843-1889), a member of a traditional French family that arrived when the painter Nicolas-Antoine Taunay (1755-1830) moved to Rio de Janeiro along with the “French mission” of 1816. In spite of an engineering degree from the Politécnica de São Paulo, like his father, Affonso de Taunay found his true calling in History. Here as well he seemed to follow in his father's footsteps, for the Viscount of Taunay also became known for his writings: he wrote the novel *Inocência* (1872), and the book *La retraite de Laguna* (1871), in which, having fought the Paraguay war, he describes an episode of the conflict. The book was very successful in France, reaching its [third edition](#) in 1891. Written and published originally in French with prefaces by the French editors [Xavier Raymond and Ernest Aimé](#), *La retraite de Laguna* circulated in Brazil in translation made by his son Affonso Taunay. Besides including the prefaces in his translation, he expanded the work by inserting comments and documents, and transforming the very nature of the book: originally a heroic account, it then became a “work of reference” (MATOS, 1977).

Not only did Affonso de Taunay organize and promote his father's work, he also left his mark on the Brazilian historiography of the first half of the 20th century, mainly due to his performance as the director of the Museu Paulista between 1917 and 1945. Located by the Ipiranga river, in the city of São Paulo, where the Brazilian Independence was presumably declared, the Museum became a monument to the nation, evolving from a Natural History museum to a History museum. His extensive scientific production revolved around historical elements, actors and facts that helped strengthen the idea of a national unity — through the “Bandeiras” (expeditions that explored the country and expanded its territory) and their most important explorers, the so-called “bandeirantes”,



such as Raposo Tavares and Fernão Dias, as well as or through prominent characters such as the Emperor D. Pedro II.

Throughout his work, one may observe the historical methodology developed by the French scholars Charles-Victor Langlois (1863-1929) and Charles Seignobos (1854-1942). When making his speech *Os princípios gerais da moderna crítica histórica* (General Principles of modern critic History, 1911), at the opening of the History course at the Faculdade Livre de Filosofia e Letras, established in the early 20th century by the St. Benedict monastery, in São Paulo, Taunay clearly appropriated and translated excerpts from [*Introduction aux études historiques*](#), written between 1896 and 1897 by Langlois and Seignobos, without actually expressing such use. He emphasized the parts that define the notions of historical document, analysis criticism, hermeneutics, and the critique of the *magistra vitae* (master of life) history. The author referred to these characteristics of the "most modern historical criticism" as examples that his students and future historians should follow (ANHEZINI, 2009; FREITAS). So, even before that work had been translated to Portuguese (which would only occur in 1944), college students were already in contact with the ideas of Langlois and Seignobos through the appropriation made by Taunay, which dialogued with the French historical methodology from the late 19th century. The relationship with the French historians, who prioritized the narrative and documents, may also be noticed in his constant search for unpublished documents to study the history of São Paulo and, therefore, of Brazil.

Not only did the author make a "Brazilian appropriation" of the French methodology (ANHEZINI, 2009), he also resorted to the advice given by his friend and "tutor" Capistrano de Abreu (1853-1927), who recommended that he dig deeper in the history of São Paulo and, especially, in the history of the bandeirantes, who should be presented as true Brazilian heroes, men that helped explore the land and conquer the territory that Brazil currently occupies.

This is how Taunay promoted paulistas (people born in the state of São Paulo) to leading actors, presenting them as privileged characters in the construction of the early 20th century national identity. Since his early studies, with the publication of *São Paulo nos primeiros anos* and *São Paulo no século XVI* ("São Paulo in its first years" and "São Paulo in the 16th century"), by the publisher Arrault et Cie, located in Tours, France, in the years of 1920 and 1921 respectively, we may notice the author's concern with the description of



the everyday and political lives of paulistas. These studies have contributed to the idea that São Paulo already suffered a strong political influence, which led the cry for independence to take place in that city.

When searching for unpublished documents for his research, Taunay came across accounts of travelers who passed through the state of São Paulo and other cities, both in the colonial period and in the 19th century. Among them, French travelers were especially relevant, for including in their accounts descriptions of the people, cities, ways of life, among other aspects. Although the author perceived many of these travelling narratives as prejudiced, even considering some as altogether false, he admitted that they were important documents for the construction of national history, allowing an input into how foreigners saw the country. Transcribing and translating parts of these reports, he contributed with the colonial and imperial historiography, as well as with its promotion, because many of these narratives were not published in Brazil, becoming known by several historians only through Taunay's work. Among these travelers are François Pyrard (1611), Froger (1695) and Auguste Saint-Hilaire. The latter was already known by Brazilian historians, so Taunay chose to translate [*Segunda Viagem do Rio de Janeiro a Minas Gerais e a São Paulo \(1822\)*](#), the least known account by the French botanist, and the one in which Saint-Hilaire favors his passing through São Paulo (MATOS, 1977).

The broad scientific production of this São Paulo historian shows us the close relationship between his work and France, especially with the historiographic French production of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The relevance of the French reference is also perceived through the importance of his father, the Viscount of Taunay, who was considered by historians such as Capistrano de Abreu to be a "foreigner" who included the countryside and other provinces in the national unity, expanding it beyond the scope of the capital, Rio de Janeiro, and its citizens. Following in his father's footsteps, Affonso de Taunay "fulfilled his mission" through his political and intellectual relationships, as well as through his efforts to include the history of São Paulo in the collection of the Museu Paulista and in the representation of the nation as an important element for the national unity of Brazil.

Attached Documents



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