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Obituary

Carlos Alvarez Maia (1945-2019), A Present Historian

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Professor Carlos Alvarez Maia was a master for my generation of historians of science. Maia was a physicist who had become a historian very early in his career, and had produced rigorously solid work. His most recent books have greatly advanced the field of historical studies of science. What he demonstrated as a professor with timidity and humility yet was displayed with audacity and boldness in his writing. Maia argued in defense of the radical historicity of scientific knowledge and against *scientism*, which he called an “ideological disaster”. In addition to these qualities, Carlos Maia was, for the most part, generous, and open, as well as affectionate towards his colleagues and students; furthermore, he had a very deep sense of humor and was honestly concerned about collaborating with students and young researchers in their formation. The field of the history of science in Brazil will lose enormously with his absence.

Carlos Alvarez Maia was from Rio de Janeiro and studied physics at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) at the beginning of the 1970s. It was a crucial moment in Brazil’s scientific life. The heroic era of national physics in the 1950s and 1960s – with Cesar Lattes, Jayme Tiomno, José Leite Lopes and Mário Schenberg – had given way to the heavy atmosphere of the military dictatorship and the hardest years during the AI-5² in 1968, and the 1974 elections. PUC was one of the great centers of national physics along with the University of São Paulo and the University of Brazil (after the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ), and its recent university reform had favored the idea that students needed to acquire a wide range of knowledge. At the PUC, Carlos Maia attended Hilton Japiassú’s classes, whom he had approached and affectionately called “Japi”. At that time, Japiassú was an influential philosopher and historian of science as well as author of numerous works, and translator of François Châtelet and Paul Ricoeur. Japiassú was developing research that would lead to his Bachelardian epistemological history of the Modern Scientific Revolution.

It is in this context that Carlos Maia, still a undergraduate student in physics, came into contact with the history and philosophy of science. In an interview granted to the journal *Temporalidades*, in 2011, Maia stated, “we read Kuhn, Koyré, Bohr, Heisenberg, Bohm and

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² Institutional Act Number Five (AI-5) was the fifth of seventeen great decrees issued by the military dictatorship in Brazil in the 1960s and 1970s. It was the most radical of all Institutional Acts and was issued by President Artur da Costa e Silva on December 13, 1968.

Feyerabend” (Araújo, Silva e Silva 2011, 12) as he recalled the creation of the *Macumba physics* study group. After graduating in 1978, Maia went on for a Master’s degree in Astrophysics at the prestigious *Brazilian Center for Physics Research* (CBPF) in the following year. He conducted research on rotating neutron stars but remained focused on his interest of the studies on science and gradually consolidated his background in epistemology, history and philosophy of science. It was also a time of transformation in these areas of knowledge with the publication of David Bloor’s *Knowledge and Social Imagery* in 1976, and, mainly, of the English edition of Ludwik Fleck’s book, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (published in 1979). Maia was one of the first Fleck’s readers in Brazil. He used to tell us enthusiastically about how he felt when he first came into direct contact with the ideas of the Polish author and laughed at the difficulties when he remembered waiting for months to acquire the book when it was first published in the USA. In order to do this, he had to write to the University of Chicago Press, order the book, make the payment, etc.

The conditions for doing these activities in these fields of research improved a little in Brazil in the early 1980s and Professor Carlos Maia was present at that time. In 1983, he participated in the founding of the *Brazilian Society of History of Science* (SBHC) and, in the following year, helped establish the *Research Center for History of Science* of the National Observatory (now the Museum of Astronomy and Related Sciences [MAST]). He later became a researcher at this center and moved from physics to history. It was a productive time for the intellectual development of our late Carlos. From this period, there were the questions, concerns and the drive to develop a PhD dissertation. It should be remembered that, at that time, pursuing a doctorate in Brazil had different requirements than nowadays. Today at the beginning of an academic career, one must have a PhD degree as well as training that has to follow a standard of “productivity” with specific criteria for the term, format, and nature of research. In the late 1980s in Brazil, there were few courses, not many positions, and a small number of professors capable of guiding a PhD dissertation. In the field of the history of sciences, the doctoral program in Social History at the University of São Paulo was the center for training during this period, so Maia went there to develop his PhD dissertation, *The Plot of Sciences in Liberal Society: The Histories of Sciences, Sciences and History*.

About ten years ago, when I was working on my own PhD dissertation, I wrote to Professor Maia to request a copy of his doctoral dissertation. He answered me with a long e-mail detailing the mishaps of the text and stating that the only copy was in the Faculty of Philosophy library at the University of São Paulo without any revision and available only for consultation. Days later, he asked me for my mailing address: he had found a copy of the thesis and would send it to me. A few weeks later, a huge box with three volumes adding up to almost a thousand pages had arrived. The text patiently wove a long web of an *episteme* anchored in historicity; however, I will talk about Carlos Maia’s ideas below. Here, I want to remember something that caught my eye. At the end of the dissertation’s acknowledgments (which included, among its pretextual elements, a “farewell to Thomas Kuhn”, who had died a few months before the defense), one can read: “To Freud and Marx”. This copy was bound and deposited for local consultation in the Faculty of Philosophy library at the Federal University of Minas Gerais – UFMG.

Maia’s PhD dissertation was prepared under the guidance of Shozo Motoyama – a major figure in the history of science in Brazil and director of the *Center for the History of Sciences* at the University of São Paulo since its founding in 1988 (the same year in which Carlos Maia started his PhD). Motoyama led this center until his retirement. He was part of a group of professors which also included Maria Amélia Dantes, Simão Mathias, and Amélia Império Hamburguer.

Carlos Maia was part of the first group of Brazilian professionals with a graduate degree dedicated specifically to the history of science (and with him other important historians of this generation, such as Maria Margaret Lopes, Silvia Figueiroa, Heloisa Bertol Domingues, Olival Freire Junior and many others). This new professional context was much

more independent for the historian of science in relation to its object, since the sciences were now analyzed from the viewpoint of history; both from the point of view of specific training in a History Department and of the professional allocation as a History of Science researcher, which seemed to have been a propitious environment for the development of some central ideas in Professor Maia's thinking. The link and the position of the historian of sciences concerning his object have become a central point for Professor Maia, and it is one of his important contributions to our area. He finished his doctorate in 1996 and, shortly afterward, joined the History Department at the State University of Rio de Janeiro – UERJ.

At the UERJ, Maia stayed for almost twenty years, where he taught a variety of subjects and guided research in the areas of Theory of History and History of Sciences, which provided him with a happy combination that also led him to his research subjects that interested him. He created the Laboratory of Historical Studies of Science, from which he gathered together his students. He was well liked by his students, who, in undergraduate and graduate studies, were surprised by the sharp-wittedness of his intellectual provocations. These last few years, the crisis, which had almost closed UERJ, worried Professor Maia. In 2008, he was a visiting scholar in the History Department at the UFMG – where he strengthened ties with the group *Scientia* by participating in various activities and collaborating to strengthen a network more focused on the theoretical problems of the history of science and its historiography. In *Scientia*, Carlos Maia left an intellectual legacy and many friends who will remember him fondly.

Speaking of Professor Carlos Maia's research, I would like to highlight two of his significant contributions to historical knowledge. The first, in the field of Theory of History, is recorded in the book *History, Science, Language: The Relativism-Realism Dilemma* (2015), which was originally published in Spanish in 2011. In this work, Maia criticizes the theory of post-Annales history and mobilizes the epistemological fortune of the historians of science to propose ways out of the “crisis of History” that has arisen since the late 1980s. One of the foundations of the crisis and the origin of so much anguish among the corporation of historians at the end of the 20th century is related to the post-structuralist offensive on the fragile scientific bases of history – whose narrative form would bring it closer to fiction and literature. As a consequence, history would be completely stuck to the textual dimension without reaching “reality”. Narrative and language would become problems for historians. And it is precisely in the language that Maia simultaneously unravels the “mentalist” idealism and scientific mythology that plagued the theory of history in search of an extra-textual reference or an “objective” contact with reality. Maia considered that this debate around the dangers of “postmodernism” kept a lot of theoretical reactionism and carried unthinking conceptions of language and science that were limited as well as anachronistic. “We need to overcome the inertia of our conceptual and methodological stances”, stated Maia (2015, 31). This inertia that reifies the “historical fact” and that conceives language as the “mere transmission of ideas (...) invention of the rational mind aimed at expressing ideas that would already be preestablished” (Maia 2015, 111).

And here comes the *insight* that many historians who have theorized about the issue of language and narrative lacked. Maia goes to the bottom in the intertwining between history and language: “The human being is human by the verb (...) There is no society without a verb. There is no history without language, as there is no language outside of history” (Maia 2015, 47). More than any other Brazilian historian, Maia knew how to take advantage of the epistemological reflections of the history of science to rigorously theorize about History *tout court* and the historicity of the human. Mobilizing Fleck and Derrida, Hayden White, Karen Barad and Wittgenstein, he reflects on historicity in the pragmatical “intersection of things with the words spoken” (Maia 2015, 57). The materiality of language and the historicity of the human are intertwined in **symbolic-material agencies**.

With the same patience and finesse of those who weave an exceptionally fine net, Maia transported the most advanced theory of history to analyze the transformations in the

history of science in the 20th century. Thus, he was notable for his thesis of the “absent historians” and contributed greatly to the fact that historians were concerned with theoretical reflection likewise about the history of the sciences, which he did not leave this task to the exclusive responsibility of philosophers and scientists. He drew our attention to how the corporation of historians had incorporated scientific metaphysics into their disciplinary protocols that alienated professional historians from the research in the history of science. The history of the sciences should be left to scientists so that they are able to unravel its content and hold on its epistemological values. This narrative has been criticized since Thomas Kuhn – whom Maia himself considered part of a movement to domesticate the history of science produced by the science system. Carlos Maia’s work problematizes this common conception in the history of science, that it should be a history made by scientists and not by historians. He does this on the side of historians, demonstrating how they also agreed with this social division of intellectual work, because they are considering an image of Science in the singular and with a capital letter, which is a unique and ahistorical entity, producing truths that reach the order of nature and, for this reason, they move away from the corrosion of historicity.

The absence of historians – which is, in fact, the defeat of a certain historicist project that was outlined in the 1920s and 1930s – is seen as negative for the effective understanding of science. This strategy is more the expression of the corporate dispute around legitimizing narratives of social prestige (and, ultimately, financing). By excluding professional historiography, the history of science is circumscribed to the field of problems and the horizon of expectations of the “scientific community” – which used the discipline as a space for its myths of origin – or philosophy, for which the history of science is the epistemological laboratory and is at the service of normative projects. The autonomy of the history of the sciences is, in a sense, the guarantee of an arena where one can establish a critical and diverse view of science, and where multiple histories are found in the “incorporation of diverse intertwined meta-discursivities, or rather, by being intertwined (...) A history of the histories of science” (Maia 2013, 289).

The absence of Professor Carlos Alvarez Maia will be felt by all of us who are curious and fascinated by this complex object of the contemporary world, which is the science and its history. A history that is in Maia’s writings – providing the tools to navigate safely against the general current of scientism and naive views on science – will endure in a manner that is serious and courageous. Finally, in addition to contributing to the advancement of the history of science, we will sorely miss Professor Carlos Maia’s place in a world where there are few generous and kind people willing to teach us how to think.

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