

António Manuel Hespanha and the Resignification of Hapsburg Portugal (1580-1640)¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the profound changes that have taken place over the last thirty years regarding the way in which historians approach Hapsburg Portugal (1580-1640), and highlight the important contribution made by António Manuel Hespanha in this matter. The way in which the period has been subjected to a process of historical resignification is described against a background of nationalist preconceptions. I also offer a perspective for the future study of Iberian history in the light of the current debate on the chronologies and timescales of historical analysis.

Keywords

Hapsburg Portugal, António Manuel Hespanha, Timescales of analysis, Iberian history, Nationalist preconceptions.

Resumo

Apresentação da profunda transformação que ocorreu nos últimos trinta anos sobre o Portugal Habsburgo (1580-1640), destacando o magistério de António Manuel Hespanha nessas alterações. Descreve-se o processo de resignificação histórica do referido período em relação às formas de pré-conhecimento nacionalistas. Esboça-se, igualmente, uma reflexão sobre o futuro dos estudos de história ibérica perante o actual debate sobre as escalas e as cronologias da análise histórica.

Palavras-Chave

Portugal Habsburgo, António Manuel Hespanha, Escalas de análise, História Ibérica, Pré-conceitos nacionalistas

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In February 1992, António Manuel Hespanha wrote the preface to *O Antigo Regime*, the fourth volume of the monumental work entitled *História de Portugal* (edited by José Mattoso and now regarded as a classic), which he was responsible for editing and organizing. Over several pages, he set out the aims of the volume, which dealt with the subject of the history of political power. At the same time, he noted that the period which the book covered, from 1620 to 1807, was not his preferred choice.

According to Hespanha, for the history of the political power groups that he and his team of scholars sought to focus on, 1750 would perhaps have been a better date to mark the beginning of the end of the corporative society, and 1820 a more appropriate date to mark the end of the first stage of the new period that was being ushered in at that time. In the case of the former, he argued that 1620 seemed a much less arbitrary choice since it marked an important change in the history of the concentration of power and the reform of the political constitution of Portuguese society (Hespanha, 1993b:7).

As would later be borne out by other observers aware of the timescales that were commonly accepted at the time of the book's publication in 1992, the situation was quite different: at that time, only a very few authors regarded 1620 as being the correct date, and similarly regarded the choice of 1807 as arbitrary. The transfer of the royal court from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro in 1807 may indeed be viewed as an event of clear, explicit, and recognizable historical significance, while the events of 1620 may have had little or almost no meaning in the long run, especially when compared with the truly momentous events of 1640.

In *História de Portugal*, by choosing 1620 as the watershed moment at the height of the Portuguese early modern age, Mattoso broke away from the tendency to regard Portuguese history as being defined by its dynasties, an approach that still continues to be very widely adopted even today.³ A crucial role was assigned to a set of circumstances which had been regarded as alien to Portuguese history and were charged with negative symbolism. He managed to consider the period from 1580 to 1640 as a hiatus (similar to the brief period of Napoleonic administration) in the natural or national history of Portugal—or, perhaps one might say, he succeeded in completely separating this period from the rest and removing it from the framework of analysis. In Hespanha's preface, the process of a gradual resignification of Portugal under Hapsburg rule is a recurrent theme, and his work and teachings undoubtedly played a decisive role here.

³ The third volume, *No Alvorecer da Modernidade*, edited by the late great Joaquim Romero Magalhães (1942-2018), on the period from 1480 to 1620, covered, in economic terms, the emergence of commerce-based capitalism in the late fifteenth century and the structural crisis in the Mediterranean region from 1619 to 1622, while, in the political sphere, it spanned the period from the ascendance to the throne of Dom João II to the initial years of the government of Gaspar de Guzmán, the Count-Duke of Olivares (Magalhães, 1993:8).

Today, what is certain is that the study of the Portuguese history of that period has undergone a radical transformation over the last three decades, not only in terms of the volume of production, but also with regard to the scope and nature of the perspectives adopted. The change has perhaps been so great that it can best be summed up by saying that we have transitioned from the study of the Portugal of the Phillips to the study of the Phillips of Portugal.⁴

It would be artless to suggest that the current wave of interest in the period from 1580 to 1640 can be regarded merely as an attempt to preserve the memory of the Hapsburgs in Portugal or as a move to meet the need to produce history which covers the Iberian Peninsula as a whole, while, at least in Spain, the term ‘Iberian History’ is used by historians to avoid referring to the Spanish or Portuguese state or nation. Rather, a movement has gradually emerged whose existence owes much to the need firstly to respond to the new challenges posed by the demands for a global approach to history, and secondly to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the transnational approach.

The extraordinary imperial circumstances that marked the end of the Avís dynasty partly explain this renewed level of interest. The spread of the Spanish and Portuguese empires across the globe from 1580 onwards is also reflected in other developments that are to be noted in recently produced works. I am referring here not only to the evident approximation that has taken place between Portuguese and Brazilian historiography, which were previously much less closely aligned, but also to the deliberate inclusion of non-European geographical regions in the perspectives generally adopted by Spanish modernists, who are steeped in the tradition of drawing a marked distinction between the European kingdoms and the overseas domains in the Americas and Asia.

The current trend for producing global history, which is now almost universal, has underlined the imperative need to adopt multifaceted perspectives, which have been urgently required for some time. Furthermore, the global approach implies working with long timescales which, by their very nature, tend to go beyond the temporal boundaries of the classical historical ages as defined from the European perspective. Is it not now time to recognize that the high early modern age is perhaps too short a time span to be compatible with a global approach to history?

Indeed, modernist historians must decide this question for themselves, and I would like to highlight two of the possible choices open to them: they can either fashion their own global spaces or they can adopt a global perspective while setting their own very precise timescales. The first path seems to me to be evident both in the current emergence of numerous *respublicae*—based on

⁴ The biographies of the three Hapsburg kings included in a well-known collection of biographical studies of Portuguese monarchs are a good example of this (Bouza, 2005; Olival, 2006; Oliveira, 2005).

the study of letters or the money trail, as well as missions and knowledge—and in the move towards analyzing transversal and/or mediating phenomena, while simultaneously adopting a transnational approach to the study of letters and the portrayal of nobles, rituals, and revolts. The second way forward is also clearly visible in the moves that have been made to produce the world history of a single year, for example *1498: Mais do que a viagem à Índia*, in which the danger of devaluing the global approach is avoided in a manner that is, at the same time, both intelligent and imaginative (Xavier and Senos, 2019).

Hapsburg Portugal offers a set of circumstances that may render it especially interesting in light of current debates. As we know, the period comprises just six decades, which means that there were some people who lived through the events of both 1580 and 1640. During the period, a unified territorial Iberian space produced a continuous flow of people, goods, ideas, ideals, knowledge, and even rules and laws, despite the continued existence of internal jurisdictional borders. This was a Luso-Hispanic monarchy that opened up opportunities for *respublicae* and different modes of transnational life, while there was a great deal of tension to be noted between those who wielded power at the level of the state and the local power-brokers: those at the center and those on the periphery.

Hespanha was actively involved in some of the most recent great historiographical controversies regarding the existence of the state/nation in the early modern age. Some of his theories provided regular topics for history teaching and have since become part of the academic mainstream, obliging us to reflect on the intellectual audacity with which he helped to set new standards not only for interpreting the limits of political centralization in this era, but also for considering the questions of corporative jurisdictional autonomy and non-violent forms of the exercise of power, while also imposing the requirement for textual evidence to be analyzed more carefully.

The renown that he enjoyed as a teacher of the history of jurists—perhaps one of the new *respublicae* that are so attractive today—brought him into contact with historians and academics from an extremely wide range of backgrounds. Furthermore, his personal and intellectual mediation, at an early stage, between distinct and longstanding historiographical traditions in national terms—initially in Portugal and Spain, and later in Brazil—had a marked influence on the two approaches mentioned above. In this regard, it should be noted that the ongoing dialogue with Portuguese historians has provided a powerful incentive for Spanish modernists to take the plunge and engage with non-European spaces. As indicated above, the study of Hapsburg Portugal and, more generally, the Luso-Hispanic monarchy, has particularly benefited from this.

For historians of my generation, Hespanha provided a solid juridical basis for the new paradigm of composite monarchy established by John H. Elliott in his studies of imperial Spain and the Count-Duke of Olivares. Hespanha's teaching also encouraged the practice of considering how power was wielded by a variety of groups in the different territories and states, who were either able to engage with one another through negotiation and agreement or entered into conflict through revolution and revolt. New, and by no means uncontroversial, approaches were to emerge from Elliott's set of composite monarchies and Hespanha's array of power groups, such as the approach based on the idea of polycentric monarchies (Cardim, Herzog, Ruiz Ibáñez, and Sabatini, 2014).

As an expert on the question of power and institutions, António Hespanha was also a scholar of the history of violence, in addition to his prowess in the juridical sphere. He demonstrated that negotiation is not synonymous with the absence of conflict, while, as an authority on war, he edited the volume of *História militar de Portugal* (Hespanha, 2004) on the early modern age.

In 1993, he produced an edition of the journal *Penélope* entitled *Restauração e a sua época*, himself contributing an influential article entitled *As faces de uma "Revolução"* in which he expressed his criticism of there being just one single explanation for the events of 1640, based on nationalist ardor (Hespanha, 1993a). He put forward the theory that, rather than being a struggle for independence, the events of 1640 signified the revival of the old Portuguese constitution, running counter to the policies of Olivares, who was himself a rebel. Consequently, Hespanha argued in favor of overcoming nationalist preconceptions in historical analysis. Almost as if he were writing a manifesto, Hespanha was asking historians to disregard these preconceptions, as he thought they endangered the analysis of the past through the application of contemporary concepts. These preconceptions were in fact pre-judgments which subtly tainted the historical past. Perhaps the 1620s had been more decisive in shaping the history of Portugal: following the Lisbon *Cortes* of 1619, the basis of the Portuguese-Spanish composite monarchy began to be reformulated and the foundations were laid for the reform that would lead to the downfall of the Habsburgs in Portugal.

In short, without the teachings of António Hespanha and without his contribution in terms of historical resignification, the prospects for the future study of the period from 1580 to 1640 would not be as bright as they appear to be today, since both politically monstrous notions and anti-natural historical timescales have been decisively condemned to the scrapheap of history by anti-nationalists.

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