

Revisionism in the Tropics: *The Political Model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire*, by António Manuel Hespanha

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Abstract

This article presents a brief archaeology of the emergence of a political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire in the works of António Manuel Hespanha. In his PhD thesis, *As Vésperas do Leviathan* (1989), Hespanha admitted that his investigation was restricted to the context of mainland Portugal. But he also confessed his interest in expanding his innovative approach to the study of the overseas territories. In fact, after 2000, he underwent what was identified as a kind of *imperial turn* in his work by writing many papers in which he tried to define a model for understanding power structures and political institutions in the colonial contexts of the Portuguese Empire in the early modern period. This article takes a critical look at the path that led Hespanha to this imperial turn and seeks to understand how his formulations (and reformulations) changed over the course of time, based on the constructive dialogue that he established with the historiographical production on the subject, particularly in Brazil.

Keywords

António Manuel Hespanha (1945-2019), Portuguese historiography, Portuguese colonial empire, Colonization, Political history.

Resumo

Este artigo procura realizar uma breve *arqueologia* da constituição de um *modelo político do império colonial português* nos textos de António Manuel Hespanha. Em seu trabalho de doutorado, *As Vésperas do Leviathan* (1989), o historiador reconheceu que sua investigação limitava-se aos quadros de Portugal continental. Não obstante, confessava seu interesse em expandir sua abordagem inovadora para o além-mar. Com efeito, desde 2000, o historiador realizou aquilo que foi identificado como uma espécie de *imperial turn* (virada imperial) em sua obra; escrevendo diversos trabalhos em que procurou justamente definir um modelo para a compreensão das estruturas de poder e as instituições políticas nos contextos coloniais do império português da Época Moderna. A proposta deste artigo é percorrer criticamente o caminho que o levou a esta virada para o Império e entender como suas formulações (e reformulações) foram sendo modificadas a partir do diálogo construtivo que se estabeleceu com a produção historiográfica, notadamente a brasileira.

Palavras-Chave

António Manuel Hespanha (1945-2019), Historiografia portuguesa, Império colonial português, Colonização, História política.

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“[...] the technique of this deconstructive endeavor is almost always the same: distrusting the evidence on transfers, filtering the collected discourses, showing the existing simplifications, mapping the facts that do not fit together, and inspecting the anachronisms.”

Hespanha, 2009:61

António Manuel Hespanha was one of the most influential Portuguese historians of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His multifaceted and kaleidoscopic *oeuvre* has had an impact in many of the areas involved in the crafting of history, particularly his studies on power, political institutions, legal forms, and the political and legal thought of the formative centuries of the contemporary world. His field of observations spanned the period from the fifteenth century—the dawn of the early modern world, when Portugal was only just beginning to emerge from the medieval magma to be introduced to new hybrid forms of power structures—to the nineteenth century—when the institutional structures of modern liberal constitutionalism were beginning to ripen. Hespanha’s extraordinary ability to collect data from new sources, while charting new and previously unknown memory territories and exploring new themes and approaches, was further consolidated by his unique erudition. His attentive look at the question of conceptualization brought him closer to a series of innovative solutions and historiographical experiences, most of which were also formulated by him.

As has been noted, he also appreciated team work, the use of new information technologies and the search for creative solutions. In his PhD thesis—presented in an extremely conservative setting, before such technologies were to become widespread – he took a step ahead of his time and converted a complex set of documents into a useful databank, produced tables and graphs, and even georeferenced his results. He produced a remarkable work that pointed to an avenue of research based on solid methods, the expanded use of sources, and safe and reliable answers. In his extensive research activities, he gathered together distinguished teams of collaborators and encouraged the structuring of sources, the digitalization of collections, and the creation of large databases for fellow researchers. He was always attentive to whatever could be done at the frontiers of these new methodologies made possible by the digitalization of culture.

This paper emerged from a presentation delivered to the *3rd Meeting of the Law History Network*, held at the Institute for Brazilian Studies (IEB) on November 1, 2019, which was

dedicated to a reflection on the works of António Manuel Hespanha (1954-2019).² We were then – and we still are – suffering from the impact of the loss of this great professor, an erudite and creative historian, and a kind and affectionate friend.

I had the good fortune to know him personally and to spend time in his company for twenty years. On occasions, we were separated from one another by great transatlantic distances, but, at other times, our meetings were facilitated by new digital technologies. In the first semester of 2001, I was a visiting researcher at the Institute of Social Sciences (ICS) in Lisbon. I had previously collaborated on a few chapters of his volume *Nova História Militar*, and, like many others, I admired his iconoclastic energy, his enduring respect for disciplinary boundaries, and—as has already been noted on many occasions—his good humor and constant willingness to encourage the involvement of young scholars.

Indeed, back then, I was still a young man interested in historiography's shift towards the dimensions of politics and power. In an inspired testimonial, Catarina Madeira Santos narrated how Professor Hespanha stimulated his students to look for their own “figure in the carpet”³ in the course of their personal development and in the production of their discourse, all of which comprises the making of history. Catarina recognized Hespanha as a generous historian who always withstood the “classical and comfortable temptation of the master, namely of forging ‘creatures’ in one’s own image and likeness, as faithful carriers and perpetuators of a message.”

In keeping with this mindset, I intend to undertake in this article a critical examination of how, based on his reflections on the paradigm of jurisdictional power in Portugal in the early modern period, António Hespanha sought to develop a political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire, which would then be absorbed and transformed in the course of time by Brazilian historiography. The twenty years (1999-2019) of Hespanha's continuous dialogues with his Brazilian colleagues enabled him not only to confirm and enhance this model, but also gave birth to an entirely new field of research and discursive production.

² I am grateful for the comments made by my colleagues on that occasion. I also wish to thank my students from the “Study Group of Readings on Colonial Brazil” linked to *finisterra_lab* (Laboratory of Studies and Researches on the Iberian Empires in the Modern Age at the University of São Paulo). In the second semester of 2019, our group studied two works that had recently been published by António Manuel Hespanha: *Filhos da Terra* (HESPANHA, 2019b) and *Uma Monarquia Tradicional* (HESPANHA, 2019a). In May 2020, I had the opportunity to discuss the first version of this paper with them.

³ By mentioning the “figure in the carpet,” Hespanha was referring to a short story by Henry James (*The Figure in the Carpet*, 1896) “in which the great writer Hugh Vereker confides that his entire work is pervaded by a secret intention, never noticed by anyone” (Santos 2015: 73-79).

António Manuel Hespanha Comes to the Tropics

Hespanha's PhD thesis was presented in 1987, and published in Spanish in 1989, followed by a Portuguese edition in 1994. He explains that, in this reworked edition, he eliminated some details and annexes linked to the requirements of academic examinations.⁴ The work presented “a detailed, panoramic view of Portuguese political and administrative institutions” in the seventeenth century, which he saw as a time when previously existing forms became stabilized and provided a “durable basis” for the future.

For a historian, a ‘panoramic view’ is always a daring enterprise, all the more so in a PhD thesis. It is an *obra prima*, not in the sense of a *magnum opus*, or masterpiece, but in the sense of its being a prime study, the first—and initiatory—work that grants us access to our craft. Thus, Hespanha's panoramic view was not complete; he had to narrow his focus. As he explains in his foreword, this work was limited to two dimensions, namely: a *substantive* dimension (a restriction of its theme), since his research was focused on “the system of political power, rigorously gleaned from other power systems (economic, symbolic and so on)”; and a *spatial* dimension, with far-reaching implications for the understanding of the object itself.

His panoramic view is dedicated exclusively to the territory of the “kingdom,” i.e. continental Portugal, “and for this reason the Atlantic and overseas domains are omitted from its scope.” Such a restriction was based on practical considerations, as he confessed (“it would indeed be unthinkable to add an assessment of the political and institutional reality overseas to that of mainland Portugal”). Hespanha suggests that he toyed with the idea of a solution supported, in his words, by “time-bound sources,” but he does not accept (at this point, a certain oscillation becomes noticeable) the reading that the kingdom of Portugal, its Atlantic islands, Brazil, and even India, could each be approached as “autonomous political and institutional realities.” (Hespanha, 1994; 10-11). Such a proposal would, as we may observe, amount to a break with a whole historiographical tradition interested in the Portuguese Overseas Empire and even with its impacts on the very structures, and even the political processes, of the monarchy.

However, in the preface, Hespanha leaves a door open for expanding on this “panoramic view.” Were it not for this practical need to restrict his perspective to mainland

⁴ The book was re-edited in Coimbra in 1994 based on the reworked 1989 edition printed in Spain. António Manuel Hespanha, *As Vésperas do Leviathan. Instituições e Poder Político. Portugal, Séculos XVI-XVIII*. Lisbon, Pedro Ferreira Artes Gráficas, 1986, p. 206. Second edition published in Coimbra, Almedina, 1994 [in free translation, “On the Eve of Leviathan. Institutions and Political Power. Portugal in the 16th-18th centuries”].

Portugal, he would certainly have included the overseas territories as part of his efforts to understand Portuguese political and administrative institutions. He also suggests that, as *peripheral power centers*, these territories would probably be “outlets of social tension” and a “field of political and administrative experiences” that contributed to the strengthening of the Crown’s power—or, contradictorily, to its deterioration (Hespanha 1994: 10-11). As we will see further on, when he decided to return to this field of studies a few years later, his reflection on this hypothesis was not resumed. It was, instead, superseded by the direct application of its solutions to the question of the corporate monarchy in the Portuguese overseas space, as he himself had established that it should be.

Following the presentation of his PhD thesis, Hespanha became involved in two highly important experiences that helped him expand his panoramic view in 1999 and produce a first interpretive draft on political institutions in the wider context of the Portuguese Empire in the early modern period: between 1995 and 1998, he served as Commissioner-General of the *National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries* (CNCDP); and from 1990–1999, he was a lecturer at the Faculty of Law of the University of Macao.⁵ In 1995, his first studies on “the system of power in the colonies” resulted in the book *Panorama da história institucional e jurídica de Macau* (Hespanha 1995a) [An overview of the institutional and legal history of Macao]. As he revealed later, his frequent travels to this remnant of the Portuguese Empire in China was essential for prompting his interest in “the system of power in the colonies” (Hespanha 2007).⁶ In the midst of all kinds of exhibitions, seminars, publications, and archive-ordering initiatives, among many other events, his work as the Commissioner-General of the CNCDP certainly provided him with a superior vantage point for examining the colonization process and, above all, the historiographical production in the communities of former Portuguese colonies. He recognized, in an interview, that chairing the Commission had been a decisive opportunity: “for slightly over three years, I had ‘findings’ and ‘expansion’ from early in the morning until late at night.”⁷

Pedro Cardim pointed out that this “type of *imperial turn* in Hespanha’s works” had a strong impact on the historiography about the empires, and particularly on Brazilian historiography.” According to him, “this turn coincided with the reception of the post-colonial agenda and with the development of studies on European colonialism and its

⁵ Hespanha personally spoke about the importance of these two experiences in dictating his shift towards studies on the Empire (Cardim 2011).

⁶ Replying to the criticism of Laura de Mello e Souza, in the chapter “Política e Administração Colonial: Problemas e Perspectivas” of her book *O Sol e a Sombra* (Souza 2006:27-77).

⁷ See “António Manuel Hespanha entrevistado por Mafalda Soares da Cunha, Maria Teresa Beleza, Nuno Gonçalves Monteiro e Rita Garnel” (Cardim 2015:24).

history” (Cardim 2017:32 ff.). But I believe the influence of Hespanha’s work predates even this “imperial turn.” After the publication of his PhD thesis in 1992, his approach would noticeably shake Brazilian historiography, which was interested in renewing the study of political structures and power dynamics. In a 2004 article, Cardim showed us how committed modern historians interested in the Portuguese Colonial Empire had been, since the 1990s, to a renewal of the studies on political dynamics and structures.⁸ At least in Brazil, in the second half of the twentieth century, political history—a theme previously left to more traditional historians immersed in a narrative and event-based approach—was repeatedly neglected by more structural and economics-based studies. This was certainly not the case with the more sophisticated (and, for this precise reason, more impactful) works—such as the studies by Fernando Novais, or Evaldo Cabral de Mello, to mention just two authors. However, it is important to point out that a certain re-emergence of scholarly interest in politics among the historians of Colonial Brazil followed in the wake of the beneficial and expansive influence of Antônio Hespanha’s *oeuvre*. This was due to the fact that Hespanha’s writings indicated a new methodology, a new approach to the sources of history and a structural understanding of the realities of power—both by bringing up a relational approach to power (led by Michel Foucault, whose work allowed him to notice its workings in other layers of historical reality) or by criticizing the “Statist paradigm,” that is, the precocious and (as he understood it) undue use of the state as a structuring concept of power and of political institutions.

Largely influenced by the works of Otto Brunner, this latter solution emphasized “the continuities between the medieval and modern political systems,” particularly among the “lowest” strata of the political world, where “traditional political allegiance structures marked by *patriarchic* and *manorial* bonds remained relatively untouched by the innovations of political theory and the power rules of modern monarchs” (Hespanha 1994:28). While being supportive of a history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*)—an outlook pioneered by Brunner, among others—Hespanha adapted the Austrian historian’s criticisms to the eschatology of state systems approaches from the early centuries of the early modern period.⁹ According to

⁸ A review of the historiography on the government and administration of Colonial Brazil is to be found in the excellent article published by Pedro Cardim (2004). According to him, the transformation of the historiography on Portugal in the modern era was based “on three main axes: the priority that was given to the study of power relations and their multiple configurations; an increased openness to the contributions of other social sciences, emphasizing the links between them in specific contexts; and the adoption of a deeper understanding of the circuits of the production, dissemination, and reception of political decisions.”

⁹ Brunner’s work *Land und Herrschaft* was initially published in 1939 and earned the Verdun Award from the Berlin Academy of Sciences (1941). Two additional editions were published during World War II with some revisions. After the war, a fourth edition was published with newly revised parts and, above all, with changes

Marcelo Jasmin, Brunner's works criticized German legal and liberal historiography for having transposed into medieval reality the "conceptual logics derived from subsequent liberalism—for instance, by setting economics apart from politics, and placing the public and private spheres as opposites" (Jasmin 2005).

This construction of a new "jurisdictional paradigm" for understanding the nature of power and political institutions in early modern Portugal was also inspired by other authors, such as Jaime Vicen Vives, Bartolomé Clavero, and Pierangelo Schiera. It led Hespanha away from the then dominant view of Portugal as the head of a trade-based empire. Economics was still a key feature of historiography in the 1980s, but it was encompassed by an institutional—and therefore exceedingly structural—reading of social life. In the introduction to Hespanha's collection of articles published in 1984 by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, he brought this new paradigm closer to the solutions of other authors from the field of Marxist Structuralism (such as Perry Anderson), who saw the political structures of the *ancien régime* as continuing to be dominated by a late Feudalism. These proposals brought his reading closer to Brunner's and cast the history of Portugal into a particular frame, or *paradigm*: an autonomous type of territory that would only be revealed to a historian who did not search within it for elements of continuity with the historical process of the emergence of modernity. For Hespanha,

it would not be audacious to state that the Portuguese social system (or the social formation of Portugal, if we prefer) was dominated until well into the nineteenth century by the feudal mode of production (the rentier-feudal system—*rentengrundherrschaft*—O. Brunner), which almost exclusively accounted for the arrangement of its agricultural productive process until the middle of the past century (Hespanha 1984:49-50).

Although, on the one hand, this perspective did not yield a prompt response about how best to understand the "policy of overseas expansion" of this "modern proto-State" (Hespanha 1984:52), it did, on the other hand, offer Hespanha a new way of viewing the power embodied in political institutions. This provided the basis for a structuralist approach to the study of power, condensed in terms of layers and mechanisms, discursive fields and

"to remove or replace terms and passages reflecting the cultural and political atmosphere in which the previous editions had appeared" (see the "Translator's Introduction" by Howard Kaminsky and James Van Horn Melton). For more information about Brunner and the history of concepts, see also the text by James Van Horn Melton (Melton 1996).

bodies, which were expressed organically and as disconnected from the dynamism of other dimensions of social life, such as the economy and social conflicts. In other words, its way of unveiling the reality of power before our eyes, with its social immanence, and not yet autonomized in social life (Weber), was extremely innovative. Aided by his methodology of a history of institutions based on the rigorous study of legal texts, the historicity of legal certificates, the ritual and behaviors of power-actors, and an anthropology of power, it was capable of opening up an extraordinary field of research. The history of the political institutions of early modern Portugal and its imperial domains had been scantily studied until then. Hespanha offered a still virgin territory to a generation of historians. Hence, his great impact on those researchers who were interested in resuming the study of political history.

Returning to our main line of reasoning: beyond this wider impact, Hespanha also provided us with a *political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire*. Starting with his “imperial turn” (Cardim), these complex solutions relating to the nature of power in the Portuguese ancien régime could be transplanted to the tropics. The success of his endeavor was also linked to the fact that he offered a form of revisionism that was in line both with the conceptual interests and with the new “mode of production” of historical knowledge inaugurated in Brazil by the expansion of the country’s graduate education system. Since the 1970s, based on its new hierarchical and formal systems of graduate studies, Brazil was experiencing a new way of making history, committed as it was to going beyond the previous essayistic tradition. The expansion of these programs in the 1990s coincided with the professional strengthening of the community of historians (with the consolidation of a funding system and new work opportunities), as well as with its vertiginous growth, an increased social division of labor (archives and collections were further institutionalized), and increasingly direct access to original documents. The orderly structuring of working teams updated the conditions for the making of history and accelerated the productive chains behind the current discourses. Within this context, the proposed views—mostly dominated by Marxist and New History perspectives—were faced with many revisionist efforts that challenged their efficacy. It is possible that the need to accelerate scholarly processes (with shorter timescales) may have sacrificed conceptual reflection to some extent, thereby limiting the absorption of the historiographical tradition (a necessary immersion for the maturation of a vocabulary and an erudition that add legitimacy to the historians’ autonomy) and leading the new generations to search for well-established interpretive frameworks or, at least, to those frameworks that are more closely associated with an iconoclastic and flexible approach.

His impact on Brazilian historiography, in particular, is not my focus in this brief

article. I do not intend to analyze how Brazilian historiography metabolized his model, or his distinct models; instead, my proposal is to present a concise *archaeology* of his reading, which means treading the path that led him towards such an imperial turn and understanding how his formulations (and reformulations) followed the constructive dialogs that were established with the historiographical production.

Hespanha's travels overseas were initially guided by an article by Luiz Felipe Thomaz on the political and administrative structure of the State of India in the sixteenth century. His aim was to "consolidate [Thomaz' basic idea of a 'polymorphic empire'] in political and administrative terms (Hespanha 2009:41). For Thomaz, the State of India should be understood in essence as "a *network*, that is, a system, of communications between several open spaces," characterized by "geographic discontinuities and heterogeneous institutions," as well as by "unclear boundaries in both geographic and legal terms" (Thomaz 1994:208-10). According to Hespanha, this system was different from that of the kingdom, since the "even more pluralist settings" of its overseas possessions and colonies were "stretched by even more powerful centrifugal forces and extended across long distances that involved not only crossing the seas, but also conquering the backlands," so that the power of the king could only be weakly represented. Thus, the rather absent historiographical contents were challenged not only in terms of the thesis of monarchical absolutism, but also in relation to the very idea of a modern Portugal based on a colonial empire structured as a worldwide domain.

Opposed to such an idea, Hespanha claimed that

the centrality of "the Empire" dissolved into a tangled mesh of contradictory relations between many different centers where the Portuguese crown occupied a range of places and positions, which were frequently insignificant and sometimes scandalously low in hierarchical term; in such places, by contrast, strong local powers would rise up and the shadows of royal "employees" would extend towards autonomous realms, covering and conferring practical legitimacy on all sorts of initiatives and temerities, which the regulations denied and the royal letters could barely gloss over (Thomaz 1994:208-10).

Hespanha's first draft text seeking to define a political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire appeared in a concise form in 1994, having been composed in collaboration

with Catarina Madeira Santos (who was then preparing an MSc dissertation on Goa¹⁰). This was a text that he had prepared with his student for a colloquium in Venice. The chapter on “the forms of power in an oceanic empire” occupied only a few pages of volume four of the collection *História de Portugal* (edited by José Mattoso and published in 1994), bringing a first reading about an empire in which “the limit was no longer the sea, but, instead, the essential links of unity among the supporting bases on firm land” (Hespanha and Santos 1993).¹¹ The authors sought to unveil “an empire marked at once by spatial discontinuity, an economy of means and coexisting institutional models.” This is still a somewhat vague statement, but it was based on the recognition that “the little country” was incapable of mobilizing the necessary financial and human resources, which led to the interpretation that the Portuguese Empire, unlike the Spanish one, was “weakly homogenous, decentralized and left to the discretion of several relatively autonomous political centers.” In contrast to “classical empires” such as (in their view) the Spanish one, the Portuguese Empire “followed a more pragmatic and economic logic founded on the autonomy and modularity of its component parts, and on the economy of political costs involved in the administration of its territories” (Hespanha and Santos 1993:398 and 408). While aiming at a wide audience (with “an intended broad reach,” in Hespanha’s own words), this book became the primary reference in Brazil for the dissemination of his perspective on political structures and political history, with a focus on institutions. The chapter that he wrote with Angela Xavier is probably one of the most frequently cited references in the dissertations and theses written on colonial Brazil in graduate studies in history in the country at the turn of the millennium (Hespanha and Xavier 1993).

The Constitution of the Portuguese Empire

António Manuel Hespanha’s double experience of immersion in the Portuguese overseas world, firstly through his study of the Portuguese presence in Macao (and Goa), and then as a commissioner involved in the process of deconstructing, reinventing, and disseminating a collective memory on the discoveries, gave him the impetus to move beyond the limits of his *Vésperas* thesis. After leaving his post at the CNCDP, he had the chance to

¹⁰ The MSc dissertation presented in 1996 was supervised by António Hespanha and published as a book in 1999 (Santos 1999).

¹¹ Years later, Hespanha explained the “meagerness” of this contribution as resulting from the editorial guidelines stating that an entire volume was about to be dedicated to the history of the expansion (Hespanha 2007).

spend a season at Yale University at the invitation of Stuart Schwartz, one of the leading historians of colonial Brazil's society and economy. Enjoying both the time and the opportunity to make contact with researchers interested in colonial contexts, Hespanha made headway with his own studies and opened up new horizons beyond the institutional side of Portuguese political history. In the late 1990s, he was involved in the production of a new publication as the coordinator of the second volume of *Nova História Militar de Portugal* [New Military History of Portugal], edited by Nuno Severiano Teixeira and Manuel Themudo Barata for the publisher Círculo dos Leitores. His volume covered the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, offering a broad view of the military conflicts that took place all across the Portuguese Empire. In seeking to achieve this aim, he was helped by a competent group of researchers.

But this openness to new themes did not diminish his interest in expanding on his overview of Portugal's institutional history in the early modern era. While in America, he finally had the opportunity to produce a in-depth interpretive essay. His critical spirit led him to write a review of the current trends in the historiography. As he recollects in his text *Para além do Leviatã* [Beyond Leviathan], this was the moment when he “undertook more systematic readings of the primary sources and secondary literature linked to the colonial administration in the State of Brazil.” In his own words, it was the moment when he felt

the conviction that, finally, the model of corporate government was not only perfectly suited to what the sources from each period transmitted to us, but also indispensable for removing some widely disseminated distortions of Brazil's colonial history, in respect of its narrative about the relations between the seat of the empire and the colony, and about the origin and development of the pro-independence movement (Hespanha 2007:60).

Thus, as may be noticed, the suggestion that he made in the preface to his PhD thesis, namely that there would be something structurally different in the shaping of the institutions in the context of peripheral powers, was abandoned in favor of an attentive look at the similarities between contradictory centers (the metropolis and the colony), to the point of his being able to resolve this contradiction. The perspective he pursued was that of revising longstanding historiographical terms based on a national and romanticized narrative. By proceeding from this starting point—namely, that it was necessary to find the ways in which a model of corporate government was expressed in other contexts far removed from the

kingdom—Hespanha set out to draft an initial summary, a guiding thread to give historiography a renewed program, being particularly mindful of the potential for revisionism, which was already in progress in Brazilian historiography.

It should be stressed that this context involved undertaking an extensive revision of the literature on the Portuguese Empire overseas. In this regard, we may consider (among other examples) the publication of the volumes on this “Portuguese expansion” edited by Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti N. Chauduri (1998). A critical appraisal of this new scheme was carefully carried out by the historian Angela Xavier. At that time, she was preparing her PhD thesis on imperial power and cultural conversions in India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (under the supervision of Chauduri and Hespanha), and, in 2000, she published an overview of the historiographical trends about the Portuguese expansion revealed in the periodical *Penélope*, attempting to understand the “rotation experienced in recent historiographical studies, under the influence of inputs from the fields of anthropology and sociology,” as well as its increasing internationalization (Xavier 2000).

Based on a brief paper that Hespanha presented at the annual congress of the Society for Spanish and Portuguese Studies, held in New York on April 27 and 30, 2000 (“The Constitution of the Portuguese Empire. Revision of Current Historiographical Biases”), he introduced a clearer program on how to approach studies on Portuguese societies overseas. He offered a concise account of his findings on how to transpose his interpretation of the corporate monarchy and the political system of the Portuguese ancien régime to the tropics. With only a few changes, this paper served as a guideline for further investigations and, more importantly, it was largely incorporated into Brazilian historiography, which was interested in finding ways to move beyond the debate that had been in progress since the 1970s, being largely guided by Marxist (Structuralist, Heterodox, Culturalist, or New Social History) perspectives. In the 1990s, in Brazil and elsewhere, the historiographical production was experiencing a crisis of paradigms and gradually opening itself up to new themes, approaches, and methods. But a more fragmented and de-conceptualizing outlook maintained the wider interpretative frameworks that had been apprehended in the ongoing debate—which, broadly speaking, opposed solutions based on concepts such as the “colonial slave-based mode of production” or “the old colonial system.” This debate laid the groundwork, for instance, for the interpretive proposal *Arcaísmo como Projeto* [Archaism as a Project], a schematic book published in 1993 (Fragoso and Florentino 1993).

Some leading Brazilian historians attended the New York seminar and took part in a round table discussion moderated by Stuart Schwartz: João Fragoso, Fátima Gouvêa, and

Junia Furtado. A first version of this text, which I had the chance to read in April 2000, shows how its efforts at (re-)interpretation were still rather uncertainly dependent on overseas historiography. Hespanha set out to review the historiography, but, in this first version, he only mentioned the “insightful” text of Luiz Filipe Thomaz. For him, Thomaz had been able to break away from

a monotonic conception of Portuguese colonialism, describing the Empire as a loose network of asymmetric political relations, each one corresponding to a specific balance of power between colonizers and colonized, without a global guiding project or model. Thomaz’ article greatly inspired my interpretation of the constitutional structure of the classical Portuguese colonialism, not only because it fits the available historical sources, but also because it is consistent with the general paradigm of early modern political culture (Hespanha 2000).

At that point, Hespanha revealed a certain lack of knowledge about the evolution of Brazilian historiography. His criticism of the romantic or nationalist historiography—inasmuch as it was based on an anti-Portuguese ideology and on a poetics that masked the responsibility of the dominant social classes for the genocide of indigenous people and for the brutal exploitation of African populations—was correct, but it was also clearly outdated. It resembled more a claim for reparations within Portuguese historiography itself, which—as a result of the cultural hegemony of the regime of the *Estado Novo* and the consequent suffocation of generations of researchers—had perhaps endured a longer period of time under the yoke of nationalist and eschatological narratives.

But this was not the case with Brazilian historiography. For this reason, I believe his outlook ended up projecting onto those Brazilian authors who were close to him a bias that did not in fact exist. As he once pointed out in a footnote, “the final symptom of an intentional reading of the history of Portuguese colonization is the idea of a ‘colonial pact’, as if there had been a planned historical manifestation and a coherent system of exchanges between the metropolis and its colonies.” For him, a new reading of the Portuguese Empire should be based on the “inexistence of a general model or strategy behind the Portuguese expansion” (Hespanha 2000).

An *Atomistic* Framework

In addition to continuing his search for similarities, by projecting a model of the corporate monarchy overseas, Hespanha noted an intense fragmentation of sovereignty in the spaces of the Empire. In other words, he saw that the political institutions of Portugal's ancient régime had been shattered into several local solutions, which were adjusted to their respective unstable and flexible local realities. Following, and further expanding on, a suggestion of Russell-Wood, he highlighted the absence of "a systematic strategy encompassing the entire Empire, at least until the mid-eighteenth century" (Hespanha 2001a:169; and Russell-Wood 1998). In fact, the viewpoint on which he based his observations—and which was consolidated in *Panorama da história institucional e jurídica de Macau* (Hespanha 1993) [An overview of the institutional and legal history of Macao]—enabled him to affirm that an institutional description of the Portuguese overseas expansion, whenever completed, would only confirm such an "*atomistic* framework." In other words, "even though the Portuguese colonial enterprises had always been connected to Portugal by all kinds of ties, there was not a unified colonial constitution in place, at least until the liberal period" (Hespanha 2001a:170).

Such a solution is surely valid if we are concerned about legal structures or power mechanisms. Yet, if we are searching for an objective basis for these structures as a means of expressing the interests being constructed through the formation of a *sui generis* society in America—marked as it was by a production aimed at a European world economy in expansion and based on the fundamental presence of slavery—then, in contrast, we can (and must) notice a consistency defined by the tension that was generated in court circles and among Portuguese-Brazilian groups (Alencastro 2000). Laura de Mello e Sousa made this criticism in the text cited above by pointing both to a bias arising from an "overvaluation ascribed by Hespanha to the legal texts" (to the detriment of other dimensions of history) and to a certain lack of consideration for the facts of slavery (Souza 2006). In an elegant and firm way, Mello e Souza summarized a series of critical remarks that emerged in the research group she led in 2004-2010 at the University of São Paulo (USP). In this laboratory project, Hespanha's works were read at critical seminars and carefully discussed by researchers with the intention of comparing the new perspectives of historiography (which was undergoing a renewal process with proposals about the ancien régime in the tropics) with the conceptual frameworks already developed about the ancient colonial system (Novais & Alencastro), commercial capitalism (Weber and Schumpeter), world economy (Braudel and Wallerstein),

and other hypotheses aimed at more all-encompassing perspectives.

After the seminar of April 2000, this work by Hespanha circulated among some colleagues and was favorably received. In the Portuguese version of the text, he included a long footnote about Raymundo Faoro and Caio Prado Jr. and pointed to the commitment of their historiography to “a narrative and nationalist discourse.” This hypothesis had been aired for some time by more recent authors such as Maria Odila Leite da Silva Dias, who allegedly promoted “a reading of Brazilian history that was free from this obsessive opposition between Portugal and its colonies” (Hespanha 2001a:168). In contrast, in this 1972 text, the USP historian considered the need to disentangle the study of the nation’s formation process in the early decades of the nineteenth century “from the traditional image of a colony struggling against Portugal” (Dias 2009).¹² Hespanha did not notice that the debate which she proposed was based on a re-reading of the works of Caio Prado Jr., who stressed that the internal contradictions of the colonial system were incapable of leading the process of breaking free from the European power, and of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, who was attentive to the transactions and commitments to the colonial structure in this process of national formation (Prado Jr. 1942; Holanda 1962).

The paper that Hespanha presented in New York was published in 2001 in a collective volume, *O Antigo Regime nos Trópicos*. This book proposed “a re-discussion—based on new conceptual parameters and new theoretical perspectives—of some theses regarding economic relations and new political, religious, and administrative practices” (Fragoso, Bicalho, and Gouvêa 2001:21). It included valuable studies by several authors and was preceded by an article written by its editors, entitled “Uma Leitura do Brasil Colonial: Bases da Materialidade e da Governabilidade do Império” [A Reading of Colonial Brazil: The Bases of the Materiality and Governability of the Empire], published by *Penélope* (Fragoso, Bicalho, and Gouvêa 2000). It represented a first attempt to construct a new interpretive framework for a history of Colonial Brazil—or, better still, for studies on the historical formation of Brazil.

It is important to mention that, in Brazil, the historicist paradigm linked to the search for a genesis of the national state had already been criticized in 1907 through the publication of an inspiring work, *Capítulos de História Colonial*, by João Capistrano de Abreu, which inspired the entire generation of the so-called “modernists” from the 1930s to the 1950s. In this search for a historical formation in the colonial period—and, thus, criticizing the idea of an established “Colonial Brazil”—the field of study was gradually being defined from the

¹² Maria Odila Dias’ text was originally published in 1972.

mid-twentieth century onwards, while attempts were also being made to go beyond a legitimizing discourse on the nation-state (a characteristic feature of authors writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). But it was still hostage to a teleological perspective that focused on the fulfillment of the ideal of the nation's formation, as an allegedly liberating and democratic project pursued by a country adhering to the brightest side of modernity. As shown by Paulo Arantes, in those years, the idea of formation—"a notion at once both descriptive and normative"—was expressed "in the form of far-reaching interpretive frameworks that recorded real trends in society, but ones which were, nonetheless, caught by a type of inborn atrophy that insisted on aborting them." According to the philosopher, "that *corpus* of essays captured, above all, the collective purpose of providing its gelatinous environment with a modern set of bones capable of sustaining its evolution" (Arantes and Arantes 1997:12).¹³

In the catalog of the exhibition *Outro Mundo Novo Vimos* [We Saw Another New World], held at the National Museum of Ancient Art (MNAA) in Lisbon, in July 2001, Hespanha wrote a summary text explaining his ideas about a "polymorphic empire," and seeking to identify a typology of the forms of domination that were practiced in the Portuguese Empire. This text began with an assumption that served as the basis for the entire construction of his explanation: "in an empire such as the Portuguese one, with its remarkable territorial dispersal, the traditional, classical European models that politically structured the space became ineffective." In order to explain such ineffectiveness, or the impossibility of transplanting the existing models, he suggested that the functional models of the corporate Peninsular monarchy "were based on the occupation and political organization of continuous spaces, and on their coverage by a network of employees entrusted with well-established duties, aiming, above all, at a passive type of administration (*iustitiam dare*)."¹⁴ Contradictorily, in the overseas spaces, these models "became incompatible" due either to the "magnitude of the spaces to be dominated" or to the "dynamics and variety of situations"—and thus they were endowed "with a prevalence of opportunity over justice as a criterion."

Thus, the adaptation of the model of corporate government in the colonization context was seen as highly flexible, requiring a case-by-case approach. In Hespanha's words, "the Portuguese Empire' structure was not based on a unified administrative model. Instead, it reconciled quite varied coexisting institutions, according to local conveniences (and also influences)." His attempt to produce a typological summary distinguished between the

¹³ The text was originally published in the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* on May 31, 1992.

following possibilities: “donated captaincies; factory trading posts; contracts; municipalities; fortresses; institutional situations resulting from ties of vassalage and protectorates; informal political links (imbued with ecclesiastical relations, trade and the presence of adventurers/entrepreneurs).” In a quite symptomatic way, the absence of a general government in Brazil, among other intermediary political systems, was only matched by a structure-less reading of the viceroy’s rule in the State of India. As I will show, Hespanha’s view was still conditioned by his vast knowledge about the history of the Empire in the East (Hespanha 2001b).

“Why was the Portuguese expansion ‘Portuguese?’”

Among the activities of the working group devoted to the study of “Ways of Governing: Politics, Businesses and Representations of the Portuguese Empire to the Empire of Brazil,” a meeting held in the city of Parati in late August and early September 2005 represented yet another step forward in the discussions on the “Dimensions of the Portuguese Empire,” which had already been consolidated at the meetings of the Brazilian National Association of History (ANPUH) in 2001 (Niterói) and 2003 (João Pessoa). The “Ways of Governing” group somehow brought together the historians interested in a renewal of political history, centered around the project being implemented at USP, and the colleagues who were working with the interpretive proposal presented in *O Antigo Regime nos Trópicos*. At this meeting, Hespanha presented a provocative work, in which he asked: “is it possible that Brazil had an ‘Ancien Regime’ in the tropics?” (Hespanha 2005). After reworking his text for a conference in Lisbon and subsequent publication in Brazil,¹⁴ his question continued to be witty: “Why was the Portuguese expansion ‘Portuguese?’”

His text proposed an agenda of “revisionism in the tropics” and suggested a new arrangement. For him, it would be necessary to “restore a broad perspective, by integrating the continuous sectoral contributions produced in recent years by the historiographies of many countries on Portuguese Colonialism.” He strove to undertake a methodological revisionism, i.e. to dismantle “the established discourse, which consecrates the present and demonizes the past.” In his words, “the technique of this deconstructive endeavor is almost always the same: distrusting the evidence on transfers, filtering the collected discourses, showing the existing simplifications, mapping the facts that do not fit together, and

¹⁴ His paper was expanded for a lecture that he gave at the colloquium *O espaço atlântico de Antigo regime: poderes e sociedades* [The Atlantic Space of the Ancien Regime: Powers and Societies], CHM-FCSH-UNL/IICT, held in Lisbon on November 2, 2005, before being published in Brazil.

inspecting the anachronisms” (Hespanha 2009:61).

In his view, challenging the unity of the “Portuguese expansion” as a historiographical object would require a revision of the two perspectives that were predominant at that time: on the one hand, the attempt to understand colonization as a project defined by a “Portuguese” policy, in other words, a policy determined by the Portuguese crown; on the other hand, the attempt to identify and comprehend a unity of colonization based on an alleged Portuguese “character” either in ethnic or cultural terms, marked by an “inner and unique willingness on the part of the Portuguese to relate with the *tropics*.” The latter perspective, such as it is found in the work of Gilberto Freyre, was deeply marked by an ideological content, permeated by the search for a Portuguese *ethos*, which was highly prized by romantic and nationalist narratives from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The former perspective, in turn, had to be discarded, in Hespanha’s view. He evoked only the premise that the governments of the early modern period were structured in a “brainless” way as a result of the “complexity of [their] decision-making processes and organized networks.” Luis Felipe Thomaz’ polymorphism was thus projected to all dimensions of the empire and complemented by a decentralized and even stunted political space.

In dialogue with Brazilian historiography, Hespanha resumed his view that the political structures of colonization were dysfunctional, chaotic, and atomistic, being determined by the individual interests of the local stakeholders. In a sense, this idea was to be found, above all, in the work of Caio Prado Júnior. This new text acknowledged the progress that had recently been made in the production of Brazilian researchers due to the impact of Hespanha’s ideas. Hespanha’s dialogue with the group linked to his book on the ancien régime in the tropics gave him feedback on the arrangement of his model and made it possible to correct a somewhat dysfunctional image—an image of “crisis,” of an apparent chaos—which led to the conclusion that “this apparent chaos was the *system* itself”: A system composed of an immense constellation of pacts, arrangements and exchanges between individuals and institutions—even those of a distinct hierarchical status, and even in cases when one could, in theory, give orders to others” (Hespanha 2009:47).

Therefore, he set out to summarize the notion of pacts, now in the sense of a “multitude of intertwined duties of gracefulness and gratitude deriving from a beneficial economy.” In these words, he is referring to Bartolome Clavero (1991). We should realize that, for Hespanha:

Indeed, every colonial space is a space of pacts. It is a space of countless pacts. Some of them are routine pacts trivialized on account of the fact that they are either recurrent or commonplace, such as the exchange of private favors. Other more evident pacts—for instance, a legislative chamber speaking on behalf of a province or kingdom as if it were its “head” or “heart”; or when the landed nobility or government representatives make commitments on behalf of everyone, in this natural head-like role that they play as representatives of the entire body (Hespanha 2009:52).

The consolidation of this collaboration with Brazilian researchers strengthened Hespanha’s reflections on this political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire. The group at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) working on the theme of the “Ancien Regime in the Tropics: Center for Studies on the Imperial Dynamics in the Portuguese World in the 16th-19th centuries” (ART) became a key space for this dialog, which had an ever stronger effect on the entire system of historiographical production. Thus, Hespanha became highly influential in the world of Brazilian historiography. I believe there is still work to be done in terms of quantifying the impact of his interpretive model on the research being conducted on the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. As Maria Fernanda Bicalho has shown, his works guided the new generation of modernist historians in Brazil and led to a comprehensive revision of such categories as “State, centralization and absolute power, as well as their central status and efficacy in the analysis of objects.” For Bicalho, his influence led to “the establishment of a new historiographical paradigm for the interpretation of old documents and for understanding the ideological and Catholic matrix of the Portuguese monarchy; and, above all, to a reflection on the architecture, configurations and dynamics, practices and representations of the Portuguese Empire.” She remarks quite correctly that “not only in his works, but also as a historian, António Manuel Hespanha is undoubtedly one of the key authors responsible for connecting the historiographies on both sides of the Atlantic” (Bicalho 2015).¹⁵

Edited by João Fragoso and Maria de Fátima Gouvêa, and published in 2010, the book *Na Trama das Redes* contains a new text by António Hespanha in which he examines the results of this dialogue with historiography and its effects on the validity of his model (Hespanha 2010). In this text, he presents a polymorphic portrait of the political structures

¹⁵ In relation to this impact, see also: Cardim (2017); Cardim and Cunha (2007); and Cosentino (2013). More recently, two particularly notable tributes to him were published in Brazil: Bicalho (2019); and Sampaio (2020). See also the texts by Herzog (2019), Dantas (2019), and Clavero (2019), in the journal *Práticas da História*.

(“this heterogeneity in the personal status of the populations that lived in the empire led to a plurality of political bonds and legal situations”) characterizing a paradoxical empire in which “the uniformity and limited political power that are typical of centralized States did not apply.” The Portuguese empire had neither a unified and comprehensive set of laws nor a centripetal administrative structure through which the autonomy of its powers could expand towards the dimensions of justice and crafts.

Yet, in the case of Hespanha, we may ask, was there an “empire” at all? Was there “a structural division between metropolis and colony”? How can one possibly define the structural features of a colonial empire (via a model) without clarifying this adjective—colonial—more precisely? In other words, it seems that at no time in the development of his model did the facts of colonization (the word that he uses to describe this Portuguese Empire), either in its structural and/or dynamic dimension, appear before his eyes. The very notion of “empire” as a power structure is not afforded any fresh signification by his model. Boxer (1969) emphasized its maritime and commercial dimension and sought to avoid the cultural and identity-based determinants of a “Colonial Empire,” as imagined by the discourse in consonance with Salazarism. Thereafter, the term was appropriated by historiography and used to project onto the previous early modern period the trans-state realities of contemporary times and colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁶

In a 2016 text discussing the legal categories and political practices in the Portuguese colonial space, Hespanha sought to consider the discursive reality of the idea of the “Empire” itself as a political act, as well as an instrument of action. Based on the fact that the term “empire” was not used officially in Portugal until the nineteenth century, he attempted to reconstruct a diversity of conceptual formulations in the legal field, which could translate the classical imperial imaginary into the “more pragmatic and economic” logics of the Portuguese Empire, based as it was “on the autonomy of its constituent parts, on a modular architecture and on resource-saving strategies” (Hespanha 2016). In this text, Hespanha makes an erudite appreciation of these legal categories and insists, while vindicating a “non-imperialist and non-formalist” approach, on minimizing transformations and maintaining an interpretation of the permanences among the analyzed structures.

In the constructions that he made about these early modern “empires,” we notice the anticipation of a form of sovereignty based on domination. The power structures pervaded

¹⁶ For the uses of the word “empire” in Portugal in the early modern era, and for the recovery of this concept among historians, see the suggestive text by Luís Filipe Silvério Lima (2008). See also the studies by Muldoon (1999) and Marcocci (2012). In 1995, Hespanha published a text about the imperial imaginary in the early modern period (Hespanha 1995b).

the systems for the circulation of goods and the spaces of labor production and control, thereby structuring a domination (an *imperium*, in the sense of authority and the exercise of command) that extended over ethnically heterogeneous populations. For Hespanha, in turn, the confirmation of the validity of the corporate power framework in the ancien régime for the genesis of his model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire meant, once again, reinforcing the homogeneity of these political spaces—which he understood, in turn, to be diverse in terms of their historical and social experiences. He refused time and again to see the political structures in the overseas territories as a “colonial exceptionalism,” and preferred to posit a “reiteration of models and solutions already experienced in the metropolises” (Hespanha and Cardim, 2018:95).

Hespanha understood that the colonial institutions—almost all of them—are genetically part of the “legal traditions or institutions of Europe,” which means in essence that “the history of colonial societies at their deepest cultural levels, such as family, politics, social representations, and religion, was, for a long time, a variation of European history.” As may be noticed, this statement marks a return to a *topos* that was largely found in sociological essays dating from the first decades of the twentieth century, which, in his view, could lead to a misunderstanding. In order to overcome such a paradox, the solution would be to take a cross section of social reality, which he effected by means of an oversimplification (in his words): “I’d like to make it clear that, when I propose the use of categories from the European Ancien Regime to interpret the colonial societies of the early modern period, I am evidently referring to the society of settlers.”

The essay ends with a question:

And since we spoke about colonizers and the colonized, we shall end here with the uncomfortable issue of asking who the colonizers were and who the colonized ones were. Or, better still, considering that the colonizers were the kingdom and the colonized ones were the settlers of European origin and their *mestiço* variations, how then, are the natives to be framed? (Hespanha 2010:75).

It is clear, at this point, that his political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire led to an *aporia*. After all, what exactly would this “colonial” dimension of the Empire be like? What is the meaning of the colonization process in the construction of social relations? What is the explanation for the stratification of the various societies (in the sense of those societies that were different from that late feudal Portuguese structure)? Is it really possible to solve

the paradox by falling back on the notion of a “society of settlers?” Since Hespanha’s eyes are turned towards these power structures, he seems to have defined a colonial relation as a political pact between courtly and colonial elites. Such a reality would be the product of a certain “negotiation zone,” considered as the *locus* of the diffuse power found in this pre-state period, which—as can be seen—emulated the processes of power within the cadres of the corporate monarchy. Proceeding from this assumption, where then would we place the natives, the indigenous enslaved actors—the “subordinate elements?” What would their position be in such an empire?

The answer to this question is not simple and summarizes a debate that has been held among generations of historians. In the case of Brazilian historiography, we may tread a path that begins with Capistrano de Abreu and extends to more recent works on colonial slavery. Readers will notice the existence of a thread, which (clearly) provides a structure for the idea that this so-called “society of settlers” did not exist as such. In other words, it could be reconsidered as a dominant class, a manorial society, “the landed nobles,” the oligarchy, and so on, depending on one’s theoretical inclinations and standpoint. In his now classic 1976 text, Florestan Fernandes quite correctly pointed to the importance of sorting out the distinct hues of Weberian conceptual devices in order to think about forms of social organization in the colonial world (Fernandes 1976). However, in the colonization process—the characteristic feature of an empire (certainly a polymorphic, inconstant, and polycentric empire)—those who give orders and rise to the positions of power (via either transplanted or renewed institutions, or even via institutions invented overseas) in order to lead the production process and control trade exchanges are, in terms of their political position, the very actors of this history.

The question can thus be rephrased as follows: ultimately, what was the role of violence, domination, and war in this “tropical Ancien Regime?” What was the meaning of labor exploitation, and how were these new social realities constructed with the re-emergence of slavery? Historiography had already accumulated reflections that could help to answer this question. These reflections appear neither in a simplified nor coarse way, nor in a way that somehow deviates from the rules of the art of history. They only appear in the concern with mediating and connecting other dimensions of reality, which do exist beyond a political model, or beyond the study of power structures and institutions. On the other hand, I believe it is fair to accept the criticisms of Marco Antonio Silveira in regard to explanatory models that emphasize the plurality of powers and their business dimension. In a recent study on the role of the *raison d’état* in the construction of the Portuguese Colonial Empire, Silveira

points to “the little emphasis placed on the many types of war and social struggles.” Thus, Hespanha’s Foucauldian approach, with its interest in the microphysics of power and biopolitics, ends up suffering from a “fear of reaching beyond the frontiers with which Thomism, in turn, circumscribed jurisdictional conflicts.” In other words, “if, by deconstructing the Leviathan, Hespanha had also set out to deconstruct the scholastic model itself, he would have stumbled upon forms that have nothing to do with the Hobbesian state of nature, but which are linked, instead, to a culturally defined molecular war” (Silveira 2019:24 ff.).

Largely as a result of the dialogue that I had with António Hespanha in the introduction to a book published a few years ago, I pointed to the need to overcome a historiography that posited an image of politics from within the power apparatus (seeking, above all, to highlight the value of consensus-building processes, or of coopting and nurturing bureaucratic or military elites). Such a reading is obsessed with an alleged “negotiation” between parties who are understood to be different from each other in their condition as subjects or monarch, but who nonetheless conform to each other within the same political system. I believe it is necessary to reconstitute the contributions of social history, to consider the construction of the Empire as a result not only of the violence of conquest, domination, and exploitation, but also of the resistance of populations. Pedro Cardim recently pointed to this shortcoming in the political model proposed by Hespanha for the Empire: “his main lacuna relates, perhaps, to the social history of subordinates, i.e. the mass of the population who, at the end of the day, were the subjects of these control measures” (Salema 2019).

Similarly, I have sought to point out that,

One cannot lose sight of the fact that domination was not exerted, after all, over the subject, who was also the colonizing actor, but, instead, over the indigenous, African and European populations (destitute either of goods or of a social position in stratified societies) submitted to a violent and deleterious system of domination and economic exploitation. The expansion of Europe’s frontiers was experienced in the New World as an effective situation of war against these populations (Puntoni 2014:21).

To recall a book that is perhaps already forgotten by many, we may assume that the basis of each human society is the process of labor. Thus, the factors behind the unity of an

empire are not outlined in a system based on an “apparent chaos,” on a pact-order ensured only by a “society of beneficial economy,” “a multitude of intertwined duties of grace and gratitude” (Hespanha 2009). Hespanha suggested that the political model of this Colonial Empire is polymorphic, thereby limiting his field of interest precisely to power structures and political institutions. He neither offered nor sought to point to a path for grasping what effectively defined this reality as an “empire.” We only read of distinct spaces where power was based on the adjustment of local realities, with the possible exercise of conquest and violence, of alliances or breaks with native populations, or parts of them. His political model still lacks an effective inventory of such polymorphism.

If we look at the East, still following the ideas of Luís Felipe Thomaz, we must understand that the State of India was essentially “a network, that is, a system of communications among various open spaces” characterized by a “geographic discontinuity and the heterogeneity of its institutions,” as well as by “the imprecision of its boundaries, both in geographic and legal terms” (Thomaz 1994:208-10). In America, by contrast, a characteristic feature was the endeavor to establish a centralized political system (the *governo geral*—government-general), by defining an *a priori* territorial jurisdiction (the *Estado do Brasil*—State of Brazil) and, concomitantly, a specific colonization project (demarcated by the *regimento do governador*—governor’s regulations). A vast array of historically constructed solutions emerged, albeit structured by a bundle of interests.

In short, I believe that, in order to define a political model for this colonial empire, we must abandon once and for all the idea that there was a “Portuguese expansion.” The correct path is to recognize Portugal as a participant in a commercial expansion—which was, at the multidimensional dawn of modernity, the driving force behind the expansion of a religious war that fractured Europe and the world, fueled by the frenzy of an imagined unity. This driving force was also responsible for the development of new fiscal, political, social, and cultural structures. Therefore, in order to develop a vision of this empire, we cannot dispense with a reading of the complex commercial and financial system that propelled the construction of this new center of power. The Empire is “colonial”: it must be defined in terms of a conceptualization for fully understanding the links and structures that bound the overseas realities to the political center of the Portuguese monarchy during the centuries of the colonization process.

From the Colonial Empire to the Shadow Empire

In early 2019, Hespanha published a concise version of his political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire in the last chapter of his book *Uma Monarquia Tradicional* [A Traditional Monarchy] (Hespanha 2019a). This chapter is a cumulative and relatively well-ordered summary of the layers of knowledge sedimented along the path that led to the construction of this model. Based on his constant dialogue with the Brazilian historiographical production, the process that he followed was that of successively confirming the hypotheses outlined in the mid-1990s. Such confirmation, I should like to stress, was a fairly tautological exercise, since the research into the ancien régime in the tropics was directed towards a relatively limited dimension of history. But this is surely a subject for discussion in another article.

As is known, Hespanha did not restrict his work as a historian to the mere confirmation of his political model of the Portuguese Colonial Empire. As I have attempted to show, this was an accessory dimension, albeit a genuinely impactful one, of his historiographical work. Following the years spent completing his PhD, his interests and his work extended into other dimensions of the history of law, constitutionalism, and liberalism. There was much more to be reaped from this field. The empire, in turn, interested him through other dimensions. In 2019, a new book revealed an entirely new field of interest. His work *Os Filhos da Terra* [The Children of the Land] seeks to study “*mestiço* identities within the confines of the Portuguese expansion.” Based on the works of George Winíus, Anthony Disney, and Malyn Newitt, Hespanha directed his attention towards what has been called the “shadow empire”: “the set of communities which, despite lying outside the formal frontiers of the empire, above all in Africa and Asia, were considered to be ‘Portuguese’—whatever this should mean” (Hespanha 2019b: 13).¹⁷

Away from this search for an explanatory model of the power structures, Hespanha became interested in the populations that adhered to a certain Portuguese identity—a “Portuguese tribe,” according to Leonard Andaya (who sought “precisely to trivialize and ‘de-Europeanize’ the identity of these Portuguese-Asian groups, thus devaluing the reference to a constant mythical element (the ‘Portuguese’).” In a rather paradoxical way, this proposal situates “this identifier, in addition to other elements, under the scope of the variable and

¹⁷ On the notion of the “shadow empire,” see George Winíus (1991), Anthony Disney (1995), and Malyn Newitt (2001). This new outlook was introduced to him by the work of Cátia Antunes (2012), which he mentions on page 270.

relational geometries of identity of local societies” (Hespanha 2019b:37).¹⁸ It is important to recall at this point the remarks of Francisco Bethencourt, who warned of the risks of a nationalist perspective encompassing (both then and now) the Portuguese Empire as an extremely centralized reality. In his words, such an outlook—certainly an anachronistic one—would not allow us to “understand the real interaction between colonial settlers, the local population and the regional powers.” On the other hand, the historian does not share an opposite view either, i.e. a view that he describes as “postmodern,” which considers the Empire to be weak and without a head. After all, would not the ideological consequence of this new perspective be equally the strengthening of a nationalist approach, since the only justification for the Empire’s continuity and permanence over three centuries would be the Church, or even a certain “Portuguese *ethos*?” For Bethencourt, the “power nebula” that kept the Portuguese Empire in a permanent albeit unstable balance among its local, regional, and central actors (who were always competing with each other under the tutelage of the Crown), appears as a still unsatisfactory solution for explaining the particularities of the South Atlantic colonial reality (Bethencourt 2007).

This new book by António Hespanha, which deserves a careful reading, brings him somewhat closer to a culturalist view concerning the Portuguese presence overseas, in the territories controlled by their established powers, and, above all, in these “shadow” spaces beyond such formal jurisdictions. As he recognizes, the constructed dimension of the object of study does not revolve around the text, due to the instability of the definition of this same identity. Since he rejects a substantiation of this Portuguese character (as it appears, for instance, in the works of Gilberto Freyre), he looks for a *mestiço* identity among the most eccentric fringes of the Portuguese Colonial Empire, seeking to discover it in every corner and in incoherent situations. All in all, who really are the “Portuguese” living in these spaces beyond the Empire? In a fleeting game of fugues, the lights of the historian disturb these wavering shadows and lead to a simultaneously complex and uncertain mosaic. Hespanha expressed a great enthusiasm with this new book. His intention was to proceed “towards a richer depiction of this evanescent ‘empire’—a task he so unfortunately left unfinished. It is now up to the historians of the present to honor him by echoing and dialoguing with his texts, his ideas, and his memory.

¹⁸ On the idea of the “Portuguese tribe,” see Leonard Andaya (1995) and Stefan Halikowski-Smith (2011).

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