

How Do We Write the History of Portuguese Imperial Imagination?

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The book under review is a compilation of chapters and articles, some previously published, on the Portuguese Empire. Covering the period from the late fifteenth century to 1961, two well-established historians have edited this book of almost seven hundred pages, which studies different types of imaginaries of the Portuguese Empire. This is a great feat that should be praised because research institutes and projects paid for with public money often have limited success in Portugal. The publication of conference papers has been used extensively to camouflage the absence of more substantial results. A second goal accomplished through the publication of this book is the recognition António Manuel Hespanha's intellectual leadership, which, through his devoted disciplines, has led to the creation of a large, flexible, and sociable academic network.

Each chapter is, without question, of high quality. More than twenty historians, in different stages of their careers and some leading in the field of imperial history, have contributed to this book some of their best research achievements—all covering the various ways of imagining the Portuguese empire. Moreover, Silva and Xavier have invited other historians to contribute who usually work outside the network created around A. M. Hespanha. By including contributors from outside the usual cohort of disciples, Silva and Xavier have established a multitude of perspectives concerning the Portuguese imperial political imagination. However, the overarching conceptualization of the book—which sometimes leads to the reproduction of dated antinomies prevalent in Portuguese colonial history and conversely in “new” concepts or analytical frameworks with very limited heuristic potential—is questionable.

The book has no central research question, yet the quest for “complexity,” an oft-repeated term associated with “multiplicity,” “pluralism,” “liminality,” “Otherness,” and “fragmentation,” manages to adequately stand in for such a question. Once complexity is explained and distilled into something more concrete, some of the above-mentioned antinomies are introduced. Perhaps the most important of these is related to *lusotropicalismo*.

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On the one hand, Gilberto Freyre, who introduced this term, is presented to discuss how the Portuguese integrated and melded with peoples in the tropics. On the other hand, Charles Boxer's perspective is presented, underlying the constant racism and discrimination found everywhere in the Portuguese empire. If this juxtaposition encompasses the two main narratives around which the field is established, including the studies in the book under review, one should ask how to address them critically.

A first step towards a critical appraisal of these opposing narratives would be to retrace the debate between Freyre and Boxer. A similar antinomy took shape during the fifties and sixties in context of defending Portuguese colonial exceptionality from the international trend towards granting independence to colonies, as well as the beginning of the Angolan War of Independence. However, as the Portuguese anthropologist Nuno Domingos has already suggested, the new imperial political imagination of those decades was not necessarily the consequence of a *lusotropical* vision, but (i) the outcome of antisubversive techniques shared by different international organisations, (ii) the impact of products from the colonies' new cultural industries (i.e., radio, film, television, and print, all associated with new practices in sports and music), and finally, (iii) the reaction to the process of African detribalisation, which led to new modes of segregation and the introduction of Africans as potential consumers within an enlarged market (Domingos 2021: 44, 51-53).

There are many other elements composing Portuguese imperial or colonial imagination during the fifties and sixties, ranging from *développement communautaire* to the incarceration in villages, and from concentration camps to limited practices of militarized terror. My point is, therefore, why should a military and political contradiction established within a specific historical context of colonialism and decolonisation be used today as a conceptual tool of analysis? Similarly, why should two narratives, respectively opposing and supporting Portuguese colonialism, continue to occupy such a central place in Portuguese colonial history, when the framework includes so many other elements as well? Finally, should historical research today simply reproduce these dated military and political views when there is potentially great value in more distance from the past?

From one point of view, these questions, which suggest considerable limitations concerning the conceptualization of the Portuguese imperial imagination, did not go unanswered. For instance, there is the case of A. M. Hespanha, who applied the concept of "legal pluralism." According to Hespanha, the legal culture of the Old Regime, to which the *ius commune* and the memory of the Roman Empire belonged, gave the colonizers the necessary framework to engage with different cultures and address otherness. This is a very

controversial issue, however, because it is still unclear how an empire—based upon the exercise of power by agents (such as viceroys, noble captains, priests, merchants, planters), organized around fortresses, churches, monasteries, *câmaras*, *misericórdias*, confraternities, and plantations, allied with local princes and collaborators, and exploiting slave labour everywhere—resulted from this classical and plural legal order.

Hespanha's background in law at the University of Coimbra instilled in him a conviction that the societies of the old regime naturalized cultural differences within a corporative order. Political theology followed a similar path. For Hespanha, it seems, the law stood above and preceded the creation of the state. The doctrine opposing the use of social sciences or sociology, which initially emerged within the School of law, ultimately paved the way for authoritarian regimes during the twentieth century. Lacking the proper background to study archival documents, Hespanha and other legal historians imposed what they had learned in college: that the law remained the most important system of regulation; that magistrates were uniquely qualified to judge societies; and that corporations and jurisdictions created an old regime order that had nothing to do with the state nor with the colonial state.

It is more difficult to explain why the prioritization of law became popular for the study of the Portuguese Empire. I believe this has to do with these scholars' engagement with John Austin's speech acts, which allowed them to participate in the "linguistic turn." Yet, why do the editors believe that "legal pluralism" determined the development of the political imagination of the Portuguese empire? I do not propose replacing "legal pluralism" with another "prime mover," for traditionally many have been proposed to reconstruct the political imagination of the Portuguese or other European empires—the Crusades, Malthusian pressures, commercial ventures, mercantilism, religion, gunboats, political economy, conjectural history, and so on and so forth. No, what I find hard to accept is the single-minded priority given to "legal pluralism."

According to Silva and Xavier, the legal culture of the old regime began to collapse from the eighteenth century and onwards. This change has three causes: the "civilizing mission," racialism and anti-racialism, and the social contract theories of the Enlightenment. According to a paragraph on pages 26-27, two phases have existed since. During the first phase, there was still a sort of tolerance of legal pluralism, which is why slavery was still accepted. Simultaneously, paternalistic attitudes towards "primitive" political and legal values meant that the transition towards "civilized" legal values was slow. During the second phase, however, which started towards the end of the nineteenth century, core aspects of the "civilizing mission" were challenged by the growing desire to respect native forms of political

organization based on local uses and costumes. Here, the universal values of progress and civilization paradoxically opposed a plurality of native cultures.

I find it quite difficult to accept the argument that an old and “primitive” legal pluralism disappeared and gave way to a new one because the tension between universal and local categories, which Silva and Xavier believe to witness in the late nineteenth century, was not unique to this period. Thus, firstly, what should be clarified are the universal values which had coexisted with the earlier legal orders based on pluralism.

Secondly, previous generations of historians have already sought to understand how the “civilizing mission” took shape in the Portuguese empire. On the one hand, they found that to “civilize” the Africans meant to incorporate them into the plantation economy. Discussions about forced labor and modern slavery during the first quarter of the twentieth century destroyed the myth of so-called “nineteenth-century abolitionism” (Jerónimo 2010). On the other hand, racism and antiracism converged in demanding the anthropological autonomy of each group or ethnic identity (Maurício 2005: 47-48, 80, 92-104, 93-94, 97-98, 103-104). Paradoxically, the concept of anthropological autonomy was used both to impose discriminatory barriers resulting in apartheid, and to denounce racism and demand independence. What was at stake in all these different forms of actualizing the “civilizing mission” had no direct link with a legal framework or culture. Hence, rather than a new legal order, I believe that political economy, anthropology, medicine, history, military treaties, and journalism were the most active kinds of knowledge that came to the fore during the period of new imperialism.

Another feature of this book is a peculiar top-down conception of the Portuguese imperial political imagination. This is caused by turning the debate between Lusitanian attitudes of integration versus Portuguese racism to a sort of “history of ideas” as represented by the “duel” between Freyre and Boxer. Rather, one could argue that these scholars paid attention to different types of legal cultures and publications. This top-down perspective shows itself in at least three other places. For instance, collaboration between the agents of the Portuguese empire and local elites is often described in terms of “mimetic governmentality.” This expression is introduced by Ricardo Roque, author of one of the book’s chapters, and reveals a top-down understanding of the Portuguese Empire. The same could be said to apply to the use of a vocabulary close to the “social logic of integration.” For instance, the concept *accomodatio* develops alongside Jesuit missionary methods and eventually includes situations whereby the colonized peoples are violently coerced (pp. 40-41). Finally, in the chapters by Marcocci, Belo, Oliveira-Magalhães, and Monteiro, references

to slavery or forced labor in intellectual publications, theater, court cases, or the guidelines of international organizations are never used to explore a perspective from below or to break the silence imposed on the subaltern.

I also have reservations about four other aspects of this book. First, the dates 1496 and 1961 are controversial milestones in Portuguese history. Why is the expulsion of the Jews in 1496 so relevant in terms of imagining the Portuguese empire, and why does the Portuguese imperial imagination conclude somewhere with the start of the Angolan War of Independence in 1961? My second reservation concerns the book's comparison of Portugal's imperial imagination with other imperial patterns. Are the empires of the Romans, Mughals, Ottomans, Habsburgs, and French logical choices for a comparison with the Portuguese Empire? Would a comparison with the Dutch and British experiences be more pertinent? Third, important scholars are missing from the various bibliographies, such as the Brazilian historian Fernando Novaes and the Portuguese historian of Africa Isabel Castro Henriques, as are some of the key works on the exercise of colonial power and identity by American Brazilianist Stuart Schwartz. Other classics, such as Vitorino Magalhães Godinho and Jaime Cortesão are also missing.

Fourth and finally, the book suffers from numerous vague and improperly edited passages. The following example demonstrates how Portuguese should not be written: "the legal culture and the categorical flexibility involved in legal pluralism can help to explain that, at different times, and as Paul Ricoeur could have said, the self has often been perceived as other, both the colonizing self as much as the colonized self" (translated, p. 37). Another sentence reveals how causality is often presented in an idealist, Eurocentric manner: "the chapter from the third part of the book explores, precisely, how the social tensions are a consequence of the unequal representation in the metropolis of the imperial territories and populations" (translated, p. 51). Thus, social tensions and conflicts resulted from representations created in the metropolis . . . or were they?

Notwithstanding all the criticisms here presented, this book compiles a set of pieces of analytical research exemplifying individual lines of research.

References

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