

Reappraising Informal Imperialism in the Early Modern Portuguese Expansion: A Commentary on António Hespanha's *Filhos da Terra*

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In his final book, the late António Manuel Hespanha turned his attention away from the legal and institutional structures of the Portuguese monarchy, focusing instead on extra-European communities with a purported affiliation to “Portuguese” culture. The historical actors at the centre of the 2019 *Filhos da Terra* established themselves on the fringes of the empire and organized their lives independently of the dictates of colonial government, while at the same time abiding by the rules set by the local authorities. In this way, they personified an informal or “shadow” empire that overlapped, complemented and, at times, opposed the formal empire headed by royal institutions. Some of the coastal settlements and city-states where these populations resided had at some point in their history been sites of official Portuguese rule and trade, until the Crown lost them to European chartered companies or autochthonous polities. Others were spontaneous colonies founded by travelling merchants, adventurers and “undesirables” (such as banished convicts or persecuted ethno-religious minorities, like the New Christians) and were never incorporated into the political-administrative framework of the monarchy. Another interpretation of this informal empire conflates it with the “missionary frontier,” that is with the areas where religious orders under the *Padroado* proselytized, but where the Crown’s temporal presence was never established.

Filhos da Terra covers a wide range of situations and collectivities, both in time and space. While the book’s broad geographical scope sets it apart from previous studies of Portuguese informal expansion, these wide lenses can mislead historians into overemphasizing patterns of convergence between populations living in very different environments. Aware of this danger, Hespanha refrained from presenting upfront a general definition of what it meant to be “Portuguese” at the far ends of the empire. In the introduction and the first two chapters, he posits that the fleet-footed and self-governing peoples stemming from informal imperialism should best be analysed from “within.” In his view, symbols of shared identity should be deduced from a wide range of case studies rather than induced from “outside” generalizations and *a priori* concepts. To do so, Hespanha takes

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the reader on a tour across three continents and two oceans, locating, contextualizing and describing different nuclei of the informal empire. He concludes that these elusive individuals and collectives could not be defined as a transcontinental moral community, let alone as a uniform ethnic group able to trace its origins back, in time and space, to Portugal (even if certain groups did come up with genealogies going back to a founding father-like figure who happened to be Portuguese). The term *filhos da terra* was cleverly chosen to convey the localized, context-specific nature of these populations, with the author himself conceding that the various “Portuguese tribes” should best be studied in relation to their milieu.

After locating the different “provinces” of this shadow empire in the lengthy chapter 3, Hespanha proceeds to identify the common ground between various informal and stateless “Portuguese” communities. In the following paragraphs I will briefly revisit the recurring patterns of convergence.

Portuguese ancestry, understood here less in biological terms and more as a social construct (particularly in periods far removed from the initial contacts between Portuguese-born individuals and autochthonous populations), was a common denominator in collectivities on the West African coast, and across South America and South and Southeast Asia. Outside the realm of ideas and immaterial heritage, the existence of “Portuguese”-influenced peoples in places untouched by early European colonialism was also reflected in material culture and forms of public display, not only in the way people dressed and in decorative elements in their personal wear, but also, for example, in the architecture of their houses. These groups’ geographical mobility, which was inextricably linked to the commercial activities of their members and their involvement in population movements, is also readily apparent. As is the juridical and cultural “in-betweenness” of some of these communities, especially in the case of the Eurasian and Eurafrican populations that found themselves torn between Portuguese patriarchal family structures and local matrilineal traditions.

The informal empire described in *Filhos da Terra* was shaped by miscegenation and creolization, which is understood here to mean the amalgamation of languages, social structures and cultures that resulted from sustained interactions between individuals from different geographical origins and ethnic backgrounds. Yet while Eurasian and Eurafrican creoles constituted the majority of the informal empire’s population, and the presence of bio-morphologically white and Portugal-born individuals was negligible, creolization was not equally prevalent everywhere. Indeed, in certain confines of the Portuguese expansion, such as Mozambique and Angola (with the exception of the main Portuguese settlement, Luanda),

creole societies were even conspicuous by their absence, while in the case of Goa, the conversion of large segments of the Hindu population during the sixteenth century did not result in Luso-Goan creoles, but instead in a non-creolized, fiercely endogamous group of autochthonous Christians who were very superficially Lusitanized.² It can hence be concluded that the occurrence and outcomes of creolization processes were determined primarily by the local and regional contexts. Factors such as climate, the balance of demographic and military power balance *vis-à-vis* the autochthonous societies, and the willingness of populations to borrow or accommodate Portuguese traits mattered a great deal more than an alleged natural inclination of Portuguese people to mix and blend in, as Luso-tropicalist narratives would have us believe (Bethencourt 2011).

Religion played a big part in the collective integrity of communities that established themselves outside the physical borders of the pluri-continental monarchy, with Catholicism serving as one of the most palpable links between the formal empire and its informal offshoots. The missions operating under the auspices of the *Padroado* are considered part of the fabric of the Portuguese empire because the Papacy had granted the Crown the prerogative to appoint those who would fill ecclesiastical posts, and because the Church revenues paying for the ecclesiastical personnel and activities were equally entrusted to the Portuguese kings. The temporal authorities hoped that religious conversion would make non-European populations more sympathetic towards Portuguese interests, and more willing to fight for the monarch, who sponsored the Church. As Ines Županov reminds us, “Missionaries were considered an integral part of the imperial sentinels and encouraged to expand the frontiers of the *Estado da Índia*, in order to prepare the ground—that is, to convert and cultivate souls of former gentiles—so that the compliance to Catholic habitus may smoothen the transition to Portuguese political rule” (Županov 2018: 238). The official Portuguese authorities relied on the “soft power,” to use modern terminology, of religion to advance some of their political and economic goals. So much so that midway through the seventeenth century, by which time the Crown had lost much of its former political and military importance in the Indian Ocean, Catholic missions were a way for the *Estado da Índia* to retain a modicum of influence on various populations over whom it otherwise had no

² Here I follow the distinction proposed by certain authors between religious conversion and “Lusitanization”; that is, a transformation of material and intellectual habits (food, dress, architecture, language) that was not necessarily tied to spiritual life. I acknowledge that a clear-cut separation between the religious and the temporal sphere cannot capture the world views and the mind-set of many of the communities addressed in the book. Moreover, the fact that baptism and catechism could pave the way for more extensive cultural conversions makes this distinction problematic. However, I have adopted this distinction in order to avoid reducing expressions of Portuguese culture and identity solely to Catholicism (Biedermann 2009: 445; Subrahmanyam 2012: 274).

authority.

Another common feature of Portuguese informal imperialism was the ambiguous stance of its communities towards the institutions of the formal empire. It was equally easy for the *filhos da terra* to undermine the Crown's authority and disregard its commercial monopolies and fiscal prerogatives as to accept becoming official appointees in areas where administrative structures were non-existent. In turn, community leaders could also reach out to the official Portuguese centres for diplomatic and military support to improve their position *vis-à-vis* the local authorities and competing trade networks. By doing so they acknowledged the symbolic pre-eminence of the Portuguese Crown, which was nonetheless mostly powerless to interfere in the internal affairs of these settlements.

Last but not least, Hespanha posits that the informal empire proved to be more adaptable and resilient to political and economic shifts than the more rigid official structures of its “formal” counterpart. The social relations and cultural interactions embodying the informal empire was what remained of the Portuguese presence and capacity to interfere in extra-European societies after the Crown lost its political and economic grip over a territory or emporium.³

Some will certainly accuse Hespanha of contradicting himself by acknowledging the “Portuguese” identity of these communities essentially as a historiographic construct and then nonetheless using it as an umbrella concept to make sense of the shared socio-cultural experiences of populations that at first glance had very little in common. But while I sympathize with this critique, I also see the point in Hespanha's ambitious survey. Therefore, and rather than focusing on discussing issues of identity formation, for which I lack the necessary expertise, I have chosen to direct my critical comments and remarks at other issues.

My first comment concerns the novelty of the approach adopted in *Filhos da Terra* and the originality of its conclusions. As he himself recognizes throughout the book, Hespanha was not the first author to offer this sort of perspective on the Portuguese overseas empire. Instead, he was inspired both by previous works of Winíus, Thomaz, Subrahmanyam, Andaya and Halikowski Smith for Asia and by the scholarship on creole identities in the Afro-Iberian Atlantic, as well as by a few scholars applying this framework of analysis to the Portuguese empire as a whole, such as Newitt, Russell-Wood and, more recently, Antunes. While *Filhos da Terra* makes for a compelling read and carries out the most

³ A view that Hespanha already held in 1995. “Tudo indica que esta [forma de] presença foi mais eficaz e socialmente mais viável, apesar da sua informalidade e inoficialidade, do que o poder directo da coroa, exercido pelos seus magistrados e oficiais (...). Do mesmo modo, as solidariedades de natureza religiosa ou para-religiosa (confrarias e misericórdias, nomeadamente) sublinhavam, reforçavam ou substituíam os laços formais de poder” (Hespanha 1995: 23).

systematic survey to date on the Portuguese informal imperialism, it must be said that the book does not break much new ground. While I understand that for the non-academic readership, who may have been exposed only to the conventional wisdom on Portuguese empire-building (i.e., their feats of arms, seamanship and mastery of intercontinental trade), this narrative may come across as revelatory and fascinating, which it undoubtedly is. Personally, however, I find that Hespanha does not so much open any new vistas on Portuguese informal imperialism as provide an up-to-date synthesis of ideas put forward in Anglophone scholarship.

A second critique concerns the excessively imprecise boundaries of the informal empire as described and conceptualized by Hespanha. I refer here to borders not just in a geographical-spatial sense, but also from a perspective of the interactions between local populations and the royal apparatus, which could range from the utmost informality of self-governance all the way to institutional integration and subordination. Hespanha's decisions on which regions and actors to include in and which to leave out of the shadow empire may sometimes seem arbitrary. I, for one, was particularly struck by the excluding of Brazil from the book. Hespanha justifies this omission because nothing resembling a shadow empire emerged in the South American territories, where a full-blown colonial administration was in place. There is no denying that, before the mid-to-late nineteenth century, no comparable judicial, fiscal or military apparatus existed in Upper Guinea, in the hinterlands of Angola and Mozambique, or East of Cape Comorin, where the formal power of the *Estado da Índia* had always been something of a mirage. But in a few territorial possessions of the *Estado da Índia*, especially in the surroundings of its capital, Goa, the Crown could boast of having a firm grip on the local economy and society. However, this does not prevent Hespanha from referring to Goa's old conquests in the book as provinces of the informal empire, devoting more pages to them than to more obvious cases of shadowy spontaneous settlements.

But going back to Brazil, it is well known that even in Portuguese America there were limits to the reach and penetration of the colonial apparatus, and these were partially related to the spatial patterns of occupation and settlement in this territory. For most of the colonial period, Brazil was essentially a string of coastal towns and adjoining agricultural areas, coupled with mining settlements in the hinterland and Amerindian villages zealously controlled by the religious orders. Between these locations lay vast swaths of untouched land and virgin tropical forests that were occasionally crossed by nomadic Amerindians, run-away slaves and Luso-Brazilian fortune seekers. There would certainly have been room in this book for an analysis of the *peruleros* or *paulistas*, ethnically hybrid groups that criss-crossed the

ill-defined physical borders between Spanish America and Brazil, and who were known for constantly defying the commands of the monarchy (Herzog 2015, 36-37, 66-67). In my view, these examples of a South American informal empire are equally deserving of consideration as the Portuguese emigration networks in Spanish America or the Portuguese creole languages that blossomed in the colonies of other European powers, as in the case of Papiamentu in Dutch Curaçao.

The boundaries between formal and informal empires were also excessively blurred by Hespanha's suggestion that the shadow empire could extend to include political actors who were firmly entrenched in the formal empire, such as the *Gãocarias*, or the political factions (*bandos* and *parcialidades*) vying for control of Goa's municipal council. The implication here is that the informal empire could be found even in the most institutionally regulated Crown domains because Portuguese and extra-European legal frameworks often coexisted in these areas, and the personal strategies and informal networks percolated the formal institutions of government. By suggesting this, however, Hespanha makes it impossible to discern any boundaries whatsoever between the informal and the formal empires. While I realize that a distinction between these two dual concepts (formality and informality, "shadow" and "light") is anachronistic, I regard complete fuzziness as working against the goals of the book. For the sake of consistency and clarity, therefore, I would have liked the selection of case studies to have been discussed upfront, with Hespanha explaining the criteria that led him to include certain regions and actors in the book and to exclude others.

I was also unconvinced by the general correlation between miscegenation, creole cultures and the shadow empire. While biological and cultural intercourse between *de jure* subjects of the Portuguese Crown and autochthonous populations occurred in areas where the Crown and European elites had no enforceable jurisdiction, as in Upper Guinea and Southeast Asia, it was equally prevalent in core areas of the former empire, such as the main urban centres of Brazil. By the same token, creole identities in certain areas of the informal empire were confined to small niches (Angola) or were non-existent (Mozambique). So although there is no doubt that hybrid and creole identities were prevalent in certain confines of the "shadow empire," this was not the case in every single offshoot, and thus cannot be considered a structural feature. Furthermore, the adaptation and synthesis of two or more cultures, and the existence of mixed-race populations, were not opposed to the official and institutionalized forms of Portuguese authority, as numerous examples throughout the empire can attest to.

Although *Filhos da Terra* does not pursue a comparative agenda, it invites for more systematic comparisons than those attempted so far. At the end of the book the reader is left wondering how the various nuclei of *filhos da terra* compare with other Eurasian and Eurafrican diasporas in terms of their influence in the places where they developed roots. In the case of the Indian Ocean, several authors, going back to Van Leur, have argued that the Portuguese “tribes” were not fundamentally different in their mode of functioning from other stateless merchant networks plying their trade long before the Europeans rounded the Cape of Good Hope. It would be worthwhile, in my view, to revisit and expand upon this comparison, but this time under different terms than in the previous Weberian and institutionally Darwinist analyses (Subrahmanyam 1993).

Speaking of comparisons, this book invites scholars to re-examine, by way of comparative analysis, why the Portuguese expansion is commonly regarded as having been more conducive or permeable to “going native” phenomena than its other European counterparts. A comparison with the Dutch overseas empire should be illuminating since the latter’s two joint-stock companies, the VOC and WIC, had organizational cultures contrasting with that of the pluri-continental Portuguese monarchy. These companies were guided by profit maximization, and the technical proficiency of their servants, whereas the Portuguese empire was a state-run and redistributive enterprise. Evidence strongly suggests that the *Estado da Índia* and the various colonial governments in sub-Saharan Africa could not achieve the levels of control that the companies were able to exercise over the lives of their employees, thereby enabling *solteiros* to leave the Crown’s service and create spontaneous colonies beyond the formal borders of the empire. The local entrenchment of European males was also more common in the Portuguese empire than in its Northern European counterparts, especially in Asia, with only a small percentage of company servants staying on in the East Indies after the end of their contracts. These employees’ temporary contracts and the fact that they were generally better remunerated than the *soldados* and petty bureaucracy of the *Estado da Índia*, who often lacked both permission from the government and sufficient money to travel back to the kingdom, partially explain the greater turnover of personnel in the East India companies. As Francisco Bethencourt recalls, the different goals and structures of the chartered companies did not mean that “que não existissem ‘renegados’, funcionários ou soldados Holandeses (para não falar nos numerosos funcionários estrangeiros da VOC) ao serviço de outras potências, só significa que essas pessoas não constituíam novas comunidades mercantis. Uma companhia comercial governada pela lógica dos negócios excluía literalmente a possibilidade de reconhecer feitorias ‘livres’”

(Bethencourt 2007: 234).

But there is also a third possible avenue for future research, which differs from the previous two by not trying to compare and contrast different socio-economic networks and formal empires. This alternative agenda does not ascribe a national affiliation to the informal and self-organized networks that operated in the underbelly of militarized and territorially bounded polities, or entirely outside their physical borders. Instead of seeing various “national” informal empires, this strand of scholarship posits the existence of a single “*informal empire* that was brought to fruition by the individual choices of free agents and their networks as a reaction to state-imposed monopolies [and] was [...] a borderless, self-organized, often cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, pluri-national and stateless world that can only be characterized as global” (Antunes and Polónia 2016: 10). Although *Filbos da terra* deals exclusively with the informal agents of the Portuguese oceanic expansion and the results of their influence, it ends by embracing the argument put forward by scholars such as Antunes, Polónia and their collaborators that imperial projection in the first age of global interactions should better be analysed as a multinational, cross-cultural and trans-religious process.

By way of conclusion, I would like to state that despite my reservations about the originality of the theoretical framework and the novelty of its conclusions, the book is rich in content and ideas, and deserves to be read and discussed. *Filbos da Terra* will ultimately be remembered as the final work of a scholar who influenced Portuguese historiography in a manner that very few in the past forty years have been able to match.

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