Reassessing the Portuguese Imperial Past: Scholarly Perspectives and Civic Engagement*

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Abstract: This article provides an overview of the advancements in discussions surrounding Portugal's imperial history. It begins by introducing the scholarly developments of recent decades, both during and after Salazar's dictatorship, highlighting their areas of focus and their impact on the perception of Portugal's imperial past. The subsequent section explores a series of civic engagement initiatives that challenged the commemorations of the imperial past, specifically addressing recent public events and the resulting controversies. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the evolving and current understandings of the Portuguese Empire, while advocating for a more critical dialogue regarding Portugal's history within academic circles and society as a whole.

Keywords: Imperial history, heritage preservation, historical memory, racism

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Over the past two decades, Portugal's imperial rule in Asia, South America, and Africa has been subject to increasingly intense debate within both academia and society at large. Until recently, the prevailing image in Portugal of the imperial past was generally positive, and those who questioned this representation were few. In the last decade of the twentieth century, however, innovative research began to undermine Eurocentric approaches to the Portuguese imperial past. This body of scholarship generated profoundly different views, exposing the violent and exploitative character of imperial rule. In parallel, a new wave of critical perspectives on the Portuguese Empire and its underlying colonial domination emerged across various sectors of society.

This article outlines the major developments in the intensive and ongoing debate surrounding Portugal's imperial past. Its principal argument is that the formation of novel perspectives on Portugal's empire is not solely the consequence of scholarly activities, but also the result of an unprecedented civic engagement of individuals and groups in public discourses. The manner in which Portugal is confronting its imperial history echoes the ongoing efforts in other parts of Europe to reckon with their own histories of slavery and empire.

The article is divided into three main sections. The first presents the major scholarly developments of previous decades, their areas of interest, and their impact in the way Portugal's imperial past has been reinterpreted. The second is devoted to the initiatives carried out by individuals and groups against contemporary celebration of the imperial past, with a focus on recent public events and the controversies they provoked. The third, and final, section reflects upon current and changing perceptions of Portuguese colonial rule and advocates for an even more critical discussion of Portugal's imperial past, both within the scholarly milieu and in society at large.

Since my research largely centers on early modern Western Europe and its Atlantic expansion, most of the examples presented throughout this article deal with Portugal's imperial rule in those specific areas and period. While playing a formative role in shaping later events in other parts of the empire, the Portuguese imperial experience in Asia receives relatively modest representation in this article. This limitation does not, however, affect the article's overarching arguments. Instead, I utilize my expertise to examine the intricacies of modern discussions, which frequently hinge on the recollections of Portugal's extensive imperial history worldwide.

It is important to note that I have been an active participant in the debates addressed here. I have taken a critical stance on several cases mentioned in this article, from my involvement with António M. Hespanha's research group in the 1990s, to more recent discussions surrounding the Jesuit Vieira. I have likewise taken part in dialogues with Afro-descendant associations and collaborated with various initiatives, such as Arjuna Keshvani's 2022 documentary developed within the framework of the project *Contested Legacies - Portugal*, directed by Giuseppe Marcocci.[1] These activities do not, however, cause me to disqualify or dismiss viewpoints that differ from my own. Indeed, I firmly believe that engaging in dialogue about these topics is precisely what present-day Portuguese society requires.

Celebrating the Imperial Past: From the Dictatorship to Democratic Portugal

In 1960, the preeminent colonial Latin Americanist and Columbia University professor Lewis Hanke visited Portugal to take part in a symposium held in Lisbon. The event was part of the *Comemorações Henriquinas*, a large project aimed at commemorating the 500th anniversary of the death of Prince Henry (1394–1460), a member of the Portuguese royal family conventionally portrayed as the driving force behind the Portuguese overseas expansion. The commemoration was sponsored by Salazar's dictatorship, and its core objective was to exalt and legitimize the Portuguese Empire.[2] It is important to note that this event was convened at a time when the Portuguese colonial possessions in Africa and India were facing intensifying challenges from liberation movements within Africa and India, as well as from the international community. In response, the regime reiterated the idea that Portugal was (and always had been) a benign and mild colonizer. They were aided in this task by most of the participating historians.

As expected, Hanke did not contribute to this celebratory chorus. In a little-known account of his experiences at the Lisbon symposium, he painted an unmistakably pessimistic picture of the Portuguese scholars he encountered, highlighting their complete lack of interest in the comparative history of European

[1] See https://contestedlegaciesportugal.org/.
[2] On the 1960 commemoration of Prince Henry, see Gori, "Historia." In "As comemorações dos descobrimentos," Catroga has demonstrated that the Salazar regime not only continued a long tradition of celebrating the Portuguese empire, but also gave it a new meaning and placed it at the center of its propaganda.

empires.[3] He went on to lament the fact that no attention was paid either to the transatlantic slave trade or to Amerindian peoples and their role in the history of the colonial period. Hanke also noted that few in attendance evinced any interest in studying sub-Saharan Africa, and none wanted to study the role of individuals and groups from Africa or of African or Amerindian descent. According to Hanke, most Portuguese historians were working on somewhat irrelevant subject matter, their approaches were extremely outdated, and they all displayed a strong nationalist and Lusocentric bias. The only exception, he concluded, was a young scholar named Vitorino Magalhães Godinho.

Hanke's account accurately describes the state of scholarship about the imperial past under the dictatorship of Salazar. The bulk of the historical research conducted in Portugal before 1974 was in service of the regime's propaganda; therefore, most historians transmitted nationalist and benign images of the Portuguese imperial past. Not surprisingly, the scholarship produced under Salazar was almost completely disconnected from the debates taking place internationally about the history of Western European empires.[4]

The term "Portuguese discoveries" expressed the essentially positive view of Portugal's imperial past developed by the Salazar regime (Gori, "Tra Sagres e Lisbona"), and the word "colonial" was stricken from the vocabulary of the historiographic milieu supporting the dictatorship. In their surveys, most historians deliberately omitted the violent and exploitative character of Portuguese conquest and were silent on the ways racial discrimination and chattel slavery constituted fundamental components of Portuguese imperial rule. Instead, they stressed the allegedly exceptional abilities of the Portuguese to deal with peoples of different ethnicities. At a later point, these conceptions would be endorsed by the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre and gave rise to what became known as "Luso-tropicalism," that is, the alleged capacity of the Portuguese to adapt to tropical regions and treat their inhabitants respectfully, without racial prejudice.[5]

Contrary to what might be expected, Portugal's transition to democracy did not herald any immediate adjustments to this representation of the imperial past. In the years that followed the end of the dictatorship and decolonization, very few historians studied the Portuguese Empire thoroughly. In fact, the colonial narrative

[3] Hanke, "The Portuguese and the Villa Imperial de Potosi."
[4] For an insightful overview and critical assessment, see Torgal, Mendes, and Catroga.
[5] There is a vast scholarship devoted to Freyre and Luso-tropicalism, but the best study is Castelo. See also O. R. Thomaz.

had been so systematically warped by the dictatorship that many post-Salazar historians seemed to avoid approaching it.[6] Among the more significant exceptions, Vitorino Magalhães Godinho,[7] Valentim Alexandre,[8] Jill Dias,[9] and Luís Filipe Thomaz[10] should be mentioned.

It was only in the late 1980s that the production of dissertations on the imperial past gathered momentum in Portuguese universities. Despite the quality of many of these works, the majority focused on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and they were almost universally concerned with Portuguese views of conquest, the first maritime voyages in the Atlantic, and the early stages of Portuguese imperial rule in Asia. Brazil and sub-Saharan Africa were largely neglected as research topics, and the same could be said of later periods in Portugal's imperial past. In fact, these studies barely touched upon the Portuguese Empire between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Matters such as slavery and the transatlantic slave trade continued to be almost completely disregarded.[11]

Overall, it can be said that, with some exceptions, the body of research produced after 1974 never significantly questioned the traditional image of the Portuguese as "mild colonists." The same could be said of the myth of the Portuguese "adaptability" to different ethnicities and their alleged lack of racial prejudice. The overwhelming majority of scholarship on Portugal's empire remained Lusocentric, emphasized (and arguably overstated) the role played by Portuguese elites, and ignored the agency of local populations. Knowledge production in the context of the maritime voyages was likewise a topic that attracted several scholars of this post-Salazar generation. In terms of engagement with international debates about the European imperial past, the contribution of this first wave of studies was far from impressive. Comparative research juxtaposing Portuguese imperialism with other Western European empires was similarly limited.

[6] For a pertinent reflection on the memory of empire during the years 1975 and 1976, see Peralta, "Retornar ao fim do império."
[7] A selection of Godinho's work includes: *Documentos para a história da expansão portuguesa* (1943–1956); *A expansão quatrocentista portuguesa* (1944); *A economia dos descobrimentos henriquinos* (1962); *Os descobrimentos e a economia mundial* (1963–1971); *Mito e mercadoria, utopia e prática de navegar, séculos XIII–XVIII* (1990).
[8] On Alexandre's trajectory and work, see C. Silva.
[9] On Dias's trajectory and work, see the collective volume edited by Silva and Saraiva.
[10] See L. Thomaz, *De Ceuta a Timor*.
[11] For a thorough understanding of this turning point and a reference to the studies that, in democratic Portugal, have revisited the imperial past, see Xavier.

To compound matters, democratic Portugal capitalized on its imperial past for celebratory purposes. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Portuguese state authorities converted the "Discoveries" into a focal point for national pride. Following its Spanish counterpart, in 1986, the Portuguese government established a National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries (CNCDP). Furthermore, in subsequent years, Portuguese authorities financed a grand exhibition dedicated to Portugal's maritime expansion, scheduled to occur in 1998, marking the 500th anniversary of Vasco da Gama's journey to India. These two instances showcase the ongoing inclination of Portuguese authorities to cast the country's imperial heritage in a favorable light and to use it as a political tool (Bethencourt, "A memória").

In the 1980s, the imperial past was instrumentalized to galvanize the Portuguese population, as the country joined the European Economic Community (1986). In the decade that followed, economic growth fueled the triumphalism of the 1998 world exhibit dedicated to Vasco da Gama. This persistent employment of imperial history for political purposes, both under the dictatorship and in democratic Portugal, partly explains why so many present-day Portuguese continue to take pride in their country's imperial past.

The Catholic Church also played a part in this process. Beginning in the 1990s, Catholic authorities sponsored various initiatives (international conferences, symposia, and major exhibitions) exalting one specific dimension of the Portuguese Empire: the Christianization of Asia, America, and, to a lesser extent, Africa. The spread of Christianity by missionaries, in particular the Jesuits, was depicted not as a violent clash of peoples and worldviews but instead as a harmonious "Encounter of Cultures," in which all parties involved dealt respectfully with religious plurality and cultural difference.[12] Again, violence, exploitation, and discrimination were broadly overlooked by the Catholic Church's initiatives.

By the time these developments took place, a number of non-Portuguese historians who had been studying the imperial past for several decades were coming into prominence. Many of them followed the paths already opened by Charles R. Boxer, renowned for his comprehensive research since the 1930s on

[12] *Encontro de culturas: Oito séculos de missionação portuguesa – exposição*. A pertinent counterpoint to this view is the collective volume *Confronto de culturas: Conquista, resistência, transformação*, edited by Monteiro and Azevedo.

myriad aspects of the Portuguese Empire.[13] In one of his most important works, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415–1825*, published in 1963, Boxer presented evidence to effectively demonstrate that racism played a role in the history of Portuguese expansion. However, he stressed that within the Portuguese Empire, there was less racism than in other early modern European empires. Moreover, Boxer highlighted the complex and ambiguous nature of race classification during that period. In spite of such seeming concessions, the book faced significant opposition from the Salazar regime and Portuguese historians who aligned themselves with the dictatorship.[14]

In the wake of preeminent historians such as Boxer and Hanke, a new generation of scholars explored new facets of the colonial empire and considered a wider range of actors. Stuart B. Schwartz, Dauril Alden, A. J. Russel-Wood, John Thornton, and Joseph Miller are among those responsible for revitalizing the field. They gave center stage to the agency of ordinary people, as well as to Amerindians, Africans, and Asians. In addition, and in contrast to most Portuguese historians' practices, they connected their studies on Portuguese imperial rule with debates about Western European colonial rule in Asia, America, and Africa (the New Philology; Asian, African, and Amerindian sources; and social history of colonial societies). Another striking feature of these studies is their use of comparison as an interpretive tool.

Schwartz's work is illustrative of the changes that have just been mentioned. From the outset, he analyzed colonial Brazil and Spanish America in a combined and integrated manner. For Schwartz, as well as for his mentor Hanke, these were parallel stories that intersected, blended, and influenced each other, and ought not be studied in isolation.[15]

By juxtaposing the Portuguese experience with that of other European empires, in particular the Spanish, this generation of scholars challenged the nation-based interpretive framework, questioned the alleged uniqueness of Portugal's empire, and examined the ties and the entanglements between the Portuguese and other Western European empires. In addition, by diversifying points of observation and exploring Asian, Amerindian, and African sources, these scholars began to break from the longstanding Portuguese-centric outlook.

[13] On Boxer's life and work, see Alden.
[14] On the significance and reception of Boxer's *Race Relations*, see Cabral. See also Curto.
[15] For an overview of Schwartz's work and career, see Cardim, "Stuart B. Schwartz."

Consequently, the violent and exploitative component of Portuguese imperial rule became increasingly visible, as did other unsavory aspects of imperial domination, such as racial discrimination, land dispossession, and the massive use of forced labor, including slave labor.

Concurrently, researchers leveled more scrutiny at a feature of empire hitherto underscored by those arguing for the benign nature of Portuguese imperialism: namely, the high levels of miscegenation in some parts of the Portuguese Empire. Such miscegenation had traditionally been regarded as an indication of the absence of racial prejudice. However, this newer corpus of studies has demonstrated that most of the race-mixing resulted from sexual violence, whether physical or other,[16] and has stressed the fact that mixed-race people living in Portuguese colonial societies suffered systemic discrimination.[17] There is no doubt that Portuguese hegemony cannot be fully understood without taking into account the social and cultural intricacies of the Empire. The problem emerges when historians concentrate solely on cultural hybridity in their analyses. This emphasis, however, misrepresents the actual intentions of Portuguese authorities when establishing colonial societies.

When mapping the renewal of investigation into the Portuguese Empire, special reference must also be made to the surveys conducted within the fields of anthropology and sociology. Scholars from these two disciplinary milieux, both of which possess established practices of theoretical and methodological reflexivity, were more ready than historians to initiate a critical discourse on Portugal's empire. This was supported by their greater inclination to decenter analysis from Portuguese themes and social actors, and to explore the subjectivity of those who were targeted by Portuguese colonial rule. Among the notable figures in Portuguese anthropological research focused on the imperial past, Jill Dias, João de Pina Cabral, Rosa Perez, Miguel Vale de Almeida, and Cristiana Bastos undoubtedly shine. In sociology, the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos played a pivotal role in subjecting Portugal's imperial past to a thorough and critical evaluation.

Because most of the populations and polities in America and Africa touched by Portuguese colonialism did not necessarily produce archival documents, the

[16] See, for instance, Vicente, "Black Women's Bodies in the Portuguese Colonial Visual Archive (1900–1975)."
[17] See Alencastro, "Mulattos in Brazil and Angola."

contribution of anthropologists and ethnohistorians—such as Jill Dias—proved to be highly relevant for understanding the response of local populations when confronted with the Portuguese. It was also in this field that some of the earliest reflections on the colonial archive as an object of study emerged in Portugal. Such studies showed that an archive, with its tensions, silences, and debates, has much to reveal about the power dynamics implemented by imperial authorities, and importantly, about local populations' responses to colonial rule (Roque and Wagner).

Developments within Brazilian historiography were also key in this revitalization. Beginning in the late 1980s, Brazilian academia originated a strong tradition of social history, in particular regarding individuals and groups from Africa and of African descent.[18] In parallel, anthropological and ethnohistorical approaches to Indigenous peoples underscored the indispensability of considering these groups when studying colonial society.[19] Thus, a profoundly renewed field of studies materialized, comprising innovative surveys on social, cultural, and institutional history in which the protagonists were not the Portuguese colonists but, instead, the "subdued" populations (Schwartz). The interconnections between gender and colonial rule were also extensively explored. More recently, groundbreaking studies on the environmental impacts of colonization have also been conducted.[20]

Increasing interaction between Portuguese and Brazilian historiographies was also crucial in the revitalization of inquiry into Portugal's imperial past. Beginning in the late 1990s, a growing number of Brazilian doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers spent long research periods in Portugal. Apart from exploring the collections of the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino and other archival collections, they fostered joint research ventures with their Portuguese counterparts.[21] In parallel, the *Resgate* project (a large-scale program of microfilming Portuguese archival sources relevant to colonial Brazil, sponsored by the Brazilian Federal

[18] Regarding the role of Africans and Afro-descendants in the history of colonial Brazil, the names of two historians deserve to be highlighted: João José Reis and Silvia Hunold Lara.
[19] Monteiro, *Negros da terra.* For an overview of the scholarship devoted to the role of the Amerindians in the formation of colonial society in Brazil, see Cardim, "Os povos indígenas."
[20] For an overview, see Schwartz and Rodrigues.
[21] An excellent example of collaborative research between Brazilian and Portuguese scholars is the collective volume edited by Bastos, Almeida, and Feldman-Bianco.

State),[22] along with a significant rise in Brazilian public investment in grants and funding, proved to be of fundamental importance for the development of research in Brazilian universities. Thanks to this investment, the quantity and quality of scholarship produced across Brazil markedly increased. These developments in turn impacted the Portuguese scholarly community, generating studies on new topics, new actors, and new joint projects. Brazilian expertise on African and, to a lesser extent, Asian history was likewise pivotal in fostering fresh perspectives on Portuguese imperial rule.

It is, however, important to bear in mind that the burgeoning interconnectivity between the Brazilian and Portuguese historiographic ranks was also stimulated by some Portuguese public institutions. In 1996, historian António Manuel Hespanha became the head of the previously mentioned National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries (CNCDP). Under his leadership at the CNCDP, he and his team developed an extensive program to both publish historical sources and support scholarship, resulting in a boom of studies on the empire. A great deal of the CNCDP initiatives encouraged debate about Portuguese imperial rule, and ultimately engendered a more critical, and less Portuguese-centric, view of imperial domination (Hespanha, *Há 500 anos*). After his tenure as head of the CNCDP, Hespanha published a comprehensive overview of the activity carried out by the organization under his leadership. In addition to listing the initiatives that had been carried out, the volume recorded expressions of opposition to the CNCDP's push for a more critical perspective on the Portuguese imperial past. It includes, as well, the responses that Hespanha provided to these dissenters.[23]

As a result of the factors outlined above, sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Brazil and the Southern Atlantic became a focal point of research on Portuguese imperial rule. Given the aforementioned interaction between Brazilian and Portuguese historians, this shift is perhaps unsurprising. However, it was also the outcome of a growing interest in Atlantic history, as well as the intensification of studies on European empires that highlighted their entangled character.[24] More

[22] For detailed information about the nature and objectives of this project, as well as access to digitized documentation, refer to the following website: https://www.gov.br/bn/pt-br/central-de-conteudos/projeto-resgate.

[23] More recently, Hespanha has revisited the time he was in charge of the CNCDP: "Comemorar como política pública: A Comemoração dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, ciclo 1997–2000."

[24] Among many examples, see Souza, Silva, and Marques.

recently, the urge to bring Africa and African populations into the history of the Atlantic world has brought greater attention to the interconnections between the two shores of the Southern Atlantic, Africa and South America.[25] This approach had already manifested in Pierre Verger's work and was further pursued by scholars like João José Reis and Luis Nicolau Pares in their subsequent research.

One thing is certain: these developments gave rise to a community of historians specialized in Portugal's imperial past and significantly more engaged with international scholarly debates about European empires. An excellent example is Francisco Bethencourt and Kirti Chauduri's *História da expansão portuguesa*, published in 1998. Authored by some of the foremost experts in the history of Portugal's empire, the five-volume collective work showcases the multifaced nature of this field of research. Its approach is less Portuguese-centric, more comparative, and encompasses a broader range of actors in colonial society.

Since then, the research conducted in other areas of the social sciences and the humanities has further contributed to the evolving understanding of empire. In the past two decades the work carried out by anthropologists[26] and scholars from literary and cultural studies has forcefully questioned the sympathetic image of the Portuguese imperial past.[27] Apart from evaluating wider swaths of colonial society, these lines of research have also aided in diversifying points of observation, and added a multidisciplinary dimension to the study of the Portuguese Empire.

Civic Engagement in Debates Concerning the Empire and Its Legacy

While developments within the scholarly milieu were undoubtedly significant, new perspectives on the Portuguese Empire also resulted from changes that have occurred in Portuguese society in recent decades. The second part of this article therefore focuses on the civic engagement of individuals and groups and examines how traditional forms of celebration of the imperial past have been debated outside academia.

It bears noting that within Portuguese society, there exist longstanding currents of critique against Portugal's imperial history. In the period known as the First

[25] Alencastro, *O trato dos viventes.*
[26] For example, Bastos and Barreto.
[27] See Ribeiro and Ferreira; Ribeiro; Cardina. Another important contribution is Vítor de Sousa's critique of the concept of "Lusophony" in his *Da "portugalidade" à lusofonia*.

Portuguese Republic (1910–26), for instance, numerous individuals espousing various ideologies, such as anarchism and communism, voiced their staunch anti-imperialist stances (Cleminson). Mário Domingues serves as an exemplary representative of this phenomenon and is particularly significant for being a Black Portuguese individual criticizing the imperial past (Garcia). Nonetheless, the 1930s ushered in a suppression of anticolonial sentiments due to censorship and Salazar's dictatorial regime.

It was only within the democratic framework of Portugal that these viewpoints were able to thrive and find more prominent platforms. Beginning in the 1990s, growing numbers of people contested the inherited formulation of Portuguese imperial history. The first wave of protest began in schools. Several middle school and high school students, in particular those of African descent, raised complaints about the textbooks they had been issued and the benign image of Portugal's empire they conveyed. Concomitantly, the involvement of individuals and civic groups in public debate about the imperial past attained an unprecedented scale.

This change was partly the consequence of international developments. The elevated importance being given to postcolonial issues, along with the activities of Indigenous leaders, intellectuals, and activists across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, demanded a different account of the European imperial past. In particular, the role played by the local populations across Africa, America, and Asia, as well as their complex responses to European conquest, required meaningful attention.

The case of Brazil is paradigmatic of such changes, with social movements supporting the coalescence of a different outlook on colonialism. The increasing preeminence of African Brazilians in present-day cultural and intellectual life led to the questioning of historical narratives that omitted the role of women and men of African descent in the formation of colonial Brazil. Furthermore, several Indigenous leaders began to underscore the connection between the contemporary challenges their communities were facing and the enduring legacy of empire. Changes in population dynamics, notably the growing trend of Brazilians migrating to Portugal, also significantly contributed to shaping these discussions.

These shifts were also felt in the Portuguese context, where diverse forms of civic engagement, particularly in the arts, began to gain visibility. In the past decades, colonial violence has become a recurring theme in the works of certain artists, with Ângela Ferreira's reflection upon the imperial past as one of several

that could be mentioned.[28] The artistic work of the Brazilian painter Adriana Varejão likewise had a significant impact in Portugal during the 1990s and 2000s.[29] The same could be said of the more recent work of Rossana Paulino, especially through her pieces alluding to the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans.[30] Ferreira, Varejão, and Paulino are just three examples among many others—particularly in Brazil—of artists whose work deals with forms of colonial exploitation, both past and present.

For their part, literary scholars like Margarida Calafate Ribeiro have studied the presence, in literature, of the violence and exploitation involved in Portuguese colonial rule, as well as its postcolonial reverberations (Ribeiro and Ribeiro; Ribeiro and Rothwell). Likewise, Portuguese literature of the past decades has evinced mounting interest in the imperial past, with the novel *Caderno de memórias coloniais*, by Isabela Figueiredo, providing a perfect example. Two of the most recent books by Alexandra Lucas Coelho focus on Portuguese colonialism in Brazil and Africa and contain extensive reflections on the violent and discriminatory character of Portugal's oppression of Amerindian, African, and African-descended persons.[31] In this context, the contributions of writers Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, Pepetela, and José Eduardo Agualusa, to name a few, hold particular significance, as they shift the discourse to African standpoints.

Visual culture and cinema have brought significant innovations to the discourse on one of the legacies of the Portuguese Empire: the enslavement of millions of persons of African, Amerindian, and, to a lesser extent, Asian descent. In this regard, the significance of Filipa Lowndes Vicente's work on the imperial past and its repercussions across time cannot be overstated. Vicente's research delves into an array of topics intersecting with imperial domination, including material culture, visual artifacts, race, and gender. Additionally, Vicente's work explores the mutual influence between artistic and scholarly discourses.[32] Also noteworthy are the recent documentary/digital archive *Contested Legacies:*

[28] For more information on Ferreira's work, see https://angelaferreira.info/.
[29] See http://www.adrianavarejao.net/br/home.
[30] Paulino's work on the transatlantic slave trade was displayed in Lisbon in 2017: https://padraodosdescobrimentos.pt/en/event/red-atlantic/.
[31] *Deus-dará*(2016) and *Cinco voltas na Bahia e um beijo para Caetano Veloso* (2019).
[32] Vicente, *O império da visão* and "Black Women's Bodies in the Portuguese Colonial Visual Archive (1900–1975)." See also Ramos, "O reino da (in)visibilidade: The Kingdom of (In)visibility"; Vicente and Ramos, *Photography in Portuguese Colonial Africa, 1860–1975*.

Portugal, directed by Arjuna Keshvani,[33] and the films Margarida Cardoso has produced on colonial and postcolonial issues (A. Pereira).

Alongside these projects, African or African-descended artists and writers have lately used their work to address aspects of colonial violence, chattel slavery and the slave trade, forced labor, racial discrimination, and land dispossession. Grada Kilomba, Francisco Vidal, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida, and Kalaf Epalanga are just a few of the many who could be mentioned. The internet portal BUALA is an excellent showcase of these and other figures, together with their initiatives.[34]

The messages brought by African-Portuguese voices into the public sphere have also proven influential. Until recently, men and women of African descent were largely underrepresented in positions of power in Portugal. Although many Portuguese citizens are Black, their representation in universities (both as students and professors), in political parties, and on company boards is minimal, mostly because of the racial discrimination that still prevails in many sectors of society, combined with unequal access to economic resources.[35] However, thanks to the efforts of Black artists, musicians, activists, intellectuals, and politicians, such inequities have been met with powerful denunciation, and progress is being made. Particularly significant are the activities of DJASS[36] and the Associação Cultural e Juvenil Batoto Yetu Portugal.[37] Analogously, public awareness about issues such as racial discrimination and unequal access to citizenship and economic rights is on the rise. Newspapers and internet portals are publishing a growing number of articles about racism and racial discrimination in Portugal, many of them authored by men and women from Africa or of African descent. Of these, the series of articles published by journalist Joana Gorjão Henriques in the Lisbon newspaper *Público* over the past several years, dedicated to racial discrimination in Portugal (and the legacies of the Empire), merit note.

These developments resonated in the museum sector. In recent years, there have been numerous instances of intersectional experiences, where museological narratives interact with the creative work of artists engaged in critical reflections on the imperial past.

[33] See https://contestedlegaciesportugal.org/.
[34] See https://www.buala.org//.
[35] See Roldão.
[36] See https://djass.pt/.
[37] See https://batotoyetu.pt/pt/.

Important initiatives and conversations are also taking place in the field of heritage preservation, especially with respect to Portuguese collections of non-European objects connected to the imperial past. Gonçalo Amaro has emerged as a key figure in the discourse surrounding the complex relationship between museums and the present.[38] Through conferences and publications, Amaro has promoted critical debates about Portuguese museums and their role in justifying colonialism and perpetuating inequalities.[39] Collaborating with civic associations and scholars, he and other museologists have created museum experiences aimed at challenging authorized heritage narratives and prioritizing memory recovery. Their objective is to reconcile the "traditional" art museum with the democratic demands of the present, while also seeking to decolonize the museographic discourse of national museums and raise critical awareness among directors and educational services. This entails fostering discussions on how collections are exhibited and emphasizing a crucial point: that any kind of object display is fundamentally political.

In 2021, ICOM Portugal conducted an important survey among Portuguese museums to gain a better understanding of their collections, assess the presence of objects from non-European contexts, and contribute to their conservation, study, and inventory (Amaro and Felismino). The survey revealed that the inventorying process remains incomplete, and knowledge regarding the origin of the objects is, in many cases, extremely scarce. However, any efforts to uncover the provenance of non-European objects and artifacts from former colonies are still primarily confined to university museums of natural history and sciences. Other noteworthy initiatives include the "Transmat project," which focuses on significant collections at the National Museum of Archaeology and the Santos Rocha Museum in Figueira da Foz. While comprehensive lists of collections eligible for repatriation have yet to be developed in Portugal, the topic has garnered discussion, albeit limited.

Still in the realm of heritage, it is worth mentioning Rui Gomes Coelho's pioneering research on burial sites of formerly enslaved individuals across Portugal. Based on principles of deep collaboration with local communities, Coelho's survey intersects archaeology, material culture, and colonial memory.

The Lisbon-based project to create a memorial to enslaved persons and the

[38] Amaro, "Das narrativas à criatividade."
[39] Amaro, "Descolonização da cultura" and "Do peso material da colonização à descolonização das mentalidades."

transatlantic slave trade stands out among recent initiatives in its significance. The idea of erecting such a memorial on one of the wharfs of Lisbon resulted from the activities of African-Portuguese associations,[40] who successfully gained the support of the city council. Three proposals were put to a vote by Lisbon's residents, in particular people from neighborhoods where most of the population is of African descent. Since then, however, the project has fallen stagnant. Carlos Moedas, the current mayor of Lisbon and a member of a center-right party, has shown little willingness to move it forward.[41]

Interestingly, this planned memorial to enslaved persons and the transatlantic slave trade was conceived at roughly the same time that Fernando Medina, the former Lisbon mayor and a member of the Socialist Party, announced his intention to open a so-called Museu do Descobrimento (Museum of the Discovery) in Lisbon. Benefiting from significant funding from the Lisbon Tourism Office, the museum would constitute a celebration of Portugal's maritime discoveries.[42] Citizens, activists, artists, and intellectuals, many of them of African descent, immediately opposed the project, and an open letter against the museum, which gathered numerous signatures, was published in the newspaper *Expresso* (Margato). Simultaneously, there was an intense public debate surrounding the proposal, with a multitude of voices raised in protest against it (Marcos). Patrícia Lino's body of work, which seamlessly blends literature, visual culture, and academic essays, stands as an exemplary manifestation of this critical discourse.[43]

The fervent public discussion about the museum was also expressed in a series of newspaper articles and television shows addressing the way present-day Portuguese deal with their imperial past. Many argued that a more serious reevaluation of the Empire was necessary, in which the violent and exploitative character of Portuguese imperial rule was openly discussed.

Others, however, opposed such a claim, and argued that there was no need to

[40] All the information about this project, its promoters, and its trajectory can be found at https://www.memorialescravatura.com.

[41] In contrast, Moedas recently inaugurated, with great pomp, the renovation of Empire Square in the Belém neighborhood of Lisbon. The 2023 refurbishing of the square includes the coats of arms of the African and Asian territories that were once part of the Portuguese colonial empire. See Araújo. For a critical assessment of Moedas and his position concerning the colonial past, see Oliveira, "Colonial Past."

[42] https://jornaleconomico.pt/noticias/fernando-medina-compromete-se-sem-complexos-com-passos-significativos-na-criacao-do-museu-da-descoberta-ate-2021-600459/.

[43] http://www.patricialino.com/museu-dos-descobrimentos.html.

revisit such past events (Saraiva). Those who complained about this debate declared that it was useless or even negative for present-day Portugal because it would foster racial hate in an allegedly nonracist country.[44] In addition, those who remain in favor of the "Museum of the Discovery" tend to assert that Portugal does not need a debate based on issues originating from the so-called political correctness of the United States.[45]

This is the position advocated by renowned experts in the history of the Portuguese Empire.[46] Apart from contending that critically thinking about the colonial past is necessarily an anachronism because it implies projecting present concerns and categories onto the past, they often classify such a debate as a political indoctrination. They usually present their position as nonpolitical, while arguing that those who promote a more critical discussion about the colonial past are bringing politics into the study of Portugal's history.[47]

We ought to bear in mind that this was not the first time that voices opposing a more critical discourse were heard in Portugal; as has been mentioned, the legacy of the imperial past has been put to debate since the beginning of the twentieth century. In order to complexify the celebratory program the CNCDP was supposed to organize, Hespanha invited a historian from India to give the keynote speech at the inauguration of the series of events relating to Vasco da Gama's voyage. The aim was to decenter the way present-day Portuguese regarded Portugal's arrival in the Indian Ocean, and Sanjay Subrahmanyan, an expert in Asian history, was the scholar chosen for this task. In June of 1997 Subrahmanyan gave a solemn talk in Lisbon before an audience of Portuguese political, economic, and intellectual elites. In his speech, Subrahmanyan did something that was already commonplace in international scholarship, but almost absent from the Portuguese academic milieu and public opinion: he analyzed the Portuguese arrival to South Asia from a South Asian point of view, relying on Asian sources. Not surprisingly, the image he transmitted of Vasco da Gama, lauded Portuguese seafarer, was not a positive

[44] Rui Rio, the former leader of the Portuguese Social Democratic Party, categorically stated, in a mid-2022 interview, that "there is no racism in Portuguese society": https://24.sapo.pt/atualidade/artigos/rui-rio-nao-ha-racismo-na-sociedade-portuguesa.
[45] See, for instance, Tavares's article "O esplendor do politicamente idiota."
[46] Costa, "A propósito da polémica sobre o Museu das Descobertas: Equívoco, teimosias e hipersensibilidades"; see also Marques's view about the place of slavery in the Portuguese imperial past, in "O Ocidente a caminho da idiotia."
[47] For a pertinent critical assessment, see Afonso Dias Ramos's "Debating 'Discoveries': Colonialism and Public History in Portugal."

one—indeed, as Subrahmanyan detailed, most locals across South Asia considered him and his men to be rapacious predators. In the weeks that followed, many complaints were lodged against this keynote address. Some contested the decision to invite a historian from India to speak about an important national hero at such a prestigious gathering. Several intellectuals and politicians, most of them from right-wing parties, harshly criticized the initiative, deeming it disruptive (or even destructive) to Portuguese national identity. Nor was this response confined to the right of the political spectrum; Hespanha's choice to put the spotlight on a historian from India was likewise decried by various left-wing intellectuals and politicians.[48] This fact unambiguously indicates that the myth of Portugal's benign imperial past is firmly entrenched in many sectors of contemporary Portuguese society.

In 2017, another controversial event took place in Lisbon: the erection of a monument to the seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary António Vieira, funded by the Catholic Church along with Lisbon's city council. The monument represents the Jesuit standing beside a group of young Amerindians, all of them posed submissively. In the plaque below the statue, Vieira is rather anachronistically presented as a seventeenth-century "champion of human rights." When Black Portuguese activists learned about this statue, protest swiftly followed, as Vieira had been a stalwart supporter of the enslavement of Black Africans and their use as forced laborers in colonial Brazil. Nor did activists fail to recall that, on certain occasions, Vieira had advocated for the enslavement of Indigenous peoples, especially those who opposed the expansion of Christianity.

Antiracist associations, along with African-Portuguese groups, announced that they would express their disapproval with a demonstration, scheduled for the same day that the statue was to be inaugurated by the mayor of Lisbon and the Catholic Church's senior authorities. In response, a group of far-right radicals arrived early, surrounded the statue, and remained there, claiming their intention to "protect" Vieira from the alleged aggression of the demonstrators. The ensuing hours were tense, with far-right and antiracist activists facing off and exchanging bitter insults.[49]

[48] Dacosta's "Vasco da Gama, o herói-vilão dos descobrimentos," published in the magazine *Visão* on June 24, 1997, includes various reactions of outrage to this conference by S. Subrahmanyan. Dacosta's article was republished in Hespanha, *Há 500 anos*, pp. 109–11. See also the response Hespanha gave to this diatribe in *Visão*, August 14, 1997, pp. 111–13.

[49] On the controversy surrounding Vieira's statue, see Thaler. See also Pereira, Coelho, Marcos, and Barreiros; Santos; and Araujo and Santos.

Despite initiatives, such as the Vieira statue, that perpetuate a positive conceptualization of the Portuguese Empire, certain state institutions have fostered a more critical discourse on the subject. The program sponsored by the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* (Monument to the Discoveries) in Lisbon is an excellent example. Originally built under the dictatorship for a commemorative exhibition of the Portuguese Empire held in 1940, the *Padrão* was later reconstructed in 1960, at a time when Portuguese imperial rule was under increasing challenge (Gori, "1940"). More than sixty years later, the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* still dominates the coastal landscape of Lisbon in the Belém area. It is located in a neighborhood with profound imperial significance and is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Lisbon (Peralta, "A composição"). A few years ago, a new team of curators, led by Margarida Kol de Carvalho and supported by EGEAC (a municipal department responsible for the preservation and management of cultural spaces in the city), determined that a more critical approach to the monument was needed. They thus sponsored a series of exhibits on the imperial past, inviting the public to join in a debate about the impact and aftermath of empire.[50]

Taking advantage of the recent surge in tourism to Lisbon, several routes have been created to shed light on the legacy of Africans in Lisbon throughout history. One of them was conceived by the prominent Africanist Isabel Castro Henriques.[51] The Lisbon Museum has participated in this movement, organizing various routes dedicated to "African Lisbon" that center the history of slavery and its role in the city's past.[52] Indeed, a growing number of exhibitions are dealing with aspects of the Portuguese imperial past and colonial domination. A good example is the exhibition *O direito sobre si mesmo: 150 anos da abolição da escravatura no império português* (The Right to One's Own Self: 150 Years Since the Abolition of Slavery in the Portuguese Empire), promoted by the Portuguese Parliament and on display throughout 2019 in its building, which aligns with the critical questioning of the place of chattel slavery and its abolition in Portuguese history. The exhibition *O impulso fotográfico: (Des)arrumar o arquivo colonial* (The Photographic Impulse: (Dis)arranging the Colonial Archive), held at the Lisbon

[50] Detailed information about the critical questioning of the Portuguese imperial past by the *Padrão dos Descobrimentos* team in recent years can be found at https://padraodosdescobrimentos.pt/evento/atlantico-vermelho/.
[51] I. C. Henriques, "Roteiro histórico de uma Lisboa africana, séculos XV–XIX." See also Rocha for Naky Gaglo's route of Lisbon's African legacy.
[52] https://www.museudelisboa.pt/pt/acontece/lisboa-africana.

Museum of Natural History and Science between December 2022 and December 2023, is likewise worthy of mention.[53]

Finally, there have been important changes in the political space. In the 2019 elections, the first three African-Portuguese women were elected to the Portuguese parliament: Joacine Katar Moreira from the Livre Party; Beatriz Gomes Dias from the Bloco de Esquerda; and Romualda Fernandes from the Socialist Party. Moreira and Dias used their platform as members of parliament to raise public awareness about the Portuguese imperial past.[54]

Contrasting Perspectives on the Critical Debate about Empire

As may be expected, the transformations outlined above have sparked diverse reactions, both within academia and in Portuguese society at large. The last part of this article details these responses.

As has been stated, several Portuguese historians specialized in the Portuguese imperial past or in the transatlantic slave trade have been dismissive of contemporary debates. Some claim that current controversies result from American cultural hegemony and its obsession with political correctness. Others deem the debate to be an artificial discussion, arguing that racial discrimination is almost nonexistent in Portugal, and that the situation has nothing to do with racism in the United States or elsewhere in Europe. A few scholars continue to deny the violent nature of Portuguese imperial rule.

Meanwhile, positive depictions of the imperial past continue to strongly resonate in contemporary Portugal, both in the scholarly milieu and in society at large,[55] and forms of celebrating Portuguese imperial exceptionalism persist,[56] both in the public sphere and in academia. The research trend that argues that the Portuguese were pioneers in defending the rights of non-European peoples and criticizing slavery is a good example of this tendency (Calafate). Such an interpretation is often evident in studies on António Vieira, the Jesuit whose

[53] https://www.museus.ulisboa.pt/exposicao-impulso-fotografico.
[54] See Canelas. The Portuguese parliament already had a black representative, Helder Amaral, a member of a right-wing party. Amaral stated, on several occasions, that being a Black man had a negative impact on his political career; see G. Henriques.
[55] Hespanha, "A história na cultura portuguesa contemporânea"; see also Peralta, "A sedução da história: Construção e incorporação da 'imagem de marca' Portugal."
[56] Roque, Anderson, and Santos, for example.

monument has already been discussed.[57] Scholarship on the Portuguese contribution to nautical and astronomical science continues to develop (Domingues), allowing historians to highlight the Portuguese contribution to modernity while avoiding sensitive topics such as violence, land dispossession, the slave trade, chattel slavery, and so on. Significantly, Portuguese scholars specializing in the history of early modern knowledge production rarely acknowledge that such a scientific and technological advancement was in service of colonial domination.

Outside of academia, the celebration of the Empire persists. The "World of Discoveries," a theme park inaugurated in 2014 in Porto, is an excellent example.[58] The same could be said of the manner in which the 500-year anniversary of the Magellan-Elcano circumnavigation was commemorated between 2019 and 2022.[59] The program, sponsored by the Portuguese government, was fundamentally Portuguese-centric and employed the language of the first globalization to celebrate, with triumphalism, Portugal's achievements overseas.[60]

Resistance to a more critical discourse sometimes comes from the highest echelons of public administration. On March 4, 2021, Portuguese prime minister António Costa expressed acute concern about the escalating debate on the imperial past. He stated that he was against the "self-flagellating image" of "our history" and argued that the "cultural wars about racism and the historical memory" were putting at risk what he called the Portuguese "national identity." According to Costa, questioning the past in this way was opening "a dangerous and artificial fracture in our identity" (Carvalho e Sousa).[61]

Shortly thereafter, in May 2021, the Council of Europe issued a report stating

[57] For a critical assessment of this way of portraying Vieira's life and work, see Cardim, "O monumento."
[58] https://www.worldofdiscoveries.com/.
[59] https://magalhaes500.pt/missao/.
[60] For a recent critical assessment of the use of the concept "globalization," see Cooper, p. 82.
[61] Prominent Portuguese politicians continue to rely on Portugal's history of slaveholding to enhance the country's image. One such instance occurred in 2017, during the Portuguese president's visit to Gorée, Senegal. In this former outpost for the trade of enslaved Africans to the Americas, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa stated that Portugal was one of the first countries to abolish slavery in its European territories. While omitting the fact that slavery continued to be legal in the Portuguese colonies until 1869, Rebelo de Sousa argued that the decision to abolish slavery in Peninsular Portugal was "a recognition of human dignity, showing respect for a status corresponding to that dignity." These statements were immediately rejected in many sectors of Portuguese society: https://www.dn.pt/portugal/um-regresso-ao-passado-em-goree-nao-em-nosso-nome-6228800.html. See also Oliveira, "Da ilha de Gorée à esquadra de Alfragide."

that "Portugal should act more resolutely to tackle racism": "It is important to shed light on the historically repressive structures of colonialism, ingrained racist biases and their present-day ramifications," said the Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović. The report asserted that school curricula were a particularly useful tool to achieve this goal. In response, the Portuguese government created a Working Group for the Prevention and Combating of Racial Discrimination, which proposed measures for the first *Plano Nacional de Combate ao Racismo e à Discriminação*. Needless to say, far-right nationalists are generally less genteel than Portuguese prime ministers when confronted with critical discourse about the Portuguese Empire. These actors have aggressively rejected any negative reference to the Portuguese imperial past, persistently emphasizing its positive effects, and, at times, even resort to threatening those who disseminate a different narrative. Such reactions are present not only in Portugal, but also in Brazil, a former colony of Portugal that has recently reevaluated the legacy of its colonizer through the lens of Christian expansion (Redação Brasil Paralelo).

Despite opposition, the debate continues to gain momentum, and both the Portuguese and the descendants of those who were directly affected by Portugal's domination are ever more openly discussing the imperial past. The same conversation is taking place within the scholarly milieu. It can be argued that this debate, irrespective of the current lack of consensus, has already wrought a transformative impact on the perception of the Portuguese Empire among many.

To begin with, it has become more and more evident that the longstanding notion of gentle and benevolent Portuguese imperial rule is a product of the deliberate neglect of the histories, ways of life, and cultures across Africa, America, and Asia. Furthermore, it stems from a lack of attention to the profoundly disruptive impact of the Portuguese empire on these societies. It is also a product of a centuries-old ideological framework used to justify Portugal's imperial rule in Africa, Brazil, and Asia.

Secondly, the thesis that there was minimal or no racial discrimination within the colonial societies emerging from Portuguese conquest is now increasingly untenable. Recent research has stressed the crucial contribution of the Portuguese (and Spanish) imperial experience, both on the Iberian Peninsula and outside Europe, in the history of racial ideologies.[62]

Thirdly, there is a growing consensus that the trajectory of the Empire and the

[62] Schaub and Sebastiani; see also Bethencourt, *Racisms.*

development of chattel slavery are inseparable, each involved in the same historical process. The history of the early modern Portuguese Empire, the history of slavery, and the history of slave trade are all part of the same story. It is now widely agreed upon that the enslaved labor force played a fundamental role in most of the colonial societies that formed under Portuguese rule.

Finally, societal changes served as a driving force behind these debates and transformations. The younger generations, along with a more ethnically diverse student body at both high school and university levels, have exerted—and continue to exert—meaningful pressure, pushing for confrontation of the imperial past and questioning the inherited myth of the empire as a benign force. The ongoing challenge lies in integrating the voices of Asians, Amerindians, and Africans into this conversation.

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