

Home > Blog

## Analysis

### The living ashes of Portuguese colonialism

By Miguel Cardina | 20 Oct 20 | Posted under: Portugal, Antiracism/Migration



Slavery memorial Lisbon

In 2020 a Memorial will be erected in Lisbon in honor of the victims of the slave trade, an initiative of Djass - Association of Afro-descendants that was one of the winning projects of the 2017/2018 edition of the Participative Budget of Lisbon. One of the proposals, designed by the artist Kiluanji Kia Henda, entitled "Plantation - Prosperity and Nightmare" Source: African Lisbon Tour africanlisbontour.com

Lisbon, November 2017: Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa speaks at the 9th edition of the Web Summit, the world's largest tech event that, every year, welcomes thousands of participants. At the opening session, Costa recalled Fernão de Magalhães (Ferdinand Magellan), the Portuguese explorer who, in the 16th century, played a central role in the first circumnavigation voyage around the globe. He compared the beginning of the so-called "Discoveries" with the technological era represented by the Web Summit. Fernando Medina, Mayor of Lisbon, had already gifted an astrolabe to Paddy Cosgrave, CEO of the company that organized the event. In that moment, he made an analogy between the pioneering nature of the Discoveries and the entrepreneurship of the Web Summit: "Lisbon was the capital of the world five centuries ago, from here routes left to discover new worlds, new people, new ideas. A great adventure started here to connect the human race [...]. 500 years ago, navigators crossed the seas. Today it is your turn, the engineers, the entrepreneurs, the creators, the innovators, the start-ups, all companies".[1]

Other examples could easily be evoked. In Portugal, the use of the maritime expansion and the colonial past to project national(ist) mythologies is constant: in advertisements, in tourism, in government initiatives, in different discursive fields, from politics to sports. As with other former European colonial powers, the memory - and the oblivion - of colonialism comes in multiple and not always evident ways. In the case of Portugal, the pervasive presence of Lusotropicalism still exists today. The ideology was appropriated by the Estado Novo dictatorship to portray Portuguese colonialism as more benign and less aggressive than other colonialisms. The continued existence

of this ideology is a particularity: one from which the country draws its centrality, at the same time that its position on the periphery of Europe leads to constraints of various kinds. The presence of dissonant voices questioning this common sentiment has grown, as I will mention below. Nevertheless, what is certain is that those images remain strongly articulated with what Michael Billig called "banal nationalism"[2]: the set of practices, rituals and discourses that weave the ways in which the nation imagines and reproduces itself.

### War and wiping memories

In March 2020, just as news about the coronavirus pandemic spread, the TV journalist Rodrigo Guedes de Carvalho spoke to young people at the end of a newscast. The journalist told them that their grandparents had been asked to go to war and they luckily were only asked to stay home and sit on the couch. The war that Rodrigo Guedes de Carvalho referred to was the Portuguese Colonial War. This was just one of many examples of using warlike metaphors to characterize the pandemic. But it also reproduces a certain reading that exists in Portugal about the Colonial War. Despite the connection that defeat in the war had with the establishment of democracy in the country, what is emphasised is the "patriotic duty" that led an entire generation to Africa.

The Colonial War lasted thirteen long years (1961-1974). It dragged close to 800 thousand young Portuguese people to Africa and about 500 thousand Africans integrated into the Portuguese troops to fight the liberation movements in three different territories: Angola, Mozambique and Guinea. With a population that would have then been around 9 million inhabitants, in proportional terms the human effort employed by Portugal in Africa was five times greater than the that used at the same time by the United States of America in Vietnam. The war would end with the emergence of five new nations in Africa - Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe - and with a political regime change in Portugal. On April 25, 1974, the MFA (Armed Forces Movement), created by middle-rank military members tired of a dead-end and politically lost war, overthrew the Estado Novo dictatorship. Europe's longest dictatorship, which went unscathed through the defeat of Nazi fascism in the aftermath of World War II, fell without effective resistance.

Two perplexities are worth highlighting. First, the military had a central role in the political change. This intimate relationship between the process that established the democratic regime and the Colonial War, through the figure of the military, would later tend to interfere in the erasure of war from public memory and above all in its bloodiest aspects. The second perplexity is that by inflicting a political defeat on Portugal, paradoxically it was the African liberation movements that ended up "freeing" it from the "burden" of being a colonizing power. This fact is as evident as it is forgotten in the dominant public memory of the country.

The memory (and forgetfulness) of the war in Portugal is part of a national memory that continues to fuel both systemic racism and the proliferation of images of a once-great country. Within the common sentiment, the narrative of an "encounter of cultures" between the Portuguese and the people they came across in Africa, Americas and Asia still exists. Particularly in relation to Africa, where the rupture was traumatic, speeches centred on resentment or nostalgia regarding the "loss" of Africa regularly emerge. They are particularly present in the narrative of so-called "returnees" - about 500,000 Portuguese people who went to Portugal from Angola and Mozambique in the years immediately following the revolution. It is important to add to this the continued existence of the idea of a "mild-mannered" country and a fundamentally non-racist society, which in the shadows conceals slavery, exploitation and colonial domination.

### Shaking ghosts

From 2017 onwards, a series of controversies have given new impetus to the debate on the colonial past. I will enumerate some, without pretending to be exhaustive. In April 2017, the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, visited the island of Gorée, in Senegal, a space once used for trafficking enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. There, he highlighted the supposedly pioneering role that Portuguese authorities played in the abolition of slavery, in 1761. In fact, the date does not signal the abolition of the slave trade throughout the Empire, but the end of slave traffic to the metropolis (concentrating it instead in the destination of Brazil). The statements triggered an open letter, in which the signatories criticized the "idealistic and exceptionalist view of the colonial legacy of Portuguese history".[3]

In the same year, the placement in Lisbon of a statue of Padre António Vieira, in which the Jesuit appears wielding a cross and with indigenous children at his feet, would fuel various gestures of contestation, the most recent chapter of which was in June of this year, when anonymous hands wrote the word "decolonize" on the statue and drew small red hearts on the three children, motivating a lively debate. Similarly, back in 2017, one of the proposals submitted and selected for the Participatory Budget of Lisbon came from Djass, an association of Afro-descendants, and proposed the creation of a Memorial of Homage to Enslaved People. The winning project was presented by the Angolan artist Kiluanje Kia Henda and it is now in the implementation phase.

However, the proposal to create a "Museum of Discovery" in the city, which appeared shortly afterwards, was the thing that was more debated. The idea had been launched by the winning socialist candidacy for the local municipality authorities, within the framework of tourist growth in the country's capital. The designation of a "Museum of the Discovery" has been contested by some sectors of academia and civil society. As said in a collective open letter, "Did the African, Asian and American peoples, with millenary histories, feel 'discovered' by the Portuguese? And how will the populations from these territories feel today when visiting a museum space that deprives their ancestors of historical initiative, reducing their role to objects to be discovered, often violently, by the Portuguese?"[4] However, a considerable number of opinion articles on the topic in the press reaffirmed the place of overseas expansion in the national identity, censoring the existence of supposed penitential narratives in some engaged sectors of public opinion.[5]

The 2019 legislative elections brought some good news. For the first time, three black women were elected to Parliament: Beatriz Gomes Dias (Left Block), Joacine Katar Moreira (Livre) and Romualda Fernandes (Socialist Party). At the same time, the extreme right achieved unprecedented representation in the country by electing André

Ventura, leader of the new party Chega that is now growing in the polls. Similar to other right-wing populist movements that have emerged all over the world, Chega's strategy has been to explore the feeling of social injustice based on a discourse around the "corruption" of the elites. This discourse not only keeps the structure of capitalist exploitation intact, but it has come to assume an increasingly homophobic and racist narrative, especially against black and Roma communities. Following the demonstrations against the assassination of George Floyd and large anti-racist demonstrations spurred on by indignation over acts of racist violence in the country, Chega promoted demonstrations under the motto "Portugal is not racist" and is trying to mobilize nationalist pride through the country's imperial history.

## What's next?

Today's Portugal is not the imperial power that went through much of the 20th century as a colonizing - though semi-peripheral - metropolis. However, throughout the country, to date there still exists a sort of imperiophilia, that induces a significant number of the speeches about its identity and its history. The weight of a denied colonial history is evident in the racism that manifests in police behaviour, in housing and segregation policies, in nationality laws, in the discourse of growing political sectors, as well as in a self-representation of the country, its people and its past, marked by the lasting ballast of Lusotropicalism. The incessant reproduction of the same narrative has been challenged in recent years, although it is difficult to anticipate how this process will unfold in the future. We only know that it will have an effective role in the political debates that are yet to come.

## NOTES

1. Lusa, "Costa diz que Web Summit coloca Lisboa no "coração" do debate sobre os desafios globais", *Correio da Manhã*, 06/11/2017; Carolina Brás e Rita Carvalho, "Web Summit. Cosgrave é o novo Fernão de Magalhães", *jornal i*, 05/11/2018.
2. Michael Billig (1995), *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
3. "Um regresso ao passado em Gorée. Não em nosso nome", *Diário de Notícias*, 19/04/2017.
4. In *Expresso*, 12/04/2018.
5. For a preliminar analysis of these debates, see: Trindade, Luís (2019), "Onde começa a extrema-direita?", *Esquerda*, n.º 1.

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