Race and society in Portugal: two notes and a remark

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Portuguese exceptionalism 1

Whoever reads the Portuguese fourth grade school book from 1961 can find the following story. Two kids, Luís and Manuel, play in the schoolyard, duly supervised by their teacher. Manuel was born in Porto, northwestern Portugal. Luís is a bright student from Angola born to a rich Portuguese farmer and a tireless Angolan-native housewife, who excels in taking care of her husband and children. Suddenly, Manuel tells Luís: “You are nothing but a Portuguese from Angola”. “Yes, but I am still a Portuguese”, replies Luís. “No! You were born in Africa. I am the one who is truly Portuguese. I am a Portuguese from Portugal”, insists Manuel.

At this point the teacher decides to interrupt the argument. “Look Manuel – he says- you are totally wrong. To be born in Angola is to be born in Portugal. Luís, who was born in Angola, is entitled to be as proud to be Portuguese as you are. You boys were just born in different provinces of the same country. Portugal begins in Europe and ends in Timor”. The quarrel is over and the two kids happily resume their games.

This story, published just before the emergence of the first armed actions against the Portuguese colonial rule in Angola, is a telling illustration of what became the prevailing principle of racial relationships under the dictatorship instituted by António de Oliveira Salazar in 1933. Feeling threatened by India and several African nations claiming independence after World War II, the Portuguese regime could no longer stick to the aggressive imperial rhetoric that dominated its first decades (Meneses, 2009). The new policy instead stressed the originality of the Portuguese territorial expansion that, differently from its colonial rivals, gave rise to countries such as Brazil, not to South Africa, Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) and the like (Meneses, 2009).

It was precisely in Brazil that the major theoretical inspiration for this new policy could be found. In a series of books about the characteristics of Brazilian society, starting in 1933, cultural anthropologist Gilberto Freyre developed the concept that the Portuguese had created a new kind of overseas civilization – so called luso-tropical - based on the peaceful symbiosis of cultural and biological contributions from many different peoples (Freyre, 1946; Castelo, 2015). With its creole culture and high levels of admixture, its peoples bonded by a mixed cultural heritage, instead of a purported biological homogeneity, Brazil provided, according to Freyre, the best example of a luso-tropical society.

Luso-tropicalism, as the intellectual movement inaugurated by Freyre became known, was embraced with mixed enthusiasm and sincerity by the Portuguese political authorities. Freyre’s emphasis on the African contribution to the new civilization was repellent to the dictator and to most members of his ruling elite (Meneses, 2009). However, the usefulness of his ideas to buy time in the diplomatic front was too obvious to be ignored. The notion that African colonies were new Brazils in the making became the new underlying principle of the Portuguese colonial ideology (Castelo, 2015).
As an anthropological concept, luso-tropicalism had a strong impact on the work of a group of eminent scholars, like geographer Orlando Ribeiro and ethnographer Jorge Dias (Almeida, 2004; Castelo, 2015). Politically backed by Adriano Moreira, an academic who became Minister of Overseas from 1961-1963, this group set up a new standard for colonial studies.

Until the end of World War II, most anthropological research was centered on physical anthropology and the definition of racial types. Ethnography was almost an amateur hobby (Pereira, 2005). From now on, cultural anthropology would become predominant, combining a strong emphasis on rigorous ethnographic documentation with the belief that ethnic diversity and miscegenation were at the heart of Portuguese identity and should inspire the design of new colonial policies (Almeida, 2004). However, this proved to be mostly wishful thinking. In spite of the good intentions of many researchers, the political orientation of Salazar’s regime did not change substantially, as directly witnessed by cultural anthropologist Marvin Harris. After participating in a United Nations project on racial relations in Brazil (1950-51, 1953), Harris decided to visit Mozambique, in order to include in his field studies countries that were still under Portuguese colonial rule. After his stay in Mozambique he wrote a strong empirical rebuttal of the theses of Gilberto Freyre, noting in its preface:

“In the course of my previous field work I had come to accept the theory that the relative absence of serious forms of racial antagonism in Brazil was the result of a distinctive Portuguese cultural tradition or national character. What was needed to confirm this theory was a study of race relations in another area of Portuguese influence. I went to Mozambique fully expecting to encounter a system of race relations which would contrast strongly with the policies of the Union of South Africa and of the other neighboring non-Portuguese areas. If my expectations were not fulfilled, it was certainly not the fault of any prejudices entertained against the Portuguese”. (Harris, 1958).

After the first military actions in Angola (1961), independence wars broke out in Guinea-Bissau (1963) and Mozambique (1964), coming to an end only in 1974 when a military coup overthrew the Portuguese dictatorship, instituting a democratic regime. The first priority of the new regime was to end up the African wars. By the end of 1975 all Portuguese African colonies became independent. Luso-tropicalism had arrived too late, both in theory and in practice.

**Portuguese exceptionalism 2**

How did the independence of the colonies shape race relationships in Portugal? The country was now facing profound transformations in the political system along with the massive return of former colonizers, and a wave of immigrants from the newly established African countries (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe and Cape Verde). However, unsurprisingly, the luso-tropical ideal did not disappear. According to its new formulations, the peoples of Africa and Portugal formed a brotherhood united by a common history, if not a common destiny. After all, they had endured together the hardships of the same dictatorship, the real cause of racial antagonism in colonial times. As always stressed by the African independence leaders, the war was against Salazar, not against the Portuguese.

On the foreign policy stage, these formulations led to the notion of “Lusophony”, a belief in the possibility of forming a transnational communion of language and values - including a fierce rejection of racism - that would distinguish Portugal from the other European countries, as much as it would singularize Portuguese-speaking countries among their African neighbors (Almeida, 2004). However, these ideas didn’t go without criticism.

In Portugal, the debate was mainly polarized between what may be called “Atlantism” and “Europeism”, and was especially relevant during the period of the country’s request for European Union (EU) membership. In line with the ideals
of “Lusophony”, “Atlantism” favored a special relationship with Brazil and the new African countries. “In the EU”, “Atlantists” would say, “Portugal will be just another European state. The country’s identity will be diluted if one ignores its special historical links with the peoples that were previously colonized”. “The empire is over”, would the Europeists reply, “let’s turn the page”.

In the new African countries, the shape of the relationships with the former colonizer was also a matter of debate. In Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea, interactions between colonizers and residents had been legally regulated until the early sixties by the so called “indigenous or native statute”, which in practice did not afford citizenship to “individuals of the black race and their descendants, who cannot be distinguished by their customs and education from other members of that race” (Ferreira & Veiga, 1957). To achieve an “assimilated status”, a “native” person would have to speak Portuguese correctly, adopt habits like eating with cutlery and having a salary (Harris, 1958; Castelo, 2015; Henriques, 2016a).

Logically, luso-tropicalism and its avatars were regarded with suspicion in these countries, mostly because they were seen as part of a purely tactical move to deny the fact that Portugal was a racist colonial power, just as bad as the others. Accordingly, the choice for Portuguese as an official language after independence was mainly justified with utilitarian arguments, which stressed its importance as a lingua franca in strongly multilingual societies. But the prospects for developing and deepening other aspects of the relationships with the former colonizer were never seen with the same optimism that predominated in Portugal (Henriques, 2016a). In São Tomé and Príncipe, as well as in Cape Verde, the situation was somewhat different. Especially in Cape Verde, a closer proximity to Portugal and to the ideal of “Lusophony” can be observed. For example, many streets and some high schools retain their old colonial names, and Portuguese remains the official language, despite Cape Verdean creole being the maternal language of a huge part of the population.

This diversity of stands towards “Lusophony” has historical explanations. The “indigenous statute” was not applied in the archipelagos of Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe, whose settlement histories differ from those of the Portuguese colonies on the African mainland. The two islands were uninhabited until their discovery and were mainly settled by slaves that were either captured or traded in the nearby coasts of Africa. São Tomé and Principe was a plantation archipelago for most of its history, even after slavery was abolished (Coelho et al., 2008). Cape Verde had a similar peopling pattern, but never became a plantation complex with the importance of São Tomé. Moreover, in the beginning of the 17th century, the northern islands of Cape Verde were gradually occupied by peasants of admixed origin that owned small portions of land and had few or no slaves, contrasting with the plantation economy that had prevailed on southern islands (Beleza et al., 2012).

Presently, Cape Verde probably has one of the most admixed populations in the world, in terms of European and African contributions (Beleza et al., 2012). While the colonial authorities used these high levels of admixture as proof for the relative benignity of Portuguese colonialism, miscegenation was in fact associated many times with the notion of “improvement” of African peoples (Almeida, 2004). Admixture led to better assessment of education; better education, in turn, reinforced the idea that admixed people had an intrinsic predisposition for better attainment. In line with this reasoning, it was among Cape Verdeans that the Portuguese used to recruit the intermediate civil servants for the colonial administration. Even today, as racial problems appear to be less acute in Cape Verde, we found a significant correlation between dark skin color and low socioeconomic status (Beleza et al., 2012). Tellingly, in present debates about the country’s identity, some sectors of Cape Verdean society believe that instead of an excessive cultural approximation to Portugal and Europe, a reinforcement of the country’s ties with Africa should be favored, including the use of creole as a teaching language (Henriques, 2016a).
Another, probably more important question is how the post-colonial situation affected the place of immigrants from Portuguese-speaking countries (also known as PALOP: Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa) in today’s Portuguese society. According to several human rights platforms, a major problem in addressing this issue is statistical invisibility (Oliveira, 2016). They accuse the Portuguese government of not following the recommendations of the United Nations about the need to collect data on ethnicity or physical characteristics (like skin color) to track inequalities (Henriques, 2016b). The available statistical information does show that, compared to the Portuguese, PALOP immigrants and their descendants are three times more vulnerable to unemployment, two times less likely to get into the university, three times more likely to have unqualified jobs and 15 times more likely to be incarcerated (Oliveira, 2016).

In face of these numbers, the same old debate about the specificity of race relationships has now been shifted from colonial Africa to modern Portuguese society. Are the Portuguese as non-racist as they like to believe, or are they just as racist as many other countries, and are simply hypocritical? And does it matter? In my opinion it does. Not for awarding the prize of the best (or worst) colonizer in the world, but because race relationships are diverse in time and space. Understanding these differences, which are of course not due to any metaphysical qualities, but are also not simply rooted in ideology and propaganda, may help us to better appreciate the diversity of experiences that led to the present “state of race” around the globe. Moreover, at the risk of being misunderstood for praising hypocrisy, I still think that it is positive that a community considers not being racist to be an important part of its own identity. As pointed out by Alan Goodman in the first article of this forum, there is a new wave of open racism that is sweeping across the United States, and is certainly also rising in many European countries. This increasing lack of a strong social sanctioning of bigotry is one of the most formidable challenges that the fight against racism has to face in our times.

Concluding remark

In his opening paper, Alan Goodman asks “why has the race-as-genetic worldview changed so slowly with fifty years of data to show it to be obsolete?”. In my opinion, the answer lies in the erroneous belief that science can by itself settle ethical and political conflict. Since at least the first UNESCO declaration on race, the power of the sheer accumulation of scientific facts about the irrelevance of physical traits to classify and hierarchize humans has been overestimated (Maio & Santos, 2015). Racism is built on preconceptions and stereotypes that are not always based on physical attributes (Fredrickson, 2002). Its key characteristic is the belief that some social groups - however they may be defined – cannot live peacefully and on equal grounds side by side because their differences are insurmountable, independently of being rooted in inheritance or tradition. To dismiss these notions, science and education are more than necessary, but will still remain unfortunately insufficient.

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References


