

“The Zenith of our National History?”
**National identity, colonial empire, and the promotion
of the Portuguese Discoveries: Portugal 1930s**

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Abstract

With the onset of Salazarism in the 1930s, the cult of the Portuguese Discoveries— itself a product of late nineteenth-century Portuguese nationalism—again became a fulcrum of nationalist attention, progressively occupying the very core of Portugal’s national identity. This (re-)mobilization of the Discoveries and their incorporation into the national profile remained tied to regime legitimacy and consolidation, as well as to concerns over Portugal and its colonial heritage. Drawing on representative writings of the imperial discourse (of the 1930s), this article examines some aspects of the ideological articulation of the Discoveries with Portugal’s national identity and the defense of Portuguese colonialism.

Keywords

Portuguese Discoveries; colonial empire; national identity; threat to empire; Salazarism

Resumo

Com o início do salazarismo em 1930, o culto dos Descobrimentos portugueses (consequência do nacionalismo português do século XIX) voltou a transformar-se numa das bases do interesse nacionalista, ocupando progressivamente o centro da identidade nacional. Esta recuperação dos Descobrimentos para o panorama nacional manteve-se ligada à legitimidade e consolidação do regime, bem como às aspirações do país e ao seu legado colonial. Baseando-se em textos representativos do discurso imperialista (1930), este artigo analisa alguns aspectos da articulação ideológica dos Descobrimentos face à identidade portuguesa e à defesa do colonialismo.

Palavras-chave

Descobrimentos Portugueses; império colonial; identidade nacional; ameaça ao império; salazarismo

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In 1998, Portugal hosted the World Exposition in Lisbon, a four-month extravaganza replete with opulent pavilions and innovative architecture, all designed to showcase a country full of promise on the cusp of a new century. The expo was both forward-looking and backward-glancing, drawing its theme—"The Oceans, a Heritage for the Future"—from Portugal's history of maritime exploration. Indeed, Expo 98—in its commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Vasco de Gama's charting of a sea route between Europe and India—allowed Portugal to implant itself in the world of tomorrow while maintaining an identity elevated by the glories of the past.

I allude to Expo 98 to illustrate the ongoing importance of the Portuguese Maritime Discoveries in the formation of the modern Portuguese national identity, even after the expiration of the imperial project. The formation of this identity began in earnest in the late nineteenth century, at a time when, as noted by Douglas Wheeler, Portugal gradually assumed the identity of a "Western European, but imperial power with worldwide trade, navigation, and emigration"—an identity that relied on "a unique Discoveries' role" (6). While the creation of this modern national identity enjoyed widespread political and ideological patronage under the regimes of the Constitutional Monarchy and the First Republic, it was the first decade of the *Estado Novo* (New State) that witnessed a renewed, more comprehensive, and deliberate reformulation of a master national narrative grounded in the Age of the Discoveries, and, by extension, in the idea of a historical and indissoluble Portuguese overseas colonial empire. This renewed attention to the Maritime Discoveries grew with Salazarism since, as Vale de Almeida points out, "it was not until Salazar's regime that an actual colonial enterprise in Africa was set up," in terms of both a "colonial regime" and "proper institutions and knowledge systems" (5).

Unlike the Portugal of 1998—which was more than two decades into its post-colonial present—the relationship of the Portugal of the 1930s to the Discoveries was strongly tied to a set of interrelated preoccupations, not only with the regime's survival and consolidation, but also with Portugal's (and specifically the regime's) recommitment to the dreams of empire—which represents the main concern of these notes. By the end of the 1930s, Portugal's focus on the Discoveries had become an extensive ideological investment in the nation's historical memory, a response in part to the recognition that the continuation of Portugal's colonial "stewardship" depended on a vigorous and reputable national image, both domestically and throughout Europe. Indeed, if the privileged status (re)accorded to the Discoveries during the 1930s was meant to fortify an ideological link between imperial Portugal and its precarious hold on its colonies, this privileged status also

exposed the extent to which this modern form of imagining the nation was predicated on concerns about the viability of the colonial empire and the nation itself. The place that the Discoveries came to hold at the epicenter of Portuguese ideals about the modern nation—along with other ideological coordinates, dogmatized in the *imperial mystique*, for instance—underscored the extent to which Portuguese national identity was premised on the “myth of empire,” which, we may recall, remained fundamentally “at the heart of the Estado Novo’s ideology” and its vision for the nation (Monteiro and Pinto: 57).

In what follows, I offer some notes on the ideological representation of the Portuguese Discoveries during the 1930s—the consolidative period of the Estado Novo—considering the main nationalist themes that sustained the discourse on the Discoveries. Although the mythology of the Discoveries and empire dating back to the late nineteenth century contained its share of detractors, normally from small antagonistic cultural and political circles, I am principally concerned with those ideological submissions that were invested in the identification of the Discoveries with Portugal as a historical project of nation and empire in the 1930s. My analysis draws upon a number of contemporary texts² to identify in written discourse some of the more prominent ideological themes, claims, and statements that both enabled and enlivened the national cult of the “golden age.”

A study of the Portuguese Discoveries as a nationalist ideology, tracing its historical development and political and cultural uses from its genesis (even before the nineteenth century) to the present day, merits an in-depth examination of its own; it does, however, fall outside the modest scope of these reflections. A few contextual remarks on the biography of the Discoveries should nevertheless be recalled, especially in the light of the ever greater number of historiographic contributions (primarily those written in Portuguese) to the understanding of the cultural and ideological driving forces behind the construction of Portugal’s modern national identity (e.g., Vakil: 1995, 1996; Torgal: 1998; Catroga: 1996; João: 2002; Matos: 2002).

“Rediscovering the Discoveries”

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese kingdom launched a series of maritime enterprises in order to map a trajectory to spice-rich India, endeavoring to create a direct commercial route and economic monopolies untrammelled by Arab

² With the telling exceptions of Jaime Cortesão, whose words form the title of this essay, and Augusto Casimiro.

hegemonies. These overseas expeditions, unprecedented in scope and intent, took the Portuguese sailors to the coasts of West Africa, and eventually to the Indian Ocean. By the end of the fifteenth century, these audacious maritime explorations both in the Atlantic and Indian oceans had led the Portuguese to the shores of Brazil, India, and eventually Japan (1542).³ These early expeditionary projects, soon joined by rival Spain, eventually allowed other European nations to embark over the next three hundred years on imperial projects in the Americas, West Africa, and parts of South Asia. For Portugal, these exploratory undertakings—which continued until the 1800s—triggered a period of expansionism comprised of a blend of religious, commercial, and military enterprises that enabled the foundations of the first and longest-lived global empire. As the scramble for Africa gained pace during the second half of the nineteenth century, nationalist politics in Portugal engaged in a cultural recovery of this period of expansion, celebrating it as the “golden age” of Portuguese history: The Age of Discoveries—A *Idade dos Descobrimentos*. Nation and empire building therefore meant that the Portuguese went about “rediscover[ing] their own Discoveries” (Leonard 2000: 525, 526; Catroga: 258), turning the exploits of the “golden past” into an imposing, lasting national cult that grew to define Portugal as an imperial/colonial project for the next hundred years.

Commemorative attention to the Discoveries, spasmodic before the prospects of a Portuguese African empire, gained momentum in the national imagination, and, as the second half of the nineteenth century evolved, so did the attention paid (albeit to a lesser extent) to the Restoration, a development that was closely linked to the “Iberian question” (Matos: 2009). The building of a modest monument in Sagres in 1839 (Infante Dom Henrique) and the 1841 historical work on the primacy of the Portuguese Discoveries by M. Barros e Sousa signaled an early interest in scripting the Discoveries into the idea of Portugal. However, the “golden age” of the Portuguese past only acquired national preeminence with the intensification of the colonial scramble, the imperial conflicts, and more explicitly in the wake of the politically and culturally seismic Ultimatum crisis in 1890. Aligned with the narrative and choreographic strategies of nation-building erupting elsewhere in Europe at the time, the emerging cult of the Discoveries came to generate a veritable cultural industry: centenaries, national festivities, commemorative monuments,

³ For Anglophone studies on the pioneering history of Portuguese overseas expansion, see Francisco Bethencourt and Diogo R. Curto, (eds.) *Portuguese Oceanic Expansion, 1400-1800* (2007); Newitt, M. D. D. *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1668* (2005); Russell-Wood, A.J.R. *A World on the Move: The Portuguese in Africa, Asia and America, 1415-1808* (1992); Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winius, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580* (1978).

museums, exhibitions, libraries, museums, archives, scientific organizations, numismatics, philately, and much writing, were all dedicated to the glorification of the nation's expansionist past and its "heroic" protagonists (Luís de Camões, Bartolomeu Dias, Vasco da Gama, and Infante Dom Henrique). Beneath this maneuvering of collective attention toward the Discoveries bubbled a febrile climate of the identitarian politics of nation, vying for the renewal of the political and cultural life of Portugal, and intensifying an ideological campaign to explain, correct, and propose a vision for a modern imperial nation (Mattoso: 23, Vakil: 1996; Catroga: 1996). Significantly, republican, positivist, and secular-leaning agendas lay behind the forging of a mystique of the Discoveries—much of which was to produce a vision of nation indistinguishable from the cancellation of the monarchy and the establishment of a Republic. After the Ultimatum crisis, however, the cult of the Discoveries came to acquire a broader cross-partisan/ideological profile, attracting the monarchist camp, the regime, the Church, and growing popular attention. The ideology of the Discoveries survived the demise of the monarchy and continued to occupy a privileged discursive space during the Portuguese First Republic. Despite the successive governments of the Republic retaining an interest in promoting the Discoveries, World War I and the political turbulence of the regime considerably impaired the official commemorative potential of the Discoveries (João: 1998, 78). Nevertheless, the political and ideological upheaval that plagued the Republic continued to excite the identitarian politics of the late monarchic period, fueling cultural struggles over competing ideological visions about the nation. In this context, opposing visions from the regime and oppositional sectors alike chose the Discoveries for "the waging of cultural battles over national identity and the mantle of tradition, and therefore, legitimacy" (Vakil: 1996).

The ideological instrumentalization of the Discoveries to political ends proved no different with the ascension of the Estado Novo in the early 1930s. As it ironed out social discord and political dissent, the Estado Novo built on the invented tradition of the late nineteenth century, proceeding to appropriate, supervise, and become the chief ideological sponsor of this national cult, providing it with a coherent ideological and material infrastructure and a mass projection on a scale that was previously unknown. With Salazar at the helm, the Estado Novo engaged in an ideological administration of the Portuguese collective memory and the meaning of the nation, both for internal and external consumption. With the confluence of concentrated state power, authoritarian orientation, a repressive state police and the organs of censorship, and effective propaganda mechanisms (under the direction of António Ferro), and backed by technologies of mass

communication, the new regime managed to generate a highly successful national ideal of Portugal grounded both in the present (the regime itself) and in the past (the Discoveries). But the adoption of the ideological legacy of the Discoveries by the Estado Novo entailed eschewing the more positivist, republican, and secular representations of the national past, and, to a certain extent, asphyxiating the rhetoric of national decadence. Instead, it pursued the grammar of a national reawakening, a re-Catholicized and traditionalist discourse on the past and present, by suppressing the competing discourses of national identity found in and before the Republic. Perhaps unavoidably, the Estado Novo retained what Vakil called "the reductive totalizing circularity of identitarian politics," which had characterized the oppositional cultural politics of the republicans in the late nineteenth century (1996). Through the discourse on the Discoveries, the regime could present itself as the embodiment of the ideals of regeneration, nation, tradition, empire, and the Portuguese.

The dawn of a new age (as promised in the label of the Estado Novo) shone forth through a re-inscription of the past, which entailed resuming the ideological (and celebratory) focus—bred and activated during the previous century—on other cardinal moments of Portuguese history, including the founding of the nation, as well as the successful struggles against the Roman, Arab, and Spanish hegemonies. Nevertheless, the new regime accorded unquestionable primacy to the historical period of the Discoveries, deploying key nineteenth-century methodologies of nationalism that came to define and sustain the ideological structure of modern imperial Portugal. The regime's re-appropriation and multiplication of the commemorations of the "golden age," for instance, (manifested in centenaries, congresses, and exhibitions, and achieving its commemorative apex in the double centenary of 1940) provided continuity to a form of organizing a national collective memory and identity stemming from the cultural and political energies activated by the crises of the last quarter of the nineteenth century (João: 2002). The Estado Novo equally embraced the traditional dreams of empire found in "all major commemorative events since 1880," but did so by presenting itself as the supreme embodiment of the imperial ideal, of the nation's historical (imperial) vocation (Catroga: 258). Significantly, questions over regime survival and consolidation, its power and its ideologically reactionary foundation, ultimately remained behind the Estado Novo's embracing of the imperial ideal, and its discursive strategies—in this case the "exaltation of the past and the so-called national tradition" (João 2002: 92; see also Catroga: 258; Leonard 2000: 259; Meneses 2009).

The *Estado Novo*: The Past and Imperial Rivalries

The enthusiastic nationalist promotion of the Discoveries cultivated in 1930s Portugal differs considerably from the post-colonial acerbic judgments of European expansion now in circulation, which (in some variants) charge the historical period beginning in the fifteenth century with unleashing nothing short of a comprehensive tragedy upon the world (see, for instance, Sardar 1993). The Portugal of the 1930s was, nevertheless, steeped in more celebratory readings of the nation's historical forays. Far from representing the exploratory venture of sailors pursuing commercial and expansionist imperatives, the Portuguese Discoveries were promoted as a historical enterprise concerned above all with spreading "the faith and the empire": The Discoveries amounted to an "odyssey of heroes," an epic which, as the Salazarist ideologue Marinho da Silva explained, was the fundamental component of the "civilizing crusade" that Portugal had historically undertaken and which it continued to define as "the modern imperial activity" (36). They represented the foremost essence—an imperial one—of Portugal, namely that, unlike any other epoch in the total range of Portuguese historical mythology, the Discoveries functioned as the ideological vertebra of Portugal's conception of its own history and, more importantly, of its own identity as a modern nation. Even the renowned republican Jaime Cortesão, resolutely entrenched on the other side of the *Estado Novo*'s political and ideological tracks, demanded such a perception. For Cortesão, the Discoveries were the chief historical expression and achievement of Portugal and deserved a place of canonical primacy in the nation's biography and national consciousness. "We consider," he declared, "the Portuguese Discoveries, from their origins and subsequent derivations, as the zenith of [our] national history." "The Age of Discoveries," he insisted, must necessarily be understood as the very "basis of the national character" (50).

In reflecting on the ideological uses of the Discoveries in 1930s Portugal, it is helpful to understand this national cult as part of a specific, if inexorable, dependence that nations and national identities have on the past—and, more precisely, on the perceived need to generate ideological narratives and representations of the past, in order to produce and standardize history. The past, that massive repository of symbolic information, had been maneuvered in the previous century into the core of the collective memory, imagination, and identity of the nation. This growing mobilization of the past, its popularization, its engrafting onto the national iconographic spaces, its rescripting to conform with, justify, and celebrate ideals pursued and contested in the present, all belong

to an overall range of traditional nationalist strategies inherited by the Estado Novo. Current historiography on nationalism routinely stresses how ideologically-crafted cults of the past remained a chief precondition for nation-building strategies, following the Hobsbawmian reminder that “nations without a past are contradictions in terms” (255). It is hardly helpful to imagine the development of a nation and its national identity without an extensive narration of the past into the general consciousness of the nation. Indeed, the linear premising of the nation on the past constitutes the very precondition of nationhood. Hobsbawm put it directly by noting, “what makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past” (255). The marked nationalism that permeated Portuguese politics from the late nineteenth century onwards appealed to the past—generating *history* as a form of narration of the past and the present—in its commitment to breathing life into the shaping of a modern imperial identity of the nation. And, in this respect, Portuguese nationalism was hardly alone. Modern historiography, in its evocation of the past, is, after all, a nineteenth-century invention, laced with positivist and romanticist zest, but ultimately developed to nurture the agendas of European nationalism.

Likewise, the cult of the Discoveries revitalized under the Estado Novo constituted a significant conscription of the past—an obligatory exercise in nationalism—aimed at fortifying the ideological alignment between state, nation, and empire. Grounding the essence of *Portugalidade* in the Age of Discoveries fostered an “ancestral” identification with the overseas world, but also with European expansionism, hegemony, and territorial acquisition. In other words, this identification directed attention to the historical links between Portugal and its colonial heritage, foregrounding the *indivisibility* of nation and colonial empire. Furthermore, the appeal to history and “historical rights,” as historians of Portuguese colonialism have frequently noted, comprised part of the arsenal of claims deployed by Portuguese diplomats, politicians, and historians alike during the convulsive journey to Portuguese empire-building, especially when threats to the country’s colonial possessions became acute.

In addition, emblemizing *Portugalidade* with the mythology of the Discoveries harnessed the notion of Portugal to an extra-European (and certainly extra-Iberian) identity—that is, a nation not reducible to its metropolitan and peninsular existence but anchored both historically and territorially in an overseas pluri-continental colonial empire. The perceived or real threat of a forcible annexation of Portugal into a greater Iberia under Spanish custody, which gave rise to a longstanding and bitter tradition of cultural and political Hispanophobia, rendered such presentations of the nation critical to the project of

Portugal as a sovereign unit and an independent agent in history. For the regime—and here Jaime Cortesão did not dissent—the ideological dividends exacted from the Discoveries spoke directly to matters of national survival: the “golden age” constituted “the most determinant basis and affirmation of [Portugal’s] independence” (9).

The late nineteenth-century development of a discourse on the Portuguese Discoveries corresponded precisely to a historical period in western Europe when “culture” and “tradition” were being invented, a development closely linked to the rise of nationalism, itself indistinguishable in many instances from the formation of modern European imperial identities and imperial rivalries. As a momentous western European historical project, national colonial adventures were marred by aggressive and multi-faceted rivalries between the continent’s many nations. By the end of the nineteenth century, political and cultural elites in Portugal (comparable to their European counterparts involved elsewhere in the scramble for Africa) endeavored to delineate an imperial metanarrative for the nation, in which Portugal and empire were seen as inextricable and synonymous terms. Much of this metanarrative of nation-empire was certainly born of a concentration of efforts to safeguard Portugal’s national sovereignty at home, though much of it was done to palisade the colonial heritage against the threat posed by other European colonial powers, which at various points in time were keenly bent on dismembering and appropriating Portugal’s colonial holdings. By marshaling the imperial exploits of the “heroic” past—in narratives that sanitized the nation’s colonial performance, or even the nation’s slavery record (Santos Junior 1935)—in order to legitimize the colonial present, the cult of the Discoveries enabled the presentation of Portugal to its citizenry, but also to other nations, as a historically legitimate European empire—that is, one possessing authoritative historical credentials as a modern colonial power (despite an embarrassingly unconsolidated African colonial project along with inconceivable economic and military debilities vis-à-vis other European powers). Therefore, in a linear sense, the process of defining and sustaining a Portuguese national identity was directly sensitive to the country’s imperial rivalries with other European states.

Certainly, the risk of losing colonial gains to other European potentates haunted the political regimes of Portugal even before the international formalization of the empire occurred in Bismarckian Germany (1885). Well recorded by historians, the instances of international crises that Portugal experienced over a potential loss of its colonial possessions proved numerous and unrelenting. These crises reached several alarming peaks following the Berlin Conference, at times bringing governments in Lisbon to the brink of

despair, and even prompting serious questions not only about the viability and future of the unconsolidated and still amorphous Portuguese Africa, but also about the survival of Portugal itself. The threat to the colonial empire in the 1930s remained an unnervingly constant concern among the political leadership, and none more so than Salazar (82-83), who came to regard achieving maximum "consolidation of the Portuguese domains in Africa against any external threat" as an urgent national priority (Alexandre 2000: 12).

Much of this "external threat" found expression in the criticisms published by the foreign press, academic literature, and official reports sullyng Portugal's colonial and historical record. But Portugal possessed undaunted voices, prepared to remind foreign naysayers of its historical labor in the progress of humankind; they were also prepared to attribute foreign hostility to Portuguese colonialism to the imperial ambitions of other European states. Thus, not infrequently were the Discoveries invoked in these responses (as, for example, by the historian Manuel Heleno in 1933) as the single greatest achievement "the Portuguese so superbly had offered to the history of the World" (7).

Faith and Empire: Luso-Messianism

Bolstered during the 1930s, the ideological stress on "the national messianic narrative of Portugal as the country of Discoveries," (Vale de Almeida: 437) largely relied on claims that the launching of the project of the Discoveries in human history was not only unparalleled, but also had vital ecumenical and transcendental meanings. More than had been possible during the secular years of the republican regime, under the "re-Catholicized" nationalism of the Estado Novo the idea that divine sanctioning had been present from the moment of the launching of the Portuguese Discoveries onto the global theater acquired greater expression. For instance, Correia de Sá wrote in 1934 that "the transcendental" and "most sublime" meaning of the Discoveries originated directly from the divine (24). Marinho da Silva also placed Portuguese history under the celestial imprimatur, demanding from his readers the recognition that there was an unquestionable "Christian sense of the Discoveries" (35). In 1937, in the midst of greater scholarly attention to the overall theme of the Discoveries, Portugal, and the colonial empire, the pedagogues A. de Almeida and J. Rodrigues delivered an address to the *I Congresso da História da Expansão Portuguesa no Mundo* defending that the Portuguese Discoveries, along with subsequent conquests, were far from being the result of historical contingency but corresponded to the historical character of an exceptional, privileged people. If the

Portuguese were the pioneers of the Discoveries (and thus European imperial expansionism), it was not "from mere accident or an insane urge for adventure" (8). Rather, providential design had enveloped the nation's history, bestowing upon it the incumbency and the honor of carrying out divine will (represented as spreading Christianity). As the renowned conservative Manuel Múrias, one of the most authoritative voices on the history of Portuguese expansionism, theologized, Portuguese history was in its essence "moved by a sacred impulse" (cited in Ameal: 98).

This sacralization of the Discoveries thus underscored a transcendental exceptionalism inherent in the Portuguese national self—which gained audibility whenever the tenuousness of the colonial empire was tested. It was the *sacred* that the lawyer Ribeiro Lopes invoked in 1933 against other nations' recurrent criticism of and efforts to eliminate Portuguese colonialism, contending that, unlike other European societies' unmeasured imperial exploits, the Portuguese colonial projects had historically cultivated their "celestial essence" (iv). This terminology, penned to defend the imperial ideal, was meant to afford an unquestionable moral superiority to Portugal's imperial historical record, especially when contrasted with other European imperial deployments. Unlike the latter, Portuguese expansionism and colonialism had been intrinsically pious, benevolent, and committed, according to Colonel Ribeiro Villas, to "integrating and nationalizing the peoples of new lands, [...] giving them the same ideals as the Portuguese" (70). Therefore, Portuguese imperialism throughout its history had been defined "by the highest principles of Christian civilization (Saldanha: lxii). And, it was this "Christian temperament," in the words of Marinho da Silva, that ultimately had rendered Portuguese imperialism—"non-imperialistic" (3).

The confluence of the pious and the sacred, the Discoveries, and imperial history within the tapestry of the nation's identity received nothing less than generous ideological subsidies from the ecclesiastical classes, especially from the Catholic conservative sectors, who encouraged the identification of Portuguese historical expansionism with the Portuguese inherently "humane and Christian character," in the words of Cardinal Gonçalves Cerejeira (in Silva: 7). The "humane" and "Christian" quality exhibited during the Discoveries entailed theological claims beyond the habitual pious (Catholic) references to the Portuguese national and historical character that allowed its apologists to reify divine intent in Portuguese history. If the discourse built around the Discoveries conceptualized the Portuguese as agents of divine will, it also simultaneously introduced them as central historical protagonists in the divine narrative.

Seen from this angle, the Discoveries represented a unique collaborative historical work between the Christian God and "men"—that is, between God and the Portuguese. Accordingly, the association of the Discoveries with the will of God enshrined a strong bid for the exceptionalist role of "the Chosen People," a point duly noted by J. Russell-Wood, who identifies the Semitic imprint in the Portuguese "ideology of expansion." This ideology, he observes, had "embraced the concept of an ethnic God, a nationalized deity who provided spiritual strength and physical protection for his chosen people—the Portuguese. In return, the Portuguese assumed a national obligation to defend and, if possible, extend Christendom" (26). During the early years of the dictatorship, this divine appointment of the Portuguese found resonance in a certain salvific conception of the Estado Novo (or Salazar himself). The historiographer of the regime, João Ameal, linked the deliverance of his beleaguered nation from catastrophe to the "dictatorship" and "the progressive ascension of the Estado Novo" (98). Only this political intervention in Portuguese history had prevented Portugal from collapsing into historical doom; the Estado Novo alone had enabled the Portuguese to "regain [their] consciousness as a Nation" (98) And only through the providential advent of the Estado Novo, as Ameal postulated in 1934, was "Portugal, again, [able to] believe in itself" (98).

Salazar himself was the recipient of religious accolades as the 1930s unraveled, being cast in the messianic attire of *Sebastianism* (Leonard 1998: 69). Army officer José Garcia d'Andrade conjured up the image of a providential savior in his 1938 patriotic tribute to Salazar, viewing the dictator as someone "who had been permitted by Providence to be born precisely to save Portugal from ruin and to ensure [its] prestige in the concert of nations" (3). Yet again, Garcia d'Andrade's messianic ascriptions were invoked against the backdrop of the threat of a discription of the colonial heritage and the promise of national rebirth. Not only did this Messianism—emphatically tied to the project of the Discoveries—push *Portugalidade* to the forefront of the Christian temporal and soteriological narrative, but it also placed Portugal as the primary center not only of Christian gravity but also of civilization. "*Lisboa*" itself was "the metropolis of the world," as was grandiosely claimed by Côrte-Real at the 1938 *I Congresso da História da Expansão Portuguesa no Mundo* (6).

Luso-Messianism—of which *Sebastianism* was one of several discursive expressions—remained a persistent feature in conceptions of Portugal, its people, and its imperial exploits, one that sprouted time and again, harkening back to the days of "Os Lusíadas" and lasting until "April 25" (Saraiva: 82). This *heroico-evangelical-imperial* ideological

continuum, of course, can be identified in the sixteenth-century texts of Camões or a hundred years later in the works of António Vieira. Archbishop Ignácio de Santa Teresa pointedly expressed this ideal in 1725, defending that “God has deliberately chosen the Portuguese out of all other nations for the rule and reform of the whole world, with command, dominion, and Empire, both pure and mixed, over all of its four parts, and with infallible promises for the subjugation of the whole globe, which will be united and reduced to one sole empire, of which Portugal will be the head” (Boxer: 374). This theme of Portuguese territorial expansionism qua Christian evangelical expansionism has its provenance precisely at the moment of the historical inception of what Russell-Wood termed the “ideology of expansion,” itself traversing much of the imperial Portuguese historiographic imagination. Indeed, from the launch of the assault on the northwest African enclave, Ceuta (1415), we can identify a disposition in the ideology to accord a cosmic stature to Portuguese expansionism. The “inevitable corollary of the ideology [of expansionism],” as Russell-Wood explains, was the elevation of “Portuguese activities from the national to the universal plane.” He further notes:

Isolated campaigns or individual deeds—when undertaken by Portuguese—became imbued with an aura of spirituality and took on global significance. In an age when Christendom was convulsed by internal schisms, Portugal not only became heir to the Iberian tradition of Reconquest but also became the self-designated defender of Christianity itself against inroads by unbelievers. The theory of restitution, which had justified the Moroccan campaigns of Dom João I, was extended to the rest of the African continent and to Asia as well (26-27).

Within the context of the ideology of Reconquest, the Portuguese military campaigns and conquests are virtually indistinguishable from earlier Christian acts of conquest and evangelization. Here, some of the dichard ideological premises of the Crusades were polished and remobilized as ideological arguments in favor of the Discoveries and the pursuit of colonialism. The Portuguese, as Côrte-Real asserted, had dutifully accepted the divine commission and entered the process of the Discoveries to uphold the obligations of “spreading the Christian faith” (153). Historically, we may recall, the exceptionalist perception of the Portuguese as agents of divine intent and champions of Christendom, received ample encouragement from papal bulls (along with other ideological endorsements that favored Portuguese expansionist projects). The *Estado Novo*, founded in large measure on the ideological jointure of Catholicism and Empire—the Luso-Christian project of expansion—did not shy away from promoting the ideological marriage

between Christianity and the Discoveries. Much of the historical and political literature of the 1930s dogmatized this conceptual union, whose sixteenth-century ideological pedigrees already ideated Portuguese (expansionist) history as one of "dilating Faith and Empire" (Camões: 43).

Historical decadence/rebirth

The discourse of a national historical rebirth in its modern form upheld the "glorious and heroic" past as a measure of the erratic national present, crippled by its unresolved, often alarming relationship with the empire. The political rhetoric of national rebirth, often employed (but not exclusively) by political parties in opposition to the regimes in power during the previous half century, was a reaffirmation of the idea of Portugal as a sovereign nation. This rhetoric also amounted to a call to reestablish and continue the heroic spirit and ideals of the empire launched during the fifteenth century. In this sense, the idea of "national regeneration," remained linearly inseparable from "the colonies, the empire, national independence," and, notably, "the discoveries" (Monteiro and Pinto: 56). The Estado Novo, the self-appointed champion and incarnation of the ideal of a national rebirth, promoted itself as the catalyst for the recovery of the spirit of the "glorious and heroic past" and the negation of Portugal's historical decadence. Themes of national decadence during the 1930s premised much of the rhetoric of national rebirth, itself linked to the context of the legacy of the Discoveries, providing an explanation for the Estado Novo (as the antidote to historical decay), while constituting a demand for the imperial ideal sceptered to the Portuguese by the Discoveries.

The persisting anxiety—which had haunted the nineteenth-century Portuguese nationalist agendas into the early years of the Estado Novo—that Portugal had somehow missed out on or risked missing out on its historical destiny ghosted in much of the nationalist disquietude with the fate of the nation and empire. This was an anxiety linked to the perception that Portugal's authentic national character and historical mission, defined by historical and evangelical imperatives, had somehow been lost to or neglected by most Portuguese. Because of either internal disarray or external opposition—so the idea went—the Portuguese had permitted the consciousness of Portugal's historical objectives and national conscientiousness to subside into oblivion, thereby compromising the very existence of the nation. National decadence, a theme which achieved marked expression in the contestatory politics of the late nineteenth century (although with a longer tradition in

Portugal), translated into the debilitating loss of a sense of national identity and purpose, profoundly linked to a colonial project that remained compromised in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The anxieties generated by this perception of national decay prompted João Ameal to draft for the Colonial Exposition of 1934 in Porto some thoughts on the “diseased” state of the Portuguese empire, which managed to achieve convalescence and rejuvenation only under the guidance of the *Estado Novo*. For Ameal, the infirmities plaguing the Portuguese nation and empire resided above all in the national failure to honor and abide by “the noble and sacred ideals” launched during the Discoveries, a failure that caused Portugal “to stray ... from its character, from its destiny and from its historical course” (97). For Portugal, the fateful consequence of this wandering off, he added, was a distinct “loss of its consciousness as a nation.” This loss of national consciousness meant that Portugal had come to relinquish that creedal rule bequeathed by the Discoveries: the “imperial imperative.” Identified by Valentim Alexandre as “o mito da Herança Sagrada” (the myth of the Sacred Inheritance), the “imperial imperative” saw the pursuit of empire as a supreme historical duty for Portugal. It forcefully regarded the preservation of the empire as both a sacred national obligation and the main evidence of the historical accomplishments of the nation (40).

If Portugal had digressed from the historical course set with the launching of the Discoveries, much of the blame rested with its historical nemesis, Spain, which, as the republican journalist Augusto Casimiro put it in 1921, had consistently sported a distinct “gothic, imperialist, and absorptive” record in Iberia (32). Returning to the Hispanophobic political and cultural narrative (re)generated after the second half of the nineteenth century, the perceived Spanish expansionist aspirations were frequently cited as the main adversary both of Portugal’s sovereignty and the Portuguese imperial project abroad. The likes of *Côrte-Real* stressed how Portugal’s ill-fated historical turn dated back to the crisis of 1580, which had resulted in the loss of Portugal’s independence to the Spanish kingdom. Until that time, Portugal’s “colonial empire, which had expanded for as long as [the Portuguese] wished, collapsed solely on account of the wretched Philippian regime” (149). The disastrous administration and compromised ideology of national leaders prior to the *Estado Novo* (particularly republicans) were equally responsible for Portugal’s fall from grace, with special blame being meted out to those Portuguese who, in the eyes of João Ameal, had only too eagerly adopted “foreign doctrines and methods.” Such undesirable foreign influence—which included an assortment of decadent political propositions

ranging from democracy, republicanism, and parliamentarianism to Bolshevik exports—had polluted the national political vision, causing domestic civil strife, engendering constitutional frictions, and inducing a ubiquitous negativism that had discouraged the Portuguese from realizing their historical mission. Many of these foreign doctrines had caused the nation to internalize what Ameal labeled the “suicidal notion of a Portuguese crepuscule in the world” (37). For Ameal and others, this crepuscule, the end of the colonial empire and imperial history, meant risking the prospects of Portugal being able to continue to exist qua Portugal: an independent, sovereign and historical entity. This very real anxiety prompted a great deal of anguished writing during the decade of the 1930s in texts with a strongly evocative, patriotic, and often alarming tenor, typified in works such as Agostinho Campos’ *A Fé no Império* (1935).

Precedence Claims

Not surprisingly, in the writings produced on the subject of the Discoveries in the 1930s, there once again resurfaced claims legitimizing Portugal’s historical primacy, and, by extension, its seniority in the authorship of European expansionism. In fact, to a considerable extent, the discourse on the Discoveries was an extension or elaboration on the discourse of primacy—which had been intensified in the previous century, and very likely, as Catroga remarked, remained the only weapon the Portuguese could enjoy substantive recourse to (230). Generated in order to defend Portugal’s entitlement to a colonial empire, these claims of historical primacy postulated that Portugal had not only been the first country to introduce Western Christian civilization to the extraordinary tasks, adventures, and possibilities of the present world, but had become the principal transformative agent for the formation of the modern world. It was through Portugal’s *pioneering imperialism*—described by Armindo Monteiro as impregnated with a humane and benevolent character, an expression of the “superior spirit of the Portuguese [mode of] colonization”—that the modern world had been formed (27, 30). A decade earlier, the republican Augusto Casimiro (a future member of the opposition to the Estado Novo) had reiterated the same theme, just like others before him, positing that the Portuguese were “the first ones” to perform such historical labor, to discover and enlarge the world: “*Descobrimos, alargámos a terra!*” (56).

Rather than locating the birth of the modern world in the “long nineteenth century,” the discourse on primacy placed the historiographic emphasis on the century of the

Renaissance as the historical moment of "transition to modernity" (Vakil 1996). It was, in other words, the Discoveries that had produced and enabled modernity; the Portuguese had inaugurated a new historical age, "introducing" the world to itself, acquainting societies with one another, creating a new global order. The evocative nationalist use of Camões' famous adage—that the Portuguese "gave new worlds to the World"—was very much in vogue, capturing this propensity to assign Portugal a role of distinct preeminence in the latest, most portentous chapter in the history of humankind, one which specifically "saved" Europe from its internal (medieval) impasse. For the historian Gaspar Ribeiro, it was precisely the protagonism of the Portuguese in the Age of Discoveries that had enabled "European hegemony" to take hold throughout the world (62). The historical primacy of Portugal resonated prominently in the anthropologist Correia de Sá's vigorous claim that "Portugal was the pioneer of civilization" (27), a claim that Portugal, through the Discoveries, had been the foundational catalyst for the new Christian and European historical era, with Portugal thereafter becoming the first nation to Europeanize, civilize, Christianize, and effectively transform the world. And Portugal, a "small country in western Europe," Correia de Sá proudly claimed, had managed to "transform itself into the first colonizing nation," so that, accordingly, it was the first nation to generate modern colonialism and therefore had extensive prerogatives over it (26).

The claim to primacy as a colonizing nation ultimately refers to the ideological efforts to link colonialism to the construction of a twentieth-century imperial identity for Portugal. The framing of Portuguese colonialism in terms of historical primacy invited dissent from the understanding that colonialism was a movement of modern provenance: the discourse of primacy maintained that genuine colonialism was not merely a matter of the modern occupation and settlement of overseas territories. Instead, bona fide, healthy, and edifying colonialism was derived from centuries-old military, commercial, and evangelical labors, along with the national costs and sacrifices incurred in the process. Appealing to longevity, this definition of colonialism was rooted not in the formalities and agreements of the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, but in the very first steps taken by the Portuguese in Ceuta in 1415, when the Portuguese had no competitors for the status of pioneers.

The Discoveries and the Colonial Empire

The promulgation of the 1930 Colonial Act signaled the formal creation of an imperial mentality among the Portuguese by the Estado Novo, a mentality that relied upon and stressed *historical continuities*, and which, above all, linked the Discoveries to the modern empire while also connecting the founding of Portugal to the contemporary colonial project and the Estado Novo. In the nationalist historiographies of Salazarist Portugal, at least during its first decade, one can discern depictions of Portuguese history as one uninterrupted progression from Afonso Henriques, the youthful founder of the Portuguese kingdom, to the colonial empire and its contemporary metropolitan political expression, the Estado Novo (see Belo: 23; Martins: 1933). The iconography of the Estado Novo did not fail to provide several instances promoting a historical link between Afonso Henriques, "the founder of the nation," and "Salazar, the founder of the Estado Novo" (Rebello: 96). Such connections proposed a vision of Portuguese history—filled with teleological intimations—that was fundamentally structured in continuity, with the imperial present linearly premised on a past crowned with expansionist and colonizing imperatives (located both in the Reconquest and the Discoveries).

Not insignificantly, the Discoveries as an ideological instrument for promoting and legitimizing the colonial empire, amounted by themselves to an incomplete, unfinished historical project. The colonial empire, which was inseparable from the nation, represented its fulfillment. Empire represented the natural historical outcome, the inevitable corollary of the Discoveries; it became the reason why the Discoveries were celebrated in the first place (see Cortesão: 9). The emphasis on historical continuity, which aligned the Discoveries with the colonial empire, affirmed the *unidirectionality* of Portuguese history, not only precluding the possibility of alternative historical itineraries, but rendering colonialism and the colonial empire as an obligatory historical destination for the Portuguese nation. Having been percolated through the Discoveries, Portuguese history could only have resolved itself in a colonizing project. The Discoveries, in short, constituted the point of historical departure for the present colonial condition. This specific historiographic predication of the present on the past was, moreover, 'compulsory' if imperial Portugal was to have a future. Speaking to a 1937 congress on the history of Portuguese global expansionism, Henrique Campo Belo stressed this point, insisting that without an unequivocal national sense of "*continuidade histórica*" (historical continuity) there would be no imperial mentality within the nation, and therefore, no empire (401).

The ideological alignment between the Discoveries and colonialism persisted, with various degrees of intensity, until the demise of the colonial project in 1974. A look at this late twentieth-century disassociation within the metaphysics of Portuguese nationalism is helpful in highlighting how national identities can be and often are strategically repositioned, and subjected to the "calculated" deployment of historical continuities and discontinuities. To this day, Portugal is no exception among the former colonizing nations when it comes to ensuring a safe political and ideological distance from the judgments of history, which, particularly after 1945, have weighed against colonialism. Like other former European imperial nations, post-1974 Portugal has endeavored to distance itself from the specter of its former colonial self. At the same time, however, it has continued to maintain a close association with the Discoveries, even though these have now been re-cast to help shape the country's post-colonial national identity, itself a subject of growing interest among Portuguese-speaking scholars.

To view this issue from a different angle, one can compare the 1940 Portuguese World Exhibition in Belém with the aforementioned 1998 Lisbon Expo—the country's two towering celebratory moments of the twentieth century. At the first event, the Portuguese empire was exalted, its historical expansionist achievements and aspirations carved in a grandiose architecture that grounded *Portugalidade* not only in the foundational moments of the nation, but firmly in the Discoveries and the colonial empire; at the second event—billed as the last World Exposition of the century—Lisbon reached into the past to recover selective material to express a new, Europeanist, post-colonial, post-imperial identity. The thematic similarities and differences between the two episodes are revealing: At both events, the Discoveries were amply referred to, celebrated, and *iconographed*. Colonialism, however, was an entirely different matter. The 1940 exhibition was itself a lively expression of the ideological links between colonialism and the Discoveries, a fact that was amply registered in statues, speeches, conferences, and exhibitions. Modern, but resiliently nostalgic, the World Expo of 1998 attempted to revive old glories and achievements under the expansionist aegis of "giving new worlds to the world"—all the while silencing the centrality of colonialism to nineteenth and twentieth-century narratives about the Discoveries and Portugal's national identity. The difference between these two exhibitions points to Portugal's strategic shift to a post-colonial identity, in which the Discoveries were given a new-old place. And yet, despite attempts to "disconnect" the Discoveries from colonialism in "post-colonial" Portugal, the centrality of the Discoveries

to the theme of Expo 98 underlines a lingering national attachment to much of its old imperial identity.⁴

Conclusion

The construction of the modern Portuguese national identity—which, in this sense, was very much in tandem with other nationalist ideologies—availed itself of “a series of different ad hoc discourses” that could be traced back to various historical and geo-cultural claims, although it was the “Golden Age” of the Discoveries that came to occupy “the core of the modern Portuguese national identity” (Cusack: 592). Dreams of empire alone seem to demand this conscription. The Discoveries in turn, as sketched out above, were sustained and complemented by interrelated ancillary discourses on the nation’s historical character, of which national rejuvenation, and Luso-Messianic claims of primacy featured prominently, themselves being central to the imperial discourse. Ultimately, the Discoveries led to the formation of a compelling lexicon which brought into one ideological orbit *Portugalidade*, Portugal, empire, national sovereignty, and, by the 1930s, the Salazarist regime.

With Salazarism, the Discoveries were “strategically” invoked in the service of regime legitimacy and nationalist ideology, which had become thoroughly intertwined with dreams of empire, so much so that, had internal or external forces brought the colonial project to an abrupt end decades before, or at least by the time of Salazar’s political ascension, then the cult of the Discoveries might have had a different iconographic itinerary within Portugal’s modern narrative of nationhood. This minor counterfactual, if tautological, point merely highlights the centrality of the imperial ideal to the discourse on the Discoveries. Even more significant is the extensive ideological dependence that the Portuguese imperial project, the nation, and, more pointedly, the regime, came to have on the Discoveries. We may briefly recall that, from the late monarchic regime through to the Estado Novo regime, the idea of Portugal—especially as an empire—was subject to competing discourses, with dissenting voices coming from small sectors of literati in Portuguese cultural and political society. Not only were the likes of Oliveira Martins or António Sérgio (to mention but two prominent examples) suspicious of the value of the colonies for Portugal, but so was Salazar before he was “forced” to accept the colonies’ centrality for the regime’s consolidation (Catroga 1998; Leonard 2000; Meneses 2009).

⁴ For analyses of the relationship between the Portuguese Discoveries, Expo 98, and the Portuguese national identity, see Power and Sidaway, 2005.

Salazar’s late conversion to the imperial ideal might persuade us to consider whether the Discoveries (and colonialism) were a direct ideological *precondition* for the Estado Novo’s crafting of its state-nation vision—with a conservative, Catholic, patriarchal, protectionist, and traditionalist orientation—in the early 1930s. But even if the Discoveries were not a precondition, their cultural weight and ideological legacy could not so readily be ignored by the regime, especially when political consolidation, internal cohesion, national sovereignty and prestige and dreams of empire remained paramount concerns—none of which, incidentally, were necessary for or directly present in the staging of the post-colonial Expo (1998).

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