

Hespanha, António Manuel. *Filhos da Terra: Identidades Mestiças nos Confins da Expansão Portuguesa*. Lisbon: Tinta da China, 2019. 366 pp. ISBN: 9789896714765.

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In *Filhos da terra*, António Manuel Hespanha asks who was identified as “Portuguese” during the overseas expansion. Studying developments in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, he concludes that classification as Portuguese (both in the past and as applied in the present) was usually tied to certain cultural practices such as dress, utensils, religion, language, or modes of behavior. Rather than depending on origins or descent, or even political subjection, individuals who behaved as Portuguese could be considered thus by their contemporaries or by present-day historians even if they had no other ties to that country and resided outside the boundaries of the so-called Portuguese empire.

Identity as Portuguese was sometimes appropriated or even reclaimed. It could be imposed on other individuals, or used to identify them, regardless of what these individuals chose or desired. Why this happened and what were the results is the central question Hespanha tackles. How did these processes of extension happen and what types of association with the Portuguese led to the imposition (or appropriation) of group identity both in the early modern period and in contemporary imagination? Taking on certain Portuguese characteristics was often the easiest explanation, but, on occasion, so was benefiting from proximity to or even collaboration with the Portuguese.

These are all incredibly important questions. An older historiography tended to portray the Portuguese empire as a territorial entity with a center linked to a series of peripheries. A newer historiography has proposed instead that the empire was essentially a network of centers tied to one another economically and perhaps also politically. Some historians even ventured to describe an empire that spilled outside its so-called boundaries to “zones of influence” that formed an “informal” or “shadow” empire. But if the designation “Portuguese” was as fluid and conjunctural as Hespanha describes, if it was instrumentalized both in the past and in the present, what does it tell us about nation and empire? Can we at the beginning of the 21st century disassociate political and economic history from the social and cultural realm in which non-state and non-sovereign forms of

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hegemony operated? Could interrogating the meaning attributed to Portuguese-ness over time help us question the supposed dichotomy between Europeans and non-Europeans, Portuguese and non-Portuguese and, more generally, the chronological prediction that enabled previous generations to distinguish between pre-empire, empire, and post-empire?

Hespanha clearly demonstrates that the category “Portuguese” could apply to individuals who originated in that kingdom, but also to natives of other territories and continents or to individuals of mixed ancestry. It could be meaningful in interactions with the Portuguese but it could also bear important consequences (both negative and positive) in relations between native groups, some identifying others as Portuguese. There could also be a gradation, with some groups being identified as “more Portuguese” than others or Portuguese only in some ways. Including a positioning rather than fixed characteristics and often extremely ambiguous in nature, appropriating (or applying unilaterally) Portuguese-ness was both a means and an end for both those affected by this categorization and those who engaged in making it, now and in the past. It allowed them to imagine the successful expansion of Portuguese hegemony without the Portuguese necessarily wanting it or doing anything to merit it, also demonstrating that this extension could happen even before the Portuguese arrived at a particular location. Carried by the tools and the habits individuals chose to adopt because they needed or desired to, this hegemony was propelled by the circulation of both humans and objects. As a result, it was both extremely solid and incredibly ephemeral. It could begin before empire and could last after it had waned, but fragility was its most salient characteristic. Language, for example, perhaps lasted longer than fortresses—Portuguese serving as the *lingua-franca* of many areas—but as Hespanha rightly suggests, the meaning this had for different individuals could radically change over time. As with all cultural artifacts, repetition could render its use so natural that the connection to Portugal or its empire could fade away even while the practice itself still lingered. Portuguese characteristics, in other words, could continue to demarcate a difference, even an identity, but which one and why could—over time—become much less clear (or less relevant). Also, over time these artifacts could become less Portuguese yet maintain their prestige as originating, theoretically, in that country. They could function alongside other cultural traits that could be mostly non-Portuguese, thus creating a context that both assimilated individuals as Portuguese but also distinguished them from the so-called “canonical” ones.

Were contemporary Portuguese aware of the enormous potential of achieving some measure of hegemony through cultural artifacts? Hespanha seems to suggest that

sometimes they were. He describes how, on occasions, authorities and individuals attempted to capitalize on such developments, imagining the possibility of bringing these various groups of the so-called Portuguese under formal obedience. Other actors, however, sought to acquire only a limited influence over members of such groups and many abandoned all pretensions to “use” these Portuguese for imperial ends. At stake in taking one position or the other were beliefs regarding what was possible and what was just, but also which aspect of imperial policy was pursued: politics, economy, religion, or prestige, to mention but a few examples.

If there were multiple ways for being Portuguese (one could be born in Portugal under allegiance to the monarch, descend from Portuguese parents, have special relations with the king or the Portuguese, take on some Portuguese characteristics in certain ways but not others), there were also multiple ways to belong to the empire. One could be under direct sovereignty, be tied to the empire through political agreements or commercial ties, be subjected to Portuguese ecclesiastical patronage, or be identified with empire because of the sharing of some cultural or social practices. Yet, regardless of which road was taken, the forces at work seemed to take on the characteristics of a *deus ex machina*. If hegemony could expand independently of imperial actors and often before their arrival, and if it depended on local dynamics, then once hegemony expanded, it was likely to endure, even self-perpetuate. This is perhaps what post-colonialists pointed to when they described the impossibility of those formerly colonized to detached themselves from their former colonizers, indeed to a degree that, on occasions, gave former colonizers powers they lacked during the colonial period.