

# Propaganda and sovereignty: New State and the exaltation of the Portuguese empire in late 1930's

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The Portuguese World Exhibition held in Lisbon in 1940 was the apogee of imperial mystification and the corollary of self-identity representations fabricated by Salazar's New State. Organised to commemorate the country's 800 years and the 300 years of its restoration of independence after six decades of Spanish rule, the exhibition was also a celebration of the regime and a symbolic statement to the world. As António Ferro, the secretary of National Propaganda put it, it was an

admirable opportunity to show, to enemies and friends, the eternal drawing of our frontier lines.<sup>811</sup>

With France already occupied by Nazi troops, Lisbon was transformed in a spy's nest and a shelter for thousands of Jews and refugees waiting for a visa to board towards America. Gleaming with its lights and festivities, the Portuguese capital offered a strange contrast to those who fled from Europe's dark cities devastated by combats and air raids.

Lisbon was then a "vivid and sad paradise," as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said in his book *Letter to a Hostage*, recalling his brief stay and his visit to the exhibition. According to the French writer and aviator, Portugal seemed to ignore "the appetite of the beast" and "clung to her elusive happiness."<sup>812</sup> Without human or material resources to resist any possible attempt to attack its European and overseas territories, Portugal could merely hope to succeed through diplomacy and propaganda. To a certain extent, only historical and moral arguments could withstand national integrity, and those arguments were persistently used both externally and internally.

Since the Colonial Act – a decree penned by Salazar himself<sup>813</sup> and issued in 1930 with constitutional effects –, Portuguese territories overseas were not only legally specified as part of the "Portuguese Colonial Empire" but also ontologically legitimated. As the text stated, it was of the "organic essence of the Portuguese Nation" to perform its "historical function" of possessing and colonising overseas territories and to "civilise" their indigenous populations<sup>814</sup>.

As a keystone of the dictatorship policies regarding the colonies, this Act was aimed to other colonial powers' appetites, a recurrent issue in Portuguese agenda since the Scramble for Africa, the British Ultimatum trauma in 1890 and the partition agreements concerning Angola and Mozambique established between England and Germany in 1898 and 1912-13. For its colonies, Portugal fought the Great War to have a seat at the peace conference. However, the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations brought new obligations of economic development and a "civilising mission" to post-war colonialism, to which Portugal had to correspond. And for which the country was quite often put into question.

Besides the international responsibilities, a closer look at the Colonial Act preamble gives us crucial information about its purposes: to combat "certain international currents" with imperialistic intents which threatened the "traditional dogma" of colonial sovereignty, and to put in order the colonial administration, all for the sake of Portugal's "superior interests and destinies." To sum it up, the Colonial Act bound the colonies to Portugal's own future and independence. And based on the principle of "moral and political solidarity," it established the non-divisibility of all the territories that formed the "Portuguese Colonial Empire."<sup>815</sup>

Needless to point out, after World War II Salazar had to adjust this discourse considering the geo-strategic map of the Cold War, the international pressures to democratise and decolonise, and the survival of the regime itself.<sup>816</sup> The Constitution of 1951 (which replaced the term *colonies* with the more integrative notion of

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<sup>811</sup> António Ferro, "Carta Aberta aos Portugueses de 1940", in *Diário de Notícias* (17/6/1939).

<sup>812</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Letter to a Hostage*, (transl. Jacqueline Gerst), London: Pushkin Press, 1999.

<sup>813</sup> In co-authorship with Armindo Monteiro, future minister of the Colonies. Note that the Colonial Act was prepared and issued when Salazar, in accumulation with the Ministry of Finance, was appointed interim minister of the Colonies (first time, from 21 January to 29 July 1930).

<sup>814</sup> *Decreto n.º 18.570*, 8/7/1930.

<sup>815</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>816</sup> Fernando Rosas, *História de Portugal – O Estado Novo (1926-1974)*, (dir. José Mattoso), vol. VII, Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1994.

*overseas provinces*) and Lusotropicalism theory<sup>817</sup> were two pillars of that only apparent change, conducted more on a semantic level than in substance. Back in the 30's, the New State's nationalist propaganda enhanced the referred ontological matrix by intertwining history, religion and politics to affirm Portuguese sovereignty.

### Stating the difference and staging the message

As already sustained by historians like Valentim Alexandre, it's possible to trace a continual discourse back from the early years of Constitutional Monarchy (right after the emancipation of Brazil) through the Republican period and the dictatorship, regarding African colonies as a priority of national policies and the key to Portuguese independence<sup>818</sup>. It wasn't, therefore, a discourse created by the New State. What Salazar's regime shaped based on those premises was, in fact, a national image that fit its purposes, blurring the lines between nation and ideology.

Even before Salazar's rise to power as chief of Government, Portuguese representations in international and colonial exhibitions stressed out the role of the empire to the nation's unity. In accordance, the colonies were presented as part of the country and as such incorporated in the national pavilions, with architecture playing the function of integrating diversity. With variations that can be related to the political and economical goals of those image projections and the budgets assigned, that was the case for the three most important exhibitions during the early years of the Portuguese dictatorship.

To the historicist focus of the Ibero-American Exhibition of Seville, opened in 1929, Portugal replied with a sumptuous baroque pavilion inspired in the manor houses of the eighteenth century<sup>819</sup>, to symbolise the nation's glorious past and its respect for the legacy of the Age of Discoveries preserved throughout centuries and regimes. Because the permanent part of the building was intended to later serve as a Portuguese consulate, it's not difficult to see the importance of leaving such a statement in Spain. The only exception to that centralised image was conceded to Macau, with a small pavilion resembling the pagoda of Barra, aimed to reinforce the propaganda of that territory and to fade international accusations related to opium traffic and maritime piracy.

A very different architectural solution was adopted in 1930 for Antwerp International and Colonial Exhibition, where Portugal transformed part of an exposition hall into a small and humble pavilion with Art Deco façades<sup>820</sup>, spending much less than in Seville. Nonetheless, the same message was delivered: the colonies were part of the nation and history legitimised Portuguese possessions. Considering the Congo frontier with Angola, such a claim in Belgium was clearly a reminder.

In 1931, for the Paris International Colonial Exhibition, lavishly staged in Vincennes, the political discourse did not differ but another kind of solution became necessary. The avenue that crossed the building site made it almost impossible to conceive a single pavilion, and therefore it was decided to separate the historical section from the colonies display of recent developments and products. However, architect Raul Lino, well known for his study and idealisation of the *Portuguese House*, solved the dissociation problem projecting four buildings with strong visual elements associated to metropolitan Portugal, combining references from the austere sobriety of its monasteries to the monumental architecture of the golden Age of Discoveries. The ensemble was distinctively provided with turrets, arches and tiles, and highlighted by a remake of a "manueline" portal, a stylised *padrão*<sup>821</sup> and a 35 meter-high tower crowned in its four faces with the Order of Christ's Cross, presented as the "revered symbol of Portugal's colonising work."<sup>822</sup> The association of Portuguese empire to Faith was centuries old but the providential myth had, by then, resurged with all the weight of an official thesis.

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817 Coined by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, Lusotropicalism sustained that Portuguese colonisation couldn't be compared to other imperialisms, given the unique background of metropolitan Portugal, the Portuguese ability to adapt to tropical cultures, and the long tradition of miscegenation. The theory fitted the New State's purpose to present Portuguese empire as a multi-continental and multiracial nation and was officially adopted from the 50's on. Many historians and researchers (among them Charles Boxer, Cláudia Castelo and Miguel Vale de Almeida) already pointed out its frailties and failures.

<sup>818</sup> Valentim Alexandre, "Portugal em África (1825-1974): uma perspectiva global", in *Penélope*, n.º 11, Maio 1993, pp.53-66. Valentim Alexandre, "A África no imaginário político português (séculos XIX-XX)", in *Penélope*, n.º 15, Junho 1995, pp.39-52.

<sup>819</sup> Projected by architects Carlos and Guilherme Rebelo de Andrade and very similar to the Portuguese main pavilion at the Rio de Janeiro Exhibition of 1922, later reassembled according to original plans in Lisbon's Parque Eduardo VII to serve as exhibitions venue (nowadays known as Pavilhão Carlos Lopes).

<sup>820</sup> Projected by Felix Horta, the author of Macau's Pavilion in Seville 1929.

<sup>821</sup> Stone pillar carried by Portuguese fleets, to set up as mark of discovery.

<sup>822</sup> *Exposition Coloniale Internationale de Paris (Section Portugaise) – Catalogue Officiel*, Commissariat Général du Portugal, 1931, pp. 11-33.

In a time when colonial powers built exotic pavilions at international fairs to seduce visitors with a “one-day journey around the world,”<sup>823</sup> Portugal stuck to its roots and did not follow the trend. Moreover, the legacy of the past was always underlined to justify the present and pave the way for the future. In Vincennes, and for the first time since the beginning of the dictatorship with a considerable assertiveness, Portugal presented its colonialism as being original and centred on spiritual values, guaranteeing that the efficiency of its administration methods conquered the affection of native populations. Of course reality was quite different. Nevertheless, as a propaganda resource, this strategy was not only followed during the 30’s but also exacerbated by New State’s “imperial mystique” and staged according to the occasions.

Several internal controversies were motivated by the representations at Seville, Antwerp and Vincennes, but the political message was clear: Portuguese overseas territories were parts of the same state and, therefore, sovereignty was unquestionable. However, much had to be done to both sustain that message abroad and indoctrinate metropolitan and native populations.

Portuguese imperial propaganda was, obviously, in close relation to the fast changing context of that era, when the Great Depression hit economies worldwide and uncertainty dominated international politics. Sure, the above-mentioned exhibitions’ presence was scheduled some time in advance but they were representative of the Portuguese military dictatorship’s priorities regarding foreign affairs.

Only after those charm operations in Spain, Belgium and France did the regime decide to organise the first (and only) Portuguese Colonial Exhibition. Held in Porto in 1934, it was defined by Armino Monteiro, then minister of the Colonies, as “the exercise of a sovereign faculty.”<sup>824</sup> And that stood both for external as for domestic purposes, considering Hitler’s and Mussolini’s already declared expansionist aspirations, white separatist claims in Angola, internal oppositions challenging and fighting the regime, and the general indifference or ignorance of Portuguese people about colonial matters.

Being the first big exhibition prepared by Salazar’s New State, although its meagre budget, it was intended to be a nationalist “lesson” and to operate as a cohesion factor. Once again, faith, empire and sovereignty were the pillars of a staged discourse that transformed Palácio de Cristal into an Art Deco inspired Palace of the Colonies and the surrounding gardens into a miniature of Portuguese overseas – where natives specially brought for the event provided the “realistic” animation in “typical” indigenous villages and added the exotic flavour, thus maintaining the old tradition of *human zoos* for European amusement.

With its relics, documents, books, artefacts, products, decorations and monumental allegories, Porto’s Colonial Exhibition was in line with the previous international representations and was also<sup>825</sup> directed by a colonialist: army captain Henrique Galvão, soon to be appointed director of National Radio (Emissora Nacional) and orchestrator of the Colonial Section and Imperial Pageant of the Portuguese World Exhibition in 1940, who would later become a regime dissident and lead the famous Santa Maria hijacking in 1961. Yet, at the heyday of the “imperial mystique”, Galvão was the man who organised the most powerful representation of Portuguese territories: the well-known map *Portugal is Not a Small Country*, simultaneously a didactic image and propaganda motto.

### **A new image for an old discourse**

Despite the key role of written and spoken word for the Portuguese regime, in a time when many couldn’t read and only a few could afford to buy a radio set image had a core importance in propaganda. Cinema and exhibitions were then certainly the most effective media, and not surprisingly they were both used complementarily: propaganda documentaries were shown at exhibitions, and exhibitions were registered on film to be later presented in movie theatres. The broader the audience, the more disseminated political and ideological messages could be.

Of course the impact of moving images was an important counterpart to the visual statements of photography, painting and sculpture, and that combination was recurrent in propaganda exhibitions like the ones above mentioned. However, only after António Ferro was designated secretary of National Propaganda and put to action his “Policy of the Spirit” became the use of visual discourse a coherent praxis. Not by chance, the first Portuguese political propaganda film was produced for the Paris International Exhibition, in 1937, the first time Ferro shaped a national representation at a major exhibition abroad. This film, titled *A Revolução de Maio* and directed by António Lopes Ribeiro (who co-wrote the script with Ferro), mingled fiction and real footage to tell the story of a communist’s conversion to the cause of the New State. It was an idyllic projection

<sup>823</sup> Main slogan of the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931.

<sup>824</sup> Armino Monteiro, preface to *Álbum Comemorativo da Primeira Exposição Colonial Portuguesa*, Porto: Litografia Nacional, 1934, pp.8-10.

<sup>825</sup> Army officer Silveira e Castro directed the Portuguese representations in Seville and Vincennes. The republican engineer and historian Armando Cortesão, by then in charge of colonial propaganda (at Agência Geral das Colónias) was responsible for the national representation in Antwerp.

of an idealised country, intended to soften the image of the dictatorship and to present Portugal as a stable player in a time when a global conflict was again on the horizon.

Being a right-wing dictatorship with close resemblances and relations to Hitler's and Mussolini's totalitarian regimes, the Portuguese New State couldn't, on the other hand, discard the vital importance of the old Anglo-Portuguese alliance. The risks were obvious. By then, the clash between left and right had already led to Spanish Civil War and Guernica. And the support given to the Spanish nationalist Falange could be tricky: Salazar knew that Iberism was still an aspiration for many republicans, as much as he knew that the Great Iberia unification was in Franco's plans.<sup>826</sup> With internal oppositions closing their ranks, the Portuguese dictator hardened both discourse and action. Violence, political arrests and deportations multiplied, and censorship tightened, while official anti-communist propaganda urged people to "defend the nation" and the Portuguese "order".

Paris International Exhibition of 1937 offered the opportunity to stage abroad that proclaimed "order" of the New State, but evidently in a composed tone. Formulating a seductive discourse that articulated images and words, António Ferro introduced there, though, a modernist enunciation that could hardly satisfy the orthodoxy of the regime.<sup>827</sup> On the outside, the national pavilion, projected by architect Keil do Amaral, combined modernist constructive elements with a bas-relief gallery of past heroes and strong visual symbols, such as the Portuguese coat of arms and the Order of Christ's Cross. Inside, only the present would have place under the tutelary figures of Salazar and President Carmona, represented by sculptures.

Large photomontage panels, slogans, diagrams, decorative paintings, all conveyed the message that the dictator's governance was a "contemporary work of art."<sup>828</sup> For that, Ferro relied on the artistic skills of his regular collaborators, among others, the painters Bernardo Marques, Fred Kradolfer, Dordio Gomes, Emmerico Nunes, Jorge Barradas and António Soares; sculptors Rui Gameiro, Canto da Maia, Barata Feio and Francisco Franco, and photographers Mário Novais and Domingos Alvão. That up-to-date version of the *Lusitanian House* set an iconic reconfiguration of facts addressed to the masses and international political leaders. Colonies occupied one room of the building and the map *Portugal is not a small country* was emphasized with depurated aesthetics. Slogans like "we have a doctrine and we are a force" punctuated the circuit in pure ideological rhetoric. But reactions were favourable. While Germany, the USSR, Italy and Spain staged in Paris a symbolic ideological confrontation, Portugal managed somehow to promote itself as an example and to present Salazar as the Professor dictator, thus marking the distance towards other authoritarianisms.

Meanwhile, in Lisbon, the Historical Exposition of the Occupation tried to demonstrate that even in adverse periods Portugal had always been able to reinvigorate its overseas legacy and keep sovereignty on its territories.<sup>829</sup> Organised by the Ministry of Colonies and set by an executive committee led by Júlio Cayola, this propaganda event relayed on documents and artworks to validate the premises of the Colonial Act, to which was dedicated an entire room. More than twenty artists collaborated in that visual narrative about the empire's genealogy, among them the modernist painters Fred Kradolfer (who conducted the works), Almada Negreiros, Mário Eloy, Sara Afonso and Estrela Faria; sculptors Hein Semke, Diogo de Macedo, Francisco Franco and Maximiliano Alves, and photographers Manuel San Payo, Mário Novais and António Duarte. From Discoveries navigators to the heroes of the nineteenth century African occupation, a continual lineage would lead, with no surprise, to Salazar and Carmona's regime.

On a political and propagandistic point of view, it should be underlined the parallel organisation of the first Congress on the History of Portuguese Expansion in the World, that gathered in Lisbon academics from several countries. On the aesthetic level, although Ferro had no direct interference in the Historical Exposition of the Occupation, its clear similarities to the national representation in Paris seem to demonstrate that there was, at least, an update of means, methods and techniques used by national propaganda when compared to the early 30's practices. In 1939 António Ferro was also responsible for the Portuguese pavilions at New York World's Fair and Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco, in which the main target audience were Portuguese emigrants. As such, anachronism and emotional rhetoric shaped those visual discourses, though the national sovereignty issue operated, once again, as the connective tissue.

Surely one of the most visible proclamations of that concern was the large-scale statue titled *Soberania* (Sovereignty), created by chief-architect Cottinelli Telmo and by sculptor Leopoldo de Almeida (the same authors of Padrão dos Descobrimentos), to be displayed outside the Portuguese in the World Pavilion during Lisbon's 1940 celebrations. Given the reality of World War II and all the menaces pending on Portuguese metropolitan borders and overseas territories – official "neutrality" was, in fact, a fragile position continuously manoeuvred both with Allies and Axis powers –, that statue could only have a symbolic meaning.

<sup>826</sup> Bernardo Futscher Pereira, *A Diplomacia de Salazar (1932-1949)*, Alfragide: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2012.

<sup>827</sup> Margarida Acciaiuoli, *Exposições do Estado Novo 1934-1940*, Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 1998.

<sup>828</sup> *Idem*, p.61.

<sup>829</sup> *Boletim Geral das Colónias*, vol.XVIII, n.º 150, Setembro 1937.

The Portuguese World Exhibition, as the general-director Augusto de Castro admitted, was a “city of illusions” erected to honor the dead and teach the living, as a testimony of “national consciousness.”<sup>830</sup> With its historical, ethnographic and colonial sections, its decorated pavilions, its congresses, solemn acts, parades and entertainment activities, no wonder it looked unreal to the eyes of a foreign visitor like Saint-Exupéry:

Lacking an army, lacking guns, [Portugal] had raised against the armaments of the invader all her sentinels of stone: poets, explorers, conquerors. Instead of soldiers and guns, all the past of Portugal blocked the way. Who would dare to crush her in her inheritance of so great a past?<sup>831</sup>

Even if sentinels were indeed made of metal, wood and plaster, the Portuguese World Exhibition left marks not only in the capital of the empire but also in the mythicised image that Portugal fabricated of itself. History took its course, the regime was overthrown three decades later and all those propaganda events became a part of the past, kept in books, films and old newspapers. Not without placing some navigators, princes and men of arts and sciences permanently anchored on the Tagus bank, on a limestone replica of their 1940’s modernist-style caravel.



Cover of the propaganda album *Portugal 1940* (Lisboa: SPN), with the statue *Soberania* at the Portuguese World Exhibition

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<sup>830</sup> Augusto de Castro, “Discurso inaugural da exposição em 23 de Junho de 1940”, in *A Exposição do Mundo Português e a sua Finalidade Nacional*, Lisboa: Empresa Nacional de Publicidade, 1940, pp.54-70.

<sup>831</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Letter to a Hostage*.

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