

António Manuel Hespanha and the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries¹

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Abstract

This paper presents the singular post-nationalist nature of the stance adopted by historian António Manuel Hespanha as the Commissioner-General of the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries (CNCDP) during the period 1996-1998.

Keywords

Portuguese discoveries, Commemorations, Post-nationalism.

Resumo

Apresenta-se a singularidade pós-nacionalista da orientação do historiador António Manuel Hespanha como comissário-geral para as Comemorações Nacionais dos Descobrimientos Portugueses (CNCDP) no período 1996-1998.

Palavras-chave

Descobrimientos portugueses, Comemorações, Pós-nacionalismo.

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As a historian, António Manuel Hespanha made extensive use of sources from the field of law and legal literature. However, unlike most “legal historians,” he used these sources as a starting point for the difficult task of identifying differences rather than repetitions in the field of human action. This is why he was considered to be a post-nationalist historian.

Like many others, I was pleasantly surprised in December 1995 to learn that he had been appointed as head of the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries (CNCDP) by the newly appointed prime minister António Guterres. Some commented at the time that the prime minister had diminished the political importance of the position by making such an appointment, while, at the same time, demonstrating to his fellow party members that he was free to choose for office whomsoever he wished. António Hespanha was an independent, without any links to the party that had just won the 1995 election. But the most interesting thing about this singular appointment was the novel stance adopted by the new head of the CNCDP, who offered us a new vision of history in the public sphere, both as a discipline and, above all, as a cultural domain.

The commission had been set up in 1988, being based on the traditional model for the organization of commemorations and largely inspired by the celebrations previously held in 1898 to mark the 400th anniversary of the Portuguese discovery of the sea route to India. Its political aim was to organize commemorations that would rival those being planned by Spain to mark the events of 1492, together with the holding of the Expo '92 World Exposition in Seville. The Portuguese celebrations thus involved the organization of events both at home and abroad to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the voyages of Vasco da Gama in 1497-98, and Pedro Álvares Cabral in 1500. Under Hespanha's predecessor, Graça Moura, the CNCDP had made its mark with the creation of the Portuguese pavilion at Seville in 1992 and the holding of its first art exhibitions. In the 1990s, it was a driving force for the development of new cultural activities in Portugal, providing funding for a range of projects and initiatives. António Hespanha's appointment was, nevertheless, an astonishing gesture, signaling a new direction in the organization of national commemorative events.³

Commemorating historical landmarks traditionally involves the celebration of individuals putting down roots, in other words, the process of validating their belonging to a group, which is the opposite of history, because the heroes that are being celebrated existed

³ António M. Hespanha reviewed his experience in “Comemorar como política pública. A comemoração dos Descobrimientos Portugueses, ciclo 1997-2000.” *Práticas da História, Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, No. 8 (2019): 198-220.

in the past, while the group lives on. The fascination with heroes is that they are always contemporary to a specific era, but commemorations are organized within the sphere of everyday pragmatic political activities and are designed to enthuse and animate crowds of people by glorifying “our” superior status.

The new CNCDP commissioner-general stated clearly: “according to common-sense culture, history represents above all continuity . . . a familiar narrative. From history we are supposed to receive a quasi-biological legacy, a material inheritance and a cultural framework; and we tend to assume that this heritage constitutes the structure for building our identity” (Hespanha, 1997: 5). However, rather than seeking to impose an alternative to traditional perspectives, that would be as well anachronistic and identitarian, Hespanha appealed to our sense of historical responsibility. He explained that “we are responsible for what we ourselves do in society today, at the national and international level. This is the sphere in which we must prove . . . the merit of our conduct.” He claimed, furthermore, that “the idea of historical accountability is not even morally very healthy,” recalling anti-Semitism and collective guilt, as well as the distracting role of historical reparation in the face of the manifestations of iniquity that we witness today. Hespanha dismissed this perspective, which was actually just as identitarian as it was nationalist, replicating it instead in its negative form, also founded on the ahistoricity of collective entities.

Hespanha’s aim was to introduce “a degree of rationality” (in his own words) into the “process of the formation of the political imagination.” Besides being an “intellectual enterprise,” writing the history of the Portuguese expansion requires a certain distancing from the events of the era. Yet, at the same time, as “a component of our present culture,” it serves to validate the images that those in Portugal and other countries currently have of the Portuguese identity. Introducing rationality could only “challenge the view of things that has been bequeathed to us, thus making this perspective difficult to take for granted.” In order to achieve this, we must not simply “add more information to the common sense argument,” but rather “add a layer of complexity by embracing new facts, new perspectives, and new assessments,” while also presenting such new perspectives as equally precarious as the previous ones. A new approach was therefore called for: “To promote a sound and thorough knowledge of the world of the Portuguese Discoveries and disseminate this knowledge effectively and dispassionately in today’s world” (Hespanha, 1996: 5).

“The great advantage of these celebrations” would be to “realign the relationship between Portugal and the rest of the world” in those places where there remained traces of the Portuguese presence or its influence on the arts, language, and the economy. Thus, the

celebrations could be regarded “as a valuable contribution in terms of an intelligent and open diplomacy.” To achieve this, they had to be all-embracing, without any hint of nostalgia, or *saudosismo* (Hespanha, 1996: 5). This was the ambitious plan that Hespanha devised in order to break away from the forms traditionally planned for such commemorative ventures and to adopt an innovative stance.

But the new style of diplomacy proposed by António M. Hespanha met with stiff opposition in the more conservative circles of the party of government, as well as in the sphere of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The prime minister's initially close involvement in the commission's work gradually began to diminish, and, when the commission presented its program for the celebrations of Vasco da Gama's voyage to India at the Jerónimos Monastery in Lisbon, Guterres did not even attend the event. Liaisons with the commemorative commission were now entrusted to junior members of the government, many of whom showed themselves to be indifferent or even hostile to its work.

Just over twenty years later, this period now seems to belong to the distant past. The appointment of historian António M. Hespanha to head the CNCDP also appears to have been just as improbable. During those years, it was believed likely that nationalistic pronouncements would be considered as the primary, “spontaneous” discourse of leaders and then gradually disappear, and it was thought possible that history as a discipline and a culture would increasingly be able to free itself from the traditionalist paradigm of the legitimacy of authority, cultural routine and social conformism. However, the debate in 2018 regarding plans for a new Museum of the Discoveries to be created in Lisbon revealed the depth of support for conventional mercantilist conservatism, even among those groups that had been expected to eschew it.

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