

Visual Criticality: Photography and Colonial Critical Infrastructure
(Angola and Mozambique, 1880s-1930s)

In the early 1880s, Portugal began the construction of railways in its colonies. The main goals were to reinforce Portuguese influence and to increase colonial revenues. In this paper, I analyse the railways built by Portugal in its colonies of Angola and Mozambique, between the 1880s and the 1930s, as critical infrastructure, following the theoretical framework provided by Engels (2018) and Högselius & al. (2013). I argue that the lack of railways in those domains fostered a sense of urgency, as it could jeopardise the Portuguese imperial project. Railways were considered critical to assert Portuguese sovereignty, to exploit local resources, and to attract traffic from neighbouring territories. Once built, the lines evinced two vulnerabilities: the competition of South-African harbours and the dependence on British capital. A few episodes involving Portuguese and British agents highlighted these vulnerabilities and motivated Portuguese policymakers to correct them. Additionally, I offer that photography was a key instrument to enhance the criticality of colonial railways (and the dangers of their absence) and to contain their vulnerabilities, both amongst Portuguese stakeholders and at an international level. I argue that, drawing from its alleged and fallacious objectivity, photography contributed to reinforce the symbolic role of imperial rail tracks and to underpin the ideology that Portugal possessed an imperial leaning such as other European colonial powers (cf. Ryan 1997). This paper balances between a literature review and the use of primary textual and visual sources to provide a novel approach to Portuguese colonial railways.

References:

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