

Commentary on António Manuel Hespanha, *Filhos da Terra: Identidades mestiças nos confins da expansão portuguesa*

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There are good reasons to applaud the publication of *Filhos da Terra*. Above all, António Manuel Hespanha was able to produce an amply documented critique of the still widespread notion that whenever the word “Portuguese” (*português*) appears in historical documents or local identity discourses today, it is an indicator of some sort of “genuine Portugueseness” having survived in a distant corner of the globe. A community officer once told me in Batticaloa, on the East Coast of Sri Lanka, “Please explain to your colleagues in Portugal that we are Portuguese Burghers, not Portuguese.” *Filhos da Terra* brings us all closer to understanding what this apparently paradoxical turn of phrase may mean. Hespanha also makes a laudable effort to place the countless semi-informal communities in what is often referred to as the “shadow empire,” and which grew beyond the official imperial sphere, where they belong: at the intersection between European and non-European societies, grounded in age-old practices of “chthonic” (Hespanha 2019: 14, 254) community-building, far from Crown control and the grandiloquence of the chronicles.

Last but not least, *Filhos da Terra* offers a brief but powerful critique of recent attempts at fashioning the Portuguese empire as a pioneer in abolitionism and human rights advocacy. Such propositions are outlandish and, as Hespanha rightly points out, at odds with everything we know about Iberian expansion. While some people in the Portuguese empire certainly did defend the rights of certain non-white groups, the intellectual and practical impact of such activities was, overall, “extremely weak” (*debilíssimo*) (Hespanha 2019: 297).

This being said, *Filhos da Terra* is also a deeply problematic book. It has been packaged as that most desirable and least attainable of things: a bottom-up, revisionist synthesis. In reality, however, it is very much a personal notebook and a testimony to Hespanha’s own process of discovering and working through some of the vast literature on the topic. It could have been, but is not, a pathbreaking classic. Hespanha thrived on being counter-intuitive, contrarian, even polemic. He picked his fights well when it came to dismantling the myth of the early absolutist state in Portugal and Spain, and will be remembered as a great historian in that regard. But his political orthodoxy also impeded him from engaging equally rigorously

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elsewhere. His incursions into imperial or expansion history were always hampered by his profound dislike of people working in the field, while his preface to a thematic issue of the journal *Oceanos* on the Renaissance chronicler João de Barros (Hespanha 1996: 5) is a good example of how difficult he found it to dialogue with a community he himself considered to be inherently reactionary. Even as he headed the very institution created to commemorate the Portuguese “discoveries,” he could not appreciate the complex oeuvre of Barros as anything else than imperial propaganda.

This militant unease runs through *Filhos da Terra*, too, and undermines it. To be sure, Hespanha was right to feel apprehensive about certain continuities between the scholarship produced under the *Estado Novo* and that produced after 1974 in a field still known in Portugal as *História dos Descobrimentos e da Expansão*. But this critical spirit also blinded him to his colleagues’ innovations. Luís Filipe Thomaz, the person who has contributed most forcefully to the reinvigoration of expansion history in Portugal since the 1980s, is the *bête noire* with whom Hespanha wrestles in many passages of *Filhos da Terra*. On page 32, for example, he refers, accusingly, to an emphasis on informal empire, as present in much of Thomaz’s work, as amounting to a claim for Portuguese exceptionalism (a key trope in Salazar’s imperial propaganda). On page 34, meanwhile, the connection with Gilberto Freyre, the Brazilian Luso-tropicalist scholar instrumentalized by the *Estado Novo*, is made almost explicit. But painting Thomaz simply as a reactionary representative of the old imperial order is to miss a crucial point.

Confusingly perhaps for Hespanha, Thomaz, the Catholic (today Moldovan Orthodox), anti-Marxist historian of Portuguese imperial ideas and courtly factionalism, has also produced and helped develop, as a multilingually operating, globally connected historian of cross-cultural interactions, some of the most cosmopolitan and sophisticated history ever written in Portugal. *Filhos da Terra* reveals a total failure to acknowledge the achievements of this new historiography known as *História Luso-Asiática*. Rooted in the scholarship of Denys Lombard, Geneviève Bouchon and Jean Aubin developed in France in the 1970s-80s, the study of Luso-Asian history contributed in the 1990s – as Thomaz’s ideas percolated into Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s game-changing work – to the emergence of what is now referred to internationally as global connected history. This, along with the critical school of *Ancien Régime* institutional and legal history headed by Hespanha, is one of only two internationally relevant innovations in post-revolutionary Portuguese historiography – and arguably the only one to have achieved a genuinely global impact. Its boldest proposition and greatest achievement have been precisely to reframe what had been referred to as “Portuguese”

materials by placing them firmly in the context of non-European archives and societies, and thus opening the gates to an entirely new historiography of cross-cultural interactions. The most frequently cited of Thomaz's conceptual interventions, the somewhat bland notion that the empire was a "network," sits on top of a much wider, deeper and more strikingly innovative way of transforming things once considered "Portuguese" into critically re-centered aspects of local, regional and global processes far beyond the Eurocentric notions still at work in Hespanha's own oeuvre. *Filhos da Terra* contains musings, for example, on Goans' supposed obsession with social status and its symbolic representation in public life, yet it does not even seem to have occurred to the author that Indian society, too, may have contributed to such a culture. By contrast, a Luso-Asian take on Goan history treats the territory as a part of South India profoundly intertwined with everything that was going on across the Deccan sultanates, the empire of Vijayanagara, the kingdoms surrounding it, and the Mughal empire emerging further north. Such connections are almost entirely absent from *Filhos da Terra*.

This is strange in that the focus on the chthonic nature of "Portuguese" communities around the edges of the empire could have brought Hespanha into close proximity to the ideas developed by Luso-Asian historians. Yet the transcultural, transimperial dimension of the latter is largely missing from *Filhos da Terra*. Although the exact reasons for this could be debated, the patchy critical apparatus of the book suggests that Hespanha may not have tried very hard to understand the ideas shaping the field he set out to critique. Although tracing George Winus' expression "shadow empire" (Hespanha 2019: 14) to the year 1991 (rather than to 1983, when it was coined) may seem like a minor mistake, it nevertheless exposes a wider lack of understanding of how this historiography evolved. Similarly, the erroneous attribution (Hespanha 2019: 319) of *O Domínio do Norte de Samatra*, an exemplary study of the Acehnese polity based on Portuguese and Malay sources by Jorge dos Santos Alves (Alves 1999; cf. Lobato 1999), to Manuel Lobato suggests a limited interest in engaging with the work of colleagues. The accusation that "some recent historiography" considers the so-called Portuguese communities of places such as Cacheu, Hughly, Patani or Makassar as "informal extensions of the formal empire," and that their study amounts to nothing but "a social history of expansion," does not sit comfortably with what those studies argue (Hespanha 2019: 17, 40). Finally, the notion that the Luso-Asian school has done nothing more than produce monographs on "the Portuguese in..." (Hespanha 2019: 25), thus justifying Hespanha's own incursion as a supra-regional scholar into the critical study of frontier communities, really prompts one to ask how much of the literature the author had read at

all. It is of course true, as Hespanha contends, that most Luso-Asian studies have had a spatially defined focus (on North India, South India, Sri Lanka, Bengal, Arrakan, Pegu, Siam, Cochinchina, Aceh, Melaka, Maluku, Fujian or Ryukyu, for example). But that is precisely because each of those studies pushed the boundaries of what used to be referred to as “Portuguese expansion history” by combining the use of materials written in Portuguese with area studies literature and, when possible, non-European (i.e., Persian, Malay and Chinese, for example) sources to throw light on local and regional historical processes.

Luso-Asian historiography explains the successes and failures of Portuguese “presences” in Asia by examining the ways they functioned in those local contexts, far from the metropolitan processes that Hespanha himself spent much of his life working on. The Hughly and Macao studied by Jorge Flores (Flores 2002a, 2002b), the Malay ports studied by Jorge dos Santos Alves and Paulo Sousa Pinto (Alves 1999; Pinto 1997), the Kolamba and Kannur studied by this commentator (Biedermann 2014) – they are all consciously and deeply embedded in non-Portuguese structures explored with the help of non-Lusitanist scholarship. The whole point of Luso-Asian history and much of the “connected history,” especially in the Asian sphere, has been to re-center the analysis on the societies to which the Portuguese came and to understand why and how these societies integrated the newcomers into their own worlds. That this may at times appear to resonate with Luso-tropical ideas on the innate ability of “the Portuguese” to adapt to the tropics is true. The point can also be made that an excessive emphasis on connectivity and integration has sometimes come with a certain blindness to violent conflict. We must indeed be ruthless when it comes to unmasking rose-colored readings of the past for what they are: attempts by reactionary forces today to legitimize the social and political legacies of empire. But we must also be rigorous in our engagement with all serious and innovative scholarship, regardless of whether it comes from a corner of academia we inherently like, or a corner we dislike. When it came to going global, António Manuel Hespanha ended up becoming a victim of the very politics that first propelled him to glory in Europe.

Much will depend over the coming years on our willingness to engage with the works of both Hespanha and Thomaz, and on our ability to foment dialogues across the battle lines imagined in *Filhos da Terra*. While we should not, of course, depoliticize the field (Biedermann 2021), there is outstanding scholarship on all sides, and some of the best has emerged precisely where academic cultures intersect, such as in the work on Goa carried out by Catarina Madeira Santos and Ângela Barreto Xavier (Santos 1999; Xavier 2008). Whichever region we work on, a combination of ideas formulated by Hespanha and Thomaz can take

us a long way into new intellectual territory. It is always salutary, therefore, to keep questioning one's own orthodoxy even as one sets out to challenge the status quo created by others. To innovate is to combine methods and build bridges. Hespanha's final book could have been a foundational one – he was an intellectual giant, and perhaps with more time he could have achieved the revisionist synthesis it was his ambition to write. We can pay homage to him by learning from his failure and, rather than reproducing old schisms, propelling ourselves forward together. Where Portuguese historiography has been most cosmopolitan, it has sometimes lacked critical incisiveness. And where it has been at its critical best, it has lacked transcultural ambition. We could all benefit, therefore, from trying to combine the best of both worlds. Future generations might then remember us for our courage in attempting to be critical of past and present power imbalances in a genuinely cosmopolitan way.

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