



RECENSÃO

*Lisboa e a Memória do Império:
Património, Museus e Espaço Público,*
de Elsa Peralta,
por Jonas Prinzleve

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EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa. Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9
1600-189 Lisboa Portugal — analise.social@ics.ul.pt

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PERALTA, Elsa

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Jonas Prinzleve

In recent decades a proliferation of interest in memory studies has coincided with growing debates over the colonial past of Europe and its multiple repercussions. Unfortunately, and despite often overlapping themes and methodologies, the two fields of memory studies and postcolonial studies have developed relatively separate from each other (Rothberg, 2013). Elsa Peralta's book, a collection of previously published essays, is a rare example of research that brings them closer to each other. It critically connects the two research strands by investigating commemorative representations of public places in the city of Lisbon, exposing how a celebration of the country's imperial past continues to be central to cultural memory production in Portugal. Published in 2017, the book has received due recognition among a small but growing scene of Portuguese scholars and cultural practitioners who integrate a critical postcolonial perspective within their own work. With an English translation still forthcoming, the book is a landmark in the debate on cultural memory production in postcolonial Portugal, a context that has not received the international scholarly attention it deserves, considering

the country's ambiguous position in postcolonial Europe, as it is discussed in Peralta's work.

Often considered the "last colonizer", Portugal's fascist dictatorship lasted until 1974. Provoked by colonial resistance wars, its ending resulted in the country's democratization and finally in the loss of its colonies. Yet, the end of the so called *Estado Novo* ("New State") did not signify a break with a deeply inscribed pride-taking in the history of Portuguese empire, which for centuries had been a main source for the construction of national identity. Instead, Peralta shows that throughout the last decades, cultural memory production continues to rely on a discursive nexus of nation and empire, however adapted and reinterpreted to fit a *Zeitgeist* of cosmopolitan and multicultural values. Peralta's book historicizes the constant reinterpretation and reconfiguration of Portuguese celebration of empire, noting a continuous absence of critical, public reflection on the violence of slavery and colonialism that Portugal was involved in. The book's common thread is this: despite reconfigurations according to national political interest, a commemorative discourse of empire

has been a constant in modern Portuguese history, and Lisbon has been its center stage until today. To arrive here, Peralta provides us with five chapters that include a summary of the history of Portuguese memory of empire, an analysis of the spatial configurations of the national historical district of Belém in Lisbon, a reading of the Museum of the Orient and its exhibition on Portuguese Orientalism, an examination of empire discourse as a touristic marketing strategy, and lastly an interpretation of Lisbon's Monument to the Overseas Combatants.

The first chapter, entitled "Fictions and Myths of the Imperial Nation"¹ shows how the historical period of the 15th and 16th century, i. e. the first wave of European global expansion, was appropriated first by the Portuguese monarchy, later by the government of the 1st Republic, and lastly by the following fascist dictatorship as a source for constructing and propagating national identity. Peralta investigates how the two centuries during which Portugal contributed significantly to the growth of maritime trading routes were re-invented as the "Golden Age of the Discoveries" (p. 39), with protagonists such as Vasco da Gama becoming heroic figures. More interestingly perhaps, Peralta brings to the fore the political motivation behind this "sacralization of heritage" (ibid), which served as a legitimization for later attempts at global

expansion and conquest. Peralta skillfully traces this paradigm through the periods of colonization of Brazil and the trading of enslaved Africans, through Portugal's participation in the "Scramble for Africa", and through the military colonization of African territory by the *Estado Novo*.

The first chapter covers two central particularities of the Portuguese case: the first is the pseudo-scientific concept of "luso-tropicalismo" by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (p. 52), which proclaims a harmonic and multicultural unity of Portuguese metropolis and colonies. Used to legitimize and prolong Portuguese colonialism, the doctrine and its myth – Portugal as the good colonizer – have been scientifically disproven just as vigorously as they remain influential in national self-understanding. The second particularity is the idea of a Portuguese "inter-identity." Portugal holds a long legacy of relative dependency and marginalization by European powers such as Spain, England, and the Netherlands (p. 55). Controversially, Portugal is diagnosed with a double-condition, as both colonizer *and* colonized, the latter at least metaphorically (see also Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Between Prospero and Caliban: Colonialism, Postcolonialism and Inter-identity", which is not cited in the book). This double-condition contributed to the spread of the idea of "luso-tropicalismo." The *Estado Novo* had no difficulty in portraying European colonial powers as heinous colonizers, while falsely proclaiming Portuguese

1 All translations from the original Portuguese are my own.

colonialism to be different, pacific, and non-racist. A famous example is the renaming of the Portuguese colonies into “overseas territories”, a euphemism meant to preserve the empire despite colonialism being proscribed by the UN during the 1960s.

Chapter two shows how the myths of empire are “paradigmatically inscribed” (p. 65) in Belém, a historical district west of the Lisbon city center. Peralta examines the architectural components of different historical periods including the Jerónimos Monastery, the Tower of Belém, the Square of the Empire and its surrounding gardens, and the Monument of the Discoveries. All charged with memory of empire, these are assembled to construct a “memory complex” (ibid) that tells Portugal’s national epos of modernity and empire.

Chapter three maps Lisbon’s museums from a postcolonial perspective, providing insights on collections and exhibitions of the Military Museum, the Navy Museum, the Museum of Ancient Art, and the Museum of Ethnology. Peralta reveals how different artefacts and narratives that commemorate and celebrate empire are dispersed across Lisbon’s museum-landscape. On the basis of a theorization of the museum as an affective space, the second part of the chapter focuses on a permanent exhibition in the Museum of the Orient, “Portuguese Presence in Asia” (p. 132 ff.), showing how its assembled objects, paintings, and poetry create “the Orient” as a mystical, distant, and utopian space.

The fourth chapter discusses the relationship between tourism, marketing and public heritage management. Building on the assumption that the afterlife of empire is condensed in images and imaginative figures such as “seafarers” and “discoverers”, Peralta looks at how touristic experiences of Portugal and Lisbon are premediated through travel guides, photographs, and sight descriptions. Using as examples the World Exhibition 1998 (Expo’98), the 2007 national tourism campaign *Portugal: Europe’s West Coast*, and two exhibitions of the Museum of Ancient Art, Peralta traces contemporary forms of “repackaging” of empire that advertise Lisbon in a competitive, global tourism market.

The last chapter returns to the district of Belém to interpret the Monument to the Overseas Combatants. Inaugurated in 1994, the monument commemorates Portuguese soldiers who fell during Portugal’s colonial wars between 1961 and 1975. Examining the monument, its surrounding plaques, and its inauguration performance, Peralta finds two central functions. The monument signals the end of the colonial empire, “building a temporal frontier between the colonial past and the postcolonial present” (p. 178), while simultaneously attempting to alleviate the hurtful truth of loss of empire by dissolving it in an exaltation of the nation. Peralta shows how the deaths of the fallen soldiers are “sacralized” and de-historicized, as they transcend into the image of the fallen combatant, who in turn transcends into the collective of the Portuguese people (p. 194).

In sum, the book provides an account of the specificities of Portugal's culture of empire and how it effects the country's state-funded memory production. Illustrating Portugal's (post-) colonial position, Peralta reminds us of the diversity of strategies of institutional dealing with difficult colonial pasts in Europe. The book only briefly mentions the growing cultural and academic opposition against a linear commemoration of empire, yet its findings arguably make it an example of such resistance in its own right. In addition to the amply cited theoretical literature from the Anglophone context, Peralta's argument could benefit from additional historical references on Portuguese colonialism to underscore even further the paradoxes of national commemoration of empire.

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Jonas Prinzleve » jonas.prinzleve@campus.ul.pt » International FCT PhD Programme in Comparative Studies (PhD-COMP), Centro de Estudos Comparatistas, Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa » Alameda da Universidade — 1600-214 Lisboa, Portugal » <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9581-9590>.
