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CONGRESSO INTERNACIONAL

<https://tourismheritage.wixsite.com/2026>

Keynotes

Mike Robinson
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CHAM - Centro de Humanidades: Universidade NOVA Lisboa e Universidade dos Açores

ARTIS - Instituto de História de Arte, Universidade Lisboa

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COLONIAL HERITAGE ON DISPLAY: TOURISM, LEISURE AND THE MAKING OF *ESTADO NOVO* IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

As with similar political paradigms in the early twentieth century, the Portuguese *Estado Novo* - an autocratic regime in force between 1933 and 1974 - grounded its legitimacy, as well as that of its leadership, particularly António de Oliveira Salazar, in the existence of a transcontinental empire. This empire, articulated through cultural heritage and symbolic representations, was mobilised to project notions of national authenticity and historical continuity. Within this framework, this chapter examines how colonial cultural heritage was instrumentalised by propaganda agencies led by António Ferro as a means of indoctrinating the population in contexts associated with tourism and leisure - that is, in spaces where the exercise of power was not overtly anticipated. The First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition (Oporto, 1934) and the Exhibition of the Portuguese World (Lisbon, 1940) are analysed as case studies to demonstrate how colonial heritage functioned as a vehicle for disseminating and legitimising the ideology of Salazar.

Keywords

Colonial heritage, Tourism, Leisure, Propaganda, Estado Novo

1. Cultural Heritage, Autocracies and Legitimisations

Cultural heritage constitutes a key resource in the construction of collective identities and memories and thus serves as a powerful instrument for the validation and dissemination of “imagined communities”, as conceptualised by Benedict Anderson (2006). This tends to occur in tourist and political narratives, particularly within autocratic contexts. Building on this premise, this article reflects on the ways in which the Portuguese *Estado Novo* - an autocratic regime established under António de Oliveira Salazar and in force between 1933 and 1974 - mobilised representations of colonial heritage to construct and consolidate its propaganda apparatus, with particular emphasis on spaces of tourism and leisure during the regime’s first decade.

As Santos Silva (2024, p.10) observes, the foundations of any political regime are closely tied to the ways in which the nation is defined, how national identity is constructed, and which historical narratives are mobilised. Similarly, Anderson (1983, p.181) argues that monumental heritage - often intertwined with tourism - enabled the state to present itself as the guardian of both local and generalised traditions. Elements such as legends, castles, cultural landscapes, and gastronomy are mobilised to convey ostensibly unquestionable narratives which are, on the one hand, presumed to be intrinsically known by all members of a given community, and, on the other, presented as emblematic ‘postcards’ for external audiences.

As mentioned before, the notion of “imagined communities”, as conceptualised by Anderson (1983), encapsulates a model of community frequently celebrated in both political and tourist discourses. Within this framework, heritage functions as a cohesive force, binding individuals who are presumed to share common traditions and comparable understandings of the past and the present in ways that distinguish them from outsiders. In this sense, heritage appears to offer both community members and visitors an experience of authenticity, intended “to evoke an emotional response that serves to elicit empathy and moral engagement with the historical events and actors portrayed” (Falcucci, 2021, p.115), thereby reinforcing and validating collective identities.

Autocratic political regimes, even more so than democratic systems, have historically regarded both tangible and intangible heritage as particularly effective instruments for legitimising constructed notions of identity, as well as the authority of regimes and their leaders. In the early decades of the twentieth century, regimes such as Fascist Italy,

Francoist Spain, and the Portuguese *Estado Novo* under Salazar invested heavily not only in the preservation of inherited heritage, but also in the production of new tangible heritage and the revival of intangible practices. The former functioned as a means of validation, while the latter operated as a vehicle for the projection of future national memory. This was a period in which heritage frequently served to delineate and exclude, rather than to unite - an understanding later challenged by the principles articulated in the Council of Europe's Faro Convention (2005).

Moreover, given the relatively low levels of literacy in the early twentieth century, the immediacy and perceived authenticity of heritage rendered it a particularly effective medium for ideological transmission. Cultural artefacts, as Anderson (1983) suggests, carry a strong emotional legitimacy, enabling heritage not only to represent identities but actively to construct them (Falcucci, 2021). In this sense, heritage functioned simultaneously as a medium of education, persuasion, and ideological conditioning.

2. The Portuguese Estado Novo: Propaganda, Empire and the “Politics of the Spirit”

Two illustrative examples - though not directly related to colonial heritage - demonstrate how the *Estado Novo* mobilised cultural narratives to legitimise authority and reinforce national identity.

In December 1932, the nation was presented with what was framed as compelling evidence of its historical continuity when the director of the National Museum of Ancient Art, José de Figueiredo, published a newspaper article suggesting that a likeness of António de Oliveira Salazar could be identified in the fifteenth-century *Saint Vincent Panels*, attributed to Nuno Gonçalves. This interpretation was received as a form of prefiguration, particularly as the depicted figure appeared to be associated with financial affairs, mirroring Salazar's own background.

A few years later, in 1938, the regime launched a national competition aimed at identifying the “most Portuguese village”, defined as the settlement least influenced by external elements. In practice, this criterion corresponded to conditions of relative isolation and economic deprivation. Participating villages were encouraged to showcase both their tangible and intangible heritage in order to demonstrate an essentialised form of “Portugueseness”, embedded in their cultural expressions and everyday practices.

These are clear examples of propaganda which illustrate how it intends to “indoctrinate audiences, to persuade them to act in certain ways, to adopt behaviours that would then spread generally through proselytising and imitation” (Serra et alia, 2024, p.281). In the aforementioned cases, images, cultural heritage and ways of living were used to provide credibility and to convince viewers of an unquestionable version of history.

Still on this same issue, Pierre Bourdieu (1989) tells us that we just need

to know how to uncover [power] where it is least visible, where it is most completely ignored and therefore recognised: symbolic power is, in effect, that invisible power which can only be exercised with the complicity of those who do not wish to know that they are subject to it, or even that they themselves exercise it (pp.7-8).

Ideological propaganda is most potent when conveyed subtly and without overt commitment, in settings where its presence is least expected - such as environments associated with tourism and leisure, which are expected to be relaxed, informal, and removed from centres of power.

A central tenet of *Estado Novo* was grounded in the belief in an empire whose geography was intended to convey the vastness of a renewed “Portugueseness”, as illustrated by the following map, entitled “Portugal is not a small country”, produced by Henrique Galvão for the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition with the intention of illustrating how vast the whole Portuguese nation was as a result of the colonial territories, dramatically based in European grounds.

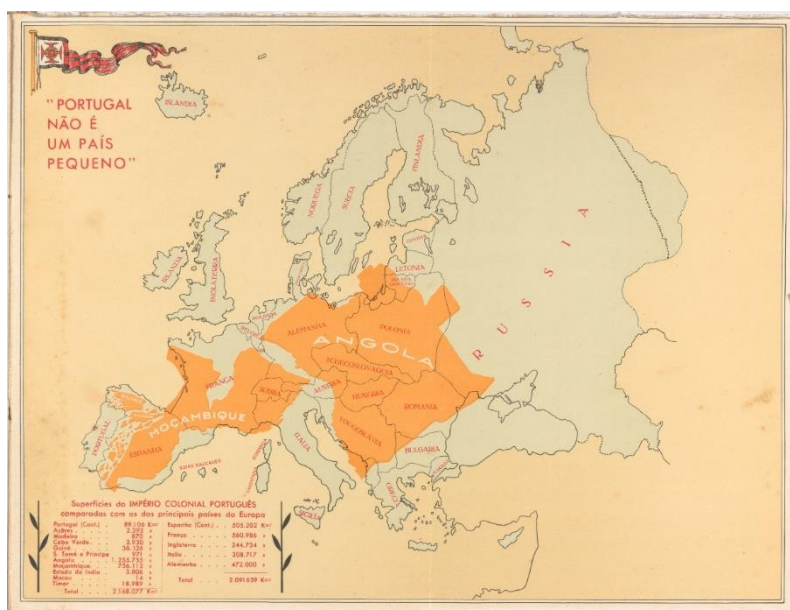


Figure 1. “Portugal Não É Um País Pequeno”.

Source: Cornell University Library. Persuasive Cartography: The PJ Mode Collection. ID Number: 1237.01. File Name: PJM_1237_01.jpg

Actually, maps were presented as self-evident representations of this enormity, capable of communicating such a message even to those unable to read, thereby reinforcing how authoritarian states acknowledged empires as exhibits of glory, pride and responsibility (Santos Silva, 2024).

Alongside developments in the Portuguese metropolis, a substantial programme of architectural restoration was undertaken, which included a “systematic survey and listing of colonial cultural heritage assets” (Jerónimo & Rossa, 2022, p.14). Santos Silva argues that “national cultural heritage was thus constituted as a canon elaborated by state agencies (...) in accordance with the political principles and needs of the dictatorship” (Santos Silva, 2024, p.10). The principal figure behind the propaganda apparatus of the *Estado Novo* during the first sixteen years of the regime was António Ferro, who headed both the National Agency for Propaganda (SPN) and the National Agency for Information, Popular Culture and Tourism (SNI). These agencies implemented a wide range of initiatives aimed at constructing and disseminating a new image of the nation, in which empire and heritage played central roles.

In November 1932, Ferro published an article in which he elaborated on the importance of culture in general, and of heritage in particular - the so-called “Politics of the Spirit”. Referring to countries such as Italy, Germany, England, or France, Ferro emphasised the importance of attending to what he termed “the issues of the spirit”: the various forms of

artistic expression, which should not be regarded as a “mere dessert of social life”. Cultural development, he argued, was as vital as science or industry, insofar as it enhanced both domestic cohesion and international prestige. The “Politics of the Spirit” would become a key reference point and justification for the initiatives developed by both propaganda agencies, also encompassing colonial cultural representations and heritage.

3. The First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition (1934)

As per Falcucci, “the materiality of the Empire was exhibited in a plurality of spaces, promoting a more decentralised gaze” (Falcucci, 2021, p.116), resulting, in the case of the Portuguese *Estado Novo*, in a form of ideological indoctrination disguised as tourism or leisure, as illustrated in the examples that follow.



Figure 2. The cover of the catalogue of the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition.
Source: Hemeroteca Digital¹

The first one is the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition, held in Oporto in 1934. Henrique Galvão, a former supporter of Salazar who later became one of the most prominent opponents of the Portuguese *Estado Novo*, was an experienced military officer involved in several initiatives related to the colonies, and served as the technical director

¹ Available at https://hemerotecadigital.cm-lisboa.pt/RaridadesBibliograficas/OlImperioPortugues/OlImperioPortugues_item1/index.html

of this event, which drew on similar events previously organised in Marseille (1922), Antwerp (1930), and Paris (1931) and for which he projected the abovementioned map “Portugal Não É Um País Pequeno”.

The exhibition was presented as the “first major act of colonial propaganda in the metropolis”, intended to raise awareness of the geographical and spiritual significance of the colonies, as Galvão stated in the official exhibition catalogue. It received extensive press coverage and at the opening ceremony Salazar reinforced the idea that the event constituted a tribute to both past and present colonisers.

Within the exhibition grounds, visitors had the opportunity to explore inhabited indigenous villages representing the ambiances in the various Portuguese colonies, as well as replicas of colonial monuments. The official catalogue provided comprehensive information about the colonies located in Africa, Macau and India² through narratives that could readily be interpreted as forms of tourist promotion, highlighting heritage and so-called traditional local representations in the colonies.

As noted, the narratives on display combined propaganda with forms of tourist storytelling, through the exhibition of both tangible and intangible heritage, including crafts, gastronomy, and traditions. This event constituted a significant official attempt to inscribe a colonial history - constructed through narratives, images, and memories - into the national identity based on a carefully prepared itinerary for the visit.³

4. The Exhibition of the Portuguese World (1940)

A comparable initiative took place a few years later at the *Exhibition of the Portuguese World* in 1940, arguably the most iconic representation of the Double Centenary, which evoked both the foundation of the nation (1140) and the restoration of independence from Spain (1640). The exhibition was held in Belém, a highly symbolic area that includes the Belém Tower and the Jerónimos Monastery, in close proximity to the Colonial Garden. Paris had been invaded by the Nazis only a few days earlier, which heightened the importance of these commemorations as a propagandistic tool that, among other aims, “staged the Portuguese nation as historically destined for imperial greatness” (Sapega, 2008, p.3).

² Available at https://hemerotecadigital.cm-lisboa.pt/RaridadesBibliograficas/OImperioPortugues/OImperioPortugues_item1/P1.html

³ Available at https://hemerotecadigital.cm-lisboa.pt/RaridadesBibliograficas/OImperioPortugues/OImperioPortugues_item1/P428.html



Figure 3. Exposição do Mundo Português.

Source: Biblioteca Nacional Digital⁴

This map shows, at its centre, the Empire Square, a designation that remains in use today. Number 7 corresponds to the Colonial Section, which showcased the cultures and traditions of the various peoples that constituted the vast Portuguese Empire, from Africa to Timor. The displays included replicas of African huts, colourful Indian settings, and bustling streets representing Macau. The Colonial Section also featured monuments dedicated to the empire, a colonial restaurant, and a broadcasting station that played so-called exotic music.

As noted by Sapega, “the events surrounding the *duplo centenário* sought to extend the boundaries of the populace’s imagination to include the residents of Portugal’s African and Asian colonies” (Sapega, 2008, p.23). This exhibition, in particular, highlighted the perceived greatness and diversity of Portugal under the leadership of Salazar, encompassing not only the European mainland but also a so-called empire that projected a Portuguese essence across other continents.

As in the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition, individuals from the colonies were brought to the metropolis to lead ostensibly “normal” lives and to be observed by visitors attending the Exhibition of the Portuguese World. In this way, they served “as the living proof that the Portuguese constituted a universal race that was historically destined to carry out overseas expansion” (Sapega, 2008, pp.26-27). One may therefore concur with Sapega that “the colonial section [was] conceived as much to provide visitors with an entertaining

⁴ Guia oficial/Exposição do Mundo Português. -: s.n.], 1940. - [1] mapa desdob.: il.; 22. Available at [cmhttps://permalinkbnd.bnportugal.gov.pt/records/item/14434-guia-oficial](https://permalinkbnd.bnportugal.gov.pt/records/item/14434-guia-oficial)

spectacle as to contribute to their educational or moral enlightenment” (Sapega, 2008, p.40), or spiritual development, as Ferro would put it, at a time when “it became necessary to show the empire to the Portuguese public and to legitimate it” (Castro, 2017, p.175).

5. End of Tour

In both cases - the First Portuguese Colonial Exhibition and the Exhibition of the Portuguese World - there was no explicit intention for these to function as tourist or leisure events. Nevertheless, the populace was encouraged to visit them, which they did in large numbers. Besides, the event of Lisbon, in particular, resulted in a significant development of tourist infrastructures, including improvements to the public transport network as well as the building of monuments or lodging structures that still exist and used by the tourist sector nowadays.

Colonial heritage was mobilised to naturalise the political structures and ideology of *Estado Novo*, including within tourism and leisure settings where propaganda mechanisms might be considered less prevalent. Within the framework of the Politics of the Spirit, both propaganda agencies, headed by Ferro, promoted encounters between different cultural heritages - namely the colonial and the Portuguese - in order to emphasise the perceived vastness of Portugal and to illustrate a notion of Portugueseness composed of diverse peoples and cultures. In this sense, Sapega’s assertion that “colonial heritage helped redefine the Portuguese collective identity” (Sapega, 2008, p.3) is particularly valid, as visual and experiential forms of representation are due to reinforce what is seen as self-evident and unquestionable. Or as Castro argued, “in the case of Portugal there was a sacralisation of the empire capable of firmly seeding within the minds of the Portuguese people an ancestral, and therefore legitimate, idea of ownership” (Castro, 2017, p.166).

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