



**HAL**  
open science

## Colonial legacies in comparative perspective: a view from Portugal

Benoît de L'Estoile

► **To cite this version:**

Benoît de L'Estoile. Colonial legacies in comparative perspective: a view from Portugal. Peralta, Elsa and Nuno Domingos. Legacies of the Portuguese Colonial Empire: Nationalism, Popular Culture and Citizenship, Bloomsbury, In press, 9781350289796. halshs-03925122

**HAL Id: halshs-03925122**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03925122>**

Submitted on 5 Jan 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Benoît de L'Estoile

## Foreword

### Colonial legacies in comparative perspective: a view from Portugal\*

After visiting the Monastery of the Jeronimos or the Tower of Belem, along the Tage river in Lisbon, two luxuriant instances of Manueline architecture, built in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century in the wake of Portuguese expansion overseas, tourists and locals throng in the traditional pastry-house *Pastelaria de Belem* to savour its famous *pasteis de nata* (custard tarts); on every table, cinammon is available to pepper the *pasteis*. This gesture reactivates the quest of Portuguese sailors conquering the maritime Road to India to bring back to Europe coveted spices such as *Cinnamomum verum*, originally from Sri Lanka. On leaving the *pastelaria*, visitors may stroll in the nearby Tropical Botanical Garden, the former Colonial Garden created in 1906 to host species originating from the Portuguese colonies on various continents. Cinammon, as well as coffee, chocolate, tea, and sugar, have been so much part of European daily life for centuries that we fail to perceive them as colonial legacies, together with various other materialities, architectural, botanical and edible.

The present volume offers a welcome critical take at the conspicuous, although sometimes unacknowledged, presence of imperial legacies in various areas of today's Portugal, from music to language to work relationships, urban policies, migrations, cultural diversity, memory and history, but also in popular culture, be it in central historical neighborhoods or the shantytowns of Lisbon's periphery to the planes of Portuguese national airlines.

As stated in the introduction, Elsa Peralta, Nuno Domingos and other contributors to this volume have creatively appropriated a research program on "colonial legacies" which I outlined more than a decade ago. Back then, drawing on Malinowski's insight to study "the past as it lives now", I called for developing an "anthropology of colonial legacies", inviting to explore the multiple forms, conscious or not, in which the colonial past is part of our present. I ended my essay expressing the hope that a research program on "colonial legacies" could "open up fruitful avenues for inquiry on 'the past as it lives now', including (...) comparative research on the various ways of dealing with colonial legacies, in former imperial capitals or in former colonial peripheries" (de L'Estoile 2008: 277). The present volume, of which most chapters focus on the Greater Lisbon, offers a substantial contribution to such a research program. It is

---

\* To be published in Peralta, Elsa and Nuno Domingos (eds.) 2023. *Legacies of the Portuguese Colonial Empire: Nationalism, Popular Culture and Citizenship*. NY: Bloomsbury.

beyond the scope of a foreword to undertake such an analysis, but I would like to highlight how the Portuguese case offers a privileged case to study “colonial legacies” in a comparative perspective.

### **The past in the present: colonial memories or legacies?**

I am grateful to the editors of this volume for this opportunity to revisit the notion of “colonial legacies”. In common parlance, « colonial legacy » is associated primarily with negative traits (such as racist violence, stereotypes and prejudices), and used to denounce the persistent remains of colonialism in the present. Thus Zimmerer (2015) points out “the problem of confronting Germany’s colonial legacy” in relation to the issue of recognizing genocide against the Herero and Nama in Namibia. “Colonial legacy” is indeed often used (in the singular form) as a “target notion”, that is as a tool aiming at identifying a pathological or undesirable feature with a view to uprooting it. “Colonial legacy” is thus often associated with a call to “decolonize” (museums, urbanism, diplomacy, knowledge, streetnames, etc.). While such a use may make sense politically as a tool to denounce unwelcome continuities, it however severely restrains the analytical potential of the notion. In the first volume of *History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault invited us, rather than privileging the repressive (negative) dimension of power, to be on the look for its productive effects. Similarly, we need to pay attention not only to colonial violence and processes of appropriation, but also to the productive dimension of colonial legacies. Of course, it is not a matter of falling back to the hackneyed issue of the positive or negative effects of colonization in terms of a balance sheet, or of an evaluation from a moral perspective, but rather of developing an analysis of the scope and diversity of what has been “produced” by colonial interactions, both in former colonial territories and in former metropolitan centers.

Many scholars have approached the study of the past in the present under the label of “colonial memories”. Thus, in a previous book, Elsa Peralta proposed a fine analysis of “the place of the imperial past” in the city of Lisbon, largely built around the notion of memory (Peralta 2017). Despite the richness of such works, the semantic field of “legacy” offers a wider heuristic potential than the one of “memory”. ‘Colonial memory’ refers to a specific kind of “collective memory”, a form of “collective representation” in the Durkheimian sense, associated with a distinctive social grouping (Halbwachs 1992). This notion however suffers from limitations. First, it tends to project the characteristics of the individual psyche unto an essentialized “collective mind”. “Colonial memory” then typically triggers a number of associated terms belonging to the semantic field of psychology or psychoanalysis, such as forgetting, denegation,

amnesia, repression, etc<sup>1</sup>. While some scholars have seriously tackled the challenges to explore the interactions between individual and collective memories (e.g. for colonial memories in Portugal Dos Santos 2021), the field of investigation has often been restrained to the sphere of public discourses and representations. Second, this notion, originating in the academic field has been reappropriated in public discourse, loaded with affective and normative aspects (for instance when one speaks of a “duty of memory”, leading to forms of blurring. In sake of clarifying, I suggest to refrain from using “memory” as an analytical category, focusing instead on exploring how it is used as a ‘native’ category by various actors in different situations. Finally, “memory” as a substantive focuses on a state of (collective) mind rather than the processes that shape it; part of what is called “memory” could be more fruitfully analyzed as “commemoration” or “remembering practices”, thus highlighting issues of process, agency and visibility.

In my original paper, I insisted upon “the indeterminate, open character of the ‘legacy’”. Inviting scholars to explore to the full the potential of the metaphor, I stressed the variety of perceptions and emotions it elicited:

“Legacies are not simply ‘handed down’; they are often claimed and negotiated, but also repudiated, selectively accepted, falsified or challenged. They involve various feelings, nostalgia and jealousy, remembering and forgetting, gratitude or bitterness. They may elicit contestation and negotiation, struggle for recognition and suspicions of illegitimacy. A legacy creates relationships (sometimes quite conflicting) between the various potential heirs: legacy at the same time divides and relates, as suggested by the double meaning of *share*, to divide and to have in common” (de L’Estoile 2008: 270)

After independence, a number of countries chose new names, often associated with pre-colonial kingdoms, to mark a break with the colonial past. However, most post-independence national states can be described as colonial legacies: not of course because they would lack pre-colonial history but because most of the time, their territorial formation, as well as their population, language(s), political and cultural institutions, etc., have been decisively shaped by colonial experiences and interactions.

The notion of colonial legacies thus opens up more perspectives for inquiry than colonial memories. Notably, it suggests to include a focus on material culture, on flows of people and goods, but also on so called “immaterial” elements such as language, music, food, cultural performances, aesthetics, institutions, legal norms, emotions, etc. It also involves a reflexive

---

<sup>1</sup> Thus Stuart Hall (2007: 5) evokes “the amnesia which has overtaken British popular memory of its long imperial past”.

questioning of the very categories with which we try to order and make sense of the world we live in, that often are themselves colonial legacies. Thus, the very notion of “heritage” is often a colonial legacy, which has been reappropriated by post-independence national States, with varying degrees of continuity (see for instance Roussillon 2010 on Morocco).

Peralta and Domingos stress the historicity of colonial legacies, and their transformations across time and space. Indeed, colonial legacies appear more or less salient in different contexts and at different times. Thus in 2014, German artist Philip Kojo Metz installed in front of the Berlin German Historical Museum his sculpture “The invisible hero”, a vacant pedestal meant to be “a memorial for the Cameroonian soldiers who died in the First World War for the German fatherland”. By setting up a conspicuous vacancy, he called attention to an historical episode who had remained completely invisible in public space and historiography. Similarly, at the University of Oxford, a statue of the late XIXth century diamond magnate Cecil Rhodes on the street façade of Oriel College, which for decades had been barely noticed by college students, fellows and visitors, was literally made salient in 2016 by the “Rhodes must fall” movement, (Beinart 2019). Conversely, each fall since 2002, in early September in Paris, Saint-Germain-des-Prés becomes a meeting point for an international Tribal Art fair, called *Parcours des Mondes*, attracting galleries and collectors from Europe, the USA and Australia. While a number of impressive artefacts displayed as masterworks, especially the most prestigious ones, have been collected in colonial situations, and the very category of Primitive Art still used by some galleries, the absence of any explicit reference to colonialism is striking; the occasional mention that an artefact was brought back by an officer, or a colonial administrator, serves but as a proof of its “authenticity”. In other words, such an event is *not* recognized by its participants as being a colonial legacy. This suggests a research question: which colonial legacies are visible or not at what time? Among the various colonial legacies, conscious or unconscious, which are the ones that, at a given moment, are recognized as salient, or “problematic”? And who are the actors involved in these processes?

In recent years, various individual and collective initiatives endeavoured to make colonial legacies more visible in the urban landscape. Thus, an *Historical Guide to an African Lisbon*, highlighting the ancient African presence in Portugal’s capital, was recently published in English and Portuguese (Castro Henriques 2021). the *Musée pour l’histoire de l’immigration* produced a booklet on traces of colonial history in Paris 12<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*, where it is located, pointing out street-names, architecture and statues. In Berlin, “Decolonial city tours” in German and English are organized in the “African quarter”, with the stated aim to “uncover the hidden

history of colonialism”<sup>2</sup>. A similar Decolonial Tour is also organized in Oxford by students. Such initiatives constitute alternative readings of the public space, modifying the perception of the past in the present by making colonial legacies visible. The colonial past is also made present through images. Thus, Paul Gilroy published *Black Britain. A photographic history*, a book of photographs explicitly meant to make visible the place of people from African descent in Great Britain, yesterday and today<sup>3</sup>; analogous books have been published in France. Other initiatives such as Facebook pages or websites, serve similar purposes.

Colonial legacies (in the plural form) are not univocal, but plural and contradictory, reflecting the complex and contradictory forms of colonial relationship themselves, and of the various ways they have been appropriated (or not) subsequently. They are not received passively, but their meaning is actively reinterpreted and renegotiated according to situations. Far from aiming at an inventory of "colonial legacies" in order to eliminate them, the challenge for scholars is to seek to understand the ways in which colonial legacies, both in Europe and in the former colonial dependencies, crucially shape today the modalities of relations and conceptions of self and other, and the ways in which people confront and negotiate them.

### **De-centering colonial legacies : a peripheral empire**

Near the historical city of Coimbra, a highly popular theme park, called *Portugal dos Pequenitos* (Portugal of the Little ones), offers a miniature summary of Portuguese monuments and original features. Designed by a personal friend of Salazar, the head of the *Estado Novo* regime, it opened in 1940 as a village of typical regional houses; it expanded in the 1950s, in conformation with the late colonial affirmation that the “Overseas Provinces” were part of the country together with the Peninsular ones (Thomaz 2005): thus, along with replicas of the Tower of Belem or the royal castle of Sintra, the Mozambique Pavillion reproduces a Portuguese fortress, the India one an Hindu Temple; statues of semi-naked warriors adorn the African section. This form of permanent colonial exhibition meant to instill into children and their parents the myth that Portugal was in essence an imperial nation, extending both on peninsular mainland, the Islands (Madeira, Açores) and “overseas territories”. This materialization of empire is still in place, perpetuating among Portuguese kids and their parents the idea that the “Portuguese world” shares some kind of common destiny. In recent years,

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dekolonialestadtfuehrung.de/>. Similar bicycle tours are organized in Paris by the association Alter Natives, targeting descendants of migrants from former colonial territories.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall (2007: 5) writes that “the legacy of that troubled past continues to influence the direction and destiny of the Black British diaspora”.

museums have become a central place where the presence and visibility of colonial legacies have been hotly debated, prompting a wave of critical self-examination. In Lisbon however, the recently opened Museum of the East (*Museu do Oriente*) epitomizes a form of nostalgia for Portugal's imperial past, lacking any critical confrontation with it; similarly, the project of a Museum of Discoveries, emerging from the project of museum on Portuguese as a global language, attracted scholarly critiques for its uncritical ingenuity (Peralta, this volume). Such features suggest that the naturalization of colonial legacies may be stronger in Portugal than in other European countries.

While all Europe has been involved in colonial relations, the duration of the colonial experience, and its impact on national life have been highly differentiated. A specific feature of Portuguese colonial experience is that it lasted longer than most European countries, from the conquest of Ceuta in Morocco in 1415 to the cession of Macau to China in 1997. This contrasts strongly with Germany, whose direct involvement in colonization was both very late (in the last quarter of the XIXth century) and terminated early when its possessions were lost during World War One. To take another case, Sweden's colonial experience was dual: directly over the Sami populations in the North, indirectly through the participation of Swedes in the colonial enterprise of Leopold's Congo Free State, or through missions. These variations account for different modalities of presence of colonial legacies in European countries. Thus, in Germany, for a long time, colonial history occupied a highly marginal place in the national narrative. While for obvious reasons the issue of public memory was saturated with the Nazi past, most Germans were ignoring the fact that their country had been a colonial power. In 2015, the National Museum of German History, in Berlin, explicitly thematized the relationship between the colonial past and the present in its exhibition *German colonialism. Fragments past and present*, "hoping to "lead to the establishment of stable, long-term identities in the sense of contemporary global connections in Germany and in the former colonial territories" (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2015).

Compared to other European countries, Portugal's colonial past is still relatively recent. While Belgian, British and French colonies in Africa had become formally independent by 1960, the wars of independence started in 1961, and Portuguese migrations to Africa continued well into the 1960s. While many poor Portuguese looked for a better future in the African colonies, where they could exchange subaltern positions at home for a comparatively higher ones, other went to Brazil, and from the 1950s on to Europe. The immigration from former Portuguese colonies in Africa started relatively late in comparison to France, Britain, or Belgium; in the 1970s, the majority of migrants from the colonies at that time were the so-called *retornados* (returnees),

who had been living in the African territories, some time for various generations, including *mestizos* and Goanese people. In the 1980s Portugal, benefiting from its inclusion in the European community, became a labour market for Brazilians; while such a situation may be described as post-colonial, this feature is probably not salient for most Brazilian migrants.

Portugal was the only European empire that had for a time its capital moved to a colony: when Napoleon's armies invaded Portugal in 1807, the king fled to Brazil with his court, government and national institutions. The singular place of Brazil also surfaces in the peculiar fact that the legitimizing discourse of the late colonial system, *luso-tropicalism*, had been initially conceived in the 1930s as a national myth for the former colony by a Brazilian thinker, Gilberto Freyre, who became a sort of "organic intellectual" of the Portuguese empire (Thomaz 2002). The claimed exceptional character attributed to Portuguese, a supposedly more inclusive attitude, both by miscegenation and by incorporation of cultural elements from colonized populations, served to justify the continuation of colonial rule at a time when other European countries had given up most of their former colonial territories. The claim that one's own form of colonial rule is unique (and better than the other) is a self-justifying myth common to all colonial powers. Miguel Vale de Almeida (2002) pointed out, while cautioning against slipping into a form of « Portuguese exceptionalism », it is essential to pay close attention to the specificities of post-colonial Portuguese experience. This dual concern leads to his suggestion to use the notion of "Grey Atlantic" (*Atlantico Pardo*), at the same time paying tribute to the idea of "Black Atlantic", coined by British cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy, and explicitly trying to avoid the pitfall of mechanically importing analyses developed in and for the English-speaking world. As a consequence of academic geopolitics, most analytical frameworks available to think colonial and post-colonial situations are inscribed in specific imperial experiences, such as the US or British ones. As we have seen, while the various European colonial trajectories share generic features, each is also singular. While they provide heuristic questions and hypotheses, they may not be directly adequate to situations rooted in different histories, such as Belgium, France, Spain or Portugal. A critical comparative perspective is thus an epistemic necessity in order to make sense of a case. A crucial challenge is to make an effort to include within this dialogue discussions developed in other places and languages. In other words, the Portuguese case does not only provide a "field" to test theories elaborated in English-speaking imperial and post-imperial settings, but also has the potential to contribute new perspectives to the study of colonial legacies.

While some contributions analyze the experience of migrants from the former empire (Brazil, lusophone Africa), this volume is centered on Portugal; certainly, the experience of colonial



legacies would be different if apprehended from Brazil, Goa or Guinea-Bissau. Confronting points of view across the Atlantic was precisely the objective of various encounters between Brazilian and Portuguese scholars, interrogating shared legacies, and the content of terms such as “colonial” and “post-colonial” (Bastos, Vale de Almeida and Feldman Bianco 2002). They stressed the need to develop concepts and methodologies in dialogue with current international debates on colonialism and post-colonialism, while accounting for the specificities of Portuguese imperial experience. Portugal offers the fascinating paradox of being a peripheral empire: priding itself of being the first modern European empire, it was a poor country at the periphery of Europe, whose elites self-consciously struggled to enhance their status by mobilizing the empire. This is precisely what gives it a powerful potential for de-centering more usual perspectives on colonialism and post-colonialism.

The issue of language appears here as a central topic in various chapters. Language is indeed one of the most important colonial legacies, as pointed out by Amílcar Cabral, the independentist leader of Cape Verde: “The Portuguese language is one of the best things that the Portuguese left us, because language is an instrument for people to relate to each other, a means to express the realities of life and the world” (Cabral, 1969, quoted in Estevens, this volume). At about the same time, Algerian writer Kateb Yacine famously claimed that “the French language was and still is a war booty”. Languages inherited from the colonial past constitute a common medium through which intellectuals, artists, writers, but also migrants, from former colonial peripheries and colonial metropolises can argue, conflict, exchange in a space of (partial) shared understandings. “Lusophony” is at the same time a shared medium, and the basis for interstate political projects, like the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP), created in 1996, but also for consumption and personal appropriation.

Creole languages are fundamentally colonial legacies. They cannot be “unmade”, because they are constitutive of individual and collective ways of being in the world. Such processes of linguistic and cultural appropriation are precisely what French Caribbean intellectuals Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant, call “politics of creolization”, which consists of saying: “thoses riches belong to you, all languages belong to you”. (Glissant and Chamoiseau 2009). A Caribbean perspective suggests that decolonizing cannot aim only at uprooting all “colonial legacies”, because they are constitutive of our very being. Estevens’ contribution shows that the choice by young people of Cape Verdian origin raised in Lisbon to use Creole in their musical works is a performance of a specific identity. Such a case suggests a number of comparative enquiries: what are the specificities of post-colonial migrations in relation to

language? In what ways is the status of Creole among Cape Verdians in Lisbon's periphery different from the status of Portuguese among Lusitanian immigrants in France? Conversely, how does the fact that some migrants come from former Portuguese colonial territories whose official language is Portuguese affect their relationship to that language?

The various chapters in this volume suggest to what extent daily life is permeated with colonial legacies, and how these are deeply ambivalent. As shown by Domingos, the celebration as a consensual national figure of the football player Eusebio, born in Mozambique and becoming in the 1960s a star of the Benfica football club in Lisbon, repeats the colonial narrative of assimilation. Similarly, the celebration of Lisbon as a pluricultural and global city, with its vibrant musical scene animated by musicians originating from Africa or from the diaspora, echoes tropes of « luso-tropicalism ». The category of “Lusophone music”, played on TAP (Portuguese Air Transportations) planes, has also been appropriated by musicians from Brazil, or from Portuguese-speaking Africa.

\*

\*      \*

Recognizing that our contemporary world is largely post-colonial urges upon us the necessity to confront colonial legacies in all their complexity. Focusing on the Portuguese case, the richness and timeliness of this volume invites readers to realize how much colonial legacies are constitutive of today's world, not only among the migrants of former colonized territories, but of urban infrastructures, of flows of people, goods and ideas, of our knowledge and perception of the world, and of the very tissue of our lives, much beyond what is explicit or conscious. Legacies can be reevaluated and their meanings change over time, as they are reappropriated by different heirs. Uncertainty regards not only the present and the future, but also the past: what was considered certain can become contested or unsettled. The present time is especially interesting in that respect, offering a rich field for future investigations. The peripheral Portuguese empire, challenging us to explore new paths to account for its complexity, has the potential to decenter what has largely become a stereotyped vision of colonialism and offer new insights on colonial legacies.

### **References:**

- Bastos, C., M. Vale de Almeida e B. Feldman-Bianco, 2002. eds. *Transitos coloniais: Diálogos Críticos Luso-Brasileiros*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Castro Henriques, Isabel, 2021. *Historical Guide to an African Lisbon*, Colibri.

- Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2015. *German colonialism. Fragments past and present*. Exhibition, Berlin.
- Dos Santos, Irene, “To Link Life Histories to Historical Narratives. The Place of ‘Memory’ in Post-1974 Portuguese Society”
- Foucault, Michel, (1979) [1976]. *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. London: Allen Lane
- Gilroy, Paul, 2007. *Black Britain. A photographic history*, SAQI.
- Glissant, Édouard, Chamoiseau, Patrick, 2009. « La créolisation et la persistance de l'esprit colonial », *Cahiers Sens public*, 2009/2 (n° 10), p. 25-33.
- Halbwachs, Maurice, 1992. *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press
- Hall, Stuart, 2007. Preface to Paul Gilroy, *Black Britain. A photographic history*, SAQI.
- de L’Estoile, Benoît, 2008. “The past as it lives now: an anthropology of colonial legacies”. *Social Anthropology/ Anthropologie sociale*. “Colonial legacies”, 16: 3, 267-279.
- Palais de la porte dorée, undated. *Traces de l’histoire coloniale dans le 12<sup>e</sup> arrondissement de Paris*, Paris.
- Peralta, Elsa, 2017. *Lisboa e a Memória do Império: Património, Museus e Espaço Público*, Odivelas.
- Thomaz, Omar Ribeiro. 2002. “Tigres de papel: Gilberto Freyre, Portugal e os países africanos de língua oficial portuguesa”. in Bastos, C., M. Vale de Almeida e B. Feldman-Bianco, eds. *Transitos coloniais: Diálogos Críticos Luso-Brasileiros*. Lisbon: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Thomaz, Omar Ribeiro, 2005, “the good-Hearted Portuguese People. Anthropology of Nation; anthropology of Empire”, in de L’Estoile, B., Neiburg F., and Sigaud L. (eds.). *Empires, Nations and Natives. Anthropology and State-making*,. Durham: Duke University Press, 58-87.
- Vale de Almeida, Miguel. 2002. “O Atlântico Pardo: Antropologia, Pós-colonialismo e o Caso ‘Lusófono’” in Bastos, C., M. Vale de Almeida e B. Feldman-Bianco, eds. *Transitos coloniais: Diálogos Críticos Luso-Brasileiros*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais.
- Zimmerer, Jürgen, 2015. « The first genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the problems of confronting Germany’s colonial legacy”, in *German colonialism. Fragments past and present* 138-145