



Monument to
the Discoveries,
Lisbon, Portugal



An immense Portugal

The Lusitanian Empire knew how to use freedom granted the local elites and missionary religious fervor to maintain its standing for five centuries

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How did a small country of less than 90,000 square kilometers establish a presence on five continents in regions such as Africa, Japan, China, India and Brazil? No modern colonial European empire was as lasting and/or as broad in scope. Portugal was the first global empire-builder (although the Portuguese refer to themselves as a kingdom, not an empire, as the Spanish do) whose holdings survived pretty much as a whole until the mid-1970s. It was not until 1999 that Macau was given back to China. “Portugal’s success was due to innovations that exceeded the bounds of any known model. The pioneering relationship between center and periphery was marked by the flexibilization of the power held by the local elites, without Lisbon ceasing to be the pole from which authority radiated. Also fairly new was the use of religion to create imperial unity,” explains historian Laura de Mello e Souza, of the University of São Paulo (USP). She coordinated the research project *Dimensions of the Portuguese Empire*, a thematic project begun in 2004 and recently completed with FAPESP support.

The objective of the research, which has already given rise to books such as *O governo dos Povos* (The government of the people) (Alameda), *Contextos missionários: religião e política no Império Português* (Missionary contexts: religion and politics in the Portuguese empire) (Hucitec/FAPESP), and *O império por escrito* (The empire in writing) (Alameda), was to revisit the concept of the “old colonial system” and to see whether it was still workable, given the innovations that historical

research had brought to light. The study generated about approximately 30 academic papers, among masters' theses and doctoral dissertations, and was divided among groups of researchers for a better analysis of the political, economic, cultural, and religious dimensions of the Portuguese Empire. The result was a complex picture full of diversity in which de Mello e Souza says, "the multiple is visible in the one."

"Long-accepted views of a chaotic colonial administration, a monstrous bureaucratic regime that was sluggish and inefficient with an authoritarian center and submissive colonies cannot account for the ability of this immense empire to maintain itself over such a long period. The fact is that Lisbon used its power intelligently in overcoming the separation, of oceanic proportions, between the capital and its colonies," the professor explains.

The chronological period selected for the project, between the 15th and 19th centuries, was chosen because it was the period of Lusitanian expansion. After 1822, there is no justification for treating formations as independent as the Brazilian and Portuguese empires as a group.

The project updates a debate that had arisen at the end of the 1970s as to how to interpret the economy and society of Portuguese America, reassessing both Caio Prado's idea of "the meaning of colonization" and the concept of the "old colonial

system" defined by Fernando Novais. The result, says de Mello e Souza, is a dialectic play between the parts and the whole, eliminating the mechanical opposition between capital and colony and going far beyond the Brazil-Portugal relationship. "In this rereading, the Portuguese Empire lacks homogeneity and has relatively autonomous political centers. The idea of a unitary imperial ideology needs to be challenged," says the researcher.

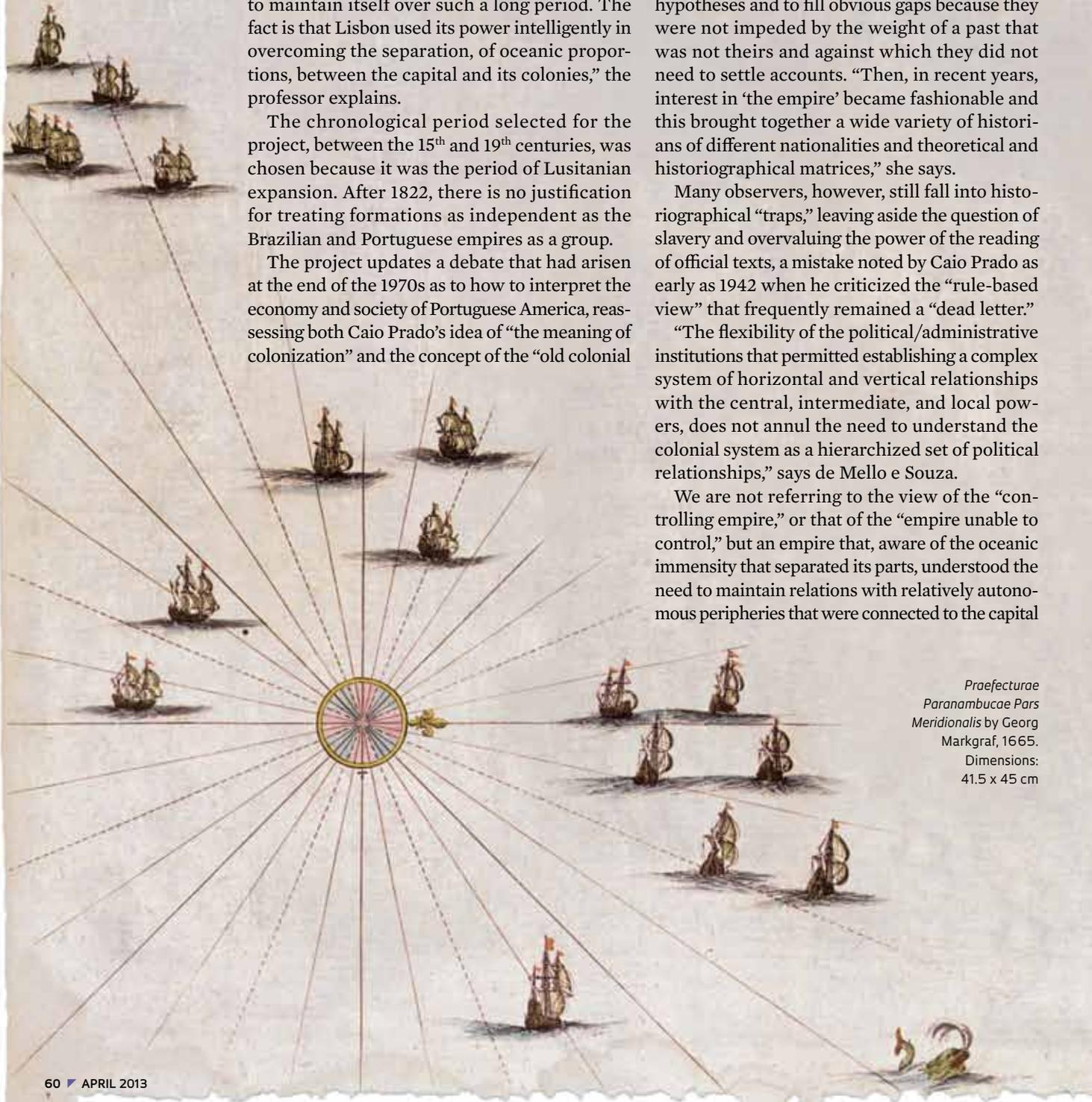
HYPOTHESES

To Professor de Mello e Souza, the post-colonial resentment of the Brazilians cleared the way, for many years, for foreign historians to trace their hypotheses and to fill obvious gaps because they were not impeded by the weight of a past that was not theirs and against which they did not need to settle accounts. "Then, in recent years, interest in 'the empire' became fashionable and this brought together a wide variety of historians of different nationalities and theoretical and historiographical matrices," she says.

Many observers, however, still fall into historiographical "traps," leaving aside the question of slavery and overvaluing the power of the reading of official texts, a mistake noted by Caio Prado as early as 1942 when he criticized the "rule-based view" that frequently remained a "dead letter."

"The flexibility of the political/administrative institutions that permitted establishing a complex system of horizontal and vertical relationships with the central, intermediate, and local powers, does not annul the need to understand the colonial system as a hierarchized set of political relationships," says de Mello e Souza.

We are not referring to the view of the "controlling empire," or that of the "empire unable to control," but an empire that, aware of the oceanic immensity that separated its parts, understood the need to maintain relations with relatively autonomous peripheries that were connected to the capital



*Praefecturae
Paranambucae Pars
Meridionalis* by Georg
Markgraf, 1665.
Dimensions:
41.5 x 45 cm

It was a highly rational empire that was aware that local problems required immediate solutions produced locally



Novissima et Acuratissima Totius Americae Descriptio, by John Ogilby, 1671. Dimensions: 43.5 x 54 cm

by ties that were more or less loose – without, however, Lisbon ceasing to be the center from which power emanated. The distance between king and subjects, which could appear to be a problem, reappears now as a “virtue” for purposes of governing.

“The colonies also, among other traits, mirrored the sociocultural values of the Iberian peninsula. To that end, the creation by the Portuguese of an almost universal system of political communication between the Court and the colonies was important. What might appear to be an institutional weakness became its strength, revealed in adaptability to different political and territorial situations and, at times, in a sort of administrative pluralism,” the researcher observes.

The originality of the foundations of the Portuguese Empire can be seen in its creation of new structures that served as intermediaries in the relationship between the local powers in the overseas territories and the powers of the center.

“For example, the Portuguese administrators who came to certain parts of what would eventually become Brazil did not match the stereotype of the “petty tyrant” who sought to seize the spoils from the Brazilians. Of course, there were unscrupulous people. But, in general, it was recognized that one couldn’t lean too hard on the colony. Exploitation very often took the form of intolerance, followed by flexibility in application of the laws,” de Mello e Souza notes. “Thus, to complain – as Tiradentes did – that the Portuguese administrators came to plunder our riches and suck our blood, does not explain much, and it entangles us in the wrong kind of discussion

of domination. In reality, the administration was able to function only because the local elites were participating in it,” she says.

THE CROWN

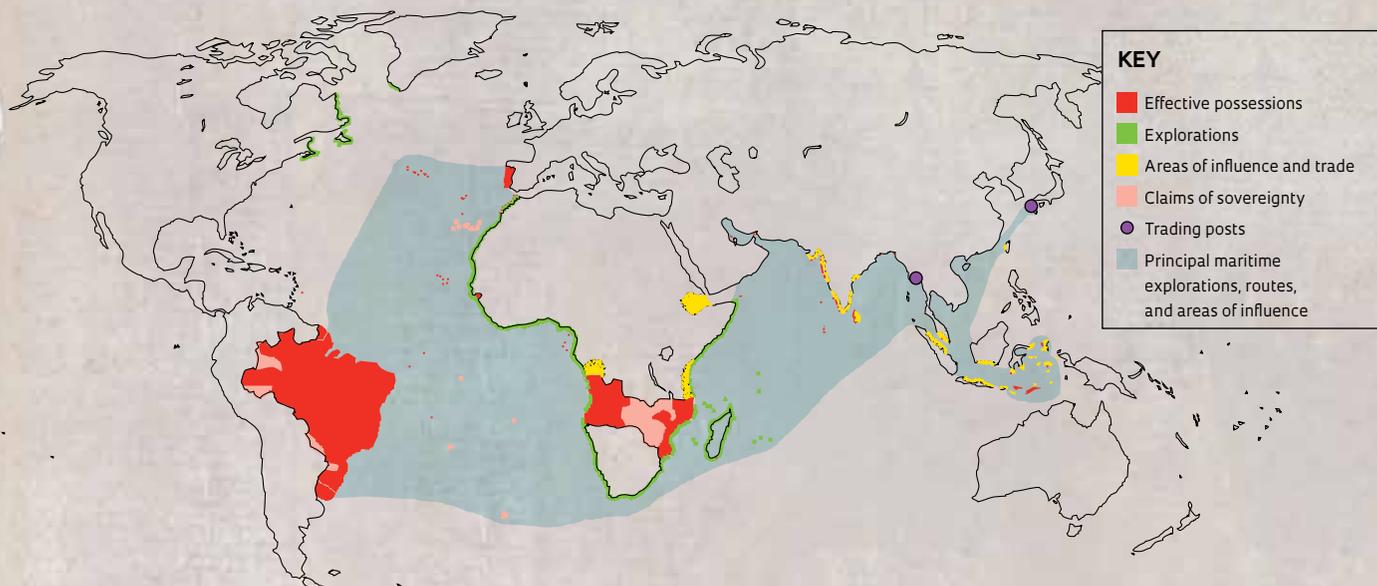
The researcher stresses that relationships within the empire cannot be understood merely by consulting legal documents. “The Crown knew that it could not impose control by insisting on the letter of the law. Until 1822, the ‘Brazilians’ saw themselves as Portuguese and not as a dominated people,” she explains. Thus, local episodes of revolt were not always synonymous with a “struggle for independence,” but rather were reactions to rearrangements. The definition de Tocqueville gave of the Old Regime is still valid: “Rigid rules but flaccid practice.”

However, we should not speak of a “tropicalized Old Regime.” If colonial society is viewed as the Old Regime in the strict sense, its particularities explode and corrode the basic principles because it was organized and stitched together by the practice of slavery, something that did not exist in the European environment,” de Mello e Souza remarks.

“The slave trade sullied the image of the local nobility, separating them from the monarchy. They chased after titles, honors, and indulgences, thereby increasing their dependence on the Portuguese king, a situation that was exacerbated over the years,” the historian says. The specificity of Portuguese America did not reside in the assimilation, pure and simple, of the world of the Old Regime, but in its perverse re-creation, fed by the slave traffic, by the labor of black slaves,

Map of the Portuguese Empire (1415-1999)

The development and decline of the Lusitanians, from glory until decolonization



by the introduction into the old society of a new element that was more structural than institutional: the practice of slavery.

Once again, the solution came through flexibilization. “According to the principles of the Old Regime, persons of “infected blood” were forbidden to hold administrative office. This would make it impossible to govern the colonial regions because most of the native elite was composed of mestizos. Regions such as São Paulo and Minas, for example, were almost entirely populated by half-breeds and mulattoes. Thus, a mulatto would be appointed to commander of the local militia and would then cease to be a mulatto and could rise in status,” the professor notes. Although officially subject to the rules of the old colonial system, the periphery of the empire used and abused the ability to “roll with the punches.”

“The project was innovative in that it discussed those peculiarities of the Portuguese Empire, making it more explicative. The discussion caused us to replace the concept of a colonial system with the idea that the colony was not a mere extension of the metropolis but a subordinated territory that played a vital role for the Empire by providing a considerable portion of the resources essential to its existence,” observes historian Jobson Arruda of USP, a member of the project team. “The Lusitanian imperial system was highly rational and featured an awareness that local problems required immediate solutions produced locally,” he continues.

This awareness was one of the principal reasons the Portuguese were more successful than their Spanish rivals. “The Spanish monarchy

was a variety of kingdoms, while Portugal was a unified monarchy. Great efforts were made to increase the power of the State at the expense of the nobility and the administrative districts. Those resources helped in the maritime expansion, which, in turn, left the monarchy less dependent on noblemen and the common people, thanks to the resources obtained. In exchange, those resources enabled the State to co-opt the nobility, which afforded the Portuguese king an astonishing consolidation of his power,” explains historian Ana Paula Megiani of USP, compiler of *O império por escrito* (Alameda) and also a researcher on the project team.

“That centrality gave the Portuguese monarchy a level of command over its empire that was greater than the Spanish had. The local authorities served as the means for exercising that power, expressions of centrality, rather than of dismemberment of the empire,” Megiani comments. Even so, Portugal was living with a contradiction that did not afflict the Spanish: it was an empire without an emperor.

“In that context, the religious face of the empire is the one that best expresses its universality. The Church offered a substrate suited to the practical implementation of a group of dogmas and principles. Its religious missions were its principal operational tool for cementing together the parts of the totality,” says historian Adone Agnolin of USP, a contributor to the research project unit titled Religion and Evangelization. “The religious perspective introduces the foundation of a *universalitas* (an empire-building principle inherited from the Romans) that was passed on,

from the political standpoint, to maintain those empires but that, in the last analysis, is grounded on the idea of a 'symbolic empire' uniting politics and religion," says Agnolin.

According to Agnolin, through its missionaries the Portuguese Empire reversed the historical formation process when it found its universal purpose in the figure of the monk. "Monks were its privileged instrument for the realization of the project and, from that starting point, Portugal introduces itself as a new and unprecedented imperial model," he says.

De Mello e Souza says that this view is one of the great novelties brought to light by the research project. "Missionaries are arms of the homogenization of the faith, making the Portuguese more adaptable in the face of religious and cultural confrontations," the historian says. The temptation to "demonize" the Church is great, but mistaken. "All the actions of the diplomatic, administrative, or commercial agents were backed by the missionaries, who lent legitimacy to the array of actions that were intended to advance the common good and, therefore, the salvation of men," she says.

WEALTH

In those days, the notion of "the common good" encompassed the colonial dimension alongside Christianity, albeit with tensions. Increasing the wealth of the king meant increasing the wealth of the monarchy and, thus, the wealth of its Christian vassals. The increase in trade and in the wealth of the kingdom was connected to and based on the function of the king in his expression of the exercise of the theological virtue of charity and of earthly virtues in distributive justice.

The unity of the monarchy as a unit of the community was directed toward both the common good and salvation. The ultimate purpose of the Empire was not restricted to colonization; that was seen only as a means. The purpose was salvation because it permitted conversion of the heathen and sustained the missionary, expansionist, and universalizing action of the Catholic Church.

"That specificity develops in the second half of the 15th century. At the foundation of colonial expansion we find theology and, in its wake, the results of a new colonial commerce. It is in that direction that Portugal builds, with an extraordinarily early start with respect to other European nations, the new perspective of universalization represented by the articulation among empire, theology, and trade," Agnolin explains. The missions, along with commerce, were one of the privileged channels for the first dialogues with the cultures that came in contact with the Iberian world. The empire of men was, first of all, the empire of God.

"In addition, while Europeans needed to understand the local cultures, it was also necessary

Colonial Possessions

From glory to decline, each century reveals the course of imperial development



to develop new cognitive tools to use in dealing with the new situations resulting from contact. It was a process of translation from one party to another in which the religious language functioned as a symbolic forum for mediation that was vital to the incorporation of the native people into the Portuguese monarchy," observes the historian. The missions made the necessary "accommodations" to the various local realities.

"While commercial interests were the starting point in the relations between empire and religion

The wisdom of the Lusitanian Empire was to govern each region in a specific way, flexibilizing the power according to local issues, handing down power depending on the needs

and between the administration of peoples and the Catholic missions, we cannot fail to consider how the 'dimensions of the Portuguese Empire' were sustained on the universalism that submits to the modern achievement of autonomy of natural law," says Agnolin. Thus, at the base of the tension between theology and empire, we find that notion of empire whose objective was to accomplish the imposition of a common government for the peoples, according to the varying modes of local interlocution, as in the political and cultural dimensions.

Another element of Lusitanian wisdom was to maintain specific governments for each part of the empire, adapting them to the local idiosyncrasies. One colonial region was not governed in the same way as another. In the fundamental case of religion, Christianity determined, starting from that context, a nexus between "things of faith" and "political life." It was from that standpoint, which sought the universal, that the practice of evangelization made the necessary "adjustments" in relation to the particular non-Western cultures.

The Portuguese Empire developed projects that sought to incorporate other peoples, with

catechesis as the central vehicle of this attempt. "Flexibility and adaptability, along with relative autonomy, were instruments of survival of that empire, with Lisbon at the center, although very often overloaded. The fundamental role was assigned to the Church and the religious orders, which were more important to the maintenance and defense of the Lusitanian territory than was the Portuguese State," says Brazilianist Kenneth Maxwell of Harvard University.

Within the empire, the Europeanizing culture, including religion, played a role in the maintenance of that empire. "It was a culture that was enraptured by the civilizing ideal but alert to recombinations and mechanisms capable of further extending its dominion. Hence the various forms of circulation of written materials or aids to representation such as cartography," adds historian Leila Algranti of the University of Campinas (Unicamp). This peculiarity made it possible, using the thematic project, to create the Digital Library of Historical Cartography (see "A mine of maps," issue 183 of *Pesquisa FAPESP*), the Laboratory of Historical Cartography Studies (LECH), and the Center for Documentation on the Atlantic (CENDA).

To de Mello e Souza, the consultation of previously ignored writings was another high point of the project in that it revealed how communication took place among the distant parts of the empire without relying on the invention of the printing press. "It was a process of intensification and diffusion of the methods of collecting, organizing, and preserving written information related to the formation of the bureaucracy and the modern State and associated with the sophistication of forms of knowledge and the new ways in which elements connected with writing ascended the social scale," Algranti states.

"In terms of Portugal and Brazil, it is obvious that without written communication it would have been practically impossible to administer the empire. In addition to the printed materials, handwritten records of every kind (letters, regulations, chronicles, grammar books) performed a vital role in the transmission of ideas, values, rules, customs, and wisdom between the metropolises and their colonies, as well as among the various overseas possessions that were part of those colonial empires," Algranti observes.

As it expanded, the Portuguese Empire felt the need to exchange information more rapidly. "Orders that until then were given orally began to be put in writing. The rules regulated not only administration but also other spheres, such as the political and judicial realms, involving complaints or accusations," Algranti continues.

According to Algranti, understanding the colonization of America means capturing the forms of communication between conquerors and the con-



Armillary sphere
Dimensions:
38.5 x 38.5 cm

quered, of integration and modification between the Old World and the New World. “Looking at the empire, those new analyses allowed us to see the ways in which the metropolitan presence came to be relative, the prominence of the role of the colonial elites, and the specificity and scope of the evangelizing processes,” de Mello e Souza observes.

“With that, the fundamental economic and social questions, i.e., the siphoning off of wealth and the establishment of compulsory systems of labor, especially slavery, assumed their relative positions. The meanings and contents of the Lusitanian empire gain a singularity that forces us to rethink its essence, particularly how it became part of the capitalist logic,” she says.

This colonial dynamic ultimately made the resident colonizers, previously connected to the metropolitan sovereignty, a force moving toward autonomy. “Their action made it feasible for capital to take root and for trade routes to be obtained, making them independent of the metropolis,” says Arruda.

One could not exploit the colony without making it grow, without developing it, thus leading to tensions whenever the central authority in Lisbon was unable to satisfy the new local necessities and when it may have been hindering growth.

DECLINE

The seeds of the empire’s decline were present in the very essence of its maintenance. “Portugal was an important cog in the gears of the construction of capitalism, especially during the mercantile stage. In capitalism, however, it is impossible to maintain hegemony forever because its logic is the dynamics of migration from the center of accumulation,” Ana Paula Megiani explains. During the 18th and 19th centuries, we no longer see in Europe the affluence of wealth among the Iberians. “The crisis in mercantile capitalism led to the crisis in the Portuguese Empire, but if we were to consider the cultural, religious, and political dimensions, we find a different duration,” she says. “The impact of Lusitanian colonization was much greater than its governmental structure,” Maxwell reports.

“The inflexion point of the Empire occurred during the Marquis de Pombal period, between 1750 and 1777. The marquis had given the local elites great authority, and whenever this was not the case, there was conflict,” de Mello e Souza observes. Increasingly, the old idea of the necessity and possibility of a Luso-Brazilian empire tears the notion of the old colonial system to shreds. “Many people wanted to decentralize the empire and make Brazil the center, which was beginning to destroy the relations between metropolis and colony to the point that one can no longer speak of center and periphery,” the researcher continues.



Meridionalis
Americae Pars,
Petrus Plancius
c. 1592-1610
Dimensions:
39.5 x 55.5 cm

The local elites were gaining unprecedented status. The arrival of the royal family in 1808 hastened the trend by creating the strange situation of a colony that was also the seat of the empire.

“The fears expressed in light of the increased independence of the local groups only intensified with the French Revolution and the advances made by Napoleon. Some members of the Portuguese elite were starting to seriously consider that a change in roles was the only way to hold on to Brazil,” says de Mello e Souza.

In 1822, the process consolidated. “However, one part of the old empire was freed only after a painful process of civil wars, as in Africa, where external forces entered the field, due to the refusal of the Salazar regime to negotiate,” Maxwell recalls.

That intransigence, according to the Brazilianist, left few alternatives open, and in the 1970s, when the empire in Africa came to an end, there remained Cold War battles and the issue of South African apartheid, with Cuba, the United States, and the former Soviet Union extending their conflicts into the former Portuguese colonies.

No longer was there any way for “that land to pursue its ideal/to become an immense Portugal,” as boasted by songwriter Chico Buarque in *Fado Tropical* (A tropical fado). ■

Project

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