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WHY EUROPE, WHICH EUROPE?

A Debate on Contemporary European History as a Field of Research

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On the Boundaries of European History: Writing the History of European Colonialism in the Twenty-First Century

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In late 1984, the well-known monthly magazine, *History Today,* brought together a group of distinguished contributors from different branches of history to discuss the diversity of approaches of historians writing at the time in a series of articles entitled 'What is… history?'.[1] The last article of the series was published in January 1986 and asked, 'What is European History?'. A.J.P. Taylor replied with the sense of humour that is said to have been characteristic of him, 'European history is whatever the historian wants it to be. (…) There is only one limiting factor. It must take place in or derive from the area we call Europe. But as I am not sure what exactly that area is meant to be, I am pretty well in a haze about the rest!'.[2]

I readily confess that I, too, am not sure what exactly Europe is meant to be. The generally accepted geographical concept of Europe – a continent from the west coast of Ireland to the Ural Mountains – is of little use to understand its current political and cultural extent, let alone its history. The archipelago of the Azores, like Iceland, sits on both the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates and the Madeira archipelago sits

on the African plate. These two Portuguese autonomous regions are part of the so-called “EU outermost regions”. Together with the “EU overseas countries and territories” and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, they extend the current political boundaries of the European Union to the western Atlantic Ocean, the north of Africa, the Caribbean basin, the Amazonian tropical rainforest and the Arctic region, as well as to the Indian and Pacific Oceans.[3] These are remnants of a shared colonial past that shaped not only the history of each individual colonial power, but also the history of Europe as a continent.

Undoubtedly, Europe’s colonial past is part of the reason why Europe has become what it is today. To be sure, some historians continue to attribute European “exceptionalism” or “miracle” to a European culture of growth and other intrinsically cultural qualities; but it has long been argued that the exploitation of colonial resources and peoples was a key element for the accumulation of European wealth and provided a material basis for industrialisation.[4] The importance of colonialism and imperial projects for creating representations of Europe had already been stressed before the New Imperial History gained momentum in the 1990s.[5] Yet, as Alexander Semyonov has already noted in his contribution to this debate, the consolidation of the New Imperial History approaches played a crucial role in advancing novel perspectives on the mutual relationship between metropole and colony and challenging the focus on nation-based historical frameworks, thus blurring the boundaries of European history.[6]

From the pioneer of overseas expansion to the pioneer of globalisation

Coming from Portugal, these boundaries have never seemed clear-cut to me. At almost 900 years old, the Portuguese national borders have only been within the continental limits of Europe for less than 300 years. Portuguese history is deeply connected to the histories of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, even though little attention is given to the histories of African, Asian, and American peoples before, after, and/or beyond European colonialism in Portuguese academia or society. The history of the Portuguese overseas expansion into Africa, Asia, and Brazil, by contrast, is introduced as a class subject from an early age. Unfortunately, this early introduction to colonial themes is not the result of the awareness that no national history can be entirely understood or explained internally, without looking beyond its borders, nor is it an expression of self-reflectivity on the issue of Eurocentrism.[7] Rather, this engagement with the histories of the so-

called Age of Discoveries betrays the grip that the colonial past still has on Portuguese representations of the nation and national identity.

Undergraduate degrees in history at Portuguese universities naturally provide a more nuanced view of the past than what is taught in primary and secondary schools. In a way, however, their structure continues to make it difficult to escape from the national focus that is so pervasive on the preceding levels of education. History curricula in university tend to be divided into national history and the history of the "rest" of the world. On the one hand, therefore, there is the history of medieval Portugal, modern Portugal, contemporary Portugal, which includes its imperial past. On the other hand, there is general medieval history, general modern history, general contemporary history, etc., which supposedly covers all of the rest. This compartmentalisation does not incentivise the adoption of transnational and global approaches. The prospect of the latter might be seductive for writing the history of a country with such a long colonial past, but "global history" is not always taken as an invitation to reflect on the global conditions and interconnectedness that shaped the past. Rather it is often a fashionable label for history that includes parts of the globe within Portugal's hegemony: the pioneer of overseas expansion has become the pioneer of globalisation. For example, the Global History of Portugal, originally published in 2020 and recently translated into English, includes both understandings of what global history is, side by side, in its over 90 chapters.[8] Perhaps predictably, many chapters are devoted to colonial/imperial matters, while only a few explore the repercussions of European interdependencies in Portuguese history.

In addition to the limiting structure of undergraduate history degrees, history departments in Portuguese universities usually do not have researchers who specialise in the history of other European countries, as is often the norm elsewhere in Europe. Their absence also hinders dialogue between different historiographies. As a European University Institute's alumna, I am convinced that the potential discussion that could arise from being exposed to multiple national histories would help students and researchers realise how these are, in fact, interwoven, shedding light on parallels and connections across national borders.[9]

It is thus not surprising that Portugal has proved better at researching its own colonial and imperial past than at investigating its relationship with Europe and/or its place within Europe. Nevertheless, this picture changes significantly when it comes to the history of the Portuguese twentieth century.

Doing European history?

Research on Portugal's recent colonial and imperial past has only gained momentum in the last 25 years, largely encouraged by Valentim Alexandre. Initially trained as an historian of the nineteenth century, Alexandre later refocused his research on twentieth-century colonialism and supervised many ground-breaking dissertations that influenced a whole generation of researchers.[10] Investigations into Salazar's dictatorship in the metropole, however, still predominate in the historiography of twentieth-century Portugal. Comparing the Portuguese dictatorship with the other European right-wing dictatorships has been a main feature since the first studies were published shortly after the revolution.[11] Although Salazar sought to dissociate his regime from Mussolini's fascist regime, "fascism" was the epithet by which it became known among the Portuguese resistance, before and after 1974.[12] Therefore, pointing out the "New State's" similarities with the Italian fascist regime was a primary concern in the aftermath of the revolution.

The field has evolved enormously since these early academic investigations. Thematically, it expanded from the initial focus on political ideology and institutions that structured the regime, to cover themes as diverse as cultural diplomacy and academic exchanges, migration, feminism and LGBT resistance, cinema and sports, to name but a few. Methodologically, more and more projects have been conceived in a transnational or comparative way, usually pairing Portugal with another right-wing dictatorship. These projects could be called "doing European history" in the perspective of the editors of this debate, as stated in their inaugural piece.[13] Studies that make use of a Portuguese-only empirical basis are usually strongly complemented with secondary literature on fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Francoist Spain, attempting to situate the Portuguese regime in the "era of fascisms". Their authors take part in the transnational debate on how European societies gravitated towards fascist, authoritarian, and populist movements and governments in the interwar period, namely through participation in international conferences and collective volumes. As such, by inscribing their research in the solid academic field on European interwar authoritarianism, they also "do European history", even though in a different register from their colleagues whose empirical research transcends the nation-state.

In turn, historians of Portuguese colonialism in the twentieth century are required to traverse the boundaries of political regimes and thus do not fit under the umbrella of comparative histories of European fascism. By focusing on Salazar's dictatorship,

continuities between his colonial policies and the ones adopted during the regimes that preceded his rise to power would have been missed. In addition, there would be a risk of turning a blind eye to common aspects shared with imperial powers that were not dictatorships, as the dichotomy between European democracies and totalitarian dictatorships does not always apply to colonial settings. For instance, research on matters as diverse as public health and disease control, "native" taxation and labour, agricultural sciences, development, or migration and white settlement have shown that Portuguese colonial authorities were aware of the policies and practices adopted by other imperial powers.[14] This was not unique to the Portuguese: other European empires constantly learned from each other.

In recent years, research on modern colonialism and inter-imperial relations has increasingly emphasised cooperation and emulation between colonial powers. Notwithstanding the increasing intra-European tensions and exacerbated colonial rivalries from the beginning of the "age of empire" to decolonisation, colonisers faced similar challenges in the process of establishing and maintaining colonial rule in their possessions. There were common 'imperial repertoires' of rule, to use Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper's expression, that informed practices and ideas of the different colonial powers regarding the administration and exploitation of their colonies.[15] This does not mean that the specificity of each colonial empire should be downplayed – there were many ways of governing an empire and sometimes even different ways of governing different regions within the same colonial empire. While looking for solutions for shared problems together, however, European colonisers created and reinforced their commonalities, blurring intra-European differences in colonial contexts.[16] In addition to practical and scientific knowledge, people also circulated beyond the borders of colonial empires, taking part in processes of empire-building within and outside the limits of their own nation's colonies.

From this perspective, writing the history of European colonialism since the late nineteenth century cannot be limited to a set of compilations and comparisons between the various colonial projects and the engagements of the many different European colonial powers with their colonies. As Bernhard C. Schär pointedly suggested in a recent article, we need a new imperial history of Europe.[17] It needs not only to question the border between "metropole" and "colonies" as the New Imperial History of the 1990s has done, but also to cross the boundaries between and beyond colonial empires. In other words, we need a history that moves away from approaches centred in nation-based empires (per se or compared) and that does not overlook the involvement of people from every part of Europe. Europeans from both colonial powers and countries without colonies were present within the structures of colonial

expansion and exploitation, taking advantage of their Europeanness in racially defined colonial societies. We require a new imperial history of Europe that is inherently global, overcoming narratives that consider Europe as a model and the scale against which the world is measured, yet that does not efface Europe as a category of historical analysis. As Ferenc Laczó, Camilo Erlichman, and Pablo del Hierro put it in their contribution to this debate, the point is not about choosing to 'remain European' or 'go global'.[18] We need to do both: after all colonialism was a shared European project.

Which European colonialism matters?

This does not mean, however, that all colonial empires were considered equal in the first place. Notwithstanding the inter-imperial collaboration that flourished in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the way colonial nations perceived their position and that of their competitors on a 'hierarchical ladder of prestige', to use Samuël Coghe's fitting expression, determined with whom they wanted to collaborate, and from whom they believed they could learn.[19] Paradoxically, historians who write the history of European colonialism of that period are still confronted with hierarchical ladders of prestige today.

Researchers who take smaller European powers with colonies as the point of departure of their surveys still need to justify why their research is relevant and why colleagues, funding bodies, and publishers should take an interest in it. While comparative and transnational studies that approach colonialism as a collective European project are becoming more and more frequent, the British, French and/or German empires are usually taken as the frame of reference. The history of the smaller European powers' colonialism is sometimes taken as a bit part or a token in edited volumes, but comparisons with these case studies are often deemed irrelevant. It is not a matter of the duration or extension of their colonial empires. If that were the case, European countries with colonial empires for a much longer period and with a far greater extensive reach than Germany – like Portugal but also, for instance, the Netherlands – would arouse more interest among the international audience than the German colonial empire. Matters of economy and geopolitics in Europe *in the present* play a role in determining whose colonial pasts are placed at the centre of the history and historiography of modern colonialism and whose colonial pasts are relegated to a marginal role or overlooked completely.

As the contributions of Efi Avdela, Alexander Semyonov, Jitka Malečková or Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir in the previous rounds of the EuropeDebate have shown, this is a widespread problem experienced by scholars outside of the "Big Three" and not exclusive to the history of colonialism.[20] Global history has opened up imperial history to peoples and societies who had traditionally been marginalised but has yet to change perspectives on which interpretation of Europe matters, or on whose history is worth telling. Breaking these engrained historiographical hierarchies is perhaps the major challenge of European history as a field of research in the twentieth-first century – if able to do so, it would also be its major breakthrough, paving the way for an account that reflects Europe's more nuanced past and the way Europeans from great and smaller powers alike and actors from the world forcibly put under Europe's hegemony shaped the way this collective history happens.

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1. I would like to thank Christoph Kalter for his valuable suggestions on an earlier version of this text. [↩]
2. A. J. P. Taylor, What Is European History? in: *History Today* 36/1 (1986), p. 46. [↩]
3. Many of us may never have noticed that some of them are even represented on the Euro banknotes. See Manuela Boatcă, Thinking Europe Otherwise: Lessons from the Caribbean, in: *Current Sociology* 69.3 (2021), pp. 395–397, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392120931139. Her invitation to rethink how Europe as a political, cultural, economic, and discursive formation is imagined is thought-provoking. [↩]
4. I will not attempt to summarise a decades-long (and heated) debate here. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Kenneth Pomeranz's influential *The Great Divergence* has been published more than twenty years ago. Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton 2000. [↩]
5. See, for instance: V. G. Kiernan, Europe in the Colonial Mirror, in: *History of European Ideas* 1.1 (1980), pp. 39–61; Alec G. Hargreaves, European Identity and the Colonial Frontier, in: *Journal of European Studies* 12.47 (1982), pp. 166–179. [↩]
6. Alexander Semyonov, Provincializing Europe, De-centering Europe, Hybridizing Europe, in: Sonja Levsen / Jörg Requate (eds.), *Why Europe, Which Europe? A Debate on Contemporary European History as a Field of Research*, November 8, 2020, https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/321.) [↩]
7. On the many limitations and omissions in Portuguese history textbooks used in lower secondary education (i.e. attended by pupils usually aged 12 to 15), see Marta Araújo / Silvia Rodríguez Maeso, Slavery and Racism as the "Wrongs" of (European) History: Reflections from a Study on Portuguese Textbooks, in: Douglas Hamilton / Kate Hodgson / Joel Quirk (eds.), *Slavery, Memory and Identity: National Representations and Global Legacies*, London 2012, pp. 151–66. [↩]
8. Carlos Fiolhais / José Eduardo Franco / José Pedro Paiva (eds)., *The Global History of Portugal: From Pre-History to the Modern World,* Brighton 2022. On the limits of this genre of history books that aim to give a global reading to the national past, see Arthur Asseraf, Le monde comme adjectif: retour sur l'Histoire mondiale de la France, in: *Revue d'histoire moderne contemporaine* 68.1 (2021), pp. 151–162. [↩]
9. After reading Efi Avdela's remarks about the challenges of scholars working on non-Greek history in Greece in his piece for this debate, I realise I may be being too optimistic about how this exchange of ideas would actually take place in a national institution, however. [↩]

10. Namely Cláudia Castelo, *"O Modo Português de Estar No Mundo". O Luso-Tropicalismo e a Ideologia Colonial Portuguesa (1933-1961)*, Porto 1998. See also Valentim Alexandre's first reflections on the importance of colonial matters for the establishment of the dictatorship, which acted also as a "call to arms" to twentieth-century historians: Valentim Alexandre, Ideologia, Economia e Política: A Questão Colonial Na Implantação Do Estado Novo, in: *Análise Social* XXVIII.123–124 (1993), pp. 1117-1136. [↩]
11. See, for instance, Manuel de Lucena's foundational investigation on state corporatist structures in Portugal. Manuel de Lucena, *A evolução do sistema corporativo português*, Lisbon 1976. [↩]
12. Stanley G. Payne, Fascism and Right Authoritarianism in the Iberian World – The Last Twenty Years, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 21. 2 (1986), pp. 163-177: 172. [↩]
13. Sonja Levsen / Jörg Requate, Why Europe, Which Europe? Present Challenges and Future Avenues for Doing European History, in: Sonja Levsen / Jörg Requate (eds.), *Why Europe, Which Europe? A Debate on Contemporary European History as a Field of Research*, October 15, 2020, https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/86. [↩]
14. Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo / José Pedro Monteiro, Das "dificuldades de Levar Os Indígenas a Trabalhar": O Sistema de Trabalho Nativo No Império Colonial Português, in: Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (ed.), *O Império Colonial Em Questão, Sécs. XIX-XX: Poderes, Saberes e Instituições*, Lisboa 2012, pp. 159–96; Marta Macedo, Império de Cacau: Ciência Agrícola e Regimes de Trabalho Em São Tomé No Início Do Século XX, in: Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo (ed.), *O Império Colonial Em Questão, Sécs. XIX-XX: Poderes, Saberes e Instituições*, Lisbon 2012, pp. 289–316; Philip J. Havik / Alexander Keese / Maciel Santos, *Administration and Taxation in Former Portuguese Africa, 1900-1945*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2015; Samuël Coghe, Inter-Imperial Learning and African Health Care in Portuguese Angola in the Interwar Period, in: *Social History of Medicine* 28. 1 (2015), pp. 134–154; Maria Do Mar Gago, *Robusta Empire: Coffee, Scientists and the Making of Colonial Angola (1898-1961)*, Lisbon 2018; Caio Simões de Araújo, Whites, but Not Quite: Settler Imaginations in Late Colonial Mozambique, c. 1951–1964, in: Duncan Money / Danelle van Zyl-Hermann (eds.), *Rethinking White Societies in Southern Africa, 1930s–1990s,* London 2020, pp. 97–114. [↩]
15. Frederick Cooper / Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History. Power and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton 2010, pp. 287–329. [↩]
16. See, for instance, Jeremy Adelman, Mimesis and Rivalry: European Empires and Global Regimes, in: *Journal of Global History* 10. 01 (2015), pp. 77–98; Volker Barth / Roland Cvetkovski (eds.), I*mperial Co-Operation and Transfer, 1870-1930: Empires and Encounters*, London 2015; Ulrike Lindner, Colonialism as a European Project in Africa before 1914? British and German Concepts of Colonial Rule in Sub-Saharan Africa, in: *Comparativ* 19.1 (2009), pp. 88–106; Ulrike Lindner, *Koloniale Begegnungen: Deutschland und Großbritannien als Imperialmächte in Afrika 1880-1914,* Frankfurt 2011; Christoph Kamissek / Jonas Kreienbaum, An Imperial Cloud? Conceptualising Interimperial Connections and Transimperial Knowledge, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 14.2 (2016), pp. 164–182; Daniel Hedinger / Nadin Heé, Transimperial History – Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition, in: *Journal of Modern European History* 16:4 (2018), pp. 429–52; Cyrus Schayegh, *Preliminary reflections on transimperial history – The Leiden Terra Incognita Lecture*, Leiden 2022. A mention is due to the Transimperial History scholarly network and blog: https://www.transimperialhistory.com/. [↩]
17. Bernhard Schär, Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies: Towards a New Imperial History of Europe, c.1770–1850, in: *Past and Present* (ahead of print) (2022). [↩]
18. Ferenc Laczó / Camilo Erlichman / Pablo del Hierro, Reconceptualisation and Renewal. On Writing Contemporary European History Today, in: Sonja Levsen / Jörg Requate (eds.), *Why Europe, Which Europe? A Debate on Contemporary European History as a Field of Research*, April, 11, 2021, https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/740. [↩]
19. Samuël Coghe, *Population Politics in the Tropics: Demography, Health and Transimperialism in Colonial Angola*, Cambridge 2022, p. 247. [↩]
20. Efi Avdela, The Quest for (a Utopian?) European History, in: Sonja Levsen / Jörg Requate (eds.), *Why Europe, Which Europe? A Debate on Contemporary European History as a Field of Research*, November 2, 2020,

https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/301; Alexander Semyonov: Provincializing Europe, De-centering Europe, Hybridizing Europe, in: ibid., November 8, 2020, https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/321; Jitka Malečková: On the Margins of European History, in: ibid., November 22, 2020, https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/342; Erla Hulda Hallddósdóttir, Speaking From the Fringes: Which Europe Belongs to Europe?, in: ibid., May 3, 2021, https://europedebate.hypotheses.org/885. [↩]

ALLGEMEIN