The Debate on Race Relations in the Portuguese Empire and Charles R. Boxer’s Position

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Abstract

How do we read Charles Boxer’s Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire (1450-1825)? In order to identify the author’s intention, three main analytical contexts should be taken into account. In England, Basil Davidson, among other journalists, took the lead of an anti-colonial discourse. In the US, academics like James Duffy participated in the same kind of debate. Finally, under the pressure of the emerging war in Angola at the beginning of 1961, Portuguese circles of academics and politicians prepared a variety of responses. Boxer arrived late to the debate on race relations and the nature of Portuguese colonialism, and his conservative views prevented him from becoming an anti-colonial intellectual. By the same token, his noble dream of objectivity in using the past also prevented him to accept established myths on Portuguese life in the tropics.

Keywords

Colonialism, Race relations, Charles R. Boxer, Historiography

Resumo

Como ler As Relações Raciais no Império Colonial Português (1450-1825) de Charles B. Boxer? Para colocar a intenção do autor nos seus contextos de pertinência, três exercícios analíticos deverão ser considerados. Em Inglaterra, Basil Davidson, entre outros jornalistas, foi pioneiro na elaboração de um discurso anti-colonial. Nos Estados Unidos, foram universitários, tais como James Duffy, que participaram no mesmo tipo de debate. Finalmente, sob a pressão do início da Guerra em Angola em 1961, os círculos portugueses ligados à academia e à política prepararam uma variedade de respostas. Boxer chegou tarde ao debate sobre as relações raciais e a natureza do colonialismo português. Do mesmo modo, o seu sonho nobre de objectividade nos usos historiográficos do passado impediu-o de aceitar os mitos que se estavam a estabelecer acerca do mundo que os portugueses criaram nos trópicos.

Palavras-Chave

Colonialismo, Relações Raciais, Charles R. Boxer, Historiografia

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I would like to thank Onésimo Teotónio Almeida and Luís Adão da Fonseca, both of whom invited me to participate in “Portuguese History in a Global Context—A colloquium to celebrate the tenth year of the e-Journal of Portuguese History” (Brown University, October 11–13, 2012), and Miguel Jerónimo, who organized a seminar at the Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa entitled “Histórias do império” (24 May 2013), which was sponsored by CesNova and the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia. At both of these events, different versions of this article were presented and discussed. This article was written with the collaboration of Bernardo Pinto da Cruz.
In February 1957, Lord Hailey gave a talk at the Sociedade de Geografia as part of a conference titled “The Rising Spirit of Africanism.” Its published translation into Portuguese, which appeared in the Sociedade’s Boletim from the same year, misrepresented the spirit of the message that the former governor of various provinces in India (1924–1928, Punjab; 1928–1934, the region that is now known as Uttar Pradesh) and the coordinator of African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara (1938) had delivered. According to the British conference participant, the large shift that had taken place in the last few decades was based in the emergence of the African voice. Sure, the attention given to the “native African”—not to be confused with nationalism, which had been imbued with a sense of what might more properly be considered tribalism—varied in scale: the attention given was quite noticeable in the British territories, also visible in the French, less seen in the Belgian territories, and even less so in the Portuguese ones. The reasons that determined such a difference were not just dependent on the political systems created by the colonial European states. Segregation policies and African responses to them correspond to reasons that are more structural, economic, and demographic.

According to Lord Hailey, in South Africa, one of the most discussed segregation cases in the world, the integration of close to two thousand Africans into an economy driven by another two thousand white people and the subsequent improvement of the Africans’ quality of life—despite their lack of leadership and the absence of a sense of community coupled with the strong positions taken by the white population—set up a context for the process through which the Africans were gaining consciousness of their important role. Generally, in the territories under British administration, only Kenya showed the violent side of “Africanism” with the Mau-Mau, who associated terrorism with superstition, though they only represented a small part of a tribal group. In the other territories under British administration, there seemed to be a natural propensity to favor local political institutions, which implicated self-governing ideals that fended off calls for independence. On the contrary, in the territories under the French colonial administration, integration of the colonies, an ideal enshrined in the 1948 constitution, was sought after, leading to a rebranding of the former colonies as “overseas provinces,” granting citizenship to Africans, and supporting representatives in the metropolitan parliament. In the case of Congo, it wasn’t clear if the 70,000 settlers had citizenship rights—an uncertainty that was

3 “Everywhere one becomes conscious that the African, who previously had only a silent role in the drama of Africa, now has a speaking part, and often indeed a crucial share in the development of the play” (Hailey, “The Rising Spirit of Africanism”). This topic had interested that author ever since the first edition of Survey had been published, cf. Lord Hailey, “Nationalism in Africa.”
even clearer with relation to the Africans there. Despite the improvement of their economic situation, they were refused any type of political representation. Whereas, with the Portuguese territories, Lord Hailey commented on the restricted forms of assimilation, but stressed the obvious forms of segregation for the majority of the African population:

There is even less evidence of the manifestation of African opinion in Portuguese territories. Portugal is a firm exponent of the principle of the integration of overseas territories with the metropolitan institutions, but this has taken the form of the complete assimilation of a small and careful selected body of Africans with the resident Portuguese citizens. To that extent she deprives the indigenous population of what might otherwise be its natural leaders. To all appearance the great non-assimilated indigenous population is an inert, or at any event silent mass.\(^4\)

Also, in 1957 the second volume of the “Estudos de Ciências Políticas e Sociais,” which had been preceded by a first volume written entirely by Adriano Moreira, was dedicated to the *Enquête sur l’anticolonialisme* (Inquiry on Anticolonialism). Featuring contributions written mainly in English, though also in French and Spanish, it included authors such as Eduardo Mondlane, who was working on his PhD in New York. A year later, Raymond Firth, an anthropologist and the successor to Malinowski in the London School of Economics, performed the same kind of comparative exercises that Lord Hailey had done, which were all based on a system of variations in scale in order to demonstrate that the differences in skin color were not universally accepted, but socially and culturally produced:

In the Union of South Africa, and to some extent in the South of the United States, the racial segregation works the most stringently. But in the North of the United States, and in many parts of British Africa, it is much less strong. There seems to be no such segregation in Portuguese Angola, and a European government officer may marry a native woman and set up a household which earns respect and recognition of a full social status.\(^5\)

The density of issues raised by that last ranking of racial segregation is, perhaps, less than that which is raised by Lord Hailey’s talk, which was limited to Africa. However, what is important to ascertain is the authorial intent when describing these situations in comparative contexts, using as much of the African voice, as Hailey does, as segregation

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\(^4\) Hailey, “The Rising Spirit of Africanism.”

\(^5\) Firth, *Human Types: An Introduction to Social Anthropology.*
based on the color of one’s skin, as Firth’s book does. At a point, both seem to match up: the models of African assimilation and integration that the Portuguese put into practice in their African colonies were very limited, as the number of white settlers was low; additionally, according to Firth, these models were only put forth by the functionaries of the colonial state. In turn, according to Hailey, the majority of the African people who lived in Portuguese colonies represented “a silent mass,” without voice and, as a result, still segregated.

Juxtaposed with the prudent and analytical perspectives of Hailey and Firth, Arnold Toynbee’s ideas seem more like generalizations that were crafted to receive a warm welcome from the Portuguese officials. Indeed, a lecture delivered by him in Lisbon between 1959 and 1960 at the Instituto de Altos Estudos Militares resulted in applause from Marcello Caetano, as, in the speech, the renowned historian referred to the Portuguese Empire in the following words:

I suppose that the Portuguese tradition of liberalism regarding the question of racial mixing is one of the causes of the noteworthy durability of the Portuguese colonial empire in the present century. The Portuguese Empire is not just the first colonial power of Western Europe, it is also the one that has suffered the first losses. Its losses came about in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the then-growing colonial empires, the British, French and Dutch, were, in part, built upon former Portuguese possessions. After 1945, these three younger Western European colonial powers melted as though they were icebergs that found themselves in tropical seas. In contrast, the remainder of the Portuguese Empire did not diminish. Could it be this way because, in the overseas territories of Portugal, mutual integration has formed at such a level that a very strong bond of sympathy has been created?

The question was rhetorical, and in fact, for Toynbee, the relative advantages of the Portuguese were based on their suitability for racial mixing, which was sustained by the mechanisms of integration favored by religious conversions that not only the Portuguese

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6 Toynbee, “O Ocidente e o Futuro.” It is of note that, in that very year, Ortega and Gasset argued that Toynbee’s work did not contain one word of praise towards England, whose colonial empire had been based in readings of the Old Testament and in racism; this contrasted with the Catholic colonial populations from Spain and Portugal who read the Bible less often and who kept a different kind of relationship with native peoples: “In effect, instead of exterminating them at first like the English did, or, later on, distancing themselves from them, what they did was join with them and create mixed races” (Ortega and Gasset, *Una interpretación de la Historia Universal: En torno a Toynbee*). Though the contrast between the colonizing models used by the Protestants and the Catholics was unquestionable, Ortega mused that Toynbee’s sensitivity with regard to the tragedy of racism did not have any parallels with what happened with this “other tragedy, precisely that which comes from the existence of large numbers of mestizos and mulattos in the countries where it occurs, something well known to all that have traveled through the Americas and South Africa” (Ortega and Gasset, *Una interpretación de la Historia Universal: En torno a Toynbee*, 264–65).