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Abstract

This article sets out to examine the impact of the changes in Portugal’s fisheries in the second half of the 20th century, with particular reference to the Northwest Atlantic cod fisheries between 1948 and 1974, respectively the creation of the ICNAF and the Portuguese Democratic Revolution. Science, Law and Diplomacy are the three prongs of this work. Focusing on the Portuguese angle, and making use of a huge range of sources, this article deals with the rise and fall of the Portuguese cod fishing industry in an international context.

The analysis is multidisciplinary in perspective: economic and social history, “diplomatic history” and the history of science are its foundations. Political and trade relations with Canada and Denmark play an important part in identifying the Portuguese government’s adaptation strategies and the fishing entrepreneurs involved in the main external changes of the 1950s and 60s: the first signs of scarcity of resources, the First and Second United Nations Conferences on the Law of the Sea, the issue of extending the limits of territorial waters and the setting up of multilateral bodies for managing the Northwest Atlantic fisheries (ICNAF, 1948). The way in which the Corporate Organization for Portuguese Fishing - the institutional framework established by the Salazar dictatorship in the 1930s - received the external discussions on the problem of overfishing and dealt with the threats, embarking on unheard of initiatives in external cooperation vis-à-vis intergovernmental organizations for the management of fisheries, are questions that are fundamental to this work.

In this, as in other domains of post-war Salazarist foreign policy, involvement in supranational organizations was a “necessary evil” that ended up creating isolated areas of cooperation and openness to the advances of marine science. The most surprising conclusion of this article is probably this: even under a dictatorship, one that favoured a “historicist diplomacy”, Portugal succumbed to the principles and practices of multilateralism in order to defend its interests in the deep-sea cod fisheries of Newfoundland, Labrador and Greenland.

Keywords

Fisheries history; Cod; Portugal; resources management; Diplomacy; Multilateralism
Introduction

In the second half of the 19th century, the industrialization of Portuguese fisheries (the arrival of steam seine fishing connected with the rapid growth of the canning industry) and the increasing perception of the usefulness of oceanographic and marine biology studies led public authorities and scientific bodies to increase their involvement in fishing and pisciculture. The state used specialized departments in the Navy to institutionalize the “fisheries services”, as well as to regulate technology and rights relating to the catching of certain species. In addition to these measures, the Portuguese authorities carried out surveys of the fishing industry, fostered hydrographic campaigns and encouraged the establishment of “maritime laboratories”.\footnote{Inês Amorim, “A Organização dos Serviços de Pescas e as iniciativas de desenvolvimento e divulgação das ciências do mar – o laboratório marítimo em Aveiro – o projecto de Melo de Matos”, 1 Congresso Luso-Brasileiro de História da Ciência e da Técnica, Evora/Aveiro, UA/UE, 2001, pp. 594-605.} The technical advances in fish production and processing attracted both capital and capitalists, but they also provoked conflicts between shipowners; they set local and national authorities against one another and forced negotiations to be held between neighboring countries on the mobility of resources and the respective sovereignty over territorial waters. This was the case with the agreements signed between Portugal and Spain in 1878 and 1885. Their purpose was to protect sardine fishing and guarantee exclusive fishing rights for “national vessels” in the territorial waters of each of these Iberian countries.\footnote{See, idem, ibidem.}

By the mid-19th century, the Naval Ministry Fisheries Board (Comissão de Pescarias do Ministério da Marinha) was already intervening in the domain of fishing and monitoring the imbalances in the relationship between men and sea on behalf of the state. Interpreting the fishermen’s complaints, the Board ruled that the number of steam trawlers engaged in sardine and hake fishing should be reduced.\footnote{Baldaque da Silva, Estado actual das pesca em Portugal, Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional, 1891.} Fishing began to be seen as a productive industrial sector.

Reacting to the pressures of business associations and those of shipowners and traders organized in mixed-capital firms, and bearing in mind the views of naturalists, the British authorities also promulgated various laws in the early 20th century to combat the fishing crisis in the North Sea. This was the first ocean zone to exhibit the frailties of the sea fisheries in the industrial era. One common denominator stands out from this series of measures: even though the unanimous diagnosis on the state of the “depletion of resources” of high commercial value was a new feature, and despite being based on natural-scientific arguments, its meaning was clearly instrumental and presumed the defense of a return on capital from industrial fishing.\footnote{See Robb Robinson, Trawling – The Rise and Fall of the British Trawl Fishery, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 1996, pp. 101 and ff.} Similar trends could be observed in the second half of the 20th century, in particular in the 1950s and 1960s.

At the end of the 19th century, the “problem of the North Sea” led to the formation of the first intergovernmental organizations for fisheries management and the systematic assessment of the