“The Zenith of our National History?”
National identity, colonial empire, and the promotion of the Portuguese Discoveries: Portugal 1930s

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Abstract

With the onset of Salazarism in the 1930s, the cult of the Portuguese Discoveries—its product of late nineteenth-century Portuguese nationalism—again became a fulcrum of nationalist attention, progressively occupying the very core of Portugal’s national identity. This (re-)mobilization of the Discoveries and their incorporation into the national profile remained tied to regime legitimacy and consolidation, as well as to concerns over Portugal and its colonial heritage. Drawing on representative writings of the imperial discourse (of the 1930s), this article examines some aspects of the ideological articulation of the Discoveries with Portugal’s national identity and the defense of Portuguese colonialism.

Keywords

Portuguese Discoveries; colonial empire; national identity; threat to empire; Salazarism

Resumo

Com o início do salazarismo em 1930, o culto dos Descobrimentos portugueses (consequência do nacionalismo português do século XIX) voltou a transformar-se numa das bases do interesse nacionalista, ocupando progressivamente o centro da identidade nacional. Esta recuperação dos Descobrimentos para o panorama nacional manteve-se ligada à legitimidade e consolidação do regime, bem como às aspirações do país e ao seu legado colonial. Baseando-se em textos representativos do discurso imperialista (1930), este artigo analisa alguns aspectos da articulação ideológica dos Descobrimentos face à identidade portuguesa e à defesa do colonialismo.

Palavras-chave

Descobrimentos Portugueses; império colonial; identidade nacional; ameaça ao império; salazarismo

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In 1998, Portugal hosted the World Exposition in Lisbon, a four-month extravaganza replete with opulent pavilions and innovative architecture, all designed to showcase a country full of promise on the cusp of a new century. The expo was both forward-looking and backward-glancing, drawing its theme—“The Oceans, a Heritage for the Future”—from Portugal’s history of maritime exploration. Indeed, Expo 98—in its commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Vasco de Gama’s charting of a sea route between Europe and India—allowed Portugal to implant itself in the world of tomorrow while maintaining an identity elevated by the glories of the past.

I allude to Expo 98 to illustrate the ongoing importance of the Portuguese Maritime Discoveries in the formation of the modern Portuguese national identity, even after the expiration of the imperial project. The formation of this identity began in earnest in the late nineteenth century, at a time when, as noted by Douglas Wheeler, Portugal gradually assumed the identity of a “Western European, but imperial power with worldwide trade, navigation, and emigration”—an identity that relied on “a unique Discoveries’ role” (6). While the creation of this modern national identity enjoyed widespread political and ideological patronage under the regimes of the Constitutional Monarchy and the First Republic, it was the first decade of the Estado Novo (New State) that witnessed a renewed, more comprehensive, and deliberate reformulation of a master national narrative grounded in the Age of the Discoveries, and, by extension, in the idea of a historical and indissoluble Portuguese overseas colonial empire. This renewed attention to the Maritime Discoveries grew with Salazarism since, as Vale de Almeida points out, “it was not until Salazar’s regime that an actual colonial enterprise in Africa was set up,” in terms of both a “colonial regime” and “proper institutions and knowledge systems” (5).

Unlike the Portugal of 1998—which was more than two decades into its post-colonial present—the relationship of the Portugal of the 1930s to the Discoveries was strongly tied to a set of interrelated preoccupations, not only with the regime’s survival and consolidation, but also with Portugal’s (and specifically the regime’s) recommitment to the dreams of empire—which represents the main concern of these notes. By the end of the 1930s, Portugal’s focus on the Discoveries had become an extensive ideological investment in the nation’s historical memory, a response in part to the recognition that the continuation of Portugal’s colonial “stewardship” depended on a vigorous and reputable national image, both domestically and throughout Europe. Indeed, if the privileged status (re)accorded to the Discoveries during the 1930s was meant to fortify an ideological link between imperial Portugal and its precarious hold on its colonies, this privileged status also