The Memory of the Portuguese First Republic throughout the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

The Portuguese First Republic (1910-1926) is still today a historical period marked by the controversies it generated. Despite its overall failure as an attempt to democratize and modernize the country, the regime left a powerful legacy in the collective memory, acritically glorified or condemned, depending on whether it fueled the apologetic and proselytic view of the utopia-to-be or, in contrast, the devilish view of a close-to-anarchy and Jacobin-like experience. This text analyzes the way in which the First Republic’s memory became a topic for heated debate, marking out positions and projecting them onto the appreciations that successive Portuguese generations were to make on this matter throughout the twentieth century.

Keywords

First Republic; republicanism; memory; historiography; commemoration

Resumo

A Primeira República Portuguesa (1910-1926) é ainda hoje um período histórico marcado pelas controvérsias que suscitou. Apesar do seu fracasso geral, como tentativa de democratização e modernização do país, ela deixou um poderoso legado na memória coletiva, acriticamente glorificado ou condenado, consoante alimentou a visão apologética e proselitista da utopia tentada ou, em contraste, a visão demoníaca de uma experiência anárquica e jacobina. Este texto analisa a forma como a memória da Primeira República se tornou um tópico de acesa discussão, extremando posições e projectando-as na própria leitura que gerações sucessivas de portugueses foram fazendo dela ao longo do século XX.

Palavras-chave

Primeira República; republicanismo; memória; historiografia; comemoração

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1. The Republic and republicanism: between “idea,” regime and memory.

1910 was the year in which Portugal underwent the most significant regime change in the course of its national history, ceasing to be a Monarchy, as the country had always been since its foundation in the middle of the twelfth century, and becoming a republic. October 5, the key date of that year of turmoil, was the day on which a small number of military units, acting on behalf of a civilian cultural elite, implemented a minimum program backed by a maximum support. In 1910, almost everybody who had a (public) opinion was united against a deadlocked monarchy, run, as it was, by unstable governments and a rather inconsequential king. What remained to be defined was the kind of collective future that the new republican regime was to bring about, and whether that future would be one of progress and democratization, living up to what the republican propaganda had long announced.

This opened up a wide-ranging and ongoing debate as to what Portuguese republican life should be like, fueling large parts of the Portuguese political, social and cultural history during the last one hundred years and throughout the course of its different existing republics. The recent centennial commemorations of October 5, in 2010, showed the great variety of different reasonings invoked in relation to what a Republican Portugal is or should be, even if the regime’s institutional form is not questioned. Consequently, those commemorations served as a starting point, or a pretext, to revisit the 1910-1926 republican experience and assess the impact that it had had on national life. For the past one hundred years, the First Republic has been a constitutive element of recent national memory, envisaged here both as a set of collective discourses made up of the sum of individual recollections, and also as a set of representations echoed by press and historiography and displayed as “official” portraits—with or without implicit political militancy—of that important twentieth-century time slice.

What triumphed in Portugal in the early hours of 5 October 1910, was not so much an idea, a new political culture or a unified party project, but rather a radical and armed vanguard of the so-called PRP (Partido Republicano Português, or Portuguese Republican Party). Not that there did not exist an idea, or a republican political culture. In fact, republicanism did pre-exist the political regime inaugurated in 1910, and even outlived it after 1926, serving as a basic and underlying collective reference for the period of Portuguese modernity from the constitutional monarchy to the last years of the “New State” regime. It was the ideological stance (and hope) of republicanism that drove so many