

Portuguese colonial geographical tradition (1926-1974)

José Ramiro Pimenta*

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Introduction

The Portuguese colonial geographical tradition should not be reduced to the production made by researchers and within centres of research institutionally confined to the university.¹ If that is the privileged line in which we move in this paper, such is mainly due to the need to bring into the academic debate the phases of formation of geographic science as an institutional programme amidst the social life and political context it belongs to. Nevertheless, in the domain of the colonial relations, one should not forget several institutions that, besides university, decisively contributed to the production of a geographic science, among which the examples of the Geographical Society of Lisbon or the 'Junta' of Colonial [afterwards, Overseas] Research were not the less important ones. To them and other similar ones we shall make reference whenever that would be necessary to illustrate the relations that were established between the political and intellectual sides of research – nevertheless, we must again state that this portrait of Portuguese colonial geographies will mainly draw upon the work that was produced in the academic context.

* Faculty of Arts of University of Porto, Portugal. CITCEM – Centro de Investigação Transdisciplinar, Cultura, Espaço e Memória

¹ This study reworks the paper presented to the 2008 Oporto Geographical Conferences (Faculty of Arts, University of Porto). Also attended these conferences, and there presented papers, James Sidaway (Un. Plymouth), Richard Phillips (Un. Liverpool), João Sarmento (Un. Minho) and Ana Francisca de Azevedo (Un. Minho). An earlier simplified Portuguese version was published as part of the foreword of *Geografias pós-coloniais* (Pimenta, Sarmento & Azevedo 2008).

Antecedents and contexts

The evolution of the Portuguese geographical colonial programme of research, even if it does present some continuity, must be understood not only as a result of its internal dynamics but also of the relations it establishes, on one hand, with the international evolution of geographical thought, and the diverse paradigmatic proposals that there originate, and on the other, in the historical and geopolitical relations that Europe, and Portugal in particular, keep with the faraway territories that are held under its jurisdiction. The 20th century is a time of profound political changes: two worlds wars break out, a socialist revolution rises and exports triumphantly a new model of government and re-colonization to almost half of the world, the northern America emerges as the most important Atlantic power of the West, taking away from Europe a five centuries-long indisputable domain; finally, it is the century in whose final part, a decolonising wave will rise in Asia and Africa, as already had before risen in America, during the 19th century – nevertheless, the temptation to compare these two pro-independency movements does not resist a more than superficial observation: the 20th century decolonising movements hit more radically the magma of worldwide human and political relations.

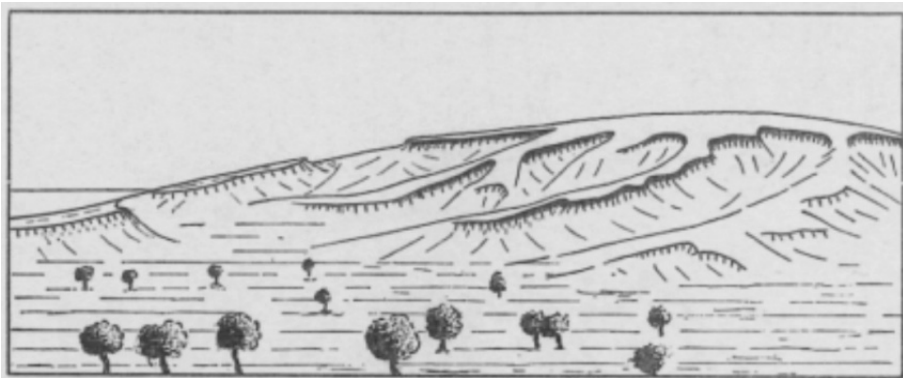
Portuguese Dictatorship (timeline)



1 – ‘Portuguese Dictatorship’ timeline (Grey circles: military coups d’état)

[This timeline clearly shows how pro-totalitarian supporters could easily mislead a vast majority of a people that was being submitted to a long period of social unrest and almost daily military movements in the end of Republic, a context that had its origins in the late years of Monarchy. After the establishment of Estado Novo (1933 Constitution) there was only one major military movement with the intention to remove Salazar: the ‘Botelho Moniz’ coup’, in 1961, allegedly sponsored by the US; nevertheless, the forces loyal to Salazar were able to defeat the opponents (Valença 1981)]

The period of time that corresponds to the affirmation of scientific colonial geography goes back, at least, to the last three decades of 19th century and extends to the equivalent period of the 20th. It is, therefore, a long period of time, in which some important political, social and epistemological transformations occur in Portugal, in the whole of the social life and particularly in the university and the discipline of geography. From the broad racialist (not necessarily racist) approaches to colonial acclimation, made by Silva Teles, to the meticulous regional characterization of the ‘highlands of Huíla’, made by Carlos Alberto Medeiros (Medeiros 1976) – probably the last study cast out in a typically ‘colonial geographical’ mould (Ribeiro 1981) – unfolds an internal process of change of the political relationship established between the metropolitan centre and the territories under its jurisdiction, that the renaming of ‘colonies’ into ‘overseas provinces’ significantly illustrates; and, at the same time, a gradual substitution of the programmes of research was also occurring within geography, in which one can see the small scale themes organized around racial characterization being progressively replaced by regional multiform studies of proximity.



2 – ‘The idea of tropical landscape’

[Iconography of landscape (Cosgrove & Daniels 1988; Azevedo 2008) has demonstrated how the ‘idea of landscape’ conveys as much of the viewed as of the viewer. The conceptualization of the Tropics is not immune to aesthetic considerations either, as it is the case of this interesting hand-sketch of ‘La butte de Birou vue de Sud’ made by Suzanne Daveau (1967). In it we can see how the Western canon of painting, the tropical environment and scientific endeavour come to be harmoniously joined together]

During the second half of 19th c., the biologist metaphor became the main interpretative analogical framework to study nature and society, even if not with the extension and intensity that is generally attributed to it by general histories of science. Nevertheless, in such a context, impregnated by biology, notions of ‘race’ and ‘environment’ became cen-

tral among the diverse interpretative statements of nature and culture, being especially effective among the disciplines that, like geography, devoted to study themes that were intersected by both of them. Portuguese geography has also participated in this international movement, particularly when, with Silva Teles, the discipline of geography is institutionalised in Portugal (1904).

Silva Teles (1860-1930) was responsible for the introduction of geography in the academic teaching in Portugal, having occupied the first chair of Geography in the Superior Course of Humanities of Lisbon, institution that eventually came to be, in the Republic, the Faculty of Arts of Lisbon. This chair would be, until the doctorate of Amorim Girão, at Coimbra, and not taking into account the ephemeral institution of a chair of Geography in the 'former' Faculty of Arts of Porto, the only academic geographer to comprise the period of the first decades of the 20th century (Ribeiro 1989). Besides being professor at the Faculty of Arts, Silva Teles also was a fellow of the Geographical Society of Lisbon, and this double condition helps us to understand his interventions in the domain of colonial geography. He promoted and chaired the first Colonial Conferences sponsored by Geographical Society, and there he presented his own vision of the role of geography in relation to the administration of faraway lands, specifically the whole problem of acclimation.

This is not the place to present a complete and detailed description of the Telesian programme of research, moulded in the casts of the racist theories of his time (Pimenta 2004). Nevertheless, an attentive reading of Silva Teles' paper, 'Ensino Colonial Universitário', a brief study presented in 1924, in the 2nd Colonial Conference, allows us to recognize the two main features of geographical science at the time, and of the colonial context of its application: on one hand, that almost nothing had been done beforehand, in the direction of an effective scientific geographical practice in tropical lands, and on the other hand the mutual interdependence of the political and intellectual sides of the research programme.²

A colonial programme of geographic research

Nevertheless, the first fully structured programme of colonial research within Portuguese geography was established by the studies of Orlando Ribeiro focusing the 'Portuguese expansion'.³ These are works of planetary scale, that result not only from the scarcity of concrete fieldwork that at the time still prevailed in relation to the colonial settings, but also from the more 'teleological' tone that still animated the author's work,

2 'In Portugal, after the ideals exposed in the 1st Colonial Conference, promoted by the Geographical Society of Lisbon, it has become recognized by everyone the need of colonial teaching. The Tropical Medicine School and the Colonial School have been created; special courses have been organized in the Superior Institute of Agronomy and in the Law Schools. It was a really remarkable development of which the Geographical Society is entitled to be proud of. [...] But all this improvement in favour of colonial instruction is already a quarter of a century long. After that, nothing more has been done. [...] There are no high colonial studies in Portugal, although we have all the elements necessary to its organization. Nevertheless, the high colonial studies should be in perfect symbiosis with the formation of a special board of colonial employees. Whatever their job should be, whatever the nature of the work in the colonies, without a proper previous scholar preparation, we shall continue, as ever it has been done, to send to the colonies people that do not know what the colonies are' (Teles 2004 [1924]: 190).

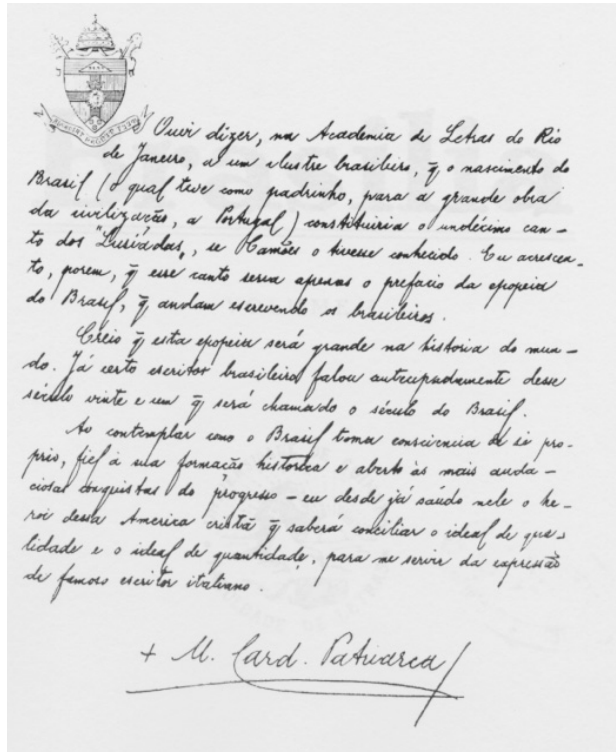
3 The most important studies that Orlando Ribeiro devoted to the theme of the 'Portuguese expansion' are collected in *Aspectos e problemas da expansão portuguesa* (1962)

in close accordance of the studies that at the same time he devoted to the ‘formation of Portugal’ as a nation.⁴

The enormous lacunae in collected data regarding the colonial territories were at once fully recognized, and gave origin to a more structured and concrete colonial geographical research, whose ‘diffusion’ within conceptual map seems to replicate the main phases of Portuguese expansion in the world.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the first studies that were devoted to overseas territories had focused in the ‘insular outposts’ that connect Europe, Africa and America, originating a whole series of reports of the Atlantic archipelagos, of which the study of the Madeira Island is the first exemplar (Ribeiro 1949).

There follows the second set of studies; one that would become the more important line of research (at least from a certain tautological point-of-view on ‘Portugalsness’) within the Ribeirian geographical school – the Brazil. There seem to exist, within Ribeiro’s work, two conceptual and affective margins that bound up Portuguese colonial geography, and that are in consonance with Portuguese cultural widespread views of his time. Two alternative assessments – utopian and dystopian – seem to coexist of the territories that would more profoundly imprint the colonial conscience of the Portuguese: Brazil and Angola. In this context, both operate as ‘models’ of a successful and unsuccessful relation of Portugal with its own ‘empire’. And even if we have the notion that the author did not force the tangible geographies of the territories, and their histories, to deterministic conceptions, it is possible, nevertheless, to detect in his own ‘psychology of research’ a morally effective appraisal of the multicultural relation that he believed could be recognized in the relations between Portugal and Brazil.⁵



4 The first of Ribeiro’s studies devoted to this theme is a paper presented to a conference in Brussels, *La formation de Portugal* (1939).

5 The first of Ribeiro’s studies devoted to Brazil is ‘Brasil, a terra e o homem’ (1942).

3. The 'Empire', the State and the Church

[Manuel Cerejeira, the most important name of Portuguese Clergy during the Dictatorship, here (1942) stating that the '21st century should be Brazilian', a standing that would eventually counteract the dispositions of Salazar's official nationalist-imperialist discourse (Cruz 1999)]

After 1945, when the western world became aware that the rhetorical absurdity of racial theories had turned to programmes of actual large-scale physical elimination of human beings, the social sciences have cautiously begun to abandon the biologist foundations that the Darwinian metaphor had so forth defended. A wave of philosophical spiritualism, that had its origins in previous moments of the century, was looked at as a possible epistemology of redemption. The planetary small-scale studies, based on majestic deterministic explanations, are progressively abandoned, and attention begins to be directed to spaces of proximity, in the context of a closer 'topographical' scale, within which one may have access to the complexity of the whole factors that give shape to a 'region'.

Within Portuguese geography, this is the moment when the two main academic geographical schools would come to existence; at Coimbra, under Amorim Girão guidance, and at Lisbon, where Orlando Ribeiro founded and developed the centre of research that would know some international recognition, and that was responsible for the first post-war International Geographical Union conference. If the school of Coimbra often favoured themes around the regional characterization of 'metropolitan' Portugal, and only episodically turned its attention to the colonial settings,⁶ the school of Lisbon, under a close guidance of its director, established a complete and comprehensive programme of research regarding the overseas territories (Amaral 1979).

If we attentively observe the evolution of publications devoted to colonial themes inside Portuguese geographical bibliography, one can at once, and not surprisingly, recognize that, even if, along with the political nature of the colonial jurisdiction, its morphology changes, the programme of research displays some continuing lines of inquiry, from its beginning till the end.

The major problems that the post-war geopolitical re-arrangement has generated forced Portugal to engage to a more effective occupation policy of the territories (part of them only nominally) under Portuguese jurisdiction. This justifies the 'geographical missions' that the government entrusts to the university in Western Africa and India (Ribeiro 1950, 1956). Again, one notices the 'cartography of expansion' being replicated in the academic production of colonial geographical knowledge: after the conceptual 'settling' of the Atlantic islands, and the 'discovery' of Brazil, a more distant-directed endeavour directs its attention to the 'territorial recognition' of the 16th century 'Portuguese empire'. A full programme of survey is then established, directed, with diverse degrees of intensity, to the whole set of inter-tropical territories that were presented as the foundation of the empire, and consequently of a related colonial Geography.

The programme of geographical research under the banner of the 'inter-tropical zonality' carried out by geographers in Portugal until the years of decolonisation is varied,

⁶ However, the school of Coimbra has not ignored these themes; see Campar de Almeida et al. (2003: 309-347). Also, Fernandes Martins, an important name of this school, carried out some fieldwork in Mozambique.

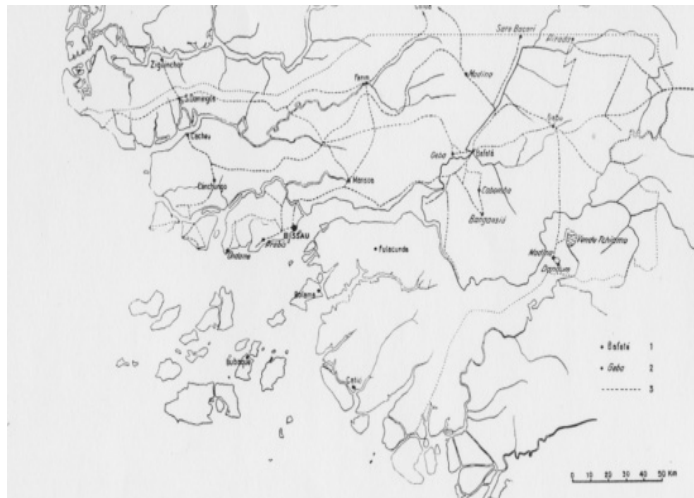
whether theme, scale and approach is considered (Daveau and Ribeiro 1973). Nevertheless, there are some uninterrupted lines of inquiry one may detect.

First, it is necessary to make a reference to the 'economy' of the research programme. The distance to be surmounted by the surveyors could be of a few hundred miles, in the case of Cape Verde, and half of the earth's length, in the case of Macao and Timor. It then is not surprising that these two territories, even if they were also object of geographical survey (Brito 1964, 1971), had become quite 'forgotten' when compared to more proximate regions. But as we shall see, this 'economic' factor builds on other more effective 'geopolitical' one.

Second, and having no intention to oversimplify the complexities of a multiform research activity, in which, for instance, urban geography displays some prominence, it is noteworthy the energy devoted to geomorphology, that has no parallel in any other sub-domain of physical geography studies of the overseas territories (and one may remember that climatology had been the most important single line of inquiry in the context of 19th c. colonial geography).⁷ We do not intend to develop unnecessary speculative hypotheses at this time, regarding the precise significance of this relative incidence, but, given the several studies devoted to the problems of effective settling of the land by small-scale farmers, it seems to be not a coincidence.

Finally, one can detect an uneven 'geographical' distribution of these studies that seems to have its origin in the international geopolitical arrangement, and of the Portuguese active standing within it. It is impressive, either by quality and quantity, the number of studies that are devoted to Angola. No other region, not even maybe the sum of all the others, may compare to the extensive bibliography that is devoted to that territory. To understand the special

role that this meta-geography plays in the history of Portuguese colonial geography, there probably is no better interlocutor than Orlando Ribeiro himself, though the pages of the book that he, in the aftermath of its decolonisation, dedicates to the 'failure of colonisation of Angola' (Ribeiro 1981).



7 In this context it is necessary to make notice of the independent line of research maintained by Suzanne Daveau, a geographer of the tropicalist tradition of French geography, and that would associate herself to the Portuguese programme of research during the 1960s (cf. Pélissier 1997).

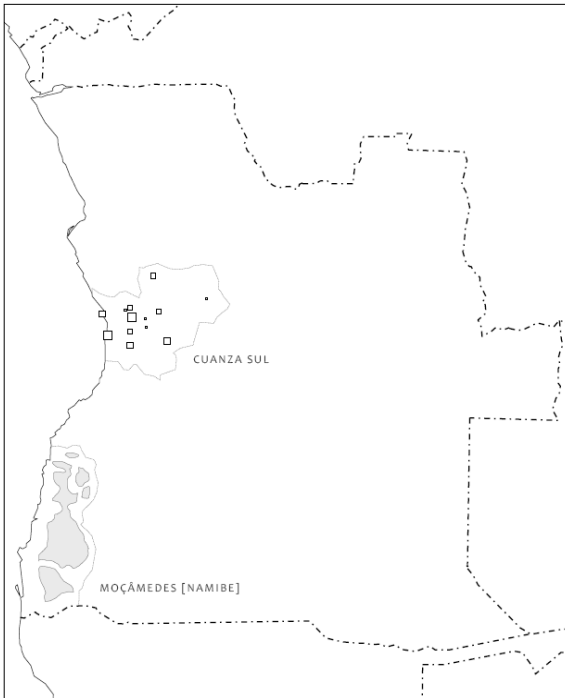
4. The geographical mission to 'Portuguese-Guinea', in 1947

[This map, indicating the itineraries that Orlando Ribeiro followed during his 1947 geographical mission to 'Portuguese-Guinea' (Guinea-Bissau), shows how much was still to be done in the effort of surveying geographically the territories under Portuguese jurisdiction, after World War II. In fact, and (not?) unexpectedly, the main geographical fieldwork in Africa was made after colonial (or liberation) wars had begun. Source: Ribeiro (1950)]

Epistemology 'of disencounter'

To Ribeiro, the African 'geography of relation', unlike the one established in America and India, is based in 'ignorance'. The incipient local political power, the mentality of local elites, the systematic denegation to Africans of prestigious, or at least wealthy standings within social structure, these are, to the Portuguese geographer, the main cause of the chaotic, bitter, and ruthless decolonisation of the region. This is not the place to present detailed Ribeiro's comparative analyses of the different 'geographies of relation' established in the diverse territories that once were under Portuguese jurisdiction. It is not

our intention to expound the possible idealistic tone that allows the comparison between so many and diverse historical and geographical situations, either in time and space. What is more important is to underline once again the special relation that geographical science (and also, more widely, some imaginative geographical cultures) establishes with this dystopian space that is Angola. In the especially traumatic moment of decolonisation, and also during the affective reconstitution in the time that followed, Angola, with its recent pathos, the infernal cycle of poverty, hunger and war, functions as a *speculum* of the ambiguity that Portugal and the Portuguese establish with their own past – or else, their own unaccomplished future.



5. The 'epistemology of disencounter'

[In spite of integrating strong Luso-tropicalist claims, the geographical work in Africa sometimes favoured the separation of the 'black' and 'white' worlds, each one made 'invisible' in the other's map: the squares account for the white settlement of South Kwanza region; the grey patterns do the same for the black settlement in the Moçâmedes (today, Namibe) region. This map shows two kinds of research that typically animated geography 'of settlement' in late 1960s and early 1970s. It draws on an 'epistemology' that unfortunately replicates a 'topography of disencounter', for the 'white city' and the 'black "muceques"' hardly connected with each other, a mutual unawareness that was never to be solved. Source: C. Mendes (1970) and M. V. Guerreiro (1968), redrawn and simplified]

Today it makes no sense speaking of 'colonial geography'; a semantic reformulation escorted the 'postcolonial' turn in social sciences, and the name 'tropical geography' (and 'development geography') collects the main themes that once belonged to that geographical tradition. The war is, or was until very recent times, present in the most part of these territories; as a result, some of the physical remains of European colonial presence will become extinct and so part of that geography would only be possible to be reviewed 'archaeologically' (Daveau 2005: 29).

The relation between Europe and Africa is now of a different nature. 'There', it has disappeared the revolting colonial administration or, as Fanon puts it, 'the permanent interposition of the white world among black cultures' (Franz Fanon, *apud* Bhabha 2004: 339). 'Here', an immense number of African immigrants, the vast majority of which are poor and unadjusted people, redraws, in the opposite direction, the century long expansion of Europe in Africa; the result could be, nevertheless, a beneficial encounter of different cultures, geographies and worlds. Here and there, one comes to the conclusion that the problems of development do not confine or even stem out of 'race' – and to abandon such kind of dichotomies is an essential step to be fully aware of the magnitude of the geographical effects that a state-and-capital sponsored uneven development imprints to the world, and the role of a post-colonial Geography within it.

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