

LUSOTOPIE

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**Circulações e ressignificações internacionais dos  
trabalhos, métodos e práticas de Paulo Freire**

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### Mafalda Soares da Cunha, coord., *Resistências. Insubmissão e Revolta no Império Português*

Lisboa, Casa das Letras, 2021

Zoltán Biedermann

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## REFERENCES

Mafalda Soares da Cunha, coord., *Resistências. Insubmissão e Revolta no Império Português*, Lisboa, Casa das Letras, 2021, ISBN: 978-989-661-207-8.

- 1 Few people will have heard about the “War of the Mad” (*Guerra dos doidos*) that tore apart the fragile fabric of Timorese society in 1776-86, or the protests staged by Black working women in Lisbon in 1717 against the Municipal council’s tax plans. Only rarely does one hear the story of Ana Dias, whose home in Funchal became a focus of illegal Jewish practices in the late 1500s, or the rise and fall of Tamandaré, also known as “Papa António”, the indigenous leader of a chiliastic cult causing the authorities trouble in the backcountry of Bahia, also in the sixteenth century. At the very best, these will be stories known to local audiences, but seldom are they presented together to a readership interested in the Portuguese-speaking world as a whole. *Resistências* arises from the need for an overarching study of movements of resistance against authority in the Portuguese Empire up to the mid-nineteenth centuries. It began with a series of twelve articles published in the Portuguese weekly *Expresso*, to which almost forty more pieces have now been added. All are in connection with the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research and Innovation project *RESISTANCE: rebelião e resistência nos impérios ibéricos, séculos XVI-XIX*, funded by the European Union as part of its Horizon 2020 programme.
- 2 Like the initial series of articles, the book is intended for dissemination to audiences beyond the strict remit of academia. The chapters are short and eminently readable,

each following a similar structure, including a brief contextualisation, an often-gripping narrative focused on one or two key characters, and a conclusion pointing to the wider significance of the action, followed by a short bibliography. *Resistências* shall be read with interest by members of the public as well as academic historians. It is also likely to find its place on reading lists for students, and anyone interested in critically rethinking the way expansion history has been taught and talked about in Lusophone countries from Brazil to Timor.

- 3 As the general editor of the volume, Mafalda Soares da Cunha, explains in her useful introductory note, the themes guiding the composition of the volume were “resistance” and “diversity”, the chosen focus was on “people or groups belonging to social categories subject to discrimination”, and a single question cutting through all of this was: “how did these people’s resistance shape processes of social transformation?” (p. 11). The volume’s underlying definition of “resistance” is a broad one, going beyond the traditional remit of violent, public manifestations of discontent, to include all sorts of disobedience, pushback and expressions of anxiety, often in the private realm, or in the interstices between public and private space, between the Empire and its fringes, in cities, forests, mountains, and on the seas. No distinction has been made between Portugal and its overseas possessions, and no classificatory taxonomy has been imposed on the events analysed, the only criteria ordering the chapters being chronological.
- 4 The resulting succession of chapters makes for stimulating reading. The quality of the research and subjacent research is mostly excellent, and whilst no summaries can be offered here of all 50 contributions, it would also do the authors no justice to provide a discussion of select chapters. Instead, I wish to give a sense of the amplitude of the research and some thoughts on where this volume may take historians next. The scope of *Resistências* is truly global, as one would expect from any work on the Portuguese Empire. There are episodes from Portugal, West Africa, the Atlantic islands, Brazil, the Kongo, East Africa, the Persian Gulf, India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Japan, and Timor. The ethnic composition of the protagonists is equally varied: there are people racialized in all sorts of ways (“negros”, “mamelucos”, “mestiços” etc.), and of course folks considered “white”. There are Judaizers and Native American shamans, people close to Protestantism, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and many Catholic converts. There is a remarkably balanced proportion of women and men. There is also, perhaps more unexpectedly, amplitude in social status: resistance was the remit of the wealthy as well as the poor, the powerful as well as the subaltern, the ambitious as well as those losing ground.
- 5 As one would expect, many disruptions of the political order happened on economic, and especially fiscal grounds. To find such stories, so familiar to students of Ancien Régime Europe, protagonized by men and women from all walks of life and racialized across an ample spectrum of possibilities, is refreshing. It suggests a universality of sentiment springing from fiscal discontent. Other stories constitute powerful reminders of how much of the pain inflicted by empire was contingent upon violently constructed categories of race, culture, and gender, very much to the contrary of the public discourse thriving again in Portugal today, where history is mobilized to instil a sense of admiration for the country’s “multiracial” past. Even without conducting a rigorous statistical analysis, the reader comes away with a strong sense that people racialized as “Black” were more likely to pay for their actions with their lives than

people considered “white”. This may well be a topic deserving further query though: was the brutality of Ancien Régime justice a leveller of sorts cutting through racial divides?

- 6 To gather such an array of stories in one volume following a single, chronological structuring principle, carries both potential and risk. Whilst much of the material makes for an exhilarating reading experience – it is difficult to put this book down –, some troubling thoughts may come to the critical reader, too. The very strength of the idea of putting everything together in one volume also carries the risk of lumping very different experiences together under a single, amorphous notion of “resistance”. The problem here is not so much that “resistance” itself is a concept under revision in other subfields, where some consider it to hamper a full understanding of the complexity of subaltern agencies; in Portuguese historiography, it is fresh enough to shift perceptions and inspire new scholarship. What is troubling is the way relatively trivial protests by “white” people sit side by side with far more complicated actions involving men and women whose very identities and physical existence was under constant and ferocious assault by the empire, including its illustrious metropolitan elite.
- 7 On one side, we contemplate mutinies such as that of the *cavaleiros* and *moradores* of Tangiers against their new governor Rui Mendes de Vasconcelos in 1593; or the discontent of the urban populace of Portugal against their Spanish monarch, Phillip III, in the 1630s; or the resistance of professional guilds and their representatives in municipal councils to taxation; or a group of nuns who disrupted peace in Viana do Minho to resolve an internal dispute between two women. On the other, there are indigenous people hunted down and forced to work for the colonizers; Africans torn from their families, enslaved and worked to death in the New World, even after perhaps trying to revolt on a ship; and vast numbers of people living in what we so innocuously call “colonial societies” in constant fear and existential uncertainty, under violent repression, forced day after day to perform a social and material inferiority that most of us today could barely survive for a week.
- 8 Rather than construing such thoughts as a criticism against the makers of the volume, it is worth pointing out how the pitfalls result from the very boldness of the enterprise. They also offer good grounds for productive new work. Countless ideas for further research – from small, micro-historical explorations to ample, comparative, and connective reformulations of what we know about Portuguese imperialism – can emerge from *Resistências*. There is enormous potential in comparative-connective approaches combining regions or groups not traditionally studied together. In this book, cases of armed insurgency in Kongo, Sri Lanka, and Timor appear without any connection between them. In reality, a comparative study of the political fragmentation that shaped those three theatres of colonial aggression would be very timely, and would help to understand many other regional cases where the Empire sat uncomfortably on top of unstable local power structures, with shifting allegiances, tactically manoeuvring warlords, intense diplomatic negotiation (another form of resistance), and entire populations capable of throwing the imperial order into disarray by literally walking away from it.
- 9 Another inevitable thought is that, whilst this volume places its discursive and emotional emphasis on resistance (thus embracing, very legitimately and productively, a certain type of agency of subalternized individuals and groups), it also calls for a vigorous highlighting of the structures of oppression. The latter may of course risk

shifting the focus back to the agency of the powerful. But a companion volume to *Resistências* would certainly be welcome, in which the strategies and tactics of aggression, oppression and repression are fully analysed and brought into the presence of the modern reader. Those strategies are the rotten core of an Empire that, otherwise, is still all too often celebrated in Portugal, and even in some quarters of its former colonies. The fact that this volume takes its stories from the beginnings of the Empire into the nineteenth century serves as a reminder of how the early modern period cannot be fully detached from the modern. We today are the heirs of all that happened after 1800, but also before.

- 10 In sum, *Resistências* is a timely, carefully produced, eminently readable, and intensely thought-provoking work. It deserves to be read widely and will inevitably spark discussions that shall contribute to the ongoing critical renewal of Portuguese imperial history.

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## AUTHORS

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