



The Politics of the Essay Lusotropicalism as Ideology and Theory

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Abstract

In this article we discuss the politics of the essay of three major twentieth-century Portuguese-speaking intellectuals: Gilberto Freyre, Jorge Dias and António Sérgio. Our topic of discussion is Lusotropicalism. Through an examination of the essayist production of these thinkers (1920s–1960s), we revisit this social theoretical account of racial miscegenation, social assimilation and cultural hybridity originally developed by Freyre by reference to Brazil and later extended to the case of the Portuguese colonial empire. In particular, the article shows how the essay performs a crucial role in the origins, process of development and the implications of this social theory. By eliciting a reflective interplay between form and content, the essay trumps both the journal article and the monograph in providing these three key intellectuals with the outlet with which to think through a social theory that briefly doubled as an ideology of state.

Keywords Lusotropicalism · Essayism · Gilberto Freyre · Jorge Dias · António Sérgio · Postcoloniality · Hybridity · Miscegenation

Introduction

In this article, we discuss the “essay form” as an important tradition in the history of the social and human sciences in Portugal (Silva 2015). The essay form is here both our object of study, namely as it appears in the writings of Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987), Jorge Dias (1907–1973) and António Sérgio (1883–1969), and, to use Adorno’s formulation, a “speculative investigation of specific, culturally pre-determined objects.” (Adorno 1984,

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p. 151) Our “speculative investigation” is about Lusotropicalism. This refers to a conception of the “Portuguese world” (Portugal, Brazil and its former African colonies) as a distinct civilization (Eisenstadt 2002), with a shared cultural and social order where the biological process of racial miscegenation goes hand in hand with the processes of social assimilation and cultural hybridity (Freyre 1986, p. 16). In particular, we discuss this discursive formation as found in the essays of Freyre, Dias and Sérgio, whose rich and nuanced intertextuality reflects a problematic about empire, colonialism, and race relations – as well as about the role of science and literature in their development. We explore some of the ways in which the essays by Freyre, Dias and Sérgio speak to each other around three key themes and against the backdrop of the Portuguese colonial empire. These themes include the centuries-long “decadence of the peninsular (i.e. Iberian) peoples,” national identity (national, but also colonial and post-colonial), and the conditions of possibility of knowledge production under/about colonial rule. To some extent, colonialism becomes an answer to the preoccupation with national decadence in face of the rise of capitalism. It also provides the context for the development of the essay form among intellectuals and academics (more explicitly in the case of Sérgio, but, to a lesser extent, also in the case of Freyre and Dias) interested in reflecting about their societies. National identity and cultural forms provide the angle through which these thinkers were able to reflect about the commonalities among Portuguese-speaking peoples. This concern eventually leads to the development of Lusotropicalism, a discourse about imperial race relations that later provided the Portuguese dictatorial regime – the *Estado Novo* (1933–1974) – with a legitimating rationale for its colonial politics especially when the colonial uprisings started in the early 1960s. Finally, epistemology is the question around which these authors’ writings turn onto themselves, so to speak, i.e. towards their conditions of possibility and cognitive limits. The status of the “essay” comes here to the fore. Understood as a category that eludes the positivist distinction between form and content, the “essay” questions the separation of knowledge from art, of social science from fictional literature, a separation that the Enlightenment’s demythologization of the world threatens to make inexorable. That the essays here at stake were written at a time when academic institutionalization of the social sciences in Lusophone countries was still embryonic helps explain their choice as a writing style. Yet it also goes a long way in explaining their success among the reading public of the mid-twentieth century and the influence of their themes and ideas, *maxime* Lusotropicalism, in the collective imaginary of Portuguese-speaking publics up to the present day, even after the decolonization in the mid-1970s.

This article contains four sections. The first is on “the essay” with reference to the specific ways it acquired in the work of Freyre, Dias and Sérgio. We argue that the essay, contrary to the article or the monograph, distinguishes itself not for its particular form or specific content but because of its distinctively open and reflective attitude towards the interplay between form and content. In the remainder of the article, we reconstruct the Luso-Brazilian dialogue among our three intellectuals in three successive sections. A brief conclusion follows.

The Essay as Form

The politics of the essay is here mobilized in order to discuss the ideas of three major twentieth century Lusophone thinkers: Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987), Jorge Dias

(1907–1973), and António Sérgio (1883–1969). By “the politics of the essay” we mean an inquiry into what the essay form enables and constrains one to do. Instead of taking the essay form for granted, we explore the ways in which it performs an active role in the production and circulation of the ideas inscribed in them. As a result, to study the politics of their essayist production is to pose questions such as: What kind of outlet is the essay when compared with other formats of academic writing? How does it relate to the development of ideas themselves? A brief presentation of what we mean by the essay form is thus in order.

The essay is a form of writing that challenges the dichotomy between form and content. This challenge is reflective and inherently rebellious. It marks the distinctive character of the essay genre (Adorno 1984; Lukács 1974). A number of implications follow from this understanding. First, the essay has no characteristic form. Essays may be as short as a few paragraphs in a page or several hundred pages long. Second, the essay does not distinguish itself for any particular theme. Essays can be biographical or historical, can discuss human psychology, culture or nature (Dillon 2017).

The opposite of the essay is a text whose form is presented as neatly separated from its content. For instance, the scientific paper’s or the treatise’s validity relates exclusively to its content, which is presented as logically coherent and often supported by factual evidence, not its form, which is presented as neutral. This strict separation between form and content reflects a broader understanding that posits the separation between science and literature, between what is real and what is fictional. In reality, when science presupposes (rather than questions) that all knowledge can be translated into scientific discourse, it is presupposing exactly what it should have been questioning all along: What are the conditions of knowledge-production? Is the truth content really independent from the textual form in which it is presented? It is here, when doubt emerges as the driving force of intellectual inquiry broadly construed, that the contribution of the essay form to intellectual life comes to the fore.

The essay contributes in various ways to a better, more critical, and often more imaginative account of social reality. By putting the emphasis on the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total, it calls our attention to the central role of social change. No less important is the rejection of the position according to which there is a necessary identity between theoretical models and the reality those models are purported to represent: the underlying presupposition of unmediated access to reality by the thinking mind is something that the essay form has long exposed as myth. In fact, we cannot think facts non-conceptually and we cannot think concepts non-factually (Adorno 1984, p. 160). As a result, the essay mediates an “arena of intellectual experience” (Adorno 1984, p. 161), in which ideals of absolute certainty and conceptual clarity are defied. As our three intellectuals’ essayist writings will show, the essay begins not with the simple, but with the complex and difficult. Their starting point includes, among others, questions of national identity, the rationale of colonial projects, and the possibility of historical progress, as well as the conditions of knowledge about such issues. The answers their essays provide will not be exhaustive, but speculative and tentative. They shed light upon underlying historical structures, without asserting their presence. A strong emphasis is placed in rhetoric; in most cases, the essay’s content and its rhetoric are fused together. The contrast with the academic article or monograph, which represent the orthodoxy of scientific thought, should be clear by now: the essay is

inherently unorthodox, heretic even in its attempt to make visible what science tries to keep invisible – the interplay between form and content (Silva and Vieira 2019).

The fact remains, however, that it is not the essay, but the article and the monograph that are the dominant forms through which scientific discourse is produced and circulated. This tension between the essay form, more speculative and freer from academic strictures as to engage more reflexively about its own status, and the article/monograph form, more constrained in its formal characteristics and less self-reflective, reached its peak in the mid-twentieth century. This is the period when the latter gradually became the uncontested form in science and the former was relegated to fiction and other non-scientific domains. This is also the period covered in this article: Freyre, Dias and Sérgio write the bulk of their essayist production between the 1920s and 1960s.

How do they conceive of the essay? Although all three made extensive use of the essay as an outlet through which to express their ideas, there are noticeable differences in how they view it. According to Gilberto Freyre, widely regarded as the founding father of Brazilian sociology, the essay was integral to the “training of the mind, of culture, and of the individual’s own character” (Freyre 1942, p. 162). His key influence in this appreciation for the essay was the British essayist Walter Pater (Pallares-Burke 1997), whose writings Freyre read with great interest from an early age (Freyre 1975, p. 46). A sojourn in Oxford in the early 1920s will only reinforce the influence of Pater’s essayism on the young Freyre (1975, p. 107–111). As a result, for Freyre, the essay constitutes the ideal genre in which to express, in an almost conversational tone, the human and social aspects of Brazil’s formation: halfway between science and fiction, the essay is a hybrid that enables the writer to “resuscitate the intimate past” and transform “that past into flesh, life” (Freyre 1975, p. 176). In sum, according to Freyre, the hybridity that characterizes the essay makes it the consummate textual form in which to capture human experience in all its fluidity and plasticity.

Jorge Dias, the most influential anthropologist in twentieth-century Portugal, shared with Freyre the idea that the essay provides the ideal textual form with which to bring back the distant past as to shed light upon present-day cultural phenomena and communities. But Dias is no Freyre. Dias’ essays are narrower. Thematically, they deal with a particular topic: national identity. Intellectually, they endorse a specific theoretical approach: American cultural anthropology, then focused on “national-character studies” (e.g. Benedict 1946). Still, the essay performs two different roles in Dias’ anthropological thinking. First, it provides Dias with an outlet that is distinct from the report or the treatise, to which he will also often turn in his career. Yet it is through the essay that Dias chooses to discuss Portuguese national identity in successive attempts between the early 1940s and the late 1960s, constantly trying to find the best formulation for his ideas. Second, once these essays are published and begin to circulate, Dias collects them in a one-volume book entitled *Ethnological Essays*. This entails at least two different consequences for what we call the politics of the essay. On the one hand, the fact that, in *Essays*, Dias organizes his writings according to a logic that is not strictly that of the date of publication is, for our purposes, an important source of information regarding the author’s intentions. On the other hand, the *Essays* enables us to contrast Dias’ essayist production with his other writings, including two celebrated monographs on Northern Portugal (Dias 1948a, 1953) and his 4-volume treatise on the Macondes from Northern Mozambique (Dias 1964). Crucially, as we shall see, Dias’

essays provide the entry-point of Lusotropicalism in his anthropological production from the 1950s onwards. It is through the essay, not the monograph or the report, that Dias imports and adapts Freyre's ideas on Lusotropicalism to account for Portuguese cultural identity and the (allegedly) distinctive nature of Portugal's colonial empire.

The essay performs a totally different role to that of Freyre and Dias in António Sérgio, a neo-Kantian public intellectual whose opposition to the Salazar dictatorship was well-known to the authorities. In Sérgio, the essay is still very much opposed, as in Freyre and Dias, to the "treatise that can limit itself to organize what is already known"; by contrast, it "evokes research, tentativeness, discovery and progress" (Sérgio 1971a, 1971b, 1971c, p. 46). The essay promises originality, agility, finesse. But, in Sérgio, the essay is still very much Herder's classic essay. It is a humanist intellectual intervention. This intervention is motivated by concern with the perceived century-long decadence of his homeland, the response to which comes in the form of a nationalist discourse around not ethnic elements but universalist ideas, the same ideas that provide him with tools to re-examine the colonial enterprise (Pereira 2018: 206). As we shall see, however, the limitations of these ideas to tackle the problem of colonialism will soon become obvious. Yet it is this very universalist understanding of the essay form that distinguishes Sérgio from our two other intellectuals. After all, it is only Sérgio that entitles his collected works – a monumental 8-volume work – *Essays* (1920–1958).

We are now in conditions to move to the discussion of their essayistic production. We begin with the author of Lusotropicalism, Gilberto Freyre.

Gilberto Freyre and the Multiple Hybrid

Gilberto Freyre is unique in several respects. Born into a privileged family in Recife and trained in the United States, Freyre is the founding father of sociology in Brazil. His magnum opus *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (here forth: *The Masters and the Slaves*; Freyre 1986) first published in 1933,¹ was an instant best-seller. Freyre's thesis on racial hybridization and elegant essayist style provided an exemplar for the first generations of Brazilian sociologists. Despite a shift towards a more positivist and quantitative sociology in the 1950s (Cordeiro and Neri 2020), Freyre is still venerated today as the consummate interpreter of Brazil. But his influence looms much larger than Brazil. Freyre is perhaps the most cited and widely translated Portuguese-speaking social theorist of all time.²

Freyre's ideas on racial miscegenation and cultural hybridity – the so-called thesis of Lusotropicalism – do not amount to a sociological theory, with general principles, theorems and empirically testable propositions. It is rather a social theory: a general, systematic and coherent account of human societies. This helps explain why it relies so heavily on rhetoric to produce its effect. The writing style is not independent from the truth content being consciously conveyed in the work (Freyre 1986, pp. xxi-xxii).

¹ The book was translated into English as *The Master and the Slaves* in 1946. The translator's preference for abstract ideal-types rather than on the spaces these inhabit (Big House, or Mansion, and Slave Quarters) elides the original title's reference to the unique socio-spatial organization of colonial experience. On Freyre's views on the symbolism of the original title in Portuguese, see Freyre (1986, p. xvi).

² According to Google Scholar, his first eight references alone have been cited over 15,000 times. (https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=g+freyre+&btnG=).

Through an impressionist analysis of Brazil's culture and society, the ideas that make up the essay's argument all converge around a key concept: hybridity, a concept that would be recuperated and regain currency in the late twentieth century as debates on multiculturalism and post-colonialism took hold (e.g. Almeida 2008).

The Masters and the Slaves is also a polemic. The essay is an argument against traditional racist ideas of group hierarchy and segregation that dominated the social and human sciences at the beginning of the century. That such ideas, and the ensuing tendency to interpret cultural differences through racial types, were deeply flawed is a lesson he took from his advisor at Columbia, Freyre (1986, p. xxvii). As a result, the way was now clear to a novel account of the origins of Brazil's national identity. In a stroke of genius, Freyre turns what was seen as the source of the problem (of Brazil's underdevelopment) into the country's distinctive identity and source of endless creativity: the existence of a poor non-white majority. The leitmotif of this innovative account is no longer the hierarchical separation of the races, but hybridity. Brazil is a hybrid civilization, whose pillars are multiracialism, miscegenation and assimilation. The end result is the "new man in the Tropics", a creative adaptation of the Nietzschean theme (Dewulf 2014), now used to account for a multiracial national identity born out of colonialism. Colonialism is here less a history of systematic violence and economic exploitation as a tale of cross-fertilization of cultures. Although violence is described in graphic detail (e.g. Freyre 1986, pp. 350–1; 390; 426), racial violence is not treated as a systematic feature of Portuguese colonial rule and, by extension, of Brazil's cultural formation.

In *The Masters and the Slaves*, the history of the Portuguese colonialization is virtually undistinguishable from the history of Brazil. Brazil begins and develops as it is colonized by the Portuguese. With this, Freyre not only distances himself from modernist understandings of Brazil as an essentially American construct, but also emphasizes the distinctive character of Portuguese colonization vis-à-vis the Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon colonial experiences. Freyre accomplishes this through the idea of hybridism. He depicts the Portuguese as a cultural hybrid, given their longstanding relationship with Arabs, Jews and other populations (Freyre 1986, pp. 3–80). This unique cultural experience is then transplanted to the tropics via colonialism. The history of Brazil is, then, the history of European, African and American stocks coming together and combining in a myriad of ways, thus giving birth to a unique civilization. Freyre writes:

From a general point of view, the formation of Brazilian society (...) has been in reality a process of balancing antagonisms. Economic and cultural antagonisms. Antagonisms between European culture and native culture. Between the African and the native. Between an agrarian and a pastoral economy. (...) But predominant over all these antagonisms was the more general and deeper one: that between master and slave. (1986, pp. 79-80)

Another dimension of these antagonisms is corporeal and sensuous. Freyre's essay offers a depicting of the coming together of cultures as an overtly sexual affair. Sexuality is, indeed, one of his master themes:

Long contact with the Saracens had left with the Portuguese the idealized figure of the 'enchanted Moorish woman', a charming type, brown-skinned, blacked-

eyed, enveloped in sexual mysticism, roseate in hue, and always engaged in combing out her hair or bathing in rivers or in the waters of haunted fountains; and the Brazilian colonizers were to encounter practically a counterpart of this type in the naked Indian women with their loose-flowing hair. (1986, p. 12)

Through the bodies of (white) masters and (black) slaves, we are introduced to the culinary habits, the clothing, the music and religious rituals of the Brazilian people as a whole. Freyre's descriptions of how Brazilians eat, dress, dance and pray are undoubtedly a literary achievement. Yet this is also a sexuality where colonial hierarchies translate into bodily relations of power, involving the male body of the master and the female body of the slave or the Indian. Freyre, however, is less invested in exposing violence and abuse than in exploring the sensuous, almost tactile, character of the socio-historical process of cultural hybridization in Brazil. This hybridism extends to the sources themselves. Freyre summons an eclectic myriad of textual sources, from the personal testimony to economic and legal sources, in a plethora of natural languages, from Portuguese and other Romance languages to German and English, all blended together in a great multifarious ensemble. The image one gets from reading this fantastic portrait is indeed that of a big house, whose domestic economy depends on the slave quarters conveniently set away from sight but near enough to be always at service. Bodies included.

The Masters and the Slaves is notable for another reason. It is one of few cases in which a classic work only adumbrates the theory for which its author will become a sociological classic. The term "Lusotropicalism" does not yet figure in *The Masters and the Slaves*. The idea of hybridization, of course, is. It would take almost twenty years, and a cross-continental tour, for Freyre to develop that idea into the full-fledged theory that would consolidate his status as a sociological classic in Brazil and beyond.

At first, Freyre's ideas about Brazilian cultural hybridization and racial miscegenation were not well received in Portugal (Castelo 1998, pp. 84–87). In the 1930s, racist ideas dominated political and intellectual debates about the empire (Almeida 2008, p. 5). Among Portuguese intellectuals, however, there was some room for Freyre's ideas, namely among those few that did not espouse openly racist conceptions of Portugal's history and cultural identity (Pereira 2018, p. 202). A case in point is António Sérgio. Sérgio, born in Damão, India, had long been involved in debates about representations of Portuguese national identity and colonialism, with a similar emphasis on hybridity. This made him the perfect choice to write the preface to the Portuguese edition of Freyre's *The World that the Portuguese Created* (Freyre 1940), a collection of conference papers Freyre delivered in Europe following the publication of *The Masters and the Slaves*.³ Even though Sérgio is seventeen years older than Freyre, the two men share a number of features. Neither will ever hold a permanent academic post. Yet this will not prevent them from becoming influential public intellectuals who will play a significant role in debates around national identity and the transnational Lusophone culture. Although Sérgio brings a humanist perspective to this task, it is Freyre who will produce a general theoretical account of the Lusophone countries as belonging to a distinct civilization united in feeling and culture, despite the disparate ethnic origins of its populations.

³ This is the revised version of *Conferências na Europa* (1938), the original collection of Freyre's conference papers.

Lusotropicalism – the general account of the Portuguese-speaking world as a distinct civilizational unit based upon racial miscegenation, social assimilation and cultural integration – is developed iteratively. Freyre theorizes about the Lusophone world as he travels across the lands and peoples that make up that very same world. In 1951, Sarmento Rodrigues, the Portuguese Minister of Overseas, invites Gilberto Freyre to visit a number of carefully chosen locations across the empire (Castelo 1998, pp. 87–92; Thomaz 1996). In each location, Freyre is invited to interact with the local population and give a talk.⁴ It is in the course of this two-year intercontinental voyage that Freyre develops and refines his views on the Portuguese colonial experience in the twentieth century. The end result, first published as the travelogue *Adventure and Routine* (Freyre 1953)⁵ and the more academic *A Brazilian in Portuguese Lands* (Freyre 1954), later theorized more systematically in two subsequent publications (Freyre 1958; Freyre 1961), is the first social theory of the “Lusotropical civilization”.

To be sure, this theory is a ready-made account to be used as state ideology by the regime that had invited Freyre in the first place. From the late 1950s until 1974, the regime will develop a vast array of initiatives and instruments to promote a Lusotropicalist version of Portugal’s colonial experience. The message was clear: racial miscegenation leads to social assimilation and the peaceful coexistence of culturally diverse populations across the empire. A message, to be sure, that had little or no impact in Freyre’s Brazil. Instead, Lusotropicalism became an imperial creation for the purposes of legitimizing Lisbon’s internationally isolated regime involved in a colonial war with little prospect of winning.⁶ More recently, the subject has been revisited by researchers interested in analyzing the actual impact of Freyre’s Lusotropical ideal-type on the Portuguese dictatorship colonial policies before the rise of anti-imperialism in the mid-1950s and, especially, after 1961 when its African colonies rose up for independence.⁷ However reluctantly, Salazar eventually accepted to integrate some of Freyre’s discourse in order to help legitimize Portugal’s colonial rule in Africa.⁸ Not long after, his successor was thrown out of power by the military in the so-called Carnations Revolution of April 25th, 1974, whose uprising put an end to the 48 years’ old dictatorship.⁹

As an ideology of state, Lusotropicalism eventually meets the same destiny as the dictatorship. With the Carnations Revolution comes the end to the colonial war and the independence process of all African colonies. By the mid-1970s, the conditions of possibility of Lusotropicalism as theory and ideology are over. Yet, as a result of decades of indoctrination, its impact on the social attitudes on colonialism and racism of the Portuguese will outlast the *Estado Novo*. In fact, postcolonial Portugal, from film to novels to public discourse, will be under the long shadow of Freyre’s ideas either through positive endorsement or by explicit rejection. The same is true of the Lusophone

⁴ These include “Uma cultura moderna: a luso-tropical” (Goa, November 1951) and “Em torno de um novo conceito de tropicalismo” (Coimbra, January 1952), both included in Freyre (1954). For a critical review of Freyre’s Lusotropical account of racial miscegenation by reference to Goa, see Xavier (2008).

⁵ For a study on this book’s history, see Bastos (2015).

⁶ A case in point is a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in November 1961, where the Portuguese representative cites Freyre’s work to justify the Portuguese colonial rule in Africa (Castelo 1999, p. 97).

⁷ On the critical reception of Freyre’s ideas in Africa and Brazil, see e.g. Cahen (2018).

⁸ On Salazar’s reluctant appropriation of Lusotropicalism, see e.g. Léonard (1997).

⁹ See Piçarra (2015), pp. 114–138.

world as a whole. For better or for worse, centuries of colonial presence created shared bonds, including a common language but also legal and other institutional forms, between the Portuguese and the non-European populations they once ruled.

One challenge to reflect upon the Lusophone condition of post-coloniality is conceptual in nature. We refer to the concept of hybridity, which re-emerges in debates about multiculturalism in the early 1990s. As in Freyre in the 1930s, hybridity is mobilized to help debunk essentialist notions of cultural purity (e.g. Hall 1992; Bhabha 1994). Unlike Freyre, however, postcolonial authors are now keenly aware that hybridity has often been used to make the presence of the colonial authority no longer visible. Their professed aim is to emphasize the agency of “subaltern” colonial subjects in their cultural encounters with Western colonizers, not to help silence them. The question, then, becomes of exactly what kind of hybridization did Portuguese colonialism promote. While racial miscegenation is difficult to dispute, social assimilation and cultural integration may well be a matter of ideological mystification.

Jorge Dias: The Anthropological Essay and Cultural Identity

In this section, the politics of the essay will bring us away from the Americas. While Freyre’s master theme of hybridity and racial miscegenation enabled him to reconstruct Brazil’s cultural formation anew, this was a theme that ultimately had its origins and implications outside Brazil. In fact, if one is to find the distant origins of Lusotropicalism, one needs to travel across the Atlantic and onto the rural communities of Northern Portugal. It is here that the Portuguese anthropologist Jorge Dias will find the ethnological cradle, so to speak, of an alternative to the Lusotropical civilization theorized by Freyre. Let us now turn to Dias’ essayist production on the fundamental elements of Portuguese national culture.

With Jorge Dias, we introduce the anthropological essay into our discussion. With it, comes a distinctive set of disciplinary concerns regarding decadence and progress, the relationship between ethnography and the essay, as well as the role of culture in anthropology – either material cultures in need of explanation (including popular, national, regional, and imperial cultures), or culture as an explanatory tool (in particular, as an alternative to rationalist and materialist approaches). If racial miscegenation is Lusotropicalism’s leitmotif, and the regime’s favored discourse to depict imperial racial and political relations, Dias and his associates offer a tripartite conception of the metropolis around distinct ethnogenetic regions. This conception is premised upon an ontological parity between the regional cultures/identities and national culture/identity so that the latter, and its distinctive unitary character, seemingly derives from the natural juxtaposition of the former. Moreover, the focus on geography comes here to the discussion alongside with an interest in materiality. Jorge Dias and his associates produce a wide array of studies of material culture, from rural artefacts to musical instruments (e.g. Dias 1948b), all interpreted as material embodiments of specific cultural formations. Again, form and content are understood as intertwined and the essay as the ideal form of expression of this entanglement.

Dias’ essayist production on national culture begins in 1942, with the essay “On the Sentiment of Nature among the Latin Peoples”. A visit to the United States in 1950, however, marks a turning point in his thinking about national identity. The “national

character studies” by American cultural anthropologists make a strong impression in Dias, partly because they complement nicely the diffusionist approach in which he was trained in Germany (Leal 2000). As a result, he swiftly endorses this culturalist approach in his efforts to portray the Portuguese as intrinsically cordial and fraternal. This rather dubious suggestion comes across clearly in the 1953 essay “The Fundamental Elements of Portuguese Culture”,¹⁰ included in his *Ethnological Essays* (Dias 1961).

The essay revolves around the idea of plural ethno-genesis as the key to Portugal’s distinctive cultural identity (Leal 2000). In fact, although the mythical Lusitanians still figure in this essay as an “astonishingly fierce and resistant people” (Dias 1961, p. 104), the main thrust of the argument points elsewhere: namely, to the geographical and cultural contiguity between them, who occupy the Northern inlands, the Suevi in the coastal Northern regions and the Arabs and Romans to the South. This essay is noteworthy for at least two different reasons. It not only marks a watershed in a debate around the national identity that could be traced back to the end of the nineteenth century (Leal 2000), but it also occupies a crucial position in Dias’ intellectual production. In fact, it is the first instance of an argument that Dias will develop in the next decade or so about the distinctive social psychological character of the Portuguese. Following work on the Japanese national character by Ruth Benedict (1946), who, like Freyre, studied under Boas at Columbia in the 1920s, Dias defines the Portuguese basic psychological type around a number of distinctive contradictions. These include the following: contradictions between daydreamers and people of action; between the intrinsic kindness and the cruelty they are capable of, especially when hurt in their pride; and, crucial for our purposes here since this is, for Dias, what distinguished Portuguese colonization as a process of “assimilation by adaptation” (1990a, p. 146), the contradiction between an enormous capacity of adaptation and tolerance for all living and natural things and a remarkable ability to preserve their own culture. The oscillation between these positive and negative poles is also, according to Dias, what accounts for Portugal’s historical periods of expansion and decadence. At the same time, the essay signals a clear-cut division in Dias’ *oeuvre* between, on the one hand, his more speculative ideologically conservative writings and, on the other, his purely descriptive ethnographic studies. Through both the speculative essay and the descriptive ethnography, however, Dias’ concern with nation-building gradually evolves into a nationalist concern with empire-building (Viegas and Pina-Cabral 2014, pp. 314, 319).

Also found in Dias’ *Ethnological Essays* is yet another crucial essay on his views on national identity and empire. First published in 1956, the essay “The Portuguese Ultramarine Expansion in Light of Modern Anthropology” is one of the earliest echoes of Freyre’s Lusotropicalist ideas in Dias’ anthropology. Dias writes:

Wherever the Portuguese arrived and settled, they followed their tradition. The men who served the Portuguese were part of the household. The small communities that they formed had this communitarian character that they knew from their homeland and that it is not foreign to many exotic societies. The Portuguese acted as human beings that deal with other human beings, in a convivial atmosphere marked by a fraternal spirit, and, I reiterate this fundamental point

¹⁰ Presented as a conference paper in 1950 and first published in 1953 (Dias 1961; see also Dias 1953).

(...) when we used slave labor, we oftentimes included them in our patriarchal, multifunctional family. (1961, p. 155)

After the publication of *Ethnological Essays* in Dias 1961, Dias will not return to the topic of national identity until 1968. In the meantime, Dias will accept the invitation by the Ministry of Overseas to undertake an ethnographical study in Mozambique, a task to which he will devote the better part of his time between 1957 and 1963 (Macagno 2002, pp. 116–122). The product of Dias' stay among the Macondes of Northern Mozambique is a primarily descriptive four-volume treatise (Dias 1964). In 1968, however, Dias returns to his reflections on national identity in the essay "The National Portuguese Character in the Present Conjuncture" (Dias 1971).

Those who would expect Dias' ethnographic immersion among the Macondes to have had him revise his earlier ethno-genetic theses about Portuguese identity and empire will be disappointed. In fact, Dias not only reiterates his original ideas but, as if these ideas were somehow confirmed by his first-hand experience among African peoples, goes on to give them an even more radical formulation. Inspired by Lusotropicalism, which by the late 1960s is the ideological centerpiece of the regime's colonial foreign policy, Dias' anthropological essay is now a powerful outlet to justify Portuguese colonialism. This justification comes in the form of an argument that expands Freyre's initial chapter in *The Masters and the Slaves* (see also Freyre 1986, pp. 193ff.). The distinctive character of the colonization undertaken by the Portuguese is said to originate in their unique multiracial composition, a combination between sub-races of the Caucasoid race and other races, including the Negroid and the Mongoloid racial types (Dias 1971, p. 39).

The politics of the essay and other forms of writing put into relief the intellectual development, tensions and contradictions of Dias's thought on national identity. In Dias's essays, Lusotropicalism meets halfway with a pluralist ethno-genetic account of national identity: it is through the geographical and historical diffusion of the Portuguese supremely plastic and adaptable identity, through colonialism, that the intercontinental Lusophone world comes about. The heart and soul of this diffusionist account is the metropolitan territory, a rural country that functions both as the starting point of Dias' anthropological analysis and the cradle of the empire. As in Freyre, this is a largely benign process. Systematic violence, political domination, and economic exploitation are generally absent from Dias' essays. These do not go as far as the regime's ethnological essayism in the apology of the colonial enterprise but are less critical than contemporary materialist analysis of popular culture. Or Sérgio, who we study next.

António Sérgio: Decadence, Humanism and Colonialism

Even in the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, there was room for dissent and criticism. Especially for those willing to pay the price. A case in point is António Sérgio. Imprisoned several times for his opposition to the regime, he will be posthumously erected into the "bad consciousness of Portuguese colonialism" (Sá 1979, p. 14). Yet, the fact remains that during his lifetime he will occupy a carefully crafted position of a constructive critic of the regime's colonial politics. Animating this constructive criticism is Sérgio's lifelong concern with the present-day decadence of his home country,

which functions as a springboard for his agenda of political, economic, social and cultural reform. This agenda, as set in the early 1920s together with the far right, was developed around the motto “Free from Finance and free from the Parties”. It envisaged freeing the country from the dying liberalism, responsible for “the mercantile orientation of the Portuguese economy since the fifteen-century” (Cabral 1988, p. 190; 192), and the partisanship associated with party politics. In their place, Sérgio advocates a “politics of fixation” (as opposed to a “politics of transportation”), which will, paradoxically enough, provide “the most articulate intellectual foundation of the ideology of autarchy that was to prevail, under Authoritarianism, for so many decades” (Cabral 1988, p. 193), Sérgio’s illiberal political views put him at odds with the Western European tradition of liberal humanism. In fact, in Sérgio, illiberal political views coexist with a neo-Kantian, humanist and universalist conception of the essay form. In the 1920s and 1930s, Sérgio’s essayism is resolutely rationalist and remindful of Max Weber. Regarding the colonies, as he puts it in 1919, Sérgio’s writings are oriented towards a “great Ideal Community of Portuguese-speaking peoples” (Sérgio 1971c, p. 271). As a result, Sérgio will never question colonialism in itself.

In Sérgio, the politics of the essay revolve around *Essays*, a monumental editorial project that will first see the light of day in 1920 in Brazil where he had sought asylum from the new Republican regime in 1910.¹¹ Sérgio launches the *Essays* with a set of disquieting questions regarding the causes of Portugal’s “decadence” (Sá 1979, p. 15). Combining a revised historiography and a sociological analysis of the colonial empire, Sérgio asks in the Preface of the first edition of the *Essays* (1920): How should we conceive of the nation to which we belong? Who are the Portuguese, where do we come from and what can we aspire to become? What do we miss, what do we know and what shall we do? What lessons can we learn from our predecessors, who taught us our masters? (Sérgio 1971a, p. 55).

His answer is unequivocal: colonialism. Colonialism is the institution responsible for our present-day decadence. Yet Sérgio will never reach the logical conclusion implicit in this denunciation and advocate the end of colonial exploitation. Instead, Sérgio makes use of universalist principles and values to re-examine colonialism. In his essays, we see this strategy being pursued from the 1910s or 1920s onwards albeit with mixed results. On the one hand, it does enable him to undertake a criticism of the specific *form* Portuguese colonialism adopted: in particular, it enables him to revisit the history of the ultramarine expansion and criticize it for not having promoted the adequate kind of entrepreneurship, civic education, and public administration Portugal would need to develop in line with its potential. In Sérgio’s history of Portugal, therefore, instead of a nationalist glorification of past achievements we find a measured patriotic discourse founded upon universalist values. On the other hand, Sérgio openly defends Portugal’s colonial rule overseas. This is a position he will never really revise, despite the significant developments that Portuguese colonial politics undergoes between the 1920s and the 1960s. Faced with the seeming contradiction between a universalist identity and a colonial identity, Sérgio’s option is to suggest an identification between the two: the conquest of Ceuta in 1415 marks, at the same time, the beginning of Portuguese ultramarine expansion *and* the beginning of a universalist

¹¹ The *Essays* were edited eight different times. Here we use the 1971–74 critical edition. A list of references of writings by and on António Sérgio is available at: <https://www.cases.pt/sobre-nos/antonio-sergio/obra/>

definition of the Portuguese nation. But this was an unfulfilled promise: the particularistic form of colonial rule betrayed its potential for universalism, leading to the multi-secular process of civilizational decadence of his homeland.

The overarching theme of civilizational decadence and Sérgio's ambivalent relationship with colonialism animate many of his essays. A case in point is the 1926 "The Cadaver-like Kingdom."¹² The argument is that Portugal reached its cultural, political and economic zenith in the sixteenth century, an epoch when the country is said to be at the vanguard of European nations. Yet today, in the twentieth century, Sérgio argues that we stand exactly at where we were – no progress has been made. Using a caustic satirical tone – "Authentic culture, critical culture, does not yet prevail in Portugal. We are the "Cadaver-like Kingdom"; we are the "Kingdom of Stupidity" (Sérgio 1972a, p. 28) – Sérgio chastises his countrymen. Moreover, the theme of decadence and the essay form are closely entwined (Marques 2005, pp. 49–50; 206). According to Sérgio, under historical conditions of (cultural and material) decadence the only literary form available for intellectuals to explore is the essay. This is because only the essay does not betray the social conditions of its production: the belief in total, complete or absolute solutions underpinning the scientific article or monograph is nothing more than a denial of our historical condition and a self-mythologizing exercise. Alongside the essay form, which offers the textual tools to speculate about how to overcome the decadent present, Sérgio's *oeuvre* rests upon two other tools: the polemic style, which helps him moving forward, and rationalism, which points the way.

While the essay is the natural discursive counterpart of historical condition of decadence, there are para-texts, which accompany the text but remain outside it, that can help perform the same function. A case in point is the preface. This para-textual feature of the book functions as a powerful threshold that frames our interpretation of the text that follows, acting not as a transparent screen but as a representation that constructs the text in a certain way (Silva and Vieira 2019, p. 5). They also point to an intertextual relationship between text and para-text (in the case of a preface, a peri-text), and between their authors.

Indeed, the fact that it is Sérgio who writes the preface of Freyre's 1940 book *The World that the Portuguese Created*, which marks the crucial transition from *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933) to his 1950s formulation of Lusotropicalism, represents a crucial episode in the politics of the essay we explore here. It is as if Sérgio (1971b) functions as a double threshold of interpretation. It not only frames Freyre's argument in that particular work, but it also helps establish a critical distance between Sérgio's reservations regarding colonialism and Freyre's iterative development of the theoretical justification of the Portuguese colonial rule in Africa.

Sérgio agrees with the fundamentals of Freyre's "diagnostic" about the existence of a "common culture" among the Portuguese-speaking peoples (Sérgio 1971b, pp. 163–5), namely the "Portuguese tendency for the hybridization of peoples and cultures, towards transnationalism, and social democracy" (Sérgio 1971b, p. 173). Yet Sérgio disagrees with Freyre's "sociological" conception of Lusophone cultural civilization as a present-day reality and, more important, as a community of destiny. At this juncture,

¹² The "cadaver-like Kingdom" ("Reino cadaveroso") is an expression originally used by Ribeiro Sanches, which Sérgio adopts to title a conference paper he gives in Coimbra in 1926, "O Reino Cadaveroso ou o Problema da Cultura em Portugal" (Sérgio 1972a).

Freyre's emphasis on the adaptability of the Portuguese people, also emphasized by Dias, and seen by both as the anthropological roots of Lusotropical civilization, contrasts markedly with Sérgio's understanding. According to Sérgio, this adaptability or versatility is associated with the cosmopolitanism of the Portuguese in the epoch of the Discoveries, a cosmopolitanism that is also Sérgio's proposal for the future of the empire. For Sérgio, "A 'man of culture', strictly speaking, refers to an individual that possesses the faculty of critical judgement, sharp, objective, *universalist*, free from any limitations of class or nationality" (Sérgio 1971b, p. 172 – emphasis in the original): as a result, a Brazilian "man of culture" is "essentially like" a "Norwegian, or Arabic" man of culture, in the sense that they all exhibit the exact same set of intellectual qualities. Sérgio's concluding remarks in this preface – that the "Luso-descendants" will be all the more "typical" as they "think and act as Citizens of the World" (Sérgio 1971b, p. 174) – adumbrate his position in later essays on the colonial question.

Despite growing international pressure towards decolonization, these essays reiterate Sérgio's 1920s views on Portugal as a "Parent Company [Casa-Mãe] with branches scattered around the whole world." (Sérgio 1972b, p. 188) In Sérgio 1956, Sérgio advocates the mass emigration of Portuguese farmers from Baixo Alentejo to "our Africa." (Sérgio 1956, pp. 24–26) In the following year, in one of his last written comments on the subject, Sérgio writes in favor of:

the liberalization of our political regime, in the transition to a practice of civic conviviality, to the recognition of the authentic self-determination of the Portuguese who live in our European territory, (...), and that afterwards that authentic power of autonomy be extended to the citizens of the overseas territories, in degrees correspondent to the various levels of culture of the different social strata of the population that lives there. (Sérgio 1957, p. 12)

Such newly defined colonial "national union" would be, Sérgio concludes, the "optimal answer" to the critics of Portugal's colonial empire.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the bulk of the regime's late answer to its critics rested upon Freyre's theoretical efforts to identify the "Lusotropical civilization," efforts that were complemented by Jorge Dias' anthropological essays. Despite the differences among our three intellectuals there is at least as much in common in their essays on the colonial question as what separates them.

All three suppose human agency to be an exclusive of the "colonist", as the expression "colonial *power*" betrays. None of them really contemplates the possibility that non-white populations have not merely mimicked but *assimilated* their white masters, not vice-versa. But, for this, we need to move away from the *essay* onto literature proper, and, in there, to the modernist *manifesto* (e.g. Andrade 1928). The idea that the colonial encounter left the colonist untouched is a self-reassuring myth, but a myth notwithstanding. In actual fact, what is the colonial encounter if not a process of mastication, ingestion and digestion: a big feast in which "natives" ate the colonists' bodies, cultures, languages and vice-versa? The difference between native and colonist,

of course, is that among the latter there are still many who believe they have left the forest as pure and untouched as when they first arrived.

This belief that one is able to describe objectively the colonial experience as from the outside is found, to varying degrees, in the essays of our three authors. In this article, we have tried to destabilize this belief by exploring the politics of those essays. This has meant to read them against one another and against other forms of writing. In Freyre, the essay is a hybrid textual form, halfway between science and fiction, that enables us to depict social life not as a closed and rigid system but as a continuous stream of thought and action. Dias, in contrast, makes a narrower use of the essay: it provides him with an exploratory outlet to import and adapt Freyre's ideas on Lusotropicalism. It is through the essay, not the monograph, that Dias reflects upon the nature of Portugal's national identity and, by extension, of its colonial empire. Finally, in Sérgio, the essay is a humanist intellectual intervention. This enables him to develop a more universalist account of identity and culture than Dias or even Freyre. Yet this same universalism also prevents Sérgio from developing a truly effective criticism of the colonial project.

Our intertextual analysis of Freyre, Dias and Sérgio sheds new light on the genealogy of Lusotropicalism. In fact, from the perspective afforded by the politics of the essays produced by Freyre, Dias and Sérgio in the mid-twentieth century, it seems that we have good reasons to conclude that Lusotropicalism, as a social theoretical account of racial miscegenation, social assimilation and cultural hybridity, remains a Brazilian story. Even though by the time it is coined, the term has already left Brazil behind. Once it arrives in Africa, it becomes a bicephalic hybrid: half theory, half ideology. But it never really blossoms. In fact, Lusotropicalism remains to this day but a mirror of Freyre's reflections on his beloved homeland. Situated halfway between literature and science, Lusotropicalism marks a high point in the Lusophone essayist production of the century. A fantastic hybrid itself, whose DNA combines insights of genius with frustrating blind spots, Freyre's account of Lusotropicalism, we submit, could only have penned in the form of an essay.

That we have chosen to do this in an article is, admittedly, ironic. But it is also testament to the porosity between textual genres. The scientific article can be as much speculative, creative and free as the essay – and as reflexive about the interplay between its form and its content – as we want it to be.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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