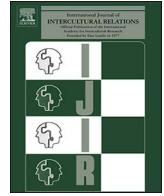


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Luso-tropicalism as a social representation in Portuguese society: Variations and anchoring[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Luso-tropicalist assumptions include the idea of a special skill that Portuguese people have for harmonious relations with other peoples, their adaptability to the tropics and their inherent lack of prejudice. Linked with colonial ideologies, these ideas were broadly disseminated in Portuguese society after the Second World War, and they still shape social knowledge. In this article we present a psychosocial study on this issue. In the framework of social representations theory, this study aims at: (1) identifying organising principles of the social representations of luso-tropicalism among Portuguese participants; (2) investigating their anchoring in intergroup attitudes, attitude towards immigration, evaluation of colonised peoples and Portuguese colonisers, nationalist self-description and explanations for the lesser success of immigrants. For this purpose, a survey was conducted with 148 Portuguese participants. We found four dimensions of luso-tropicalism: harmonious relations, colonial past, ability to adapt and cultural integration. We can ascertain an association of these organising principles (except for cultural integration) with general prejudice towards different groups living in Portugal. At this level, these results clearly contradict the luso-tropicalist assertions about the absence of prejudice. The overall anchoring results are discussed in the framework of a psychosocial approach to luso-tropicalism as a social representation and its repercussions in contemporary societies, in particular its role in justifying the expression of prejudice in Portuguese society, as well as in different issues of current intergroup relations.

Introduction

Luso-tropicalist conceptions have been put forward since first proposed in the thirties of the twentieth century by Brazilian social scientist Freyre (1933). They include, among others, the idea of a special skill that Portuguese (“lusó”) people have for establishing peaceful and harmonious relations with other peoples and for mingling with people from the tropics, an absence of prejudice among the Portuguese, and their ability to adapt to the tropics. Historians have established the course of the reception of these ideas in Portugal (Alexandre, 1999a, 1999b; Castelo, 1998), since their initial rejection in the political field (and a heterogeneous reception in the cultural field) in the thirties to their near appropriation by the regime after the Second World War. After that point, these ideas were broadly disseminated in Portuguese society in the framework of Salazar’s “New State” for the regime’s legitimation of colonialism. Luso-tropicalism survived the end of dictatorship and the end of the colonial empire as well as the consolidation of democracy and the Portuguese integration into Europe and is nowadays part of common sense. For example, due to the recent good

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results of Portugal in different sports in the 2016 European championships, the composition of Portuguese teams was sometimes also celebrated as a result and almost an objectivation of this kind of virtuous Portuguese multicultural harmony. Its extraordinarily large diffusion in lusophone societies is almost completely impermeable to criticism. In fact, criticism arose a long time ago from different fields and in different domains (e.g. Boxer, 1963/1977; Fernandes, 1972; Lourenço, 2014). As an illustration we can take just a few data from the work of Bethencourt (2013/2015, pp. 253–254) about the history of racisms: regarding the transatlantic slavery trade, “the Portuguese were responsible for the transportation of more than 5.8 million slaves (47% of the total)”. As Coelho (2016, p. 40) wrote, these numbers are like those of the Holocaust: “Portugal alone deported as many Africans as there were Jewish dead in the Holocaust (...), after exterminating no one knows how many Indians”. The brutal meaning of these numbers would be enough to question these ideas about the “mild manners” of Portuguese colonial history.

However, ideas about the supposed benevolent specificities of intercultural relations in lusophone societies survived their scientific discrediting as well as the end of the empire (Alexandre, 1999a; Almeida, 2000; Bastos, 1998; Castelo, 1998; Valentim, 2003, 2011). Besides, they are not confined to what happened in the past in the tropics but they are still alive in the present, particularly regarding issues of contemporary cultural diversity in European societies (see, among others, Moreira, 2000).

One historian called luso-tropicalism “a myth” (Alexandre, 1993, p. 65) and a “diffuse ideology” (Alexandre, 1999a, p. 394) and an anthropologist called it a “social fact” (Almeida, 2000, p. 182; cf. also Bastos, 1998). The concept of social representations fits the purpose of studying its repercussions in Portuguese contemporary society particularly well from a social psychology framework. The concept was proposed by Moscovici (1976) as a reformulation and modernisation of Durkheim’s notion of collective representations. Applied to modern societies, social representations refer to knowledge or common-sense theories about abstract concepts circulating in society (Clémence, 2001; Valentim, 2003). Its particular utility in the study of common-sense epistemologies comes from the assertion that thinking is not necessarily always ruled by formal logic – like the non-contradiction rule, for example – but can also be ruled by social regulations and norms. Thus, instead of searching for errors of reasoning in common sense and their apparent irrationality and illogical nature, we should enquire about why they function like that, searching for their own coherence and rationality. Social representations are not about the truth or the error of a cognitive system but about its pragmatics, regarding the utility and functions it accomplishes for a group; “they are anchored and not biased” (Moscovici, 1991, p. 72). Another important feature about social representations is that they “organise the social practices which make up the social/political field” (Elcherath, Doise, & Reicher, 2011, p. 734). We agree with the position that social representations are not only ideas, cognitive structures or shared beliefs that influence action, but that they “constitute” people’s daily practices (Howarth, 2006, p. 17, italic by the author).

Contemporary psychosocial legacies of colonialism are not simple reminiscences of the past that arise here and there, like some folk curiosity or spurious elements in present-day intercultural relations nor are they even just a few elements feeding on nostalgia for old empires. They are constitutive of social, cultural and social psychological ways of functioning. With reconstructed and renegotiated meanings, they play the role of “historical charters” (Liu & Hilton, 2005), being more than collective memories. Psychosocial legacies of colonialism are embedded with both contents and processes, and are indissociable from cognitive functioning and social practices operating at different social psychological levels of analysis (Doise & Valentim, 2015).

In this sense, representations of the colonial past are practical systems of understanding, framing and framed by the institutional production of inequalities and discrimination, and as such are roots of prejudice and racism (cf. Bethencourt, 2013/2015; Jahoda, 1999; Said, 1978/2004) and also of “the way we see” the Other. They are constitutive of the way we construct and think the Other and also the way we think about ourselves in colonised as well as in colonising countries. As Riggs and Augoustinos (2005, p. 473; see also Okazaki, David, & Abelmann, 2007) posited, referring to the project of Franz Fanon, the issue is not (only) “to maintain a focus on how the white man constructs the black man, but how the white man constructs the white man *through* his constructions of the black man” (italic by the authors).

In the case of luso-tropicalism, the influence of colonial historical representations on the current definition of the “Portuguese way of being” seems very clear, in particular on the beliefs about the absence of prejudice and multicultural harmony in Portuguese society. Their importance in today’s society is clear not only in the fields of the politics of immigration and citizenship but also in the psychosocial field, especially regarding the domains of intergroup relations, prejudice and identity. “Mild manners” and openness to the Other are a characteristic of the Portuguese people which is broadly taken for granted, almost as a kind of “national character”. It has pervasive effects, for example, on beliefs about the inexistence of racism and xenophobia in Portugal (for a psychosocial refutation of this belief, cf. Vala, Brito, & Lopes, 1999). It is not difficult to find this idea at stake in other issues such as in discussions about the way Portuguese society would deal with the current refugee crisis in Europe. Some claimed that its “special ability” and cultural specificity would ensure intercultural harmony and respect for the other cultures, as well as an easy integration of the refugees. The taken-for-granted, “natural” openness of Portuguese society to the refugees is just one more recent illustration of that kind of representations or “charter”. However, notwithstanding its broader current dissemination and implications, the psychosocial contemporary repercussions of luso-tropicalism have scarcely been studied until now.

The initial psychosocial studies on this issue (Valentim, 2003; for a synthesis cf. Valentim, 2011) also showed the permanence of these ideas in contemporary social representations about the Portuguese and their links to nationalism. This association with nationalism corroborated the work of historians (Alexandre, 1999b) and anthropologists (Almeida, 2000) in the social psychology domain. But this research also showed an association between adhesion to luso-tropicalist ideas and prejudice towards Africans. These results contradict, at a psychosocial level, luso-tropicalist assumptions regarding the absence of prejudice which has already been questioned on colonial relations (Boxer, 1963/1977; see also Bethencourt, 2013/2015). In fact, to be congruent, Portuguese individuals who adhere to luso-tropicalist ideas should express – at least – lower levels of prejudice, and more friendly attitudes towards other (non-Portuguese) groups in Portuguese society. But the same general trend of results showing that luso-tropicalism does not necessarily prevent prejudice was found in the studies of Vala, Lopes, and Lima (2008) and of Pereira, Barros, Torres, and

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