

Episode 3, season 4 (17 November 2022)

## **Taking up space for decolonisation: civil society initiatives in Portugal**

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**Tine Destrooper:** Welcome to Justice Visions and to our second episode of a short series we're doing on Historical Truth, in which we're looking at both formal and informal truth initiatives that have been set up in European countries to deal with settler and overseas colonial legacies. My name is Tine Destrooper, and I am the regular host of this podcast, and with me today is my co-host Cira Palli-Aspero, who is also a post-doctoral researcher with Justice Visions. And she's actually the one who took the initiative for this exciting miniseries from historical truth. Welcome, Cira.

**Cira Palli-Aspero:** Thank you Tine! It is exciting indeed to further reflect on how different actors engage with different truth initiatives. In the first episode, we talk about formal initiatives in the Nordic context, where different countries have set up its own Historical Truth Commission to explore the impact of the assimilation policies to indigenous people. It was interesting to hear how these commissions are a result of a long process in which minority groups have been undertaken their own initiatives to support the demands for the establishment of these commissions.

**Tine:** What really struck me is, in that case of the Nordic countries, also the interaction between formal and informal processes, right? And I think that's also something we'll talk about today.

**Cira:** Indeed. Yet there are other countries in which the decolonisation debate has not led to any formal response by the state. That is, governments have not set out formal initiatives to redress historical injustices. But in the face of a seemingly lack of action from the state, civil society organisations and other groups continue to bring this debate to the public sphere. This is the case of Portugal, for example.

**Tine:** And Portugal is also the case that we're talking about today, where we'll be talking about the decolonisation debate that's been going on and the kind of openings and opportunities that have been created to address legacies of colonialism. What's been done by whom, for what purpose? And we'll be having that conversation with Dr. Bruno Sena Martins, who is a researcher at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra. He has worked extensively on the topic of human rights, but especially as it relates to questions of racism and colonialism. Welcome, Bruno.

**Bruno Sena Martins:** Thank you for your invitation. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Tine:** Bruno, just to start to contextualise, to debate it a little bit and to give some background to our audience, I wanted to ask you first if you could maybe briefly talk about the state of the decolonisation debate in Portugal. So, what the main issues are? What's what is being discussed? Who is doing the talking, that general context?

**Bruno:** The first thing that I want to underline is the fact that in Portugal this is a recent debate, a recent public debate. After the Carnation revolution in 1974 there was a long period where the issue of colonisation would be something that was absent from the public debate and from the political debate. One important element for us to understand in Portugal, is that we had in the 20th century a dictatorship, which was a regime that was fascist and colonialist. And I would say that where there was some recognition of the fascist nature of the Portuguese regime after the Carnation revolution. And there was a social space to address the wrongdoings of fascism in Portugal. The same thing did not happen in relation to colonialism and to the colonial experience. So, there is an unequal critique of the past that frames Portugal, within the fascist regimes in Europe. But this is not from Europe as a colonial empire, as a relevant actor in the violence suffered by people in other parts of the world. And not to talk about the Atlantic slave trade, but all the traumas, all the sufferings that were imposed by that history absent from European history and Portugal is no exception in that regard. Only recently, I would say since 2015, some controversies brought the subject to the public debate. And of course, it was very important the mobilisation of minorities, minority groups as people of African descent. Also, it was important role played by people from academia in bringing the issue of the colonisation. And now today we have a debate that uses the result of specific national controversies, debates on specific issues, museums, statues... And also, we had an important debate that resulted from a transnational movement with the Black Lives Matter movement after the assassination of George Floyd.

**Tine:** I noticed that you also saying that there was this dynamic interaction in a way between various societal actors. And you're also underlining the role that academics have played in that sense. And I know that a lot of our listeners are scholars or are in academia. Could you speak a bit more about what role they have played?

**Bruno:** There was an organic coalition between the social movements mostly led by people of African descent and historians, post-colonialists that are in academia working with these issues. There was this statement from the Portuguese president when he said that Portugal was a pioneer in relation to the abolition of slavery, which is not true. And we had two different movements at that time. We have a movement led by black people and people of African descent. There was an open letter to the President of black people saying: "not in our name". And we also had a document made by academics, historians, people of sociology, people of different disciplines that are working with colonialism and with the issue of decolonisation. Different perspectives came together to bring to the fore the relevance of discussing Portuguese colonial past and mostly the past of colonial violence that is still to be addressed.

**Tine:** I'm also interested in the example you just gave about the statement by government, which also makes me wonder that in a way, the symbolism of Portugal's colonial heritage is really everywhere. Right. In Portugal, for example, and in the capital in Lisbon, there are so many reminders of the country's colonial and imperial pasts. And that colonial past in a way is constantly replicated in the everyday public space, right? I wanted to pick your brain about the reasons for that. I think when we discussed it amongst ourselves, we called it obsessive glorification of the colonial past, but at least that very explicit glorification of the colonial past.

**Bruno:** There are several reasons for that. One of them is the fact that Portuguese identity, until this day relies heavily on an *epic* of the discoveries. So the idea that we were, that Portugal was able to bring new worlds to Europe, is something that is celebrated everywhere. In common sense in Portugal there still is a self-image, a *grandiose* self-image that is sustained by the public discourse, in education and of course, in the public space. The self-esteem of Portuguese identity still relies a lot on the idea of a past that was majestic and was able to be everywhere in the world. The second element that I think that converges with this, is the fact that the end of the colonial period was also a traumatic experience to Portugal. It ended with a long colonial war that lasted since 1961 to 1974 that involved almost one million men in arms of Portugal that were struggling in Guinea-Bissau, in Angola, Mozambique... and that trauma was never addressed. So you have on one side, a silence towards this lost war, to this process of colonisation that impacted society but remains in society like what Michael Dorsey would call a "public secret". Something that everybody knows, but we are not able to articulate it collectively in a current, consistent discourse because of its traumatic character, nature. And secondly, of course, it is this idea that Portugal became a small country, but its self-image relies on the idea that we were once great, and that greatness comes from the idea of the empire.

**Cira:** I think coming to this, the silence that you're talking about, right, about the trauma of the end of colonialism, and the breakage, if you will, of the Portuguese empire. But there is also an official silence, an official inaction on the acknowledgement of the crimes that were committed during the colonial times as well, right? Are there any state led or any formal initiatives that are currently going on in Portugal? Is the state actively trying to create some openings for these sorts of initiatives to take place?

**Bruno:** There are some small initiatives that are emerging, and they result from the social pressure. For example, we had in September of 2022 a public apology from the Prime Minister, Antonio Costa, in Mozambique in relation to the Wiriyamu massacre. It was the first time in history where a figure representative of the Portuguese state presented an apology in relation to an event that was part of the colonialists, or in this case of the colonial war. We should see this apology as a moment that results from a process of criticism of the authorities, of the silence of the state, of the complicity of the Portuguese state with this silence that is connected also with the structures of racism. That is another form of addressing the legacies of colonialism, is to understand how it impacts the lives and the experiences of people of African descent in Portugal.

**Cira:** I think it's very interesting that you point out the fact that the apology came from the demands of social movements and the demands of society groups to say: "actually, we need a response from the state, this inaction is not acceptable anymore". What are the civil society mechanisms to challenge the state inaction?

**Bruno:** It has to do with some of the controversies that we had in Portugal. I'll give you an example. The mayor of the Council of Lisbon suggested that Lisbon should build a museum of discoveries to celebrate the experience of the overseas experience of Portugal. And that created a backlash. And that backlash was instrumental to put into the public debate a critical perspective on the colonial past. So that was an important moment. But there are other initiatives and moments. I want to mention the anti-racist demonstrations. Whenever there was a moment of police brutality, that created a larger grammar not only to address racism, inequality, exposition to violence, and the unresolved of problem of Portugal in relation to its colonial past. An important moment in 2017 when DJASS, which is an organisation of people of African descent, was able to propose the funding for a memorial of enslaved people in Portugal, which was built, and it is the first monument that addresses the participation of Portugal in the Atlantic slave trade.

**Tine:** What's really interesting to me, Bruno, in what you're describing is this very kind of fine-grained network of all kinds of initiatives talking to each other. And also the importance of these windows of opportunity, which are, of course, very often completely impossible to plan or to map, but that have a strong trigger effects on what social movements can and cannot do. I'm wondering if you're kind of looking at that whole network and that whole landscape of initiatives that are out there at the moment. If you see any consistencies in terms of what the objectives are, is it mostly around acknowledgement or is it about recognition, about accountability? Is it about social change? Do you see a constant element returning in all of these initiatives?

**Bruno:** I think that different elements converge the element and that is common to these initiatives has to do with acknowledging the colonial past and it has to do with the importance of acknowledging that that colonial past has created structures that remain today. And the structures that remain today have to do with the educational system, it has to do with the public space, and it has to do with social inequalities based on racial divides in Portugal. The racial hierarchies are still today in Portugal, and they operate on the basis of those legacies. I would say that it brings all the elements that you mentioned: inequality, recognition, social justice, historical justice. And this is a movement where different people, different actors claim that it is important to look at the past in a critical perspective. It is important to acknowledge that the colonial violence is still with us.

**Cira:** In other countries we are witnessing that these social movements, or formal initiatives they increasingly have been using the framework of traditional justice to think about redressing historical injustices of colonialism. And they do kind of pick up to these normative objectives to pressure the state, to pressure institutional structures to foster this sort of social change. Is this also the case of Portugal? is

the language of transitional justice used by civil society organisations to frame these processes?

**Bruno:** No, in Portugal that language is not a relevant language or grammar to address these issues. What we see that are the most relevant grammars, I would say, is the grammar of anti-racism, which has been important also to address the colonial past. It is a grammar that tries to address the unsustainability of the celebration of the colonial past. So, it's not about punishing or about reparations. Is about stop celebrating something that it's not possible to be celebrated because it's offensive, it's insulting for those that feel that colonial legacy and heritage is part of the structures of oppression of their lives, of their ancestors, and of their experiences as black people. So, I would say that this is the most significant language to address those issues. The ideas of transitional justice may be present in a very indirect way, because, of course, this is a transnational movement, it is a transnational framework and, of course, academics are aware of it and activists are aware of it. So those elements are present, I would say, in the mindset of people that are looking to any kind of historical justice, but not as a political framed form of addressing the colonial past in Portugal.

**Tine:** Would you say that the absence of the TJ framing it's mostly a matter of other frameworks being more relevant. Or would you say that there's also an element of maybe even resistance to the TJ framing, or what is the nature of the non-engagement, if you will, with that framework?

**Bruno:** I would say that the first reason for the absence of that framework is also the absence of a broader critical perspective on wrongdoings in the Portuguese colonial past. There is an absence of acknowledging the wrongdoings of the colonial past. And the common sense, and to this day is to think that Portugal was a different kind of empire. This is also a typical narrative that says that Portuguese people, they are prone to be with other people. They have a vocation to mix. It was not a violent form of colonialism. It was a different form that is specific to the Portuguese, and we were not a violent empire. This narrative prevents that recognition of the colonial past. The second, I would say that the frameworks that have been mobilised mostly are anti-racism, and an anti-celebratory positioning statement towards what has been the public discourse in Portugal.

**Tine:** That point that you raise about how anti-racist discourses are mobilised more explicitly, because I think in a way, what you also see in the scholarly literature is increasingly the exploration of that nexus between anti-racist mobilisation and TJ, for example. So, it's interesting in a way that Portugal is a case where we don't see this happening. And I think it's especially interesting in light of the episode that we did last month, where you do see to on the one hand, that discourse is mobilised and then at the same time there's also the formal initiatives. So, there's definitely a lot of substance to unpack further there. But as we as we're approaching the end of this episode, I think I have a last question I want to ask you. And that we ask of all our interviewees, which is mostly a question about where you as a scholar within this field are looking for inspiration, or in a way which kind of inspiring practices you're observing in the field that make you kind of hopeful about the direction in which this field is evolving?

**Bruno:** My inspiration comes from, I would say from my ancestors, and I am I entitle myself to choose my ancestors. And because I have grandfather that was a colonial administrator and I have a grandmother that was a colonised. So I am of mixed origin in a sense. I have these double belonging. But of course, I choose to be on the side of those that struggle against colonialism. And I think of figures like Amilcar Cabral, he was the leader of PAIGC [the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands (*Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*)] in Guinea-Bissau, in Cape Verde, and struggles for Portuguese independence. And he always would say “my struggle is not against Portuguese people, it's against the colonial system that prevails”. He died before the independence, so he was not here to see this reality. But I think that his legacy stays with us. And I think that the anti-colonial struggle is not something of the past, is a struggle that we should define as our mission. It is a mission for this generation that for, as Frantz Fanon say, to decolonize the present and to decolonize Europe.

**Tine:** Thank you so much, Bruno. We'll definitely link to the relevant resources that you are mentioning in our show notes so that our listeners can also look for inspiration there. For now, Bruno, I'm just going to thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and these insights with us. And then next month, we'll be back with an episode where we zoom out from these various empirical cases and reflect on what this means for the broader debate about transitional justice and historical injustice. Thank you so much Bruno and thank you Cira.

**Cira:** Thank you.