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Between Benevolence and Inevitability: The ‘Civilising Mission’ of Portuguese Colonialism

From Brussels to Berlin: the internationalisation of African affairs

During the anti-slavery conference that took place in Brussels between 18 November 1889 and 2 July 1890, the Portuguese representatives (Henrique Macedo, Portuguese ambassador in Brussels and former minister of the navy and overseas; Augusto Castilho, a naval officer who had been governor of Mozambique; Brito Capelo, an explorer and officer in the Portuguese Navy; and Batalha Reis, consul in Newcastle) were ‘armed with memoirs, documents and geographical charts’ with which they would demonstrate Portugal’s secular ‘administrative, scientific and humanitarian activity’ in Africa.1 The conference took place under the sign of the scramble for Africa and of the legacy of the Berlin Conference of 1884, and in particular under the 6th article of the General Act of February 1885.2 This article established and internationally consecrated the obligations upon all the powers exercising sovereign rights or influence over colonial territories to bring home ‘the blessings of civilization’ and to ensure the ‘protection of the native populations’ and ‘the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material well-being’, reaffirming, in general, the aims to ‘abolish slavery, and especially the slave trade’ in these territories. The generic goal, as Marcelo Caetano wrote many years later, was to make the natives ‘understand and appreciate the advantages of civilisation’; however, as we shall see, it meant much more than this.3

The General Act harmonised the humanitarian and missionary demands that traditionally coincided over the trafficking of slaves (and gradually focused on slavery) with the various commercial and political interests of the colonial powers, which were epitomised by the establishment
of free trade in the Congo and the colonial geographic definition of the region which was organised by bilateral agreements and boundary treaties that had been negotiated in parallel with the conference and were based on a very limited knowledge of the territories in question. While the Protestant groups, particularly the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), which had since 1878 channelled its missionary efforts in the region, and the humanitarian groups – in particular, the Anti-Slavery Society, which had regularly denounced Portuguese involvement in the persistence of this odious trade – had already shown themselves to be extremely active in their opposition to the Anglo-Portuguese Treaty of 1884 (which was signed, but never ratified), they redoubled their efforts on the eve of the Berlin meeting. The fear of the closure of the evangelical market in the Congo (and in other places in Africa) – a region that had been involved in an intense ecclesiastical dispute that was characterised by the conflict between the hegemonic plans of Cardinal Charles Lavigerie and his Society of Missionaries of Africa (Société des Missionnaires d’Alger) and the evangelical proposals of the Portuguese, as well as of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Congregation du Saint-Esprit) which had been operating in Angola since 1866 and in Congo since 1873 – ran in parallel with the worries regarding the closure of commercial markets which steered protests organised by the leading Manchester and Liverpool trade associations. These protests were led by men such as James Hutton and William Mackinnon, whose conjunctural colonial purposes were similar to those of King Leopold II, and contributed to both the debate and to the non-ratification of the Anglo-Portuguese agreement. The latter was above all determined by the political calculations of – and the active resistance organised by – Bismarck’s Germany and Jules Ferry’s France. The economic and political motivations of their presence on the African continent that led to the Berlin Conference were reinforced by the torrent of petitions and submissions presented by the British religious and humanitarian sector. The circumstantial juxtaposition of ecclesiastical, political and economic disputes, the historical manifestation of which can hardly be understood outside the analytical framework that captures their interrelations on an international, national and colonial level, facilitated the assertion and enhanced the influence of religious and humanitarian factors in the diplomatic processes that led to the Berlin Conference.

On the eve of the conference, the Anti-Slavery Society asked the Foreign Office to ensure the imminent multilateral negotiations in Berlin specifically address the problem of slavery and the slave trade. The instructions the British Government gave to its representatives