

# Corruption Debates in the First Portuguese Republic 1910-1926

Jens Ivo Engels

Technische Universität Darmstadt, Institut für Geschichte  
jens\_ivo.engels@tu-darmstadt.de  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8680-1882>

Mauricio Homberg

Technische Universität Darmstadt  
mau.homberg@hotmail.de  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4184-3923>

Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 20/02/2022

Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 31/05/2022

## *Abstract*

This paper deals with corruption debates as a political factor in the First Portuguese Republic. Criticism of corruption is a hitherto hardly considered aspect for understanding the instability of the Republic. Criticism of corruption as a critique of parliamentarism existed in almost all European countries in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This essay offers a systematic examination of corruption debates in Portugal and aims to emphasise the international commonalities. Similar to the rest of Europe, these criticisms contributed to the bad image and destabilisation of the parliamentary system.

The essay mainly uses political newspapers and pamphlets as sources. After an assessment of the relevant research literature and a very short section on anticorruption in the late monarchy, we will concentrate on three groups of critics: monarchical catholic voices, radical republican commentaries, and anarchist left-wing contributions. The aim is to reconstruct patterns of argumentation of the aforementioned political directions that were typical throughout the republican period. We will also take up the alleged connection between cultural backwardness and corruption

in the Portuguese self-description. In the last section, we will shortly focus on the (almost non-existent) defence strategies of the ruling republicans.

Keywords: Corruption; First Portuguese Republic; Political Debates.

## State of research

The research relevant to our topic comprises four areas. First of all, this includes an examination of the methodological approaches of historical corruption research. Secondly, the results of international research on corruption debates in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe will be presented. Thirdly, an overview of previous research on corruption in Portugal in the First Republic will be given.

Historical corruption research, conceived as an international research discourse including regular conferences and based on a clear methodological basis, has only developed since the mid-2000s. At the centre of this research is the assumption that fundamental insights into political systems can be gained by the study of political corruption. Moreover, it is based on the idea that corruption as a normative phenomenon. This is the decisive innovation compared to earlier research, which was mostly strongly anecdotal. Corruption can only be adequately studied if two dimensions of corruption are neatly distinguished. On the one hand, there are scandals, debates, criticisms and lawsuits about corruption. So the question is what a society perceives as corruption and why it condemns certain actions. On the other hand are the practices of bribery, jobbery, favouritism and patronage, which also have their own history. Those who speak of corruption make a moral and often a politically motivated judgement about these practices. The historically changeable backgrounds for these judgements have been investigated in recent years, showing that the moral and political assessment of the practices changed much – above all in the decades around 1800<sup>1</sup>.

Since then, the modern definition of corruption prevailed, prohibiting the abuse of a public office for private gain. It is intimately connected to the novel clear-cut separation of the private and public spheres. Since then,

---

<sup>1</sup> Jens Ivo Engels, “La nueva historia de la corrupción. Algunas reflexiones sobre la historiografía de la corrupción política en los siglos XIX y XX”, *Ayer. Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 115 (2019), p. 23-49; Jens Ivo Engels, “Political Corruption in Modernity. Debates and Practices in 19th Century Britain and Germany”, *Historische Zeitschrift*, 282 (2006), p. 313-350; Jens Ivo Engels and Frédéric Monier, “Pour une histoire comparée des faveurs et de la corruption: France et Allemagne (XIXe-XXe siècles)” in Jens Ivo Engels, Frédéric Monier and Natalie Petiteau (eds.), *La politique vue d’en bas. Pratiques privées et débats publics 19e-20e siècles*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011, p. 127-148; Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória and Guy Geltner, (eds.), *Anticorruption in History. From Antiquity to the Modern Era*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2018; Borja de Riquer y Permanyer, Ferran Toledano and Gemmi Rubi (eds.), *Money, Politics and Corruption in Modern Spain*, Brighton, Sussex Academic Press, 2021; María Antonia Peña Guerrero and Marta Bonaudo (eds.), *Historia cultural de la corrupción política. Prácticas, escenarios y representaciones contemporáneas*, Rosario, Prohistoria, 2019.

state action must serve neither the personal interests of office holders nor the particular interests of individual groups. Instead, an abstract conception of the common good is assumed to be the only legitimate goal of politics and public administration. The separation between the public and private spheres and the opposition of the common good and particular interests are essentially linked to the modern concept of corruption.

Since around 1800, corruption has been seen as a feature of pre-modernity and times past. A central argument of reformers and revolutionaries around 1800 all over Europe was that the prevailing social and political order was corrupt and that progress meant defeating corruption. This narrative persisted. Modern societies see themselves as free of corruption, whereas premodernity is associated with corruption. All this, of course, did not change the fact that extensive practices of patronage, clientelism, favouritism and enrichment also exist in modern political systems<sup>2</sup>. However, these can now only be protected by concealment, but no longer legitimised by offensive defence<sup>3</sup>.

In recent years, historians of corruption have looked very closely at the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From about 1880 until the establishment of dictatorships between the 1920s and 1930s, liberal and parliamentary political systems dominated in Southern and Western Europe<sup>4</sup>. In these systems, there was competition between political currents and parties and a differentiated political press. Parliamentarism, journalism and the growing importance of industry and finance formed the basis for ubiquitous debates on corruption. In other words, critical voices measured the protagonists of parliamentarism against their own, usually high standards of moral integrity. The results were, on the one hand, spectacular corruption scandals, such as Panama 1892/93 or Stavisky 1934 in France, Banca Romana 1893 in Italy, Marconi 1912 in England as well as Barmat 1924 and Sklarek 1929 in Germany.

---

<sup>2</sup> Frédéric Monier, *La politique des plaintes. Clientélisme et demandes sociales dans le Vauchuse d'Édouard Daladier (1890-1940)*, Paris, Boutique De l'histoire, 2007; Jens Ivo Engels and Volker Köhler, "Moderne Patronage – Mikropolitik in der Moderne. Contours and challenges of a new field of research", *Historische Zeitschrift*, 309/1 (2019), p. 36-39.

<sup>3</sup> Jens Ivo Engels, *Die Geschichte der Korruption*, Frankfurt a. M., S. Fischer, 2014; Toon Kerkhoff, Ronald Kroeze and Pieter Wagenaar, "Corruption and the Rise of Modern Politics in Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries – Introduction", *Journal of Modern European History* 11 (2013), p. 19-30; Olivier Dard, Jens Ivo Engels and Frédéric Monier (eds), *Patronage et corruption politiques dans l'Europe contemporaine*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Silvana Casmirri, Manuel Suárez Cortina (eds.), *La Europa del sur en la época liberal: España, Italia y Portugal. Una perspectiva comparada*, Santander, Editorial Universidad de Cantabria, 1998; Manuel Baiôa (ed.), *Elites e Poder. A crise do Sistema Liberal em Portugal e Espanha (1918-1931)*, Évora, Cidehus, 2004.

Carried by these scandals and other accusations, continuous corruption debates developed in all European societies. Regularly, members of parliament were accused of venality. Critics of parliamentarism blamed systematic corruption assuming that political decisions were bought to a large extent by industrialists. Socialist authors blamed this on the structures of capitalism. On the right side of the political spectrum, anti-capitalism was joined by anti-Semitic arguments<sup>5</sup>. A certain peculiarity was the Spanish debate about the so-called *Regeneracionistas*. They were concerned with overcoming the cacique system, which, similar to Portugal, was described as a (pre-modern) feature of Iberian society<sup>6</sup>.

Corruption in the history of Portugal has hardly been studied from this perspective. Studies on favouritism practices dominate. Thus, patronage structures in the Middle Ages and in the early modern period have been researched<sup>7</sup>. More relevant for our context are works on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Patronage in Portuguese administration has been analysed<sup>8</sup>. There is also much research on caciquism in the First Republic and on the manipulation of elections. The caciques, with their clientelist structures, very much influenced the outcome of parliamentary elections, which were almost inevitably won by the established Republican Party. This lack of openness in the system significantly affected the legitimacy of the democratic system<sup>9</sup>. It has often been pointed out that the methods and structures of electoral influence changed comparatively

---

<sup>5</sup> Olivier Dard et al., *Scandales et corruption à l'époque contemporaine*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014; Olivier Dard et al. (eds.), *Dénoncer la corruption. Chevaliers blancs, pamphlétaires et promoteurs de la transparence à l'époque contemporaine*, Paris, Demopolis, 2018; Frédéric Monier, "Enquêteur sur la corruption: Jaurès et la commission Rochette", *Cahiers Jaurès*, 209/3 (2013), p. 71-92.

<sup>6</sup> Martia Gemma Rubi i Casals, *Els Catalans i la política en temps del caciquisme: Manresa, 1875 - 1923*, Vic, Eumo, 2006; María Antonia Peña Guerrero, *El sistema caciquil en la provincia de Huelva. Clase política y partidos (1898-1923)*, Córdoba, Ediciones de la Posada, 1993; Javier Moreno Luzón, "Political Clientelism, Elites, and Caciquismo in Restoration Spain (1875-1923)", *European History Quarterly*, 37 (2007), p. 417-441.

<sup>7</sup> André Vitória, "Late Medieval Politics and the Problem of Corruption. France, England and Portugal, 1250-1500" in Ronald Kroeze, André Vitória and Guy Geltner (eds.), *Anticorruption in History. From Antiquity to the Modern Era*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 77-89; Jeremy Adelman, "Commerce and Corruption in the Late Spanish and Portuguese Empires" in Emmanuel Kreike and William Chester Jordan (eds.), *Corrupt Histories*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2004, p. 428-460.

<sup>8</sup> António Cardoso and Manuel Carlos Silva, "Entre o velho patrocínio e o clientelismo político-partidário: o caso de uma aldeia minhota no concelho de Barcelos (Portugal)", *Sociologia on line*, 2 (2011), p. 199-219.

<sup>9</sup> Fernando Farelo Lopes, *Poder Político e Caciquismo na 1a. República Portuguesa*, Lisboa, Editorial Estampa, 1994; Fernando Farelo Lopes, "Clientelismo, "crise de participação" e deslegitimação na I República", *Análise Social*, 111 (1991), p. 401-415.

little between the later monarchy and the Republic<sup>10</sup>. However, recent research has also shown that the system was less closed than was long assumed<sup>11</sup>. The same applies to the importance of clientelism in the administration: this, too, was apparently significantly overestimated in the past, while more recent work points to a professionalisation in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>12</sup>. These recent revisions concerning practices show, that the self-conception of Portuguese society and politics has overestimated its tendency for ‘corruption’.

The public debates on caciquism and corruption, on the other hand, have been studied rarely - often rather with a focus on the present<sup>13</sup>. The publications by Rui Ramos and Fernando Farelo Lopes are an exception here<sup>14</sup>.

The political historiography of the First Republic developed after the end of the Estado Novo in the 1970s. Only now fundamental questions were addressed seriously, such as the circumstances and causes of the 1926 coup<sup>15</sup>. Basically, the question of the instability of the First Republic dominates. For Farelo Lopes and Manuel Baiôa, the key to understanding the failure of the Republic lies in the “dificuldade de acesso”, i.e. the impeded or even non-existent opportunities for democratic participation due to the cacique system. Political opponents of the republicans or lower class citizens, who were more likely to be found in the countryside than in the big cities, were hardly represented politically. Thus, violence and discrediting campaigns soon became the preferred means of political participation for these forces<sup>16</sup>. Directly linked to this was the fragmentation

---

<sup>10</sup> Fernando Farelo Lopes, “Caciquismo e Política em Portugal. Uma perspectiva sobre a Monarquia e a I República”, *Sociologia – Problemas e Práticas*, 9 (1991), p. 127-137; Pedro Tavares de Almeida, *Eleições e caciquismo no Portugal oitocentista, 1868-1890*, Lisboa, Difel, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Maria Ana Bernardo, “Dos recenseamentos eleitorais como recurso para a história política e social. Uma análise a partir do seu contexto de produção (1890-1930)”, *História*, 9 (2019), p. 87-103.

<sup>12</sup> Filipe Abreu Nunes, “O Recrutamento das Elites Administrativas no Portugal Contemporâneo”, *História*, 64 (2013), p. 137-162.

<sup>13</sup> Luís de Sousa, “Political Parties and Corruption in Portugal”, *West European Politics*, 24 (2001), p. 157-180; Isabel Ferin Cunha and Estrela Serrano (eds.), *Corrupção política, media e democracia*, Coimbra, Universidade de Coimbra, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Rui Ramos, *História de Portugal Vol. 6: A Segunda Fundação (1890-1926)*, Lisbon, Estampa, 1994; Fernando Farelo Lopes, “Caciquismo e Política...”, cit.; Fernando Farelo Lopes, *Poder Político e Caciquismo...*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas L. Wheeler, “The Changing Historiography of the First Portuguese Republic: A Brief Essay” in Richard Herr and António Costa Pinto (eds.), *The Portuguese Republic at One Hundred*, Berkeley, University of California 2012, p. 69, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Farelo Lopes, *Poder Político e Caciquismo...*, cit., p. 11, 162, 163; Manuel Baiôa, “Partidos e sistema partidário na crise do liberalismo em Portugal e Espanha nos anos vinte” in Manuel Baiôa (ed.), *Elites e Poder. A crise do Sistema Liberal em Portugal e Espanha (1918-1931)*, Évora, Cidehus, 2004, p. 17.

of the Republican Party since the end of the Sidónio dictatorship in 1918 and the rise of fascism in Europe in the early 1920s, which radicalised parts of the political right. Finally, the limited influence of the state apparatus on the military, politicised by the First World War, is a factor that should not be underestimated. The aforementioned opposition forces called for it again and again, which finally led to the coup of 28 May 1926<sup>17</sup>.

Our contribution will not revise these findings. However, we would like to add another facet to the picture of the First Republic by analysing corruption debates. In many respects the arguments exchanged in Portugal were similar to those in other parts of Europe.

### **Criticism of corruption in the late monarchy**

In the decades before the establishment of the Republic, under the constitutional monarchy, the accusation of corruption was a central motive for all those who wanted to change the political system. There were numerous occasions for this criticism. Corruption allegations involved political patronage and clientelism in parliamentary elections. With the help of the caciques, regionally influential large landowners, clergymen or industrialists, the results were manipulated by buying votes or blackmailing the voters. The outcome was a system of government in which the two parties loyal to the regime, the Regeneration Party and the Progressive Party, alternated in forming the government. It was a contrived game of alternance that only at first glance seemed to work like the British system. This is known as the *rotativismo* system<sup>18</sup>. However, the *Partido Republicano Português* (PRP) and its supporters stood against it. They wanted to establish a new constitution and a democratic system. After riots in Lisbon, the Republic was proclaimed in October 1910.

An important mouthpiece of anti-monarchical criticism of corruption was the historian and politician J. P. Oliveira Martins. He sat as a member of parliament from 1883 to 1894. He was a member of the Progressive Party for a short time, but for the longest time he represented his constituency as an independent candidate, which was extremely rare due to *rotativismo*. Oliveira Martins criticised the manipulation of elections by caciques from a liberal perspective

---

<sup>17</sup> António Costa Pinto, “A queda da 1.ª República Portuguesa: uma interpretação” in Manuel Baião (ed.), *Elites e Poder. A crise do Sistema Liberal em Portugal e Espanha (1918-1931)*, Évora, Cidehus, 2004, p. 133-135, 137-140.

<sup>18</sup> Farello Lopes, “Caciquismo e Política...”, cit.

in his book *As Eleições* as early as 1878. Martins took a differentiated stance: it must be possible to articulate legitimate group interests in elections as well. The cacique system, however, mainly promoted egoistic and thus illegitimate interests. The state had degenerated into an oligarchy<sup>19</sup>.

In fact, the cacique system had ensured for decades that the PRP could not win a parliamentary majority. It is therefore not surprising that its supporters made political patronage and corruption central arguments against the monarchy. Thus, shortly before the revolution, the later state president António José de Almeida wrote in the republican journal *Alma Nacional* that cacique was “to the regime as the heart is to the organism”. And further: “If caciquism disappeared in Portugal, the monarchy would begin to have gasps like a fish on land, and would die shortly afterwards”<sup>20</sup>. A few issues later, in an article appropriately titled “War on the caciques”, electoral manipulation was directly linked to the church, which was another enemy of the republicans. For them, the fight against the political order of the monarchy was synonymous with the fight against corruption<sup>21</sup>.

### **The sponsors and motives of the corruption debate in the republic: the conservatives**

After the revolution, the battlefield changed. Now it was the opposition forces that reproached the new system in the same way and in return presented the monarchy as a better alternative. This was also easy because some of the techniques of power that had already been used in the constitutional monarchy continued to be cultivated. These included, in particular, the aforementioned election manipulations with the help of (renewed) cacique structures. However, these now worked to the advantage of the Republican Party, and thus to that of the new masters.

The accusation of corruption was first raised by the disempowered conservative, catholic and monarchist groups. They put forward the general accusation that democracies are necessarily corrupt – and the Portuguese republicans even

---

<sup>19</sup> Rui Ramos, “Oligarquia e caciquismo em Oliveira Martins, Joaquim Costa e Gaetano Mosca (c. 1880-c. 1900)”, *Análise Social*, 41 (2006), p. 32-33.

<sup>20</sup> “[...] está para o regime como o coração está para o organismo em que bate [...]. Se o caciquismo desaparecesse de Portugal, a Monarquia começaria a boquejar como um peixe fora da água, e morreria dentro em pouco”. António José de Almeida, “Galopins”, *Alma Nacional*, 28 (18<sup>th</sup> August 1910), p. 446.

<sup>21</sup> José Barbosa, “Guerra aos Caciques”, *Alma Nacional*, 31 (8<sup>th</sup> September 1910), p. 485-487.



represented a particularly bad variant. Pacheco D'Amorim, a mathematician with a doctorate from the Universidade de Coimbra, railed in the catholic journal *Lusitania*: “Vem as democracias e pretendem envenena-la com o seu veneno, corrompe-la com a sua corrupção”<sup>22</sup>. Francisco Manuel Homem Christo even went one step further and attacked the Portuguese republicans directly:

Não ha duvida que a corrupção dos homens monarchicos é profunda. Não ha duvida que, além de corruptos, se teem mostrado d'uma imbecilidade suprema. Mas a incapacidade moral e intellectual dos republicanos é maior ainda<sup>23</sup>.

Significantly, the conservatives linked the accusation of corruption to a diagnosis of moral decline in society as a result of its abandonment of traditional values, such as religion. The alleged tendency towards secularism undermined the moral bond of society. The society of the republic was a corrupt world that has sprung from the turmoil of the times. In contrast, only the church ensured the moral purity of the country, according to Homem Christo in a keynote article in his magazine *A Ideia Nacional*<sup>24</sup>. The accusation of corruption thus underlay a narrative of decline of the modern world. All this was meant to expose the republicans' optimism about progress as hypocrisy and to document the modern world's lack of moral integrity.

While the church prevented decay and corruption on a moral level, in the political sphere the monarchy was touted as a better alternative. Only the monarchy avoided partisanship and the pursuit of particular interests. This was also the argument of Alfredo de Freitas Branco when church property was confiscated on the island of Madeira in 1917:

A monarquia organica, tradicionalista e anti-parlamentar que defendemos [...] com o anulamento da acção partidária [...] teria sem dúvida procedido bem diversamente<sup>25</sup>.

With this, the Portuguese monarchists took up an interpretation that was never entirely uncontroversial. In fact, there had been a double narrative about

---

<sup>22</sup> Pacheco D'Amorim, “A religião catholica e a Reorganisação da patria”, *Lusitania*, 8 (1<sup>st</sup> August 1914), p. 500.

<sup>23</sup> Francisco Manuel Homem Christo, “Coisas a relembrar...”, *A Ideia Nacional*, 1 (17<sup>th</sup> March 1915), p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Francisco Manuel Homem Christo, “A Igreja e a Republica”, *A Ideia Nacional*, 3 (24<sup>th</sup> March 1915), p. 67-71.

<sup>25</sup> Alfredo de Freitas Branco, “Interesses Regionaes. Um novo escandalo democrático na Ilha da Madeira”, *A Tradição*, 2 (9<sup>th</sup> June 1917), p. 8.



monarchy in Europe since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, there was the assumption, originally cultivated by revolutionaries, reformers and liberals, that monarchs in particular were at risk of mixing their office and their private interests. Such debates had caused considerable damage to the French July monarchy, for example, and played a role in the Revolution of 1848<sup>26</sup>.

On the other hand, it was precisely during the parliamentary regimes of the period around 1900 that the right-wing critics of parliamentarism sought their salvation in the monarchy. This is true of the anti-republican journalists in France, such as Charles Maurras. But the Italian conservative-liberal publicist Ruggero Bonghi also saw the solution in an authoritarian king in view of the corruption scandal surrounding the Banca Romana in 1893<sup>27</sup>. The long-standing Italian head of government Francesco Crispi tried to implement Bonghi's idea in the face of a parliament perceived as weak and corrupt around 1900, albeit with little success<sup>28</sup>.

Of course, these considerations are not to be understood in a purely conservative way. They should be seen in the context of the tendency to propose authoritarian solutions in response to corruption and party strife. This includes the vision of the "iron surgeon" that the liberal Spanish publicist Joaquín Costa called for in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, even if only for a brief transition.<sup>29</sup> Crispi, Bonghi and Costa were not traditionalists. Their reflections, however, show the potential that the monarchy – or other authoritarian solutions in the case of Costa – still possessed as an authority above the parties in the face of accusations of corruption.

### The critique of the intellectuals

Not only monarchist and clerical forces criticised corruption, but also those groups that can be called radical republicans. This refers to a group of intellectuals who were critical of the political structures and morals of the country's political elite. Their most important organ from 1921 onwards was the journal *Seara Nova*. The *Seara Nova* wanted to establish a new way of thinking

---

<sup>26</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964 (1893), p. 31-32; William Fortescue, "Morality and Monarchy. Corruption and the Fall of the Regime of Louis-Philippe in 1848", *French History*, 16 (2002), p. 83-100.

<sup>27</sup> Ruggero Bonghi, "L'ufficio del Principe in uno stato libero", *La Nuova Antologia*, 122 (1893), p. 340-355.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Duggan, "Francesco Crispi, the problem of the monarchy, and the origins of Italian nationalism", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 15 (2010), p. 336-353.

<sup>29</sup> Joaquín Costa y Martínez, *Oligarquía y caciquismo como la forma actual de gobierno en España. Urgencia y modo de cambiarla*, Madrid, Los Hijos de M. G. Hernandez, 1902.

in Portuguese society and especially among the ruling elites. A pedagogy of what they called “clarity of understanding” and “discipline of ideas” was to be developed to free the Portuguese from their vices<sup>30</sup>. Its good reputation in politics led so far that in December 1923 the group of *Seareiros* provided three ministers for the cabinet under Prime Minister Álvaro do Castro. Never before had an extra-partisan group had such influence<sup>31</sup>. They considered themselves part of an international intellectual elite and claimed to develop concepts for a kind of moral revolution in Portugal.

The members of the group supporting the journal are also called *Seareiros*. Even before the founding of the journal, they had been partly in contact with each other and exercised influence, for example in the journal *Pela Grei*. Not infrequently, the criticism of the *Seareiros* was directed against the state of Portuguese politics, despite their republican views. In any case, even this group was not completely free of authoritarian thinking: some of the later *Seareiros* supported the brief dictatorship of Sidónio Pais in 1918 as an opportunity for reform, but only in the first months of the dictatorship. They also publicly turned against it before it ended. Later, after the end of the Republic, the *Seara Nova* continued to be published even under the new dictatorship.

The *Seareiros* reflected intensively on the shortcomings of the Republic, including political corruption. However, unlike the monarchists, they did not declare the Republic or parliamentarism corrupt per se. Nor was it in any way a conservative critique. In the first issue of *Seara Nova*, the group clearly declared its support for democracy. But many *Seareiros* considered the political system in its concrete form to be deficient.

In their argument, there was a structural reason for corruption. They argued that the political class of the Republic had simply adopted the techniques of power from the former monarchy and replaced the traditional cacique systems with party elites. This reasoning had been served, in 1918, for some of the future *Seareiros*, as an argument for supporting the dictatorship<sup>32</sup>. Quite obviously, the *Seareiros* held a particularly pure idea of the abstract common good being threatened by its enemies, “que deitaram abaixo as estátuas de todos os altares, para prestar apenas culto ao Bezerro de Ouro”<sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>30</sup> António Reis, “O Grupo Seara Nova: uma resposta das elites intelectuais à crise do sistema liberal” in Manuel Baiôa (ed.), *Elites e Poder. A crise do Sistema Liberal em Portugal e Espanha (1918-1931)*, Lisbon, Colibri, 2004, p. 247.

<sup>31</sup> Rui Ramos, *História de Portugal...*, cit., p. 547.

<sup>32</sup> Francisco Reis Santos, “A Situação Política. A oportunidade oferecida pelo 8 de Dezembro”, *Pela Grei* 1, (1918), p. 61-66.

<sup>33</sup> “Seara Nova”, *Seara Nova*, 1 (15<sup>th</sup> October 1921), p. 1.

The *Seareiros* noted that industrialists bought great influence over members of parliament - either through direct bribery or by means of a venal press. Augusto da Costa reported an alleged blackmail attempt in 1923. An unnamed minister had been threatened with a defamation campaign in the press if he did not abolish a certain law that placed a financial burden on the owner of the newspaper<sup>34</sup>. The move of industrialists into politics was also seen by many *Seareiros* as an expression of corruption: in 1926, Raul Proença lamented the prospect of a banker and newspaper owner becoming a member of government as a combination of “incompetência e corrupção”. This, he said, is symptomatic of Portuguese politics as a whole and shows the enormous need for reform<sup>35</sup>. This reflects the idea that only a strict separation of private and economic interests on the one hand and politicians with their obligation to the common good on the other hand makes corruption-free politics possible. Behind this is a very consistent conception of the precept of separation of spheres, typical of some representatives of the intellectual elites in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, although it was far detached from the logics of real life politics.

The solutions proposed by the *Seareiros* were primarily aimed at individual changes of behaviour. In particular, the morals of the acting politicians must improve. They would have to stop selling themselves to particular interests, but serve only the abstract common good. Even though the *Seareiros* were certainly not catholic zealots, they too argued from the point of view of the decline of morality. In Portugal, they argued, there was no sufficiently consolidated political morality, especially because there was a lack of a critical public and no independent press<sup>36</sup>. Only a morally consolidated intellectual elite could provide a remedy<sup>37</sup>. Only a renewed elite consisting of “free men” could lead the country out of the crisis dominated by corruption<sup>38</sup>.

In this position, the elitist *Seareiros* were quite comparable to other elitist reform movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Especially in the USA, the so-called *Progressives* called for a restructuring of democracy in the decades after 1900. The *Progressives* also castigated a democracy that was perverted by the corruption of the parties, so-called “machine politics” and the interests of the lower classes organised in them. They countered this with the idea that experts

---

<sup>34</sup> Augusto da Costa, “A Crise Portuguesa e a Reacção dos Homens Livres”, *Homens Livres*, 1 (1<sup>st</sup> December 1923), p. 8-10.

<sup>35</sup> Raul Proença, “Incompetência e Corrupção”, *Seara Nova*, 83 (15<sup>th</sup> April 1926), p. 209.

<sup>36</sup> “Em vésperas de eleições”, *Seara Nova*, 51 (15<sup>th</sup> August 1925), p. 54.

<sup>37</sup> Fransisco Reis Santos, “Uma Nova Oportunidade”, *Pela Grei*, 2 (May 1918), p. 127-130, p. 127; António Sérgio, “Ideias e Factos”, *Pela Grei*, 3 (July 1918), p. 183.

<sup>38</sup> António Sérgio, “Vivos e Mortos”, *Homens Livres*, 1 (1<sup>st</sup> December 1923), p. 1-2.

and strong administrations could stop the corrupt excesses of politics and raise the morale of the population<sup>39</sup>. In contrast, European critics tended to focus on the danger of oligarchic and plutocratic rule.

### Anarchist critique

There was also criticism of the corrupt Republic from the left. We refer here mainly to the anarchist magazine *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d'A Batalha* (connected to the journal *A Batalha*). The *Suplemento* considered the entire system of the Republic to be structurally corrupt. This included the shameless pursuit of private interests by politicians in public office. In particular, the combination of public office and a leading role in the private sector was a thorn in the side of the anarchists – not unlike the *Seareiros*<sup>40</sup>. The careers of many politicians, they argued, were simply careers of enrichment, seeking public office with the primary aim of maximising personal income<sup>41</sup>. In contrast to the *Seareiros*, however, the anarchists underpinned their diagnosis of corruption with an analysis of society. Corruption was only an expression of the class interest of the bourgeoisie. In the eyes of the anarchists, both industrialists and the leading politicians of the republic belonged to the ruling class. Their aim was the exploitation of the people – and no separation of spheres or interests was possible. They tried to hide their intentions behind fine words. It shows the greed and hypocrisy of the entire ruling class<sup>42</sup>.

Consequently, the anarchists' judgement towards the Republic was unequivocal. Participation in the elections, according to the *Suplemento*,

---

<sup>39</sup> John Allswang, *Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986; Maureen Flanagan, *America Reformed. Progressives and Progressivism, 1890s-1920s*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006; Alan Lessoff, James J. Connolly, "From Political Insult to Political Theory: The Boss, the Machine, and the Pluralist City", *The Journal of Policy History*, 25 (2013), p. 139-172.

<sup>40</sup> "R.I.P. À Guisa de Epitáfio para a Sepultura do Governo Castro", *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d'A Batalha*, 31 (30<sup>th</sup> June 1924), p. 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Bento Faria, "O político profissional. Aos que votam", *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d'A Batalha*, 99 (19<sup>th</sup> October 1925), p. 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> "O processo da burguesia ou A tragi-comédia das notas "falsas" e das "falsas" assinaturas de "pessoas de toda a respeitabilidade"', *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d'A Batalha*, 108 (21<sup>st</sup> December 1925), p. 1-2; José Maria Ferreira de Castro, "Os Homens de Bem", *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d'A Batalha*, 108 (21<sup>st</sup> December 1925), p.6; Unknown, "O Caso do Angola e Metrópole. Um segredo do Estado que se tornou um escândalo formidável", *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d'A Batalha*, 112 (January 1926), p. 1-2.

therefore meant supporting a thoroughly corrupt system: “Votar, hoje, é eleger a [C]orrupção; é dar à corrupção um sentido colectivo”<sup>43</sup>. As already indicated, unlike the *Seareiros*, the anarchists’ analysis was not based on deploring individual or even collective moral weaknesses. Rather, corruption here was another word for the structural exploitation of the lower classes and the state by the bourgeoisie, which ruled in economic and political terms. A call for the separation of state office and private interests made no sense against this background.

Nor did the anarchists see authoritarian structures as a solution to the problem of corruption. On the contrary, as one reads in the 1927 *Suplemento*, the dictators Mussolini in Italy and Primo de Rivera in Spain also maintained their systems with the help of corruption, although they owed their rise to the fact that they used corruption scandals to discredit the parliamentary systems. Since they also clung to capitalism, they could not overcome corruption. By serving capitalism, both parliamentarism and dictatorship were structurally corrupt<sup>44</sup>.

If one looks at the corruption debate in other European countries, one is struck by the comparatively small contribution made by left-wing authors. It tended to be the conservative or authoritarian opponents of liberal democracies who were more concerned with criticising corruption. Among the opponents of capitalism, too, right-wing critics dominated the discourse on corruption<sup>45</sup>.

Nevertheless, left-wing voices can be detected in certain cases. This was especially true in Germany, where the Social Democratic Party systematically built some campaigns on corruption scandals in the late Empire, for example in 1913 and 1914<sup>46</sup>. In the interwar period, too, the communists were at the forefront of debates on the venality of parliamentarians - but were also themselves the target of right-wing nationalist criticism of corruption<sup>47</sup>. The French socialist Auguste Rouanet had already suspected in 1893, in view of the Panama scandal, that the epoch of capitalism would not come to an end through a revolution of the proletarians, but through internal decay and corruption<sup>48</sup>.

---

<sup>43</sup> José Maria Ferreira de Castro, “Ecos da Semana. A Arte, a Vida e a Sociedade. O segredo da urna”, *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d’A Batalha*, 95 (21<sup>st</sup> September 1925), p. 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> Unknown, “À sombra da burla: Os «ditadores» querem acabar com a corrupção, mantendo contudo o elemento corruptor e sendo eles próprios corrompidos”, *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d’A Batalha*, 108 (21 December<sup>st</sup> 1925), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Jens Ivo Engels, *Die Geschichte der Korruption...*, cit., p. 272-275.

<sup>46</sup> Anna Rothfuss, *Corruption in the Empire. Debates and Scandals between 1871 and 1914*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Annika Klein, *Korruption und Korruptionsskandale in der Weimarer Republik*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Gustave Rouanet, *Les complicités du Panama. Pages d’histoire sociale*, Paris 2, 1893, p. 9.

### Criticism of corruption and the construction of historical backwardness

One of the fascinating insights of the history of corruption is how strongly the corresponding debates were and still are linked to the production of historical self-images. We noted at the outset that a certain form of corruption critique is a child of modernity. One could even go further and justifiably claim that corruption debates have contributed quite significantly to the constitution of modernity as a pattern of order. In particular, modern notions of political and cultural “progressiveness” (or its opposite, backwardness) were and still are created in the guise of corruption. The Portuguese corruption debates in the First Republic fit seamlessly into a pan-European debate, in which the “South” has played and still plays a special role. In short, overcoming political corruption has been equated with modernisation since the reform debates of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Modern societies are characterised by a successful fight against bribery. Conversely, countries with a “corruption problem” are considered to be states where modernity has not yet taken hold. This attribution is still found in political journalism to this day.

In addition to this rather theoretical linking of the past, regressiveness and corruption, an empirical-geographical attribution also took place at the latest since the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The countries of the industrialised North considered themselves to be hardly corrupt any more, since they were modern, compared to the countries of the South. Interestingly, it did not remain with an external attribution, i.e. the view from the North to the South. Instead, important voices in the southern countries agreed with this representation. The Spanish *Regeneracionistas*, for example, combined their criticism of the corrupt cacique with the diagnosis that it stemmed from the pre-modern era. The whole of Spain was suffering from the fact that the country had not developed since the early modern period, they claimed<sup>49</sup>.

Similar debates can be found in Italy, where political representatives of the southern provinces described their own home regions as thoroughly corrupt, while the cities of the industrialised North conceived themselves as uncorrupted<sup>50</sup>. In the context of the Banca Romana scandal, one of the most

---

<sup>49</sup> Joaquín Costa y Martínez, *Oligarquía y caciquismo como la forma actual de gobierno en España. Urgencia y modo de cambiarla*, Madrid, Los Hijos de M. G. Hernandez, 1902; Manuel Azaña, “Caciquismo y democracia” in Manuel Azaña, *Obras completas*, Mexico, Ediciones Oasis, 1966, p. 471-474 (first published 1923).

<sup>50</sup> Sergio Marotta, *Corruzione politica e società napoletana. L'inquieta Saredo*, Napoli, La scuola di Pitagora, 2012; Alberto Mario Banti, “Retoriche e idiomi. L'antiparlamentarismo nell'Italia di fine Ottocento”, *Storica* 3 (1995), p. 17.

important whistleblowers stated that this corruption affair showed that the Italian people were backward and not yet ready for a liberal parliamentary system<sup>51</sup>.

The Portuguese debates were very similar to the self-descriptions from Spain and southern Italy. It was mainly anarchists and *Seareiros* who participated in the self-description of Portugal as a victim of backward conditions - this also corresponded to their image of history. Thus the *Seareiro* António Sérgio differentiated a “new spirit” from an “old” one, an “old politics” from a “new politics”, “men of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” from “men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. On the one hand, there are “as almas mortas, presas [...] à tirânica plutocracia do seu falso democratismo, ao individualismo negativista, [...], à sua gôrda burguesia, egoísta e scéptica”, on the other “o século XX, com [...] o democratismo *construtor*, [...] o amor da liberdade *racional e disciplinada*”<sup>52</sup>.

In particular, supporters of the Sidonio dictatorship used a historical perspective. Francisco Reis Santos claimed in 1918 that the Republic had failed because it had created modern structures but the country did not have a modern mentality. For him, corruption and oligarchy were an expression of the “vida velha”, the old, outdated yet still prevailing conditions in the country. A new morality was now finally to be enforced by means of the dictatorial powers of Sidonio Pais<sup>53</sup>. In the journal *Pela Grei* 1918, the later *Seareiros* also formulated the assessment that truly modern countries would effectively curb corruption and oligarchy, which was not the case in Portugal<sup>54</sup>.

For anarchist commentators, the widespread corruption in the Portuguese political system simply contradicted the historical state of humankind in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As an expression of despotism, it meant the domination of outdated political conditions, wrote José Maria Ferreira de Castro in 1926<sup>55</sup>.

More surprising than the anarchists’ view of history, however, is the contribution of conservative publicists to this debate. For them, corruption was not an equivalent of pre-modernity, but rather the consequence of a moral decline in the era of modernity, caused by the loss of importance of Catholicism. Corruption is thus also a work of the harmful influence of protestants, jews, atheists and anarchists. This is a rather rare description of the situation by international

---

<sup>51</sup> Napoleone Colajanni, *Banche e Parlamento. Fatti, discussioni e commenti*, Milano, Fratelli Treves Editori, 1893, p. 318.

<sup>52</sup> António Sérgio, “Vivos e Mortos”, cit., p. 1-2.

<sup>53</sup> Francisco Reis Santos, *A Situação Política...*, cit., p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> Unknown, “Da necessidade de as elites fazerem uma revolução pacífica”, *Pela Grei*, 4 (2<sup>nd</sup> October 1918), p. 193-196.

<sup>55</sup> José Maria Ferreira de Castro, “Indiferentismo que humilha: As deportações como afronta à nossa época e à nossa mentalidade”, *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d’A Batalha*, 110 (4<sup>th</sup> January 1926), p. 1-2.



standards<sup>56</sup>. However, there were other voices among the conservatives close to the widespread backwardness discourse. Although he too blamed the decline of religion for rampant corruption, Homem Christo claimed in 1915 that the Portuguese people were not yet ready for a progressive political system along the lines of Britain. Such a system would lead to disorder and corruption because of the backwardness of the national mentality<sup>57</sup>. Even if the conservative thus legitimises the preservation of older political forms, he cannot completely escape the dominant image of a backward population. Corruption here is at the same time a kind of consequence of modernisation, and not an expression of the old.

### Defence strategies?

How did the republicans, i.e. the political elite, who were mostly a target of the criticism, react to the accusations? This question is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, we have already shown that the republicans in the late monarchy had used precisely this accusation against the ruling system. It was now turned against themselves. Secondly, this point is interesting because we have to ask to what extent the ruling circles succeeded in avoiding a loss of prestige for the Republic. We will take a closer look at two affairs that belong to the prehistory of the coup of 1926, i.e. to the late period of the Republic.

We focus on the Banco Angola e Metrópole scandal and government efforts to re-regulate the tobacco monopoly in the country<sup>58</sup>. In the case of Banco Angola e Metrópole, a notorious fraudster named Artur Alves dos Reis played the central role. He managed to commission the printing of 200,000 Portuguese banknotes with forged papers, which ultimately amounted to large-scale counterfeiting. In the Portuguese press, this was attributed to government incompetence. In many cases, however, the authorities were even accused of corruption-driven complicity<sup>59</sup>. In the anarchist *Suplemento* of 14<sup>th</sup> December

---

<sup>56</sup> António de Carvalho, “A religião Catholica e a sua influência social”, *Lusitania*, 8 (1<sup>st</sup> August 1914), p. 518-525.

<sup>57</sup> Francisco Manuel Homem Christo, “Banditismo Politico”, *A Ideia Nacional*, 11 (21<sup>st</sup> April 1915), p. 344-349.

<sup>58</sup> Susana Sousa Carvalho, *Nationalism and Regime Overthrow in Early Twentieth Century Portugal*, PhD Thesis, London, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012, p. 330 (<http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/404/>, accessed at 2022.01.31).

<sup>59</sup> Henry Wigan, “The Effects of the 1925 Portuguese Bank Note Crisis” in *Economic History Working Papers (82/04)*. Department of Economic History, London School of Economics (2004), p. 47, (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/22338/1/WP82.pdf>, accessed at 2022.01.31).

1925, the first issue after the scandal was revealed, Prime Minister António Maria da Silva was attacked: He and Afonso Costa were partly responsible. The scandal proved what allegedly had been known for a long time: The country was in the hands of the bankers<sup>60</sup>. It is unclear whether da Silva was aware of the article in this newspaper. At least he did not react directly.

The situation changed only slightly in the context of the tobacco scandal in the spring of 1926. The background was a plan by the Minister of Finance Armando Marques Guedes. He wanted to shift the tobacco monopoly into state hands. This policy again gave rise to public accusations of corruption against the government.<sup>61</sup> As it was a legislative project, the matter was debated in both houses of parliament and the government had to explain itself. However, the reactions of the government representatives were rather monosyllabic. There was hardly any real defence strategy to be seen. Rather, cabinet members reacted with a declaration of integrity and with counter-polemics, if they spoke at all.

In the Senate, Da Silva dismissed the public accusation of corruption by accusing the critics of lacking civilisation: “corrupções, como lá fora se afirma numa linguagem imprópria de quem se diz civilizado, linguagem que representa uma falta de respeito pelo seu semelhante”<sup>62</sup>. Da Silva did not address who exactly was the author of this criticism. The defence strategy therefore remained vague.

A few weeks later, when the Finance Minister was accused of the bill in the Chamber of Deputies as an “arma de corrupção política”, he did not comment at all<sup>63</sup>. In the following session, this accusation was repeated. Again, no member of the government majority reacted, not even an ordinary MP (the Finance Minister did not attend the session)<sup>64</sup>.

The two cases show that the accusation of corruption did not lead to an orderly defence strategy on the part of the accused. Even in the particularly crisis-ridden final phase of the Republic, the allegation of corruption against the

---

<sup>60</sup> A voz que clama no deserto, “Carta ao Sr. António Maria da Silva sobre a teoria do saque e a higiene pública” in *Suplemento Literário e Ilustrado d’A Batalha*, 107 (December 14<sup>th</sup> 1925), p. 1-2.

<sup>61</sup> Susana Sousa Carvalho, *Nationalism and Regime Overthrow...*, cit., p. 330.

<sup>62</sup> República Portuguesa, *Diário do Senado*, Sessão N.º 47, 20 de Abril de 1926, p. 9, (<https://debates.parlamento.pt/catalogo/r1/cs/01/07/01/047/1926-04-20>, accessed at 2022.02.02).

<sup>63</sup> República Portuguesa, *Diário da Câmara dos Deputados*, Sessão N.º 82, 6 de Maio de 1926, p. 27, (<https://debates.parlamento.pt/catalogo/r1/cd/01/07/01/082/1926-05-06>, accessed at 2022.02.02).

<sup>64</sup> República Portuguesa, *Diário da Câmara dos Deputados*, Sessão N.º 83, 10 de Maio de 1926, p. 16-18, (<https://debates.parlamento.pt/catalogo/r1/cd/01/07/01/083/1926-05-10>, accessed at 2022.02.02).

ruling political elite remained almost unanswered. There were only occasional attempts to question the credibility of the critics in very general terms.

The reaction of the Portuguese republicans to the allegations of corruption resembles the helplessness of many liberal and democratic-minded politicians in other European countries at the same time. There were hardly any attempts to systematically deal with such criticism - in this respect, for example, the conditions in the German Weimar Republic were very similar to the situation in Portugal.<sup>65</sup> However, accusations of corruption are generally difficult to refute.

### **Conclusion**

Even if accusations of corruption in the First Republic were certainly not the decisive factor in its failure, they did contribute to the image of its weak legitimacy. We have seen that the critics and also some supporters of the Republic made them with different accents. We were also able to establish that the criticism of corruption in Portugal focused on the one hand on national peculiarities, such as above all the cacique system in the elections. On the other hand, however, the similarities with corruption debates in other European countries are particularly pronounced. The basic assumptions about the preconditions and effects of political corruption were already very similar throughout Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This concerns individual aspects such as the fear of plutocracy as a result of industrialisation, but also the widespread feeling in Southern Europe that it had not yet fully arrived in modernity. However, precisely this self-description proves its opposite: societies that discuss the state of their modernity are necessarily part of modernity. Anyhow, the republican regime did not manage to develop any systematic defence strategy. In a way, the intervention of the *Seareiros* can be interpreted as an attempt to make the republic better, and thus to defend it against the accusation of corruption. However, in essence, all they could think of was an attempt to remedy individual misconduct on the part of high political representatives by calling for more morality. As a consequence, this must lead to a deficit as long as scandals and affairs created the impression that there was no change of conduct among the elites.

---

<sup>65</sup> Annika Klein, *Korruption...*, cit.