

Episode 10: “Neo-imperialisms and information”

[mix of introductory sounds]

Luís Pinto [host]: *Estados do Tempo* (The States of the Times). Because the quality of information on neo-imperialisms is a basic necessity.

[music]

Luís Pinto: Welcome to the tenth episode of *Estados do Tempo*, brought to you by the Barometer for Information Quality and Communitas. Today’s topic is the news treatment of neo-imperialisms. With us is Sandra Fernandes.

Sandra Fernandes [guest]: We are facing a failure. The post–Cold War transition failed, that is, 1989–1991, which gave rise to a world in which, supposedly, a model prevailed, which is the liberal model in all its dimensions... That world is the one that failed.

Luís Pinto: On the other side, leading the conversation, is Luís Santos.

Luís Santos [moderator]: The ordinary citizen, who already has a distant relationship with technology, right? Most, I would say, almost all Portuguese people have a mobile phone, but no one really knows, I speak for myself here, how it actually works. We have a relationship with technology; we use technology, but we’re still distant from how it actually works.

Luís Pinto: Sandra Fernandes is Pro-Rector for International Cooperation at the University of Minho and Associate Professor with Aggregation in the Department of Political Science of the same university. She researches European geopolitical dynamics, international security, multilateralism, and EU–Russia relations, with a consolidated specialisation in the external action and international policy of Portugal, particularly in the European and Atlantic context.

Luís Santos is an Associate Professor of Communication Sciences at the University of Minho and vice-director of the Communication and Society Research Centre. He researches the transition of media to digital environments. He was a journalist for 10 years and worked at Jornal de Notícias, Rádio Press, TSF, Diário de Notícias, TVI and BBC World Service.

Luís Santos: In this podcast, we are going to discuss the theme of new imperialisms and information quality. And with us is Professor Sandra Fernandes. Welcome.

Sandra Fernandes: Thank you very much, Luís.

Luís Santos: The first question I ask is a general one, regarding the theme of new imperialisms. What has happened to the geostrategic situation and the balance of forces in the world in recent times that has created a permanent anxiety for almost everyone?

Sandra Fernandes: Big question, and one that, in fact, today runs through our lives, at home, in politics, in the major themes of society. What has happened? A transition took place, one that has now been confirmed, that is, the world we were used to, in terms of who the major players were, the spheres of influence, the major agendas, what it was possible to cooperate on and what was harder to cooperate on... All of that was turned upside down. In this new world we have to navigate, literally everything is more fluid. That is, it is increasingly difficult to understand, for example, who our friends are, with whom we can share common destinies and build a common future, and who, in fact, makes that construction harder. And that runs through everything. It is not just questions of war and peace; it is the planet we live on, the environment, human rights, an entire idea of social progress that, today, is being called into question precisely because of this transition, which means that what we thought was firmly established—for example, the European integration process, for example, multilateralism, that is, the idea that all States in the world, regardless of where they are, can come together to find common solutions to common problems... Health, environment, work, and the right to work. And all of this, today, is more complicated and is, in fact, being unravelled at a dizzying speed.

Luís Santos: But do those unravelling it want to stitch something new together? Or, shall we say, will the idea of the unravelling remain? Is this the state of things now?

Sandra Fernandes: It is a great responsibility for our generation, Luís. We are still young, for our children, certainly, but it is a great responsibility, because it demands an attitude. We are here, at the University of Minho, recording this podcast, at an institution that trains good journalists, good media professionals and scientists, which are, in my view, the two fundamental fields if we are to think about the world of tomorrow. And not to give up in the face of what? In the face of what is the title of this episode, imperialisms—that is, the idea that it would be preferable to return to modes of leadership in which force is superior to law, and in which the will of some overrides the will of many others. That is, a dismantling of democracy, also, in other words. And therefore, it is still possible for us to be active in that world that creates anxiety, because it destabilises us. Still, in fact it requires work here, heightened attention, first of all from scientists and journalists, because they are the ones who help us fight disinformation, and that disinformation today is central for those who want to unravel the established order that, in fact, brought, I believe, a reaffirmation of human rights, of living together, and of common solutions in an increasingly interdependent planet.

Therefore, this idea of closing in on ourselves, of closing borders, of returning to a national identity that excludes the other is, in fact, impossible in the world we live in. We are far too interdependent for that to happen.

Luís Santos: But we have, if we want, from the point of view of the major theories of international relations, we have had the return, perhaps, of discourses on neorealism, the so-called return of power. My question is: we see States reorganising into small nuclei, we see old associations becoming almost empty, and we see a desire to create new organisations. I am thinking, for example, of NATO and this recent effort by some European countries to find some understanding that could, in some way, exist in a post-NATO situation. These movements, on the one hand—the breaking up of things we thought were solid and the emergence of new ones—are typical of the end of empires. But will we still see a strong resurgence of new entities that can provide a place for the reaffirmation of multilateralism? I would start with a statement that I think aligns with what you just said: the failure. We are facing a failure. The post–Cold War transition failed, that is, 1989–1991, which gave rise to a world in which, supposedly, a model prevailed, which is the liberal model in all its dimensions... That world is the one that failed. We

can now see key moments there in retrospect. The way September 11, 2001 was handled, the Israel–Palestine issue, clearly, and the whole theme of the development gap between the Global North and the Global South, which came back in full force, especially in this century we are living in. And in a world in which all points of the planet see how things are lived in other parts of the planet, and capitalism is also propagandistic, right? Therefore, to own and to be rich is the propaganda of capitalism, the idea that the human being will be happy if they possess wealth; all of that meant that... the world ended up creating fractures and what I consider to be, a little bit, the development of a form of power of the less powerful. The weak today, in the world we live in, are powerful. Who are the weak? The oppressed, the forgotten, populations subjected to genocide. And therefore, it makes the exercise of State power increasingly difficult, that is, the direct relationship between a foreign policy, or a decision of a State, or development aid, if we want, or even a war, because they are all forms of action on the international stage... the use of any instrument of this nature and the result obtained does not exist, or is very indirect. On the contrary, if we observe, the use of force increasingly worsens problems instead of solving them. Look at Israel, look at Russia, now against Iran; therefore, the use of force. And that leads older generations, I would say, the generations of current major leaders, namely Trump, the 1980s, to perceive the world today with completely outdated lenses. That is, we will not be able to achieve a solution that establishes a more direct relationship between using an instrument to solve a problem and the solution to that problem. Oppressed populations, poor, without prospects for the future, are populations that tend to perpetuate violence in all possible forms. And when a leader comes along, whether in Africa or in the United States, the dynamics, although with different realities, but the dynamics themselves can be made by analogy... who says: I hold the truth and I have a solution, trust me, and the solution is simplistic... the human being is, by tendency, as we know, just look at the 20th century, permeable to that form of leadership. That is what we are observing. I would say that the return of imperialisms must be seen, of course, cautiously, right? Therefore, it is not imperialism as it was in the Roman period, the Ottoman Empire period; it is not that, right? It is neo-imperialism in the sense that there is a kind of return to a single truth about national identity and an attempt to achieve security at the expense of the neighbour.

Luís Santos: When we spoke earlier about information, there was talk of the need for greater trust in science, in scientific production, in information, but what is also perceived, at the same time, is that there is an almost deliberate strategy by some political actors to diminish the relevance of these areas, of the areas that produce knowledge, that disseminate quality

information, that disseminate knowledge. How is it possible to balance these things? How is it that, if I have States that actively promote a type of discourse with little attachment to truth, shall we say, how is it that, let us say, dispersed entities that do not exercise direct power, such as universities or journalism, or other civil society entities, manage to counter this? How is it done?

Sandra Fernandes: For me, having small children still, it is one of the great challenges of the world we live in today, and here I would perhaps add a third pillar to what we can do today so that the world does not simply happen to us, but so that we still have a project for a world that is not the one we don't want. And that is precisely education for citizenship and education for... well, it is very tiring. Today, a citizen has to be an expert in artificial intelligence, an expert in fact-checking, even though journalists' work is the work of scientists. In the extreme, a citizen today would have to understand what the media say, and, on the subject, what reliable media and science say. It is very complicated, and everyday life does not allow us, ordinary citizens, always to be this attentive.

But in fact, it is an education in distrust of what comes to us through social media. That is, above all, it is that: a capacity to cross-check information and not take as true something that reaches us. Moreover, we know that, in general, we now live in bubbles due to social media, and that the information that reaches us is usually already quite inclined towards our preferences. Therefore, we have confirmation bias in our opinions.

It is complicated, but, in fact, I think the third element is, in fact, education for citizenship, which also includes, obviously, tolerance, respect for the other, and contact with what is different from us, so that we can also develop that tolerance for what is different from us.

Luís Santos: Social media were mentioned and I return to the idea of new imperialisms, because nowadays, to the efforts to develop new imperialisms of States, can we properly add the imperialisms that are not States, the imperialisms that result, for example, from the domination of certain types of platforms over a certain environment, and I am talking about the communication environment, the information environment, can the so-called Big Tech also be thought of as an empire of the new times?

Sandra Fernandes: I completely agree. The power of the private sector, namely Big Tech, is immense not only because of the financial value it can generate, therefore, resources, which is greater than the GDP of Portugal and often multiplied many times over, and of other countries in the world, but also because most of them are outside the European space, and outside the European space, there is no regulation. And the question is: can it be regulated, that is, they have a very large extra-judicial capacity in their activities, that is, when we think about the model of society, clearly the decisions that these companies make, these companies, mega-companies take, have an influence on how we are, well, an organised society and what rights we think should be protected, that is, that balance between freedom and security is completely turned upside down, shall we say, out of control because of that.

I remember that, in my memory, I do not know if you agree, the moment when it became very clear the great capacity of... that is, it is like a State within a State, practically, of these companies... it was in Trump's presidential campaign, the first one, 2016. And when all the campaigns of trolls and that issue of digging into the emails of the Democrats, of the candidate Hillary, came to light, also the targeting of voters' social media accounts... all of this meant that, without needing to manipulate ballot papers, it is a much more unsettling manipulation, isn't it? Because the very... each of us is led to behave without even realising that we have been manipulated, in the end. And, for me, that was clearly a moment of great awareness of the role of these companies and then... around that time, there was Brexit as well, also a major scandal around the fact that this capacity for manipulation had been understood. Clearly, it is one of the challenges that should also concern us at this moment.

Luís Santos: In any case, in those situations mentioned, the case of Trump's first victory and also Brexit, which are perhaps emblematic... and there have already been smaller examples in the European context, for example, and there is also the case of Brazil, right? But my next question is this. In those cases, are media just the vehicle, just the territory? Could we be, with artificial intelligence—and now I bring in another new element—in a territory in which Big Tech has agency, that is, they are more than just the place where wrong things happen; they themselves have agency and can determine things?

Sandra Fernandes: I think it was very clear, for example, here in the crossing between artificial intelligence and media, the role that Elon Musk played in Trump's second campaign, even taking a ministerial position, until he fell out, but anyway, he did what he had to do, which was to close

one of the major agencies, one of the major ministries, shall we say, which was development aid, which he closed in July last year. Here we clearly understand, well, the complicity between capital and the exercise of power, which has always existed; these are not new things, and in fact, the United States, for example, is a country where lobbying, for example, has to be very transparent. But we have now reached a moment where I think there is much less clarity; the boundaries are much less clear. Starlink, therefore, the capacity to operate an internet signal, well, a strong and uninterrupted signal, was very important in Ukraine, especially; it still is, but it was fundamental in Ukrainian resistance. A threat by Elon Musk to have Starlink stop being used in that context carried enough weight; at that moment, it was around 2023, in the middle of the war. Therefore, we clearly have questions of public policy here; that is what we are talking about, which increasingly escape public logic and are in the hands of private actors. And that is worrying.

Luís Santos: Of a few private stakeholders.

Sandra Fernandes: Of a few private stakeholders, very powerful, and I would not say rich, because I think the scale of wealth is so great that an ordinary citizen finds it difficult to understand the size of that wealth.

Luís Santos: And speaking of the ordinary citizen... And the ordinary citizen who already has a distant relationship with technology, right? Most, I would say... almost all Portuguese people have a mobile phone, but no one really knows, I speak for myself here, how it actually works. We have a relationship with technology; we use technology, but we're still distant from how it actually works. But for most citizens, these movements, for example, of large artificial intelligence companies accessing data from defence ministries, health ministries, of various countries, including European countries... is there a perception of risk? That is, do we all have some perception close to the truth about the risk being run?

Sandra Fernandes: You are talking about the ordinary citizen, right?

Luís Santos: Exactly.

Sandra Fernandes: Because at an institutional level, even at the University of Minho, for example, there is awareness, there is work that is done, even to adopt the recommendations that we have to adopt, but also in the sense of trying to create barriers, right? And some protection.

I think that here, European countries also have different sensitivities depending on where they stand. I, who have visited many Baltic states, for example, on the front line bordering Russia, for many years now, clearly have a very conscious awareness of internet and social media hygiene... it is very conscious. I mean, something as simple as having two-factor authentication on Gmail, for example. I'd never even heard of it before, and it was only in those countries that I came across it. I do not think so; we do not really do... And even having awareness, I mean, it is convenient; smartphones are convenient, they are an element... We have everything on the phone. Nowadays we have the camera, the photos, social media, email, internet searches, applications, even for civil activities, right? Civic ones, sorry. Therefore, I think it is difficult today... It is a great convenience, right? And therefore, I think it is only very occasionally that we become aware of how exposed we are. I can even share something here. As you know, I specialise in Russia, right? So... And I have some public exposure on the subject. And I can tell you that since that greater public exposure on the subject, very strange things have been happening on my mobile phone. And it is not paranoia, or anything. Therefore, I, personally, have the same awareness that it is possible to access the mobile phone for certain purposes from outside.

Luís Santos: Well... We are not going to talk about mobile phone access because that would be a whole other story, which would involve countries even outside the European or North American context and which have extraordinary technologies to do that kind of thing.

Sandra Fernandes: Yes, China, not to mention it, right?

Luís Santos: Exactly, for example. But coming back to questions of... or rather, thinking that we have weakened States due to numerous circumstances, many of them linked to also weakened economies. And, on the other hand, we have these phenomena of increasing power of certain

types of non-elected agents, the existence of a very poorly regulated communication space. How can we somehow, effectively, interfere in this? Because all of this seems bigger than each of us, and it certainly is, but how do we interfere with it? How do we, at our scale, interfere with it?

Sandra Fernandes: Perhaps to be able to answer in a slightly more practical way, shall we say, not so abstractly, I would perhaps bring it then to our scale, to our reality, Luís, which is Portugal. We are in Portugal. Portugal is a small country that thinks of itself as a medium country. It has reason to think of itself as a medium country because, in terms of its capacity to act in international politics, it has a capacity very much above its real size, population, GDP, well, other dimensions in which material power can also be assessed. Still, it actually has a much greater power than this. It has to do with its history, its engagement in the international sphere, and its democratic history since the April Revolution. So what can we do? Not give up on seeking people; when I say people, I mean organised societies, but not only. I also see the role of the university as fundamental in these matters. The relationships we have transnationally, which do not need to go through the State, although the State obviously has a supervisory role here, are very important because with that we create platforms of dialogue, of knowledge, that allow us to have a voice, to act, precisely, to move away from that idea that we are alone and perhaps isolated. Therefore, it is not giving up on investing in dialogue and cooperation at whatever level, because I think, well, using an extremely common expression, talking is how we understand each other, right? And if we stop talking to the other, including the other with whom we disagree, in fact it can only get worse, right? We can only close ourselves into worlds that cannot talk to each other, which makes no sense, doesn't it? In a country where we are all human and share a planet, and scientific evidence is there to show that it is a shared responsibility, because there is a danger here, right? For our ways of life as we know them today.

Luís Santos: Fragmenting power. Organisation, let us say, from the ground up. Is that the answer, that is, people in their groups, in their areas of knowledge, understanding each other outside the agreements that may exist between States and the agreements that may exist between transnational organisations. Could that be part of the path?

Sandra Fernandes: I... not quite. Of course, that has to happen, because there has to be construction of knowledge and positioning, but it is in the sense of, on the contrary, opening up,

right? Always trying to have doors open and never closed and not giving up, obviously, on our governments having that attitude of greater openness instead of closure, but also the responsibility of society to do so with neighbours next door, within the country, outside the country.

Luís Santos: Very well, we reach the end of this *Estados do Tempo*, number 10. Sandra Fernandes, thank you very much.

Sandra Fernandes: Thank you very much.

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Luís Pinto: This was the June 2026 *Estados do Tempo*, chapter 10, which featured recording, editing and post-production by Pedro Gaspar; moderation was conducted by Luís Santos and the guest was, this time, Sandra Fernandes. Curation is by Tiago Estevão, production by Inês Mendes and presentation by Luís Pinto. Thank you for being with us, and see you in the next episode of *Estados do Tempo*.

[closing music]