

Paquette, Gabriel. *Imperial Portugal in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions. The Luso-Brazilian World, c. 1770-1850.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-107-02897-5.

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The history of the Portuguese Empire never ceases to surprise us. Established explanatory paradigms and interpretive generalizations are never exempt from the findings of thorough documentary research undertaken in Luso-Brazilian archives and the detailed analysis of their historical files.

This is the challenge faced by Gabriel Paquette when discussing the different unexpected events that took place in the Portuguese Empire in the *Age of Atlantic Revolutions*. Adopting a periodization that is based on the revolutionary processes of the eighteenth century is not a recent method, for this was the time when imperial institutions, networks formed by individuals with common economic and political interests, and trade circuits that had linked both sides of the Atlantic during the Modern period, were replaced by other institutional arrangements.

But how can the Portuguese scenario help us understand a key period in the emergence of the contemporary world and independent American nations?

This starting point proved to be critical for the study undertaken by R.R. Palmer: *The Age of Democratic Revolution*.² A seminal work, Palmer's book was an invaluable contribution that abandoned a nationalistic and singular interpretation in favor of a comparative approach, based on transnational processes. Instead of multiple "exceptional" and "unique" paths creating new nations, the revolutionary model for independence in North America and pre-Bonapartist revolutionary France was considered the interpretive parameter for the break-up of colonial empires and for the formation of new nation states.

Here, Palmer's assumptions are the subject of Paquette's approach. One example is that there was a single possibility for the direction that Modernity took, propagating

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² Palmer (1954), Palmer (1959-64).

enlightened ideas from a central European hub to its peripheries, mimicking the political discourse from the Europe of the Enlightenment throughout the Americas.³

As far as the Portuguese Empire is concerned, the application of the “Age of Revolution” approach still presents two drawbacks: firstly, the temptation to undervalue reformist efforts sponsored by the Portuguese Crown during the last decades of the eighteenth century—which were effective in creating new ties of loyalty between Lisbon and the colonial elites, easing tensions and allowing for a period of great prosperity in America.⁴

The existing historiography is thorough in its reconstruction of the enlightened reformism commanded from Lisbon and in discussing the difficulties of our independence process. Paquette skillfully masters that bibliography, and he chooses a side as well. Furthermore, some of the insights he produces in the book recapture his painstaking research work on Spanish Reformism under the reign of the Bourbon dynasty. Common dilemmas are the leitmotif for a perspective that draws Lisbon and Madrid closer together in the battle to bring about prosperity in their empires: the impact of their imperial rivalry on their policies during most of the eighteenth century; the importance of legal ideas, especially *regalism*, for understanding a modern monarchy and its governance; the role of the Church and the corporatism of the Old Regime in the colonies; the actions performed by colonial administrators in order to ascertain the feasibility of reforms; and, finally, the colonial elites’ commitment to this process.⁵

Paquette then tackles the Portuguese Crown policy to establish closer links between the colonial elites in the key period that ran from the end of Pombal’s governance (1777) until the French occupation of the Iberian Peninsula (1807–1808). Not only in his selection, but also in his argument, there is an evident connection with the work published by the British historian Kenneth Maxwell.⁶ The “co-opting” of young Luso-Brazilian intellectuals from the University of Coimbra to serve the Crown overseas became the state’s strategy. These individuals would later work in favor of an increased control from

³ In previous works, Paquette himself (2013b) had already pointed out the misconception behind this argument. We cannot consistently believe that there was just one single European Enlightenment, let alone homogenize its impacts on the “periphery” of the European world.

⁴ Here, the criticism also points towards Jonathan Israel’s argument about the “moderate” Enlightenment. According to Israel (2010), moderate policies suggested by the political agents of the Old Regime were “inappropriate” and were unable to hold back the process that inevitably led to the independence of the American colonies.

⁵ Cf. Paquette (2008). In the case of the Spanish Empire, Regina Grafe (2012) begins with a similar perspective, and comes to a different conclusion: the decentralization that the reforms brought all across its vast empire was what held back Madrid’s efforts to modernize the colonies. High transport costs, legal barriers to trade, and the local elites’ wish to support their positions of power were the major inconveniences of the Bourbon Reforms.

⁶ Maxwell (1968), Maxwell (1973) and Maxwell (1995).

Lisbon at the administrative level and defended the consolidation of a bureaucracy that was able to serve several Portuguese dominions. The objectives were well-defined: to prevent the decline of the Empire and, once again, to stimulate economic prosperity in the colonies through an “international division of labor” and by offering these territories greater independence. Political economy was the instrument that was used to achieve these aims.⁷

The second criticism of R.R. Palmer’s model lies in the acknowledgement of an ongoing complex chain of interests and affinities, which persisted among the ex-colonies and their old metropolises, even after greater political freedom had been achieved. This is not new to Brazilian historiography: Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Maria Odila da Silva Dias had already pointed out the legacy and the continuity of Portuguese institutions in independent Brazil.⁸

Following this recognition, Paquette emphasizes that “(...) Brazil’s independence was a highly contingent, generally unsought, and somewhat undesirable break from the previous half-century’s trajectory” (2), and for many of his contemporaries “(...) the end of empire proved to be a rude, unanticipated shock, an event which legions of Crown officials, nobles, clerics, and merchants tried to forestall, if not prevent entirely, as they watched the crumbling of imperial structures across the Atlantic World. With the benefit of hindsight, they sought to divert the river of History and believed that they had engineered this feat, forcing it to flow away from revolution and toward regeneration and reform” (5).

To better understand the independence process, Paquette uses the notion of “Late Atlantic History.”⁹ By extending the chronological period of his research to a time beyond Brazilian Independence (1822) and its acknowledgement by Portugal (1825), he is able to tackle two core dilemmas for the Empires’ destinies formed on both sides of the Atlantic: the question of absence and the effects of such detachment on the individuals, institutions and states that emerged after the independence process.

Seen from this perspective, the Portuguese Empire is a source of many interesting stories. What was the impact of Brazilian independence on the economic and political interests established in Portugal? Could Brazilian sovereignty be exercised without any sort

⁷ Cardoso (2001).

⁸ Buarque de Holanda (1962) and Silva Dias (2005). More recently, Jeremy Adelman suggested that the “Revolution did not begin as secessionist episodes... much more common in the complex breakdown was the exploration of models of re-accommodating colonies into imperial formations, a groping for an arrangement that would stabilize, not dissolve empires.” Adelman (2006), 5–8.

⁹ Rothschild (2011), Brown and Paquette (2013).

of influence from its ex-Metropolis? The relationship between the Courts in Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon was much more complex than one could imagine.¹⁰

The explanation is associated with the way in which the colony consolidated its institutions and its sovereignty after independence—by maintaining the imperial model and the monarch who was next in the line of succession to the Portuguese throne. The economic feasibility of the Empire of Brazil led to the creation of ties with the Portuguese enclaves on the African coast, which were the source of slave labor for the great Brazilian agriculture. As for the prosperity of the Portuguese economy, especially its emerging industry, this may have been condemned by the loss of the Brazilian market. What was left was the decision to search for new horizons in Africa.

An interesting methodological aspect is Paquette's attempt to reconstitute individual trajectories. In this context, the empire's dissolution may be directly associated with the idiosyncrasies of its leaders, with their enormous influence and political power. For instance, Prince Dom Pedro was a major figure in this history. While still in Rio de Janeiro, he planned the outcome of the succession to the throne in Lisbon. In Europe, the shadow of the political debate expected a new alliance between the Atlantic Crowns of the Braganza dynasty.

The maintenance of the imperial model by the newly-independent Brazil led to another unusual consequence: contrary to common sense, the ideological political discourse of legality crossed the Atlantic, but from America to Europe. During the political crisis of *Miguelism*, Dom Pedro was not only converted from emperor to a warrior and the king of freedom, but he also took with him the Constitution that had been approved in Brazil.

Paquette had already studied the influence of the Brazilian legal discourse in the Portuguese Constitution of 1826.¹¹ But here we can observe its use in the context of the fresh links established between political groups and institutions after the civil war, which transformed brothers into sworn enemies.

The great value of *Imperial Portugal in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions* is that it presents an interpretation of the imperial outcome based upon a more extensive reading, clarifying nationalistic perspectives and interpretations that regarded Brazilian independence as the obvious result of an inevitable process. This is a book that has much to add to the current Luso-Brazilian historiography, for it reminds us that, ultimately, our societies and institutions shared a common history that has lasted longer than the Portuguese Atlantic Empire itself.

¹⁰ Paquette (2013c).

¹¹ Paquette (2011).

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