Ernestine Carreira & Idelette Muzart-Fonseca dos Santos, Éclats d’empire, du Brésil à Macao

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REFERENCES


1 The attentive reader can find gems here, but is obliged to hunt through much dross to do so. The chapters vary enormously in analytical breadth and empirical novelty, and do not come together as a coherent whole. Indeed, 'fragments' is a good title for an uneven collection, to which the editors' introduction and conclusion adds little or nothing. There are four practical and useful guides to archives (Aix, Nantes, Lisbon, and Macao), but they break the analytical flow, and should have been placed at the end. The book actually ends with an exhibition catalogue and a set of illustrations, a luxury in this age of close control of printing costs, whereas an index would have been preferable.

2 Two opening chapters, by Bethencourt and Mattoso, offer stimulating theoretical perspectives. Francisco Bethencourt argues provocatively that the administrative chaos prevailing in the Portuguese empire, in marked contrast to that of Spain, was a great strength. Portugal's improvisation and pragmatism allowed for great flexibility, for example in precociously withdrawing from all Moroccan forts except Tangier and Mazagão, a story which Bethencourt has rightly rescued from oblivion. He also draws attention to the substantial imperial revival from around 1740, which has been
particularly neglected in the Old World colonies. Indeed the emphasis on the resilience of
the Asian possessions long after 1600 is one of the most useful aspects of this chapter.
Another is Bethencourt’s interest in local elites working for the Portuguese, particularly
in terms of Andersonian 'administrative pilgrimages' fashioning ideas. Katia de Queirós
Mattoso follows on strongly, stressing that historians have all too often projected
backwards notions of 'proto-nationalism,' on the basis of insufficient evidence. She
explores identities across the Atlantic, demonstrating fluctuating allegiances to Christian,
European, Iberian, dynastic, anti-Semitic, and racial stereotypes.

There are several substantial empirical contributions to the field, notably by Carreira,
Gadenne, Rolland, and Bonilla. Ernestine Carreira’s long and fascinating chapter, on ship-
building in the Indian Praças do Norte, truly breaks new ground. The Portuguese were
able to exploit teak reserves and Indian artisanal and financial skills to maintain the
backbone of empire, thus providing a crucial practical reason for the post-1600 resilience
of Portuguese Asia. Hopefully, this work will stimulate more research on the Gujarati
possessions of Portugal, balancing a long obsession with Goa. Clotilde Gadenne’s chapter
on Amapá and French Guyana is similarly novel in terms of subject matter, although she
misses the crucial French interest in Amazonian cocoa, embodied by the Breton firm of
Denis Crouan et Compagnie. She also needed to explore French relations with Portuguese
traders and Amerindians more fully. Denis Rolland shows how the Vargas regime in
Brazil played a clever game with intellectuals in the 1940s, effectively manipulating them
through relative tolerance. Oiara Bonilla’s piece on the Karajá Amerindians is perhaps
more anthropology than history, but it raises the important and neglected point that
assimilation can also occur from Western to indigenous culture.

Other offerings in this rambling collection are weaker. Maria Fernanda Baptista Bicalho
does not seem to go beyond existing works on municipal councils. Natália Umbelino fails
to add anything to the question of Mozambique labourers in São Tomé, blithely ignoring
extensive publications in English on this subject. António Martins do Vale rehearses the
well-known padroado dispute, relating it to French missions in Macao. Milton Marques
Júnior looks once again at Amerindian influences in Portuguese, and yet does not develop
a stray remark on the fascinating question of Portuguese enslaved by Amerindians.
Idelette Muzart-Fonseca dos Santos makes a literary, rather than a historical, survey of
Moorish themes, failing to gloss suggestive remarks on the grossly under-researched
topic of white Muslim slaves in the Portuguese world. Tânia Risério de Almeida Gandon’s
chapter on Afro-Bahian cuisine is slight and unhistorical. This final selection of chapters
should probably have been left out of the published volume, breaking with the
Continental European habit of publishing everything served up at a conference.