

***Pursuing Empire: Brazilians, The Dutch and the Portuguese  
in Brazil and the South Atlantic, c.1620-1660***

Cátia A.P. Antunes, ed.  
(Leiden: Brill, 2023)  
[ISBN. 9789004528468]

STUART B. SCHWARTZ  
Yale University

Having deconstructed the nation-state as the basis for historical analysis, it is no surprise that historians have turned to empires as the next targets for a healthy revisionism. This new approach emphasises the porous boundaries of empires, their interactions, the imperial failures at mercantilist exclusivity, and the existence of persistent cross-imperial commercial ties, even during periods of hostility. No group of scholars has done this revision better than the early modern historians of trade and commerce whose studies of imperial interaction, cross-cultural and cross-religious contact, and the groups and individuals involved in these activities has renovated our vision of early modern empires, and perhaps the rise of the fiscal-military state as well. One of the foremost of these scholars has been Cátia Antunes, the editor of this excellent volume which provides a series of essays on Dutch activity in the South Atlantic from the late sixteenth century to about 1660, but with a concentration on the conquest and occupation of Brazil (1630–1654). The story is by necessity complex because the Dutch republic was at first in the sixteenth century a commercial partner with Portugal, then after 1581, a potential enemy of Habsburg Portugal until in 1641 it separated from the Iberian Habsburg monarchy. In that year, the Dutch Republic and Portugal became allies and commercial partners, but only in Europe, while the two countries remained competitors for colonies and commerce in Brazil, West Africa, and Asia.

With the contributions of ten other scholars, Antunes provides an excellent short introductory essay that places the chapters in context, and a discussion of the principal lines of inquiry that have characterised the study of the southern Atlantic system. Her emphasis on the development of commodity chains in the southern Atlantic and the involvement of Africans and people of African origin, or creole populations in the commercial and maritime activities provides the reader with a narrative that goes beyond a Eurocentric description of colonial trade. The volume's inclusion of chapters on

Cromohs (Cyber Review of Modern Historiography), ISSN 1123-7023, 26/2023

© 2023 The Authors. This is an open access article published by Firenze University Press under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

DOI: 10.36253/cromohs-14928

everyday life in the Brazilian colony deviates from the usual focus on government institutions and commerce, and is a welcome departure from the traditional historiography.

Imperial politics, however, is not forgotten. Francisco Bethencourt presents a thoughtful comparison of the Iberian and non-Iberian empires that seeks to demonstrate their differences. For example, the Iberian construction of ecclesiastical frameworks that paralleled secular government contrasted with the English and Dutch colonies, where these structures were mostly absent. Bethencourt admits certain similarities between the Iberian and northern European colonies, but he is also aware that it is difficult to discern if what is really at stake is not difference or similarity, rather than degree or chronology. For example, the reader might ask if Bethencourt's assertion that the Portuguese seignorial system with its donatarial grants in Madeira, Angola, and Brazil was really distinct from the 'capitalist trade-based system of the British North Atlantic' (15)? Such a description would have been surprising to proprietaries like the Duke of York, William Penn in Pennsylvania, and the Calvert family in Maryland who held powers very similar to the Portuguese grantees of the previous century. Ultimately, both the Portuguese and the English crowns (and the French for that matter) abandoned this form of privatisation of colonial development in favour of royal authority, or royally authorised companies, so while the timing was distinct, this technique of settlement shared many elements in common, and its ultimate suppression was similar.

Bethencourt is more convincing in his emphasis on inter-imperial adaptability of policies and exchange of techniques of rule and in the difference between the Portuguese and Dutch commercial strategies and the differences in emigration to their colonies which always placed the Dutch at a disadvantage. He concludes, however, by emphasising the effectiveness of the Portuguese Roman Catholic missionaries as a key to Portuguese success in Brazil. Still, the existence of various Tupi conversions to Calvinism, and the successful Dutch alliances with Tupi speakers and Tapuyas in Brazil as well as with indigenous peoples in New Netherlands as has been shown by Mark Meuwesse's *Brothers in Arms* (2012) leaves room for doubt that this explanation is sufficient to account for Dutch failure in Brazil.

In another chapter on politics, José Manuel Santos Pérez looks at how Spanish and Portuguese imperial integration took place. He discusses the specific political adjustments made in Hapsburg Brazil to assure that it would serve as a bulwark protecting the flow of silver from Perú to Spain, and by exploring Brazil's own potential to also become a source of mineral wealth. The chapter reveals, however, that despite early attempts by Philip II and Philip III to make Portuguese Brazil more like the Spanish Indies, and the efforts of king Philip IV to make Brazil profitable by eliminating contraband and corruption, or by discovering new mines, Brazil's defence and development remained a costly endeavour

even before the Dutch occupation of Pernambuco in 1630, and was especially so thereafter.

The heart of the volume are the three chapters on commercial relations between Portugal and the United Provinces. Filipa Ribeiro da Silva draws on the extensive literature on Dutch maritime activity. She emphasises not imperial rivalries, nor the actions of the Dutch East and West India Companies, but instead focuses on the often trans-imperial and cross-religious collaboration of private merchants and firms involved in financing, shipping, and contracting with the state monopolies in the colonial trades. Drawing on her own research on West Africa and the extensive literature on the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in Brazil and the Caribbean, she demonstrates how private merchants worked out strategies of collaboration with, or evasion from, the state monopoly, often by collaboration between Dutch Calvinist merchants, Portuguese Sephardi and Iberian Catholic merchants in arrangements that ignored religious and ethnic differences.

Those relationships are made clear in the two other essays on commerce. Antunes's own chapter covers much of the same period and reaches similar conclusions while focusing specifically on Brazil from the end of the 'Twelve Years' Truce (1609–1621) between the Dutch Republic and Hapsburg Spain to the reestablishment of an independent Portugal in 1668. She emphasises, however, that the Dutch had been involved in a Brazil trade well before Portugal became part of the Iberian Hapsburg monarchy, and they continued to do so after the WIC surrendered its colony in Brazil in 1654. This trade was often done with cross-religious partnerships or collaboration between Jews and Christians. Christopher Ebert and Thiago Krause follow up with a chapter on the post-1654 period when state sponsored monopolies in both the United Provinces and Portugal sought to control that trade and much contraband which increasingly involved Brazilian gold and tobacco. This illegal commerce went to Dutch factories and settlements on the Mina coast in West Africa. Much of Dutch trade with Brazil remained indirect through Portugal, but still profitable because both countries found it, and the trade of Portuguese salt for Baltic commodities carried by the Dutch, profitable. As a group the chapters on commerce drive home their common emphasis on the cross-imperial trade and the important role of non-state participants who often seemed to ignore religious and national origin differences.

As a unit the chapters on everyday life are less cohesive in their conclusions. Anne B. McGinness examines the much-touted religious tolerance of Dutch Brazil where demography forced the Dutch to make concession to the Portuguese Roman Catholics and where Jews also enjoyed religious freedom. While she holds that the Dutch Reformed Church ministers were more interested in converting Catholics than native peoples, she still presents enough evidence of Dutch missionary activity and conversions of the Tupi to call into question Bethencourt's previous explanation of the Dutch comparative failure in that regard. Her argument that increasing restrictions on Catholics after 1642 made

religion a principal cause of the rebellion against Dutch control is based on the chronicles of the Portuguese resistance written mostly by churchmen. The fact that the price of sugar was declining after 1638, that many of the planters, and especially the leaders of the revolt, were deeply indebted to the WIC and were encouraged to revolt by the new Portuguese king all suggest a possible alternative explanation to the focus on religious conflict.

Bruno Romero Ferreira Miranda's chapter on the daily life of soldiers employed by the WIC draws on his extensive research on the military history of the period, but also incorporates government reports and published as well as unpublished journals and diaries kept by the soldiers themselves about their lives. In general, pay was late, food was scarce, many sought additional employment to improve their conditions, and while the WIC maintained a defined set of military regulations, these were more honoured by evasion or exception than by compliance. Conditions got worse over time as the WIC found that the Brazilian colony became increasingly unprofitable as the Portuguese revolt progressed after 1645 and other sources of sugar developed in the Caribbean. The soldiers employed were a motley collection of people of different national origins—Dutch, Germans, Scandinavians, French, mestiços, and Indians. Promotion depended on personal ties and patronage. Those who did best had non-military artisan skills—carpentry, bricklaying, construction—that were in demand by civil society.

Marco Antônio Nunes da Silva also examines daily life in Dutch Brazil, but turns to the documentation provided by the Lisbon Inquisition, and therefore to deviance from orthodox Catholic behaviour, the presence of Jews in the colony, and to Portuguese interactions with the Dutch Calvinist clergy and laity. After a lengthy and somewhat superfluous introduction on the role of central power in the Portuguese empire versus that of local authority, the author turns to the issues of the more common interactions of Catholics, Jews, and Calvinists. Nunes da Silva presents some interesting details from Inquisitorial trials, and concentrates on interfaith relations like marriages, business arrangements, and conversions, but offers no general conclusion. Unlike McGinness, he gives little attention to the emphasis on religious differences and conflict by the leaders during the rebellion, or by the Portuguese clerical authors who later chronicled it as a justification of the Portuguese revolt in 1645.

The volume concludes with an informative epilogue by Amélia Polónia that summarises each chapter and seeks to place its content within the framework of the book as well as within the rich historiography of early modern empires. Her up-to-date bibliographic references are a guide to readers, and her essay could serve as either an introduction or a review of this book which demonstrates the ways in which the previous histories of early modern state-controlled European imperial expansion, studied empire by empire, is being creatively rethought with a new emphasis on individuals, groups and social sectors that ignored or surmounted imperial, religious, and ethnic boundaries.