Book Reviews


Is it possible that a researcher, interested in the historiography of the European expansion during the early modern period (1500-1800), can contribute to the discipline in the first decade of the twenty-first century without the fear of being labeled a Euro-centrist, regionalist, nationalist, or being otherwise branded? Although I certainly do not suggest that all debates, especially as to how one should approach history, have come to an end, one should surely aspire to a debate that is less based on such dichotomies as it is almost half a century since the majority of the erstwhile colonies have become independent.

Of course, matters of methodology can be complicated. Issues regarding the right way to approach history or the importance of looking at the larger picture in contrast to a micro-oriented outlook are not easy to settle. Ideological problems are even more complex. In this context, it is noteworthy that the present book affirms that “[t]he need to rewrite the history of Portuguese expansion stems from our refusal to accept particular ideological or nationalistic perspectives; our objective is to disrupt those encrusted layers of retrograde historiography that are still common today” (“Introduction,” p. 9). The introductory chapter goes on to illustrate that the contributors to this volume prefer to look at the larger picture rather than to focus on regional aspects and study developments within a relatively longer time frame. It is further asserted that this book constitutes a conscious attempt to move away from an anti-Eurocentric rhetoric; however, the role of regional factors has not been ignored. Does this mean that no cognizance is taken of past historiography, especially the works written in the emotionally charged period of the 1960s to 1980s? This is not the case, however, as the editors inform us that this book aims to “fully engage with the issues arising from the institutionalization of the historiographical traditions and the ideological interpretations to which the colonial and...
imperial past of European empires, in general, and the Portuguese empire, in particular, has been put” (pp. 9-11). As one reads the book, especially chapter 7, “Political Configurations and Local Powers” written by Francisco Bethencourt, chapter 1, “The Economy of the Portuguese Empire” by Stuart B. Schwartz, chapter 2, “Costs and Financial Trends in the Portuguese Empire” by Jorge M. Pedreira, and chapter 10 by Diogo Ramada Curto entitled “Portuguese Imperial and Colonial Culture,” the meaning of this aforementioned “interpretation” starts to become clear.

So what does this really mean? Can the reader of this book expect a very stylized version of history from the perspective of some particular school of thought which allows little space for individual and innovative thought? Such fears are, however, unwarranted. What one gets are fourteen well thought out chapters, which have been divided into four sections, namely; (a) Economics and Society, (b) Politics and Institutions, (c) The Cultural World, and (d) The Comparative Dimension.

Is it possible to disagree with the contributors on “facts” and their interpretations? Yes, on many counts. For example, I do not like to look at history from a general panoramic perspective. Preferences for a micro or macro level, I feel, are often a function of what kind of issues one is interested in. Two different individuals could view a chapter that covers a lot of ground (spatially as well as temporally) either as a good overview or as too sketchy depending on the kind of questions they are asking. But disagreement with the authors’ viewpoints does not mean that the book is unworthy of one’s attention. On the contrary, it has a lot to offer to a wide variety of readers.

One way of looking at the work would be as an introduction to the field, albeit a comprehensive one with a wide view on a great variety of aspects of the Portuguese expansion in the early modern period. Obviously, many issues and geographical areas (such as Southeast Asia) are not covered in as much detail as one would like to see, but that would be true for most collections that try to cover as much ground as has been covered in this book. The editors are quite aware of this matter and do not claim to have put together an exhaustive book; however, what is on offer here is a treasure mine for someone just starting in the field.

For those who are already familiar with the subject, especially the regional specialists, the book offers a thorough overview of “other” areas over a long period of time and also includes information on related subjects. For example, an economic historian mainly interested in the Portuguese presence in Brazil, who wishes to get some background information