

POLITICS AND BUSINESS IN SÃO PAULO: FROM THE OPENING OF THE PORTS TO THE INDEPENDENCE OF BRAZIL (1808-1822)

Posted on 10 Ottobre 2013 by Storia e Futuro



Categories: [Agenda](#), [Numero 30 - Laboratorio](#), [Numero 30 - Novembre 2012](#), [Numero 30 - Rubriche](#)

Tags: [Brazil](#), [History of Portugal](#), [House of Braganza](#), [Rio de Janeiro](#), [Royal Decree](#), [São Paulo](#)



di Renato de Mattos

Abstract

This article shows some of the issues addressed in our doctoral thesis on the transformations that were observed in the mercantile and social relationships in the capitania of São Paulo after the Portuguese Royal Family came to Rio de Janeiro. Based on the case of São Paulo, Brazil, we shall problematise the wider repercussions of the opening of the Brazilian ports as implemented by the Royal Decree of 28 January 1808, as also the ways in which it was adopted, showing to what extent this decision was effectively a landmark from social and economic standpoint in the centre and South of the colony, whether in terms of the relationships between the Portuguese in Europe and in Brazil, whether in terms of the associations with British interests.

The opening of Brazilian Ports (1808): interpretations and approaches

In many ways, the year 1808 was interpreted by Latin American and also by European authors as an extremely important historical milestone. The relevance of this date emerges as a confluence point in the studies of the processes of independence in Portuguese and Spanish America, as also the social and political repercussions observed in Europe during the unfolding of the Napoleonic Wars. For the historians who have dedicated themselves to the analysis of the Portuguese Empire in the first decades of the 19th Century, 1808 includes a set of "unique transformations that are absolutely singular within the historical process of the relations which until then had been maintained with the European metropolis and its ultramarine territories" (Gouvêa 2009, 394).

With the resumption of the conflicts between France and England, the Portuguese monarchy is faced with an impasse: on the one hand, the growing pressure for the England to take part in the continental blockage of Napoleon's ships in 1806, which required the closing of the port to British ships under threat from an invasion by the enemy revolutionary troops; on the other hand, if the French demands were accepted, Portugal would break relations with its traditional ally, running the risk of having its colonies attacked by the English fleet.

After months of effort by the Portuguese diplomatic corps in a move to preserve the neutrality of the Iberian kingdom, the Prince Regent, Dom João, in October 1807 decided to transfer the Royal Family and its Court to the city of Rio de Janeiro. Made feasible thanks to the support of England, who agreed to escort the Lusitanian fleet out to the tropics, the solution adopted by the Portuguese regent led to the transfer of over 10 thousand people, including members of the House of Braganza, members of the nobility and Royal employees with their riches, as well as official documents, libraries, and all the bureaucratic setup needed to reorganise the monarchy on American soil.

According to a significant part of the historiography produced about this issue, the inversion of roles between the European kingdom and the colony amounted to an effective breakaway from the period in which Brazil was largely attached to its colonist country through the mechanisms of operation of the "colonial system". According to Caio Prado, the importance of this episode resides in the excellent character which the presence of the Royal Family in Portuguese America imparted on the process towards Brazilian Independence, at the colonist government itself was establishing the foundations of autonomy by "abolishing, one by one, the old gears of colonial administration, with these being replaced by others, already characteristic of a sovereign nation" (Prado 1933, 43).

According to the author, the suspension of the Brazilian colonial statute resulted from the decision taken by the Portuguese Prince Regent himself, on implementing the "opening of the ports to friendly nations" on 28 January 1808. In its terms, the decree signed by Dom João in his brief passage through Bahia made it acceptable in Brazilian Customs to have any goods, financial assets or merchandise transported in foreign ships from the Powers or in ships of the Portuguese vassals.

In this regard, moving on to the examination of the meanings of the opening of the ports, described as a landmark of "Brazilian economic liberation", the author points out that the Royal Decree of 28 January 1808 was the result of the confluence of "factors both external and internal" to the colony (Prado 1945). Referring to the "general and external force" responsible for the franchises of Brazilian ports, Caio Prado mentions the "dismantling of the colonial regime" triggered in the second half of the 18th Century thanks to the advance of English industrialization. In the opinion of the author, "the advent of industrial capitalism as a replacement for the old and decadent commercial capitalism" led to the "decline of the former colonial system", based on "what was called the colonial pact, and which represents exclusivity of commerce between the colonies and the respective colonizing countries" (Prado 1945, 88).

Within the scope of relations between Portugal and Brazil, Caio Prado stresses the distance between the "impoverished" European kingdom, considered as "a simple intermediary, enforced and with parasite effect", and the colony, whose production force was undergoing "significant expansion". In this context, Dom João implemented the opening of the ports, thereby "freeing the colony from the obstacles that three centuries of colonialism had built up, against its free development" (Prado 1945, 94).

Getting closer to the interpretations raised by Prado, Fernando Novais (2001) points out that, even though it was always "closely linked to Portuguese politics, being derived from the migration from the court of Braganza to the American colony", the opening of the ports was the cause that was responsible for the suppression of the colonist country's exclusivity, which was the heart of the operation of the "old colonial system". Recognising the fact that the American colony was essential in order to preserve the colonist country, "not only as a colonist country, but also as a sovereign state", Portuguese statesmen who supported the "reformist" standpoint decided to transfer the seat of the monarchy to Brazil. For this author, the year 1808 represents "the inversion of the pact", in

which the colony starts to "command change and ends up assimilating the colonist country" (Novais 2001, 302).

In addition, for the author, the Royal Decree of 28 January 1808 shall be understood as the "root of all kinds of tension that unfold in the colonist country and also in the colony", ultimately leading to the Independence Movement in Brazil and also to the Liberal Revolution in Portugal (Novais 2005, 105-126).

Moreover, the opening of the ports was also considered, by the bibliography, as a clear indication of the progress of the British hegemony within the scope of Brazilian commercial practices, an aspect that would be more visible through the "complete subjection" of groups of business dealers in the kingdom or even from those in the mercantile hubs of Portuguese America, with the penetration of the British Empire, based on "intrusion and interiorisation", into the Luso-Brazilian system (Mota 2007, 94-105).

Among the analysts that follow this standpoint of analysis, we could mention the classic work by Oliveira Lima, printed as part of the commemorations of the hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Portuguese Royal Family in Brazil, in which the author says that the Royal Decree of 1808 should not be regarded as an "intentional and uninterested courtesy of the Prince Regent towards his overseas subjects" but rather as a "necessary and undelayable economic precaution", as a reply to the dismantling of marine commerce between the kingdoms of Portugal and England (Lima 1908, 210).

Problematising the meanings of the Royal Decree of 28 January 1808

Even so, over the last decades, several studies supported by different theoretical viewpoints have problematised the interpretations that regard the opening of the ports sometimes as a milestone of transformation in the mercantile relationships established between different parts of the Portuguese Empire, and other times as a preamble to the Independence of Brazil, suggesting the examination of the measures taken by the Prince Regent Dom João, as also the contradictions and social conflicts which led to the separation between the "Portuguese" in Brazil and those in Portugal based on the assimilation of the social and economic dynamics that had been in progress ever since the second half of the 18th Century.

In this regard, we highlight the study by Cecília Helena de Salles Oliveira about the meanings of Independence and also the conformation of the Empire in Brazil. On investigating the establishment of the net of Rio de Janeiro society at the start of the 1820s, particularly the battles between antagonistic property groups and the contradictions which permeated the relations established between free people, the author says that the transformations that were taking place in Rio de Janeiro actually came before the transfer of the Portuguese Royal Family and the resulting opening of the ports in 1808, as these were related "to changes which occurred as from 1750, related to

metropolitan politics and also conditions of the international market, brought about by manufacturing production" (Oliveira 1999, 61).

Thus, contradicting the authors who interpreted the historic process of Independence in a linear and evolutionary manner ever since the transfer of the Royal Family between 1808 and 1822, Salles Oliveira addresses the political conflicts which defined Brazil's breakaway from Portugal, based on changes which occurred in Rio de Janeiro in the second half of the 18th Century, a period which was characterised by the increase in the plantations of sugar cane, cotton, indigo, tobacco and foodstuffs "in unowned used land, in areas taken up by land squatters and also in *sesmarias* which had previously belonged to the Company of Jesus" (Oliveira 1999, 62).

Basing their considerations on the analysis of the diversified documents of the time and also the comments made by Edward P. Thompson (1989) and Maria Sylvia de Carvalho Franco (1968), Salles Oliveira understands that the transformations then under way in Rio de Janeiro and also in the other regions of Lusophone America, between the second half of the 18th Century and the start of the 19th, were particular expressions of the "disorganisation of the regulations of the Old Regime and also the establishment of liberal market relations". Therefore, for the author, the study of historical circumstances that involved Joanine politics ever since the Portuguese Royal Family was transferred to Brazil, through to the eve of the Proclamation of Independence assumes the acceptance of the sheer complexity and also particular shades of colonial society, expressed in the contradictory and conflicting movement "brought about both by property owners and by investors of large volumes of funds, on the one hand, and small producers and consumers, on the other" (Oliveira 1999, 62-63).

On querying some of the main explicative models which had been prepared in relation to the Brazilian economy during the first decades of the 19th Century, Stephen Haber e Herbert Klein (1992) contest the interpretations that helped to change the opening of the ports into a condition of being a point of inflection from the social and economic standpoint, whether for relations between the "Portuguese" from Brazil and from Europe, whether in terms of association with British interests.

In this perspective, the authors have problematised the analyses prepared by authors who follow a "neoclassic" concept based on the hypothesis that the opening of the ports and the Independence of the American colonies represented the release from the obstacles that were intrinsic to the regime of mercantile barter. According to Haber and Klein, the export data over the period suggests that Brazil's political emancipation did not produce any kind of structural transformation, as the Brazilian economy maintained its agrarian base after independence in 1822.

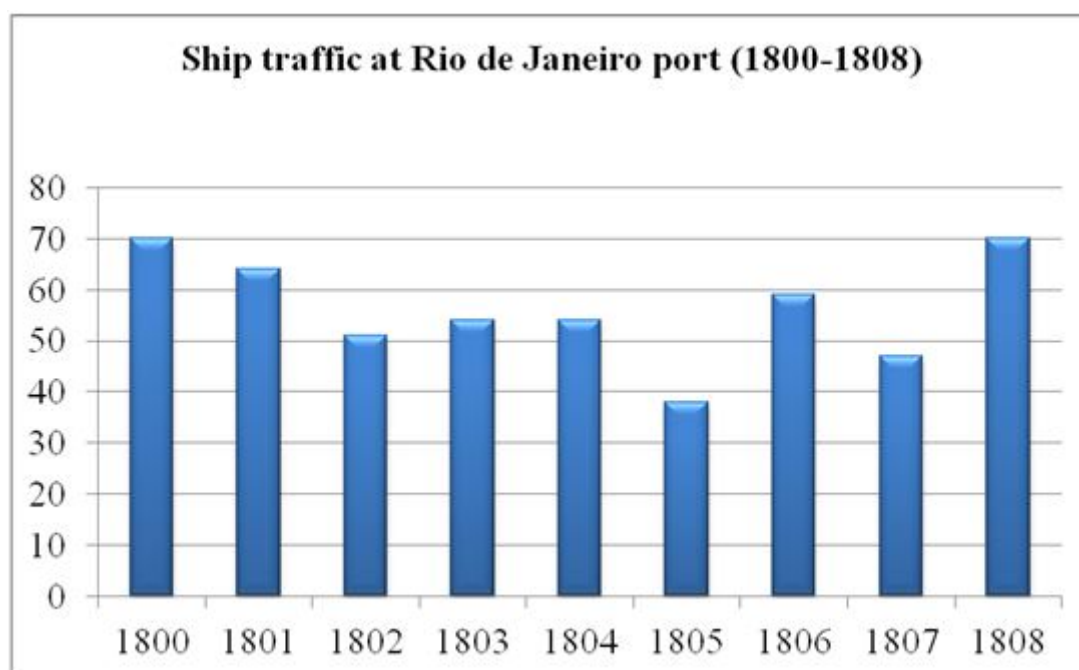
Another current interpretation, also discussed by Haber and Klein, is that which was publicised by those followers of neo-Marxist theory, which assumes that the process of independence "was nothing more than a transfer of dependence, from a dependence on a debilitated central colonist state to another kind of dependence, this time being dependent on a new powerful capitalist state"

(Haber, Klein 1992, 236). For the authors who share this assumption, the opening of the Brazilian Ports was considered as "the price for the relocation of the monarchy of the Braganza Family to America by the British, who in exchange obtained enormous concessions". Thus, the episode of 1808 would not only be the end of the commercial monopoly held by Portugal and the "breaking away from the colonial pact" as also the start of the Brazilian economic subordination to the British Empire (Haber, Klein 1992, 238).

Contrary to these interpretations, Stephen Haber and Herbert Klein show that the colony was already "integrated to the English economic sphere a long time before 1808", as the participation of Portuguese America in the "informal" British Empire was apparently materialised in 1703, with the signing of the Treaty of Methuen, while the Project of transferring the centre of the monarchy, and consequently of the Empire, to Brazil "already had its defendants at the Royal Court in Lisbon long before the formal change was implemented". In this regard, the "concessions made by the Braganza family, both before and after formal political independence, were just the institutionalization of a commercial system which had existed for a long time" (Haber, Klein 1992, 240).

In a work printed as part of the commemorations of the 200th anniversary of the coming of the Portuguese Royal Family to Brazil and the resulting opening of the ports, José Jobson de Andrade Arruda (2008) stresses that the Royal Decree of 28 January 1808 did no more than to consummate "a type of informal opening" caused by the "devastating activities of the contraband smugglers" from England. Thus, in the opinion of this author, the year 1800 is a symbolic time reference for the opening of the ports, as it "sets the uncontrollable push forward of the contraband operation encouraged by the English" (Arruda 2008, 16).

Recognising the fact that the Brazilian ports were gradually opened as from 1800, Arruda understands the decision adopted by the Prince Regent in 1808, with the formalisation of a process which preceded the "explosive international scenario" which resulted in the transfer of the Portuguese Royal Family to Brazil. Looking at the data for port movement at Rio de Janeiro between 1796 and 1811, the author confirms that, in 1800, 70 foreign ships entered the port of Rio de Janeiro, while in 1808, which is after the opening of the port was made official, some 70 foreign vessels anchored in the same place. In this regard, on comparing these figures, Arruda concludes that "the ports were open, at least that of Rio de Janeiro, for which we have concrete evidence, but if the historical experience in the port of Colonial Brazil's capital was this, then we could assume the same for the rest of the port network, where the agent of repression was less effective" (Arruda 2008, 117).



Source: Arruda 2008, 173.

Final Comments

Despite the theoretical and methodological differences, the works mentioned clearly show the importance of having a rethink about the importance that is normally assigned to the year 1808 as a point of historical change, at which there was the effective inclusion of the colony within the scope of international trade, whether under the influence of Great Britain or not. While suggesting that the effects resulting from the Royal Decree of 1808 affected all regions of Portuguese America, a significant part of historiography showed that the measures adopted in Bahia and also in Rio de Janeiro have the same meaning for the whole society, taken in a generic way.

However, these generalities contrast with the records made at the time. In the case of the capitania of São Paulo, the issues of trade, circulation of goods, and freedom or otherwise of the São Paulo-based ports to act in the area of coastal shipping and even in Atlantic trade were intensely discussed in the 1780s and 1790s and the measures taken generated a lot of conflict which, also, involved Rio de Janeiro in these acts.

In this regard, the examination of productive and commercial practices in São Paulo when the ports were opened shows the importance of a study of the activities of groups of traders and colonist authorities based in the capitania of São Paulo in the last decades of the 1700s, this being a period marred by conflicts that permeated the commercial relations between the Kingdom, the city of Rio de Janeiro, and other areas of Portuguese America.

Basing our considerations on the methodological contributions proposed by Jacques Revel (1998)

regarding the change to the observation scale as an essential tool for the understanding of the historical reality as investigated, we analyse the meanings assigned to the opening of the ports based on integration and articulation of multiplicity of spaces at different times. In this regard, examination of the "scale games" that were a part of the episode of opening the ports does not only mean "increasing (or decreasing) the size of the object on the visor, but also a change to the method and also to how things unfold" (Revel 1998, 20).

Therefore, in a local scale of analysis, our focus is now turned to the study of productive and commercial practice, from the transfer of the Portuguese Royal Family to Brazil's independence in 1822, particularly the intense debate about the issues concerning maritime commerce and the circulation of goods in the region.

The second dimension of analysis, in turn, includes the transformations which have been observed both before and after the opening of the ports, within the scope of mercantile relationships established between São Paulo and the other parts of the Portuguese Empire. In this way, the intention is to reveal the articular connections between the groups of São Paulo negotiators and the Royal Court in Rio de Janeiro, this being an essential issue for the understanding of the social foundations providing sustenance to the Government of the Prince Regent, Dom João, and later to the Government of Dom Pedro.

Finally, in a wider perspective, we shall also analyse the international political and economic context to show the way in which the Royal Decree of 1808 was inserted into the set of modifications under way ever since the last decades of the 18th Century, a period which was marked by the appearance of the industrial economy and world, and also by the reconfiguration of forms of exploitation of slave labour, after the revolution at Saint Domingue (Haiti) in 1789 (Tomich 2004).

Thus, the understanding of the links between the Portuguese empire and British commercial interests in the first decades of the 19th Century assumes a study of the process of political and economic restructuring that was occurring in the Atlantic world at the time, after the collapse of the former productive areas in the English and French Caribbean, resulting in the encouragement or appearance of new "zones of production based on slave labour" (Tomich 2003, 15), among which we could include the capitania of São Paulo and other regions of the Brazilian Centre-South, which then become important areas for the exportation of tropical goods for the European market.

Per citare questo testo attenersi alle seguenti indicazioni: Renato de Mattos, Politics and Business in São Paulo: from the opening of the ports to the Independence of Brazil (1808-1822), Rubriche: Agenda, n. 30, novembre 2012.

Biography

Doctoral student of the Graduate Studies Programme in Social History at the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, and also the recipient of a grant from the Foundation in Support of Research of the State of São Paulo (Fapesp). He surveys the history of Colonial Brazil, with special emphasis being given to the history and historiography of São Paulo, as also the mercantile relations with the Portuguese Empire. He is the author of the dissertation *Politics, administration and trade: the capitania of São Paulo and its insertion in the mercantile relations of the Portuguese Empire between 1788 and 1808*. Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, Brazil, 2009.

Bibliography

Almeida M.R.C., Azevedo C., Gontijo R., Solhet R. (cur.)

2009 *Mitos, projetos e práticas políticas: memória e historiografia*, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira.

Arruda J.J.A.

2008 *Uma colônia entre dois impérios: a abertura dos portos brasileiros, 1800-1808*, Bauru, Edusc.

Chiaramonte J.C.

1997 *La formación de los estados nacionales en Iberoamérica*, in "Boletín del Instituto de Historia Argentina y Americana Dr. Emilio Ravignani", n. 15.

Chust M.

2007 *1808: la eclosión juntera en el mundo hispano*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económico, El Colegio de México.

Costa I.D.N.

2010 *Repensando o modelo interpretativo de Caio Prado Júnior*, in Costa, Pires.

Costa I.D.N., Pires J.M. (cur.)

2010 *O capital escravista-mercantil e a escravidão nas Américas*, São Paulo, Educ, Fapesp.

Franco M.S.C.

1968 *Homens livres na ordem escravocrata*, São Paulo, Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros.

Gouvêa M.F.S.

2009 *De vice-rei a rei, 1808-18: marcos históricos na transformação do governo do Brasil*, in Almeida, Azevedo, Gontijo, Solhet.

Guimarães L.M.P.

2010 *A transferência da Corte Portuguesa para o Brasil: interpretações e linhagens historiográficas*, in Martins, Motta.

Haber S.H., Klein H.S.

1992 *As consequências econômicas da Independência do Brasil*, in "Novos Estudos Cebrap", n. 33.

Jancsó I. (cur.)

2006 *Independência do Brasil: história e historiografia*, São Paulo, Hucitec, Fapesp.

Lima M.O.

1908 *Dom João VI no Brasil, 1808-1821*, Rio de Janeiro, Typographia do Jornal do Comércio.

Lynch J.

1989 *Las revoluciones hispanoamericanas, 1808-1826*, Barcelona, Ariel.

Martins I., Motta M. (cur.)

2010 *1808: a Corte no Brasil*, Niterói, Editora da Universidade Federal Fluminense.

Mattos R.

2009 *Política, administração e negócios: a capitania de São Paulo e sua inserção nas relações mercantis do Império Português (1788/1808)*, São Paulo, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo.

Mota C.G.

2007 *Da ordem imperial pombalina à fundação do Império brasileiro, 1750-1831: o significado da Abertura dos Portos (1808)*, in Oliveira, Ricupero.

Novais F.A.

2001 *Portugal e Brasil na crise do Antigo Sistema Colonial, 1777-1808*, São Paulo, Hucitec.

2005 *Aproximações: ensaios de história e historiografia*, São Paulo, Cosac Naify.

Oliveira C.H.L.S.

1999 *A astúcia liberal: relações de mercado e projetos políticos no Rio de Janeiro, 1820-1824*,

Bragança Paulista, Edusf e Ícone.

Oliveira L.V., Ricupero R. (cur.)

2007 *A Abertura dos Portos*, São Paulo, Editora Senac.

Pimenta J.P.G.

2006 *Brasil y las independencias hispanoamericanas*, Castellón, Universidad Jaume I.

Prado C.

1933 *Evolução Política do Brasil e outros estudos*, São Paulo, Brasiliense.

1942 *Formação do Brasil contemporâneo*, São Paulo, Brasiliense.

1945 *História Econômica do Brasil*, São Paulo, Brasiliense.

Revel J. (cur.)

1998 *Jogos de escalas: a experiência da microanálise*, Rio de Janeiro, Editora Fundação Getúlio Vargas [trad. fr. *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996].

Tomich D.W.

2004 *Through the prism of slavery: labor, capital and world economy*, Boulder, Rowman & Littlefield.

2003 *A riqueza do império: Francisco Arango y Parreño, economia política e a segunda escravidão em Cuba*, in "Revista de História", n. 149.

Thompson E.P.

1989 *Tradición, revuelta y consciencia de classe: estudios sobre la crisis de la sociedad preindustrial*, Barcelona, Critica.

Wilcken P.

2004 *Empire adrift: the portuguese court in Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1821*, New York, Bloomsbury Press.

Wilma P.C.

2006 *A independência na historiografia brasileira*, in Jancsó.

