

Wiecker, Niels. *Der iberische Atlantikhandel: Schiffsverkehr zwischen Spanien. Portugal und Iberoamerika, 1700-1800* (Beiträge zur Europäischen Überseegeschichte, 99). Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2012. ISBN 978 – 3 – 515 – 10201 – 8.

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Niels Wiecker has written a monograph that is a most welcome addition to the historiography of the Portuguese and Spanish colonial enterprises in the Americas. The work provides an excellent overview of the state of the art concerning research issues and source materials in the German language, but its importance is not limited to German readers, as historians familiar with the relevant historiography in English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese will still find enough of interest in the monograph. Niels Wiecker has studied history at the universities of Hamburg and Salamanca. At the former, his PhD supervisor was Professor Horst Pietschmann, one of Germany's most important historians working on the Iberian Americas. It was his comparative and Atlantic approach that inspired Dr. Wiecker in his own work.

The book is divided into four parts, some larger than others, and a conclusion. In the introduction, the author explains the historical and historiographical background to his monograph. Eighteenth-century reforms in Iberian colonial trade are accompanied by a lack of academic interest in Spain and its overseas territories for the same period, the golden age already being in the past by then, and both Portuguese and Hispanic historiography have suffered from a post-dictatorial regionalization of history, although historians in the Portuguese language have tended to pay more attention to the bigger Portuguese picture than their Spanish-writing counterparts. This difference has also continued in Anglo-American scholarship: while David Brading's work on miners and merchants in Bourbon Mexico has become exemplary for the school of Spanish-American history writing by concentrating more on local elites and case-studies, Charles Boxer and Stuart Schwartz were two influential historians who focused more on the bigger Luso-American picture. This is not to say, however, that detailed studies on Brazil don't exist; in fact, quite the contrary. In the introduction, one of the book's major shortcomings can already be noticed: a lack of attention to South American scholarly production. On page 16,

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reference is made to Brazilian historiography, and Roberto Simonsen and Virgilio Noya Pinto's influential works on Brazil's economic history² and the gold cycle³ also receive a mention, but Brazilian and Spanish American historiography as a whole remains undervalued. This is a pity, all the more so because Dr. Wiecker is not hindered by issues of language, as many publications in Spanish and Portuguese are included in his bibliography. This has resulted in an undervaluation of interior developments in the New World, such as the construction of proper economies, intercolonial trade, and the resulting national convergence.⁴

The second chapter deals with the Portuguese and Spanish colonial policies related to trade. The two Iberian powers developed different approaches when searching for profit from their South American endeavors, although these were not without certain overlaps. The Portuguese had to allow for a sizeable participation of English merchants in their overseas trade (both legal and clandestine), something they tried to oppose at different times during the eighteenth century. The Marquis of Pombal, Portugal's most powerful figure for several decades after the 1755 earthquake, was opposed to foreign participation in Brazilian trade, and the foundation of a Junta do Comércio in Lisbon, as well as the establishment of different privileged companies, the Companhia Geral de Comércio de Pernambuco e Paraíba (1756) and the Companhia Geral de Comércio de Grão Pará e Maranhão (1759), were aimed at gaining a larger share for Portuguese merchants at the expense of foreign traders in general, and the English in particular. This system of monopolistic companies was, however, not the common tactic of the Portuguese government, although it was pursued for much of the eighteenth century in diamond production, and in trade as well. The Spanish, on the contrary, sought to develop an Atlantic trade based on the exclusion of foreigners (except the *Asiento*), the establishment of privileges centered on membership of the *Consulado*, which was a mercantile body controlled by the *Casa de Contratación* in Seville (Cadiz after 1717), and the organization of the *flotas* from Cadiz to Veracruz, Portobelo, Cartagena, and Havana.

Dr. Wiecker's discourse on trade policies is firmly rooted in existing knowledge, and the chapter mostly serves as an introduction for things to come. The attempt to expand national

² Simonsen, *História econômica do Brasil, 1500–1820*.

³ Pinto, *O ouro brasileiro e o comércio anglo-português: Uma contribuição aos estudos da economia atlântica no século XVIII*.

⁴ See, for instance, Caldeira, *A Nação Mercantilista – Ensaio sobre o Brasil*; Alves, *Minas e Currais: Produção Rural e Mercado Interno de Minas Gerais (1674–1807)*. Later, the author briefly discusses the historiographical debate, dominated by Brazilian historians, concerning the developing Brazilian economy linked to a Portuguese colonial 'crisis' (199–200).

frameworks into an Atlantic one and the idea of offering a comparative viewpoint to the Portuguese and Spanish approaches to the New World still make for relevant reading. The third chapter of the book contains its most original contribution to current historiography: the meticulous construction of a database of transatlantic shipping in the eighteenth century. In an accessible form, using MS-Access, different data are linked together and allow for searches to be made. Information about shipments taking place across the Atlantic (sailing dates, goods, captains, ships) is central, being linked to the port cities visited and the merchants who were active there. Made available through <http://www.wiecker.info>,⁵ the database offers historians the possibility of using it for their own research and adding yet more data. The author has used all the care that is warranted when constructing a historical database, not only discussing theoretical and conceptual limits and benefits, based on the relevant bibliography, but also using caution with the data. It has to be said, though, that most of these data come from different published sources, and the fragmentation of the source material is a problem when trying to determine how complete the data are. This is not to deny that it is a very interesting tool: it is not difficult to use, but it can prove tricky to handle without reading Dr. Wiecker's monograph.

Some trials conducted with this tool make it clear that the author has included more information on Spanish America than on Brazil: a search for ships arriving in Veracruz between 1728 and 1735 shows 147 ships, neatly divided by year and port of origin, and thus showing two arrivals from Maracaibo in 1730 and twenty from Cadiz two years later, while a search for ships arriving in Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco, Pará, and Maranhão does not yield anything for the same time period. This must be due to technical difficulties, because a search for ships leaving the port of Lisbon between 1728 and 1735 shows sixteen ships leaving for Bahia, eight for Pernambuco and fourteen for Rio de Janeiro in 1730 alone, while vessels also arrived in the Portuguese capital from those regions in the same years. The link between people and shipping is promising, but a lot of information is missing. For Cadiz, 109 people can be found in the database for the whole eighteenth century: shipowners, traders, and consuls, but for Lisbon, only three merchants can be found in the database. This means that a lot of work still remains to be done before the database can be fully used in research. The monograph also shows certain limitations in the linking of a publication on paper with an online database: some of the functions discussed

⁵ Accessed 16 May 2013.

in the book, such as the possibility of comparing shipping, directly export one's research findings into Excel, while the possibility of constructing diagrams is no longer available online.

The greatest merit of the database at this point is its existence and the effort that the author has made to afford it firm theoretical and technical grounds. As such, it might serve as a starting point for the construction of a more detailed database, perhaps in the same vein as Navigocorpus (available on www.navigocorpus.org), a database on European shipping and maritime trade from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. For immediate application in research, however, its use is limited. This is implicitly acknowledged by the author in the fourth part of the book, which deals precisely with shipping between the Iberian Peninsula and the New World, but does not make explicit use of the information contained in the database constructed a chapter earlier. This fourth chapter, with 122 pages, makes up half of the monograph, and is divided into three sections: Iberian ports, Atlantic islands; and ports in the New World.

Focusing on the respective roles of Cadiz, Barcelona, Porto, and Lisbon in the larger context of transatlantic trade, the author manages to draw an interesting parallel between Barcelona and Porto. Both of these were involved in trade but relied heavily on a relationship with their hinterlands, where wine and wool were produced, while Cadiz and Lisbon did not have the same connection with their surroundings but exercised an important commercial function on a national, European, and even global scale. The Atlantic islands, particularly the Azores, have received disproportionate attention from historians considering their minor importance in transatlantic trade, since their role was mainly that of providing a stopover on the Atlantic shipping route. Madeira was, in fact, the island that had greatest economic importance. At the other end of the route, Dr. Wiecker discusses the economic developments in Spanish America and Brazil during the eighteenth century, as explained by the diverse range of products sent abroad, such as cacao, and the growing importance of new regions, such as Maranhão and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and Venezuela in New Spain. He also discusses Spanish-Portuguese interaction, by analyzing (illegal) trade and economic development in the River Plate region, after the Portuguese founded their Colônia do Sacramento there in 1680.

Throughout the work, the author does not evade those issues that have made large-scale histories of commerce difficult to write, most notably the problems encountered with sources, and the ever-present problem of smuggling, but he does not always take a strong position himself. He points out, for instance, that the impact of a growing Brazilian economy on Portugal and its

colonial structure is still the subject of much debate: Jobson de Andrade Arruda sees a growing erosion of that system, with the ever greater amount of smuggling taking place toward the end of the eighteenth century being central to his argument,⁶ while Jorge Pedreira has argued that smuggling was an integral part of that system, which only began to decline when the Portuguese court fled to Brazil to escape the French.⁷ Dr. Wiecker does not provide any new insights to support either one claim or the other, but he remarks that both opinions are valid.⁸ This is an indication that his monograph is largely synthetic, as it bundles together existing knowledge in an accessible manner, within a comparative and Atlantic framework. It also focuses on a period—the eighteenth century—that is often understudied, although it was also a period of economic reform for both Portugal and Spain. This, together with the construction of the database, is the work’s greatest merit, a fact that is also confirmed by the author in his conclusion: “Much of what was already known from individual case studies has been confirmed in a larger perspective.”⁹ And, *en passant*, he does away with the notion that is often present in Anglo-American historiography, namely that the concept of the Iberian Atlantic is synonymous with an Ibero-American commercial system. The comparative efforts made by Niels Wiecker in his monograph clearly demonstrate that, while an Iberian Atlantic is valid as a concept, a Spanish-American and a Brazilian commercial system existed separately.

⁶ Arruda, “Decadence or Crisis in the Luso-Brazilian Empire: A New Model of Colonization in the Eighteenth Century.”

⁷ Pedreira, “From Growth to Collapse: Portugal, Brazil and the Breakdown of the Old Colonial System (1760–1830).”

⁸ Wiecker, *Der iberische Atlantikhandel: Schiffsverkehr zwischen Spanien, Portugal und Iberoamerika, 1700–1800*, 199–200.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

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