



BRILL

E-JOURNAL OF PORTUGUESE HISTORY

21 (2023) 365–379



brill.com/ejph

Independence of Brazil – Historiographical Trends



The End of the Eclipse for Enlightened Reformation: The Classics and New Interpretations

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Received 14 April 2023 | Accepted 21 July 2023 |

Published online 9 May 2024

Recebido 14 de Abril de 2023 | Aceite 21 Julho 2023 |

Publicado on-line 9 de Maio de 2024

Abstract

The article revisits classic historiographical discussions about the concepts of Enlightened Despotism and Enlightened Absolutism with the aim of identifying the role played by the related notion of Enlightened Reformism. It draws inspiration from new theoretical and methodological perspectives that challenge the traditional view of Enlightenment as a phenomenon centered on a single diffusion center, as exemplified by Global History, which emphasizes the co-produced nature of the Eighteenth-century Enlightenment. A turning point is considered to be the investigations carried out by historians in the 1970s, such as Franco Venturi, who, by acknowledging a "reforming eighteenth century," expanded the scope of Enlightened Reformism, seen beyond the Enlightenment and Absolutism. Enlightened Reformism is a central theme in Ibero-American historiography, increasingly viewed as an organizing concept for

governmental actions in the Atlantic empires between 1750 and 1830. With a broader scope of discussions, research addresses the relationship between Enlightened Reformism and topics such as the management of distant territories, slavery, agricultural development, mineral extraction, scientific voyages, and resistance. Studies also delve deeper into the critique of the vocabulary and theories that underpinned reformist discourses, some of which laid the foundations for the processes of independence in the American colonies in the early 19th century.

Keywords

Enlightened Reformism – Global History – Iberian Empires.

Resumo

O artigo revisita discussões historiográficas clássicas sobre os conceitos de Despotismo Esclarecido e Absolutismo Ilustrado com o intuito de identificar o papel desempenhado pela noção correlata de reformismo ilustrado. Inspira-se em novas perspectivas teórico-metodológicas que desafiam a visão tradicional do Iluminismo como um fenómeno centrado em um único centro difusor, a exemplo da História Global que enfatiza a natureza co-produzida das Luzes Setecentistas. Considera-se como ponto de virada as investigações dos historiadores da década de 1970, como Franco Venturi, que ao admitir um “setecentos reformador”, ampliou o escopo do reformismo, visto para além do Iluminismo e do Absolutismo. O reformismo ilustrado é um tema central para a historiografia ibero-americana, visto cada vez mais como um conceito organizador das ações governamentais nos impérios atlânticos entre 1750 e 1830. Com um escopo mais alargado de discussões, as investigações atentam para a relação do reformismo ilustrado com temas como a gestão de territórios distantes, escravidão, fomento agrário, extração mineral, viagens científicas e resistências. Estudos que também aprofundam a crítica ao vocabulário e às teorias que sustentavam os discursos reformistas, alguns dos quais estiveram nas bases dos processos de independência das colônias americanas no início do século XIX.

Palavras-chave

Reformismo Ilustrado – História Global – Impérios ibéricos

The debates over Enlightened Reformation present themselves in the current historiographical scenario as a rich and stimulating effort to rethink the uses and applications of the concept of the so-called modern age in Europe and in colonial spaces. Some discussions find inspiration in the approaches of Atlantic history and global history, particularly in the impact that such analytical perspectives have had on the understanding of the Enlightenment. This phenomenon, perceived less as an original and rooted phenomenon in a single center, is now seen in a broad and fluid sense, a global coproduction of innovative thoughts and actions. But it has not always been this way.

In classical studies on the subject, “Enlightened Reformation” often appears eclipsed by a broad tradition of studies on the concept of “Enlightened Despotism” and “Enlightened Absolutism.” These concepts served to distinguish a specific stage of eighteenth-century European monarchies (Scott 1990). The expressions “enlightened despot” and “enlightened despotism” were commonplace in the second half of the eighteenth century. It is not our place now to detail its linguistic uses, but some associations employ the use of the expression beyond “enlightened monarchs,” reaching even royal officials, such as ministers and secretaries of state.

Several examples confirm what has been stated above. Around 1750, uncontrolled intrigues not overseen by Louis xv prompted discussions at the court regarding the despotic behavior of his ministers (Beales 2005: 49). In the period of the French Revolution, the idea of a “ministerial despotism” crossed the Atlantic and reached the insurgents in Haiti (Gauthier 2002). Manuel de Godoy, minister to Charles iv of Spain, did not escape this same qualification and was dismissed in 1798 on charges of manipulating the King (Andújar Castillo 2008). In Portugal, Prince John (1799–1816), according to more traditional members of the nobility, lived hostage to a “ministerial despotism” exercised by the secretaries of state (Pombo 2015). The specter haunting the Portuguese nobility had a first and last name: Sebastião José de Carvalho e Mello, the Marquis of Pombal, a powerful minister under King Joseph I (1750–1777), a figure who embodied the label of an enlightened despot, even without being a monarch (Monteiro 2009).

The above examples demonstrate the perception of contemporaries regarding the relationship between reforms and fragmented notions of despotism. Physiocrats like Quesnay and Mercier de la Rivière dealt in their writings with a “legal despotism,” an ambiguous elaboration that related good government to the discovery of fundamental laws that subjected societies (Bluche 1978). The use of the expression circulated in European literate spaces and caught the attention of contemporaries. An example of this reach can be found

in the words of the Portuguese minister Rodrigo de Souza Coutinho (1755–1812), who declared in 1789, “No one is more passionate than I am about a luminous despotism, in which the interest of the despot and that of the nation is inseparable” (Pombo 2022).

The relationship between reforms and the expansion of monarchical power influenced the constitution of the historiography on the subject back in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first more consistent elaboration of the concept occurred in Germany in the nineteenth century. To avoid the controversial expression “enlightened despotism”, Wilhelm Roscher (1817–1894) formulated the explanation that modern-era monarchies would have gone through stages, the last of which being an “enlightened absolutism”. The term was used to define a time marked by reforms that significantly extended the absolute power of the monarchs (Scott 1990: 5–6; Ingraio 1986). In the 1920s, the efforts of the International Committee of Historical Sciences inaugurated a new phase of discussions. Michel L’Héritier (1889–1951) resurrected the problematic eighteenth-century term “enlightened despotism” and investigated the influence of the *philosophes* on the actions of French intendants. His studies underscored the role of physiocracy in the enlightened reforms carried out during the period following the Seven Years’ War (L’Héritier 1928; 1937; Falcon 1986).

This interpretation had an enormous impact on French historiography and beyond (Mousnier & Labrousse 1962; Scott 1990). In the journal *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* one can find an inventory of this impact: a dossier that brought together contributions from European historians of various interpretive approaches. Among them, we can mention some notable names, such as Furio Diaz, Pierre Villar, Albert Soboul, Éva Balazs, and Ulrich Ricken. (*Annales Historique* 1979). Walter Markov has signed a “summary bibliography” of the subject that reflects a simmering debate until the late 1970s.¹ The research located the moment of bureaucratization and rationalization of the modern state in the experience of reforms in eighteenth-century Europe, making the period a kind of antechamber to liberalism and democracy (Bobbio 2000). Except for Villar’s studies, little was said about the Iberian world; the reforms were a subordinate phenomenon to the main problem, the concept of “enlightened despotism.”

1 It is possible to verify the moments of rise and fall of the concept of enlightened despotism by using the *Books Ngram Viewer tool* (<https://books.google.com/ngrams/>). The same tool points out that, in the last decade, the use of the term enlightened absolutism is on the rise, with a peak moment in 2013, when we can observe an expansion in the number of studies.

The scenario began to change in the late 1960s with the emergence of critical investigations into the Enlightenment and the reforms of the eighteenth century. Franco Venturi's studies can be placed as a turning point in the debate (Rao 2005). His investigations, undertaken in the aftermath of World War II – when the marks of the experience of fascism in Italy propelled studies on the Enlightenment and the Renaissance – served as a counterpoint to the hegemony of Ernst Cassirer's work (Cassirer 1997[1932]). Attentive to Italian specificities, Venturi elaborated his concept of reform beyond government, unshackling it from the rigid boundaries of enlightened absolutism. Such a purpose was inscribed in the very title of his best-known work *Settecento riformatore* (1969), but also in *Utopia e riforma nell'illuminismo* (2003[1970]), in which he identified a “reformist eighteenth century.”

Venturi's study inaugurated, in a sense, the debate about the distinct experiences of the Enlightenment (Porter 1981; Hesse 2006). In other words, the political and social environments strongly collaborated to shape the reforms that were no longer seen as the exclusive result of the enlightened minds of a few European monarchs. Outside Italy, Marc Raeff developed the concept of the “Police State.” Within it, Cameralism emerged as the primary inspiration for reformism in Russia, suggesting a connection between the late seventeenth century and the reformist experiences of the eighteenth century (Raeff 1975). Werner Naef, in a study on the state in the modern age, warned against confusing political illustration, a chronologically and geographically broader notion, with enlightened absolutism, a notion more restricted to the experiences of Prussia and Austria (Naef 1973).

However, the investigations remained limited to one part of Europe, as did the themes that comprised the governments' reformist agenda. Studies were silent in the face of the enormous volume of reformist writings about colonial conquests and the role they played in the finances of European metropolises, particularly the Iberian ones. It would suffice to cite as an example the enormous success of works such as Abbé Raynal's *Histoire Philosophique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1770), a best-seller that relied on a wide network of enlightened collaborators and informants for its composition (Furtado & Monteiro 2016; Pombo 2019).

The studies on reforms in Portugal, especially those that took place during the administration of the Marquis of Pombal after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, were marked by opposing historiographical interpretations. Following the 1820 Revolution, liberal-leaning intellectuals saw the reforms as the Enlightenment's struggle against the obscurantism represented by the Jesuits and the Inquisition. In contrast, conservative intellectuals spared no ink in depicting the Marquis of Pombal as a cruel and bloodthirsty tyrant (Falcon

1993). These interpretations, despite their differences, remained resistant to the specifics of the Portuguese Enlightenment movement. The reforms were seen as a means to overcome the “backwardness” and “decline” of a kingdom that, under relentless censorship, remained distant from the main centers of spreading a “true” enlightenment (Carvalho 2008).

This scenario can be designed differently if we shift the focus to the historiography of Latin America in the 1970s. Francisco Falcon drew parallels between the Iberian reformist experience and the dominant approaches taken towards European monarchies. Spain and Portugal would be “far more representative perhaps of this enlightened absolutism than, for example, Russia” (Falcon 1986:13). Attentive to the period of the rise of the minister Sebastião José de Carvalho e Mello – the Marquis of Pombal – Portugal experienced, between the years 1750 and 1777, a “meeting, theoretically inexplicable, of two phenomena that should in principle repel each other: mercantilism and the Illustration” (Falcon 1993: 483). The aim was to incorporate the Iberian legacy in the debate about “enlightened despotism,” particularly in how Portugal’s reformist experience contributed significantly to the construction of the modern world from other thought traditions, such as Catholicism (Falcon 2017; Domingues 1994).

The “peripheral” condition of the countries in the Americas, former colonies of Portugal and Spain, served as an enormous stimulus for investigations that saw connections between the reforms and the independence processes of the early nineteenth century. The enlightened reformism marked the formation of American elites, providing the theoretical framework for the legislative debates that founded the constitutional charters (Carvalho 1996; Jancsó, 2003; Slemian 2019). Seminal essays, such as those by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1962) and Maria Odila Leite da Silva Dias (1972), highlighted that enlightened reformism, far from providing theoretical elements to break away from the slavery-oriented colonial order, served to consolidate profound social inequalities in the post-independence context. The legacy of enlightened reformism persisted as an ideology, particularly in advocating for the imperial solution and monarchical rule championed by the political elite that led the independence process from 1822. (Lyra 1994; Souza 2008).

This analytical perspective appeared in Kenneth Maxwell’s studies, especially in the identification of the so-called “1790 generation,” which was composed of young people born in Brazil who mostly graduated from the University of Coimbra (Kantor & Falcon 2008). Men who participated in the conjurations of the late eighteenth century and were active in the effort to elaborate reformist proposals appropriate to the territorial diversity of Portuguese America (Maxwell 1973, 1973a). Maxwell’s studies collaborated with the reflections on

the construction of the project of a Portuguese-Brazilian empire and are said to have substantiated the decision to transmigrate the seat of the empire to Rio de Janeiro in 1808 (Carvalho 2008; Meirelles 2017).

In Brazilian historiography, the term “enlightened reformation” gained prominence in Fernando Novais’s thesis. Its use characterized a pivotal moment between Portugal and Brazil: the end of the Marquis of Pombal’s ministry (1777) and the opening of the ports (1808). This moment marked the rupture of colonial monopoly and the adherence to liberal ideals (Novais 1979).² Years later, Novais published “O reformismo ilustrado luso-brasileiro: alguns aspectos” (Some Aspects of the Portuguese-Brazilian enlightened Reformation), an article that contributed to the more frequent use of the concept in Brazil (Novais 2005[1984]). Until that moment, the terms “reformism” and “Enlightenment” were not common in Brazilian historiography; studies simply referred to the term “reforms” added to the most varied adjectives, such as “pombaline,” “political,” “teaching,” and “legal,” among others.

The scenario above began to undergo transformation in the last decade. Among the most thought-provoking contributions is the work by Gabriel Paquette (Paquette 2008; 2009; 2013). His studies see illustrated reformism as a concept that organizes the governing actions of the Southern European states and their Atlantic empires between the years 1750 and 1830 (Paquette 2009: 2). He claims that the period forged a reformist political culture aimed at halting the collapse of the Iberian empires at the end of the eighteenth century, a hypothesis also proposed by Maxwell (Paquette 2013: 17). This definition shifted the axis of the discussions on enlightened reformation to the Iberian Atlantic space (Kuethé & Andrien 2018) and allowed the incorporation of problematics hitherto neglected by studies on the subject, such as the management of distant territories, indigenous people, African trafficking and enslavement, agrarian fomentation, mineral extraction, and revolt resistances.

The elevation of “enlightened reformation” to the status of a concept offers a significant theoretical gain by allowing us to problematize the peripheral condition imposed on the Iberian empires. This is not merely a matter of historiographical dispute but of a more honest approach to the reality of the eighteenth century, when the race for hegemony among the powers was linked to the possession of territories and natural resources, trade routes, and native

2 In Spanish-American historiography we find studies since the 1950s that have used the expression “enlightened reformation” to characterize the experiences of the Iberian monarchies in the eighteenth century. As an example, I cite Isabel Gutiérrez del Arroyo’s thesis, *El reformismo ilustrado en Puerto Rico* (México: El Colegio de México, 1953). I believe that more effort is needed to construct the genealogy and particularities of the concept.

peoples. This order, established from the sixteenth century on, was shaken in the mid-seventeenth century, a situation that served as leaven to produce reforms capable of preserving colonial domination (Pombo 2019).

Since it is impossible to treat more broadly the unfolding of this new vision, I will briefly comment on three aspects. The first is the framing of the concept in the second half of the eighteenth century, supported by the studies of the so-called “Age of Atlantic Revolutions.” The approach relates to the classical interpretation of an “age of revolutions,” celebrated by E. Hobsbawm and R. R. Palmer, considered insufficient to encompass global geographical realities. The proposal unveils an environment of strong political-diplomatic tensions that originated in the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) and culminated in the Opium War (1839–1842). In this context, the reforms stem from complex global interactions and not from a unilateral perspective (Armitage & Subrahmanyam 2007).

The use of this temporal cut-off, while stimulating, needs to be further refined, as it relativizes the links of the enlightened reforms with reforms and traditions of thought of the late seventeenth century (Furtado 2012; Cantarino & Leite Neto, 2020). In Portugal, there is a consistent historiography that relates the reformist actions of the Marquis of Pombal to doctrines of late mercantilism, political arithmetic, and Germanic Cameralism (Falcon 1993; Monteiro 2009; Cardoso & Cunha 2012), or even approaches that highlight close relationships with the reformist policies during the reign of King D. João V (1706–1750) (Maxwell 1996; Monteiro 2009). As H. M. Scott has stated, enlightened reformation responded pragmatically to reality and tended to continue political practices that generated effective material results. This aspect becomes evident, for example, in the actions of the men who were appointed to the governments of the conquests in Portuguese America in the late eighteenth century (Pombo 2013). As proposed by Paquette, the 1830s, it has long been the focus of Brazilian historiography, which identifies the profound politicization of reformist ideals in the post-independence context. The innovative aspect lies, therefore, in considering the concept from a global perspective.

The second aspect concerns the increase of studies on political economy in the second half of the eighteenth century, a moment of expanding the sphere of governmental control by the state during the period (Foucault 1979: 277–293). As Paquette stated, monarchies displayed impressive “institutional isomorphism” by emulating and adapting successful political-economic models (Paquette 2009: 16). In the case of Portugal, we can see economic practices being updated in the sense of progressive abandonment of the more orthodox lines of mercantilism and the apprehension of the liberal ideology inspired by Adam Smith. It is noted that, in terms of political economy, reformation

extrapolates the adjective “enlightened” by incorporating a more eclectic set of ideas (Cardoso & Cunha 2012). The defense of the Iberian overseas territories, for example, was a subject of intense debate alongside Enlightenment anti-colonial thought, and Portuguese intellectuals offered original contributions to the preservation of the empire (Pombo 2016). These ideas were not confined within their national borders, but operated vividly as they circulated through networks of information and trade connections that united Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Antunes et al. 2016).

The last aspect that I would like to note is that political economy is often associated with initiatives to promote science. From the 1770s on, one notices an intensification of studies related to the field of natural history (Raminelli 2008; Heynemann 2010; Domingues 2001). Scientific voyages expanded collections in European natural history museums by promoting an impressive movement of botanical specimens and fauna from colonial conquests. At the same time, and as a consequence, European research centers appropriated and took advantage of native sciences and knowledge (Kury 2013). Studies show how the process of conquering and maintaining distant territories was made possible by improved knowledge of those territories, including extensive production of engravings and geographic charts (Bleichmar et al. 2009).

The uses of geography guaranteed the geopolitical dominance of broad possessions for the Portuguese (Kantor 2009). They were also the result of efforts led by institutional and informal spaces – academia, botanical gardens, traveling cabinets, salons, museums, and universities – to stimulate the creation of networks for information and knowledge accrual. Further studies are needed on the dispersion of collected materials, as in the case of the expedition led by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, as well as on the networks of misinformation and the policy of secrecy common to the Iberian monarchies, which ensured geopolitical control over the dominated territories (Langfur 2023). Research needs to advance further into the role played by monarchies as propellants of an active policy to fund initiatives by local powers, actions that resulted in diplomatic treaties and the deepening of colonial conquest in accordance with the principles of Enlightenment and civilizing thought of the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. (Pratt 1999).

The contributions are numerous and benefit from the revision of the concept of Enlightenment. Studies on local particularities have broadened the range of observations, making it easier to perform inventive comparisons (Withers 2007). Information networks connected scientists, royal officials, natives, and colonists, among other agents, who investigated the natural potentialities of the territories, took notes, drew, and sent samples, all united in the task of increasing the monarchy’s revenues and, consequently, guaranteeing

royal sovereignty (Domingues 2001). These studies contribute to deconstructing interpretations which, since the eighteenth century, associate Iberian scientific culture with decadence, backwardness, resulting from Jesuit dominance of educational institutions.

The geography of the Enlightenment and the circulation of ideas, applied to reformation, help to identify both the emulation of models and the elaboration of original thoughts and practices. These notions also contribute to questioning the profound Eurocentrism of approaches related to scientific studies, unraveling how interpretations have created “centers” and “peripheries,” narrowing a horizon that proves to be increasingly complex (Outram 2019; Conrad 2012).

The analytical perspectives opened up by global history have unveiled countless possibilities for rethinking the concept of “enlightened reformation.” This framework would need to be more complete, expanding the inventory with more thorough surveys of local and global thematic possibilities. In the largest Brazilian bank of theses,³ a simple search for the term “enlightened reformation” returns more than a hundred research papers that have dedicated themselves to reflections on this topic over the past two decades. The profusion of studies leaves no doubt that, as Franco Venturi suggested, there was indeed a reforming eighteenth century that, when put under a magnifying glass, can be seen in a more cosmopolitan way and free from the constraints imposed by the notion of enlightened absolutism.

Acknowledgments

The research for this article was funded by the Carlos Chagas Filho Foundation for Research Support of the State of Rio de Janeiro (*Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro*—FAPERJ E-26/01000 2520/2019; Ref. 211.445/2019). The author thanks Iris Kantor, Marina M. Machado, Juliana G. Meirelles, and Marieta P. Carvalho for their readings and comments.

3 See Catalog of Theses and Dissertations BNDT-CAPES (<https://catalogodeteses.capes.gov.br/catalogo-teses/#/>).

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