



BRILL

E-JOURNAL OF PORTUGUESE HISTORY

21 (2023) 380–390



brill.com/ejph

The Independence of Brazil and Its Historiography

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Received 6 May 2023 | Accepted 1 September 2023 |

Published online 9 May 2024

Recebido 6 de Maio de 2023 | Aceite 1 de Setembro de 2023 |

Publicado on-line 9 de Maio de 2024

Abstract

This article reviews the main historiographical explanations for Brazil's 1822 independence from Portugal while presenting a new interpretation of the country's emancipation process. While previous interpretations emphasized the role of elites in the independence movement, new quantitative evidence sheds light on the profound impact of the Portuguese Empire's fiscal turmoil, marked by excessive expenditures and inflation, which triggered generalized discontent in both Brazil and Portugal. Political unrest ensued, leading to demands for constitutional change and the end of absolutism. The differing effects of the fiscal crisis in Europe and South America ignited a unified call for reform. Political emancipation therefore occurred in a two-stage process: a liberal revolution followed by constitutional conflict, resulting in Brazil's independence.

Keywords

Brazil's independence – late colonial period – fiscal crisis

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta as principais explicações historiográficas para a independência do Brasil de Portugal em 1822, ao mesmo tempo que apresenta uma nova interpretação do processo de emancipação do país. Embora interpretações anteriores enfatizassem o papel das elites no movimento de independência, novas evidências quantitativas lançam luz sobre o profundo impacto da turbulência fiscal do Império português, marcada por despesas excessivas e inflação, que desencadeou descontentamento generalizado tanto no Brasil como em Portugal. Seguiu-se instabilidade política, levando a exigências de mudança constitucional e ao fim do absolutismo. Os diferentes efeitos da crise fiscal na Europa e na América do Sul desencadearam um apelo unificado à reforma. A emancipação política ocorreu, portanto, num processo de dois estágios: uma revolução liberal seguida de um conflito constitucional, resultando na independência do Brasil.

Palavras-chave

independência do Brasil – período colonial tardio – crise fiscal

The apparent paradoxical fact that Brazil's independence from Portugal was led and proclaimed in 1822 by the heir to the Portuguese throne has always made the country's political emancipation seem strange and difficult to understand when compared to other independence processes in the Americas. As a result of a few selected superficial characteristics – that is, of a biased *histoire événementielle* – Brazil's independence has traditionally been framed as a peaceful political transition from a colony to a formally independent country, and as a historical example of political, economic, and social continuity. It is almost as if nothing of importance had happened in the early 1820s, notwithstanding independence itself and, more crucially, a revolutionary transition from absolutism to constitutional monarchy. For reasons that will be clarified in the following paragraphs, we believe that traditional interpretations of Brazil's independence fail to explain why it happened in the first place and, more importantly, why it happened when it did.

This article summarizes the main historiographical explanations for Brazil's independence while presenting a new interpretation of the country's emancipation process based on new quantitative evidence that allows us to reinterpret documents, letters, and parliamentary debates from the early nineteenth century. We argue that, similar to other independence processes in the Americas,

it was the Portuguese empire's financial troubles that led to political unrest, revolution, the end of absolutism and, finally, to political separation between Brazil and Portugal.¹

1 Classic Interpretations

Since the nineteenth century, there have been three main groups of explanations for the independence of Brazil. The first generally accepted interpretation emerged during the imperial period (1822–1889) and focused on the legacy of Portuguese colonization. Francisco Varnhagen, who was bestowed by the emperor with a title of nobility, presented what was perhaps the most common narrative until the second half of the twentieth century. Threatened and disrespected by impositions coming from the constitutional assembly (the *Cortes*) in Lisbon after 1820 – a political body not only associated but also completely identified with Portuguese interests, according to Varnhagen – D. Pedro, governing Brazil since his father returned to Lisbon in 1821, proclaimed political separation without major conflicts (Varnhagen 1877). Ideas of continuity (embodied in the royal family, the same that had governed Portugal since the seventeenth century) and passivity (the transition of power did not affect or was affected by most of the Brazilian population) are central to that interpretation of independence. Even critics of Varnhagen, such as Aureliano Tavares Bastos, who considered Brazil's colonial legacy – monarchical absolutism, political centralization, and slavery – a hindrance to progress, maintained this view of continuity (Costa 2005, 61). Manuel de Oliveira Lima, who as Varnhagen was a diplomat with access to Portuguese archives, carried this vision into the early twentieth century, again highlighting the “peaceful character” of the Brazilian people and arguing that independence had been a “friendly breakup” between Portugal and Brazil (Lima 1922).

These authors not only describe independence as non-revolutionary, but also present it as inevitable. For Varnhagen, the arrival of the royal family in Brazil in 1808 facilitated an expected political transition. In Oliveira Lima's biological metaphor, Brazil's accession to the status of reign in 1815 was evidence that just as a son must eventually become emancipated, Brazil had finally come of age. The only source of conflict between Portugal and Brazil in this interpretation – the Constitutional Assembly with Brazilian and Portuguese representatives that took place in Lisbon between 1821 and 1822 – enters

1 Adelman (2006) was one of the few who noticed these similarities. However, he did not present quantitative evidence to support the argument.

suddenly and unexplained in the sequence of events. The causes of the successful revolution that forced D. João to swear allegiance in Rio in 1821 to a constitution that was still being debated are not presented, much less scrutinized. The nationalist division between Brazilians and Portuguese that would be one of the consequences of conflict within the *Cortes* is presented as something that preexisted and caused the undoing of the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil, and Algarves. However, as any attentive reader of documents from early nineteenth-century Brazil will know, there was no unifying Brazilian identity or nationalistic sentiment before 1821 in Portuguese America.

Another historical fact that the nationalist interpretation does not consider is that, as the Portuguese empire had been governed from Rio de Janeiro since 1808, many of Portuguese America's regions in fact rebelled against Rio's absolutist powers in the 1821 liberal revolution in Brazil. As Roderick Barman stated more than thirty years ago, "the harsh reality overlooked by the nationalist interpretation is that by June 1821 the kingdom of Brazil had dissolved into its constituent parts, not because of the machinations of the Lisbon Cortes but because of the desire of the local notables to recover provincial autonomy and to escape dominance by both Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon" (Barman 1994, 66). A similar criticism of the nationalist tradition was put forward by Maria Odila da Silva Dias, who convincingly showed that independence was not marked by a nationalist movement in Brazil (Dias 1986).

Following the nationalist interpretations, sanctioned and disseminated by the Brazilian Historical Institutes, a new generation of studies that used academic methodologies emerged in the 1930s. Caio Prado Júnior, who inaugurates this new phase, places economic relations at the center of the explanation for political separation. By emphasizing the idea of discontinuity, independence was now a revolution, but one led and accomplished by the Brazilian landed elite. Using a Marxist framework, Prado Júnior argues that the opposition of interests between colony and metropolis grew during the eighteenth century when gold discoveries intensified royal control over American territory. Until then, local landowners had shared power with Portuguese representatives (Prado Jr. 1986). The political crisis took on new contours with the boom in commodity exports after 1780, which intensified the dispute between landowners in Portuguese America and merchants linked to the metropolis. The reduction in colonial autonomy during a time of local economic growth was a contradiction that demanded synthesis, that is, emancipation.

The opposition between farmers and merchants presented by Caio Prado has been shown to have limited analytical strength, especially if the relevant transformations occurred during the second half of the eighteenth century, as the author argues. On the eve of independence, merchants residing in the

main cities of Brazil were also part of the “nobility of the land.” There is plenty of evidence that merchants involved in the slave trade invested in large agricultural holdings at that time (Fragoso and Florentino 2001). Therefore, there was no opposition between the commercial classes and landowners because these groups overlapped for decades before the crisis that led to independence. Another problem for Marxist interpretation is the end of colonial exclusivity with the opening of the ports in 1808 and the transfer of government from Lisbon to Rio. From then on, Brazil was no longer a colony – especially the southeast region. It is difficult, then, to use trade and structural positions occupied by Brazilians and Portuguese in commercial exchanges as sources of conflict that might have led to independence when these structural oppositions were no longer in place.

Another influential interpretation that builds on Caio Prado’s legacy is that of Fernando Novais and Carlos Guilherme Mota. They retain the idea of internal contradictions of the colonial system but, unlike Caio Prado, these contradictions are not situated in the Brazil-Portugal relationship, but instead in their common relationship with Britain, the center of the capitalist system (Novais and Mota 1996). Core features of the colonial system, such as slavery and trade monopoly, allowed for primitive accumulation that resulted in the Industrial Revolution. However, after the change in the mode of production that came with capitalism, slavery and trade restrictions became a drag on an economic system that needed consumers and free markets.

The use of the Industrial Revolution to explain Brazil’s independence suffers from an overdetermination problem. The most relevant fact in modern economic history has become the main cause of other processes because of its historical importance. However, as Pedreira has shown, it is hard to find any signs of commercial or political-ideological crisis of the colonial system in its final years (Pedreira 2006). Unlike Celso Furtado’s classic interpretation of the 1950s (Furtado 2006), later studies have shown that there was a boom in trade during the last decades of the colonial period. Several commodities, especially cotton, experienced impressive growth after 1780. Finally, the transfer of the Royal Court to Rio in 1808 also presents a problem to Novais’s interpretation. With free trade, there was no longer an impediment to the expansion of British capitalism to Brazilian markets. So why did independence only occur in 1822? In the end, as Jurandir Malerba argued, it becomes clear that structural, *longue durée* explanations are simply not fit to enlighten our understanding of political movements (Malerba 2006, 39).

After decades of dialectical materialistic historiography, a new generation of scholarship has sought in recent years to focus on the influence of ideas on political agency in Brazil – on liberalism as an ideological tool that presented

a path to change. Political culture, therefore, has gradually become an influential interpretation of Brazil's independence. According to Lúcia Pereira das Neves, political emancipation was not a revolution and involved only "members of the elite and a small number of free men, with more or less direct access to written culture" (Neves 2003, 22). The unprecedented circulation of documents discussing liberal ideas in the Luso-Brazilian world between 1820 and 1822 means that several words acquired new meanings and greater weight in public discourse. Tyranny, freedom, revolution, and constitution were not only used to delimit the problems of the colonies but also meant a path for change. For Pereira das Neves, this new mentality helps explain why independence became possible at the beginning of the 1820s. The problem is that liberal ideas had already been circulating within Brazilian elites since the eighteenth century (Maxwell 2004). The change in political culture that Neves identified in 1821 was a consequence of the liberal revolution (and the freedom of the press that ensued), as opposed to an exogenous cause of political change in the 1820s.

2 Independence and the Fiscal Crisis²

When the royal family arrived in Brazil escaping Napoleon's troops, there was a good deal of optimism on the part of locals regarding the economic prospects of the colony. Trade liberalization and proximity to power, an important condition for economic advantages in an absolutist regime, made economic elites envision a prosperous future. A decade later, however, urban uprisings began to spread simultaneously in Brazil and Portugal. Military personnel, clergy, urban dwellers (on both sides of the Atlantic), and plantation owners, all pointed to the excesses of the political system as causes of general dissatisfaction (Schultz 2013). Foreign observers, such as the Prussian consul in Rio de Janeiro, describing a situation of debacle in public accounts and the monetary situation, stated that the colony was "overrun with bank paper money" (Sturz 1837). After the king had to return to Portugal, his incumbent, D. Pedro, declared that the government was bankrupt.³

The Portuguese Empire's fiscal crisis, which created feelings of political discontent by the end of the 1810s, occurred gradually and then suddenly. When

2 This section is based on our book *Adeus, senhor Portugal. Crise do absolutismo e a Independência do Brasil*. Companhia das Letras, 2022.

3 *Documentos para a história das Cortes Gerais da nação portuguesa*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, pp. 243–4.

the royal court arrived in Rio de Janeiro, the government faced unprecedented expenditure obligations: it had to build a new administrative structure in South America while war expenses in Europe persisted. To cover expenses in Brazil, a series of taxes were created, especially in sectors with lower collection costs, such as the foreign trade sector. However, raising tariffs on imports, the traditional source of revenue, was economically unfeasible in the short term. The low diversification of the colonial economy meant that residents of Brazil needed to import a range of products, and the Napoleonic embargo on Europe had already significantly increased their prices.⁴ The cost, therefore, fell on exports, especially commodities with high demand in the period, such as cotton. In 1808, Thomas Jefferson's embargo offered an even more favorable market in Britain for Brazilian cotton, which explains why the Portuguese government believed that the cost of taxation would fall largely on consumers across the Atlantic.

The increase in revenues from exports, nonetheless, was insufficient to cover expenditures over time. The costs of the royal house in Rio de Janeiro, combined with military incursions on the River Plate (1816–1820) and in the northern region of Brazil (1817), generated growing deficits. The uprisings in the north were the result of tax increases (including consumption), which showed that this form of collection had reached its limit. Furthermore, the Portuguese government was unable to secure external sources of finance such as loans from Britain. The available option was to raise loans with *Banco do Brasil*, an institution created in 1808 with the explicit function of providing funds for the government. The government had borrowed from the Bank since 1810, but the loans began to grow faster after 1815. During this period, complaints about delays in payments owed by the government, the devaluation of paper money, and rising inflation suggest that the government was using monetary issuance to repay the loans. The record of debates in the constitutional parliament (1820–22) also confirms that D. João was in debt to the bank. On the eve of independence, the *Banco do Brasil* represented 26% of government revenue.

The effects of the fiscal crisis, especially inflation, help explain why independence was not the exclusive work of the elite, as argued unanimously by the three main interpretative traditions for the independence of Brazil. The rapid increase in prices, especially staple foods such as manioc flour and beef jerky, brought unrest to different urban groups, who attributed the situation to the crown's financial excesses. Higher food prices also increased the cost

4 The low tariffs in the commercial treaty of 1810, therefore, were not just a result of British political pressure. See Pereira (2021) for a quantitative analysis of the commercial treaty.

of production for exporters through the cost of feeding slaves. There are also numerous petitions from crown officials and other professionals, such as teachers, asking the king to raise salaries to offset the rising costs of living. We estimate real wages for this period and show that the fall in living standards in the decade between 1812–1822 was the largest that would be recorded until the end of monarchy in Brazil. Pamphlets, political reports, and correspondence between authorities, back in the 1810s and the 1820s, relate explicitly to both economic and political crises (Pereira 1956).

Despite these crises, there is no evidence of talks about independence or political emancipation in 1820 and 1821. What happened then in Brazil and Portugal was a military and popular urban uprising demanding a constitution and the end of absolutism. We argue that these political movements were ignited by the different effects of the fiscal crisis in Europe and South America: arrears of payment to military and civil servants in Portugal and inflation in Brazil. The difference between the two regions stems from the existence of an issuing bank and greater circulation of paper money in Brazil. American and European representatives were, at first, united against the king on the streets of the main cities of the empire and in the *Cortes* in Lisbon. What eventually sowed the disagreement between them was the fact that the fiscal crisis persisted. Trying to cut spending mainly in America, the Portuguese representatives (who outnumbered Brazilians 2 to 1) proposed cutting bureaucratic positions created in Rio after 1808 and refused to authorize a foreign loan to save the *Banco do Brasil*. Brazil's central-south political and economic elites then united around D. Pedro in defense of independence from Portugal. Northern notables that had revolted against Rio's centralization and at first sided with Europeans at the *Cortes* were brought to an agreement with center-south elites after D. Pedro offered them an exclusively Brazilian constitutional assembly and future control over taxes and investments in their provinces. Thus, the two-stage Brazilian independence process (liberal revolution and, afterwards, constitutional conflict and secession) was completed.

It should be noted, finally, that there is reason to hope that the new evidence on economic and fiscal troubles during D. João's government, as well as the new interpretation of Brazil's independence that those findings have elicited, should lead to further research on political movements both in Portugal and in Brazil in the 1810s and 1820s. We believe that there is a new, detailed and less nationalistic history of the 1820 liberal movement waiting to be written. The link between economic problems and political dissatisfaction both in Europe and in South America at the eve of the revolution indicates that the establishment of a Constitutional monarchy for the Portuguese empire in 1821 was not a nationalistic matter, as it is still regarded by many Portuguese

and Brazilian historians, but a more fundamental, transcontinental political movement. Both Manuel Fernandes Tomás, in Oporto, and Cipriano Barata, in Salvador, asked for the establishment of a parliament to limit the king's powers. The royal family return to Europe was a secondary matter (nobody would want D. João to simply rule the empire from Lisbon, if that ruling went on without constraints). But, of course, further research is necessary to either qualify or reinforce that argument.

More broadly, the link between fiscal constraints, economic malaise, and political revolts is one of the potentially more fruitful but at the same time one of the less explored research agendas for historians of nineteenth-century Brazil. William Summerhill has written a magnificent book on how Brazilian elites managed to keep the national budget “on an even keel” from the 1830s on and throughout most of the nineteenth century (Summerhill 2015). There is still need and opportunity, however, to investigate the relationship between fiscal problems and political events in Rio in the 1820s, leading to D. Pedro's abdication of the crown in 1831. Even less explored than national fiscal matters immediately after independence are budgetary circumstances for provincial governments throughout the nineteenth century. We still do not have proper quantitative evidence of copper money coinage (used by local governments to make ends meet and satisfy the constant request of revenues from Rio's government) by the end of the 1810s and the beginning of the 1820s, even though it seems that that specific form of *fiat* money contributed to local inflation and political unrest. And we have not yet explored possible relationships between local fiscal matters (very important after the decentralizing constitutional change of 1834) and the crucial provincial revolts that marked Brazilian history up to 1849. In sum, there is much to be gained if historians are convinced that it is in their best interest to follow the (state's) money.

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