

Book Review/Reseña

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Malerba, Jurandir. *Designing Brazil. Colonialism and Governance from the Portuguese Enlightenment to Brazilian Independence (1750–1825)*. Routledge, 2025.

Designing Brazil approaches the relations between Brazil and Portugal at a decisive moment that created the conditions for Brazil to transition from a colony to an independent country. Impacted by the recent liberal revolutions, which eventually led the Portuguese court to transfer to Rio de Janeiro in 1807–1808, Portugal, under the intellectual guidance of Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, the Marquis of Pombal, implemented a series of revitalization and modernization plans in an effort to prevent the empire from slipping into decline. The central subjects of this book are the projects, systems, plans, and ideas created by agents that belonged to the Portuguese elites—the Portuguese “enlightened reformism.” These innovations are articulated against a complex background context, treating the reforms of the country’s administration as a response to the crisis of the *Ancien Régime* and the collapse of the previous mercantilist logic of exclusivities, privileges, and monopolies in the economy, and reading the Portuguese Enlightenment in relation to the broader Enlightenment.

The first part of the book ranges from the reforms of the Pombaline Era to the impact of Portuguese Enlightenment in Portuguese America. The “*estrangeirados*,” members of the elite who had circulated around Europe and brought Enlightenment ideas to Portugal, diagnosed its decadence and advocated for modernization of the state. Carvalho e Melo, a “*estrangeirado*” himself, sees traditional nobility and the Jesuits as great obstacles to modernization, stripping the latter from the monopoly of teaching and expelling the order from Portuguese territories. His educational reforms were designed to bring about the “rationalization of the state into the service of the productive system” (28) and the “secularization of society through state action” (29).

Chapter 3 focuses on the meaning of the Enlightenment, exposing a fundamental contradiction in Portuguese “enlightened reformism”: since its proponents sought the

preservation of an absolutist monarchic state, the prevalence of reason led to pragmatism but not autonomy, emancipation, and individual liberty. The subsequent chapters analyze sociopolitical aspects of the period between the death of José I (1777) and the flight of the Portuguese Court to Rio de Janeiro (1807). Although Pombal resigns, reformers such as Martinho de Melo e Castro and Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho remain in power. These chapters also discuss the alleged crisis of the colonial system and the projects envisaged to increase the wealth extracted from Brazil. Here, author Jurandir Malerba emphasizes the role of scientific expeditions, cartography, and printing as an official political strategy devised by Coutinho to more efficiently map and exploit natural resources.

The transition to Part II covers the war between England and France over political hegemony in Europe, framed by Malerba as the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* and its colonial system when confronted by the liberal revolutions that shifted global geopolitics. Portugal makes a diplomatic effort to avoid taking sides in the conflict, but ultimately aligns with England, which would ensure the protection of the Portuguese court on its way to Brazil. The move reshapes social and power dynamics between colony and metropole, and the adaptations required display the approximation “between the two types of Portuguese: the newcomers and the local residents” (125–126): as merchants (with slave traders among the richest ones) provided accommodation for the court and paid homage to the king, the latter granted them honorific titles and nobility distinctions. Coutinho is once again a protagonist, sketching the restructuring of civil and financial administration. This moment also touches the works of Azeredo Coutinho, who refutes Montesquieu by arguing that education, laws, and trade, not climate, determine people’s courage, thereby defending civilization in the tropics while also justifying the slave trade as a favor to Africans.

The following chapters introduce the debate on the independence of Brazil that will take place in more detail in Part III. Chapter 11 shows the birth of a new class from within the *Ancien Régime* in the Brazilian context as a consequence of the arrival of the Portuguese court and the administration of the kingdom. Chapter 12 assesses the memory built around the figure of king João VI, and Chapter 13 deals with José da Silva Lisboa, Viscount of Cairu, a prolific writer, whom Malerba considers the designer of the economic liberalism doctrine that Brazil would adopt as an independent country, and the “mentor” (166) behind the opening of Brazilian ports, which benefited England and marked the beginning of Brazil’s political and economic emancipation from Portugal already by 1808.

The last part focuses on the independence of Brazil. As the colonial power of Portugal over Brazil decreases, the political conjuncture exposes the limits of the actions of aristocratic reformers toward preserving the unity of the Portuguese kingdom. The new social class will soon become Brazil’s ruling class, and among the projects that envisaged solutions to critical matters related to Brazil, such the slave trade, the Indigenous population, or the

establishment of factories, this aristocracy defines itself by economic interests, holding a fluid political identity, defending monarchist or republican agendas to the extent that these conform to their interests against internal enemies—enslaved people and lower classes—and external enemies—the Portuguese from the metropole. In this sense, Bonifácio—who, despite being a defender of monarchic authority, advocated for the suppression of slavery, recognized the oppression against Indigenous peoples, and understood the need for structural social changes in the nation—is defeated by a far more conservative project.

By focusing on figures of the Portuguese Enlightenment, mainly Bishop Azeredo Coutinho, Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho, José da Silva Lisboa, and José Bonifácio, and extensively engaging with primary sources and numerous scholars about this decisive moment in the history of the Portuguese Empire (including Brazil, which remained a colony for most of the period covered by the book), *Designing Brazil* approaches the class that perpetuates and shapes Brazil as a nation to this day. If, at the moment of independence, this class will defend monarchy, later it will support the proclamation of a Republic that is equally elitist and based on the concentration of income, land, and power. Malerba writes a compelling history of political and economic ideas and makes an original contribution to the bibliography about the period.

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