

Enlightened Reform in Southern Europe and its Atlantic Colonies, c. 1750-1830

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This is an important volume that hopefully will disseminate new ideas and stimulate new research outside and beyond the communities of Enlightenment and Atlantic historians that have contributed to it. The Southern Atlantic has been the site of some of the most interesting recent work in Atlantic history. Harry Kamen's fascinating claim that Spain was created by the empire, rather than the other way around, was only imaginable in that Atlantic context.⁽¹⁾ Similarly the Portuguese Atlantic merchant society, as described by Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, was a genuinely diasporic, border-crossing phenomenon, exactly the kind of community that Atlantic history promised to bring to historical light.⁽²⁾ The book offers a good example of the kinds of new ideas that might be generated if historians responded to Jack Greene's call for a 'hemispheric perspective', uniting Hispanic and Lusophone historiographies with the more familiar material on the 13 colonies.⁽³⁾ The volume is timely and speaks to current debates in a variety of fields. It offers more than a summation of new work in Southern Atlantic history and some new perspectives in the history of the Americas though. It has a sharp analytic edge, and uses the reform initiatives of the various states on the Mediterranean and Atlantic littoral as an optic through which to unite a set of seemingly divergent experiences. The base on which this feature of the volume is built is the plethora of work on reforming and patriotic societies in the absolutist states. To have some of this work gathered in one place is a contribution in itself. Developing a synthetic view on reform in the Southern Atlantic would be an ambitious agenda, but the organisation of the volume extends even beyond that, to a reconsideration of the nature and history of absolutist states and in particular to the relationship between absolutism and Enlightenment. The attempt to organise a collective volume of this scope and range should be applauded, and it is full of interesting ideas and insights. However this intervention is best thought of as a splendid opening to what will

be a much longer conversation. The new research is very exciting, placing the Iberian experience at the centre of the period is genuinely transformative, but many of the categories and explanatory concepts used to address that experience need to be rethought.

The central organising idea of the volume is, of course, 'enlightened reform'. 'Enlightened reform' is a deceptively simple idea. It is offered as a more reliable term than 'enlightened absolutism' or 'enlightened despotism' to account for the efforts toward political change conducted by a variety of elites in Ibero-America, Brazil, France, Italy, Portugal and Spain in the aftermath of the Seven Years War. At points it is used as an antonym to 'government reform', and the publics that pursue enlightened reform are also those that create new standards of legitimacy for the monarchies. At others government is located within the project, indeed as an 'engine' of reform generating novel ideas through its search for improved governance. This aspect of the idea reflects our changed understanding of absolutism as a process of negotiation between elites and the monarchy and is relatively uncontroversial. The collection illustrates how creole and colonial elites were able to implicate themselves within the polity and were not necessarily driven to oppose it.

More novel is the close integration of the congeries of improving and learned associations, from agricultural societies to physiocratic circles, into the project of enlightened reform. There is a price to be paid for widening the scope of the state's partners and gathering them in one big tent. The concept of enlightened reform becomes so capacious that it eventually loses its institutional mooring. In the introduction Gabriel Paquette argues that enlightened reform survived the ancien regime and traversed the revolutionary decades to provide a governing ideal in the early 19th century. This is a challenging and possibly unsuccessful extension of the idea. Matthew Brown's essay on monarchist themes in Bolivar's political practice, for instance, has difficulty disentangling continuities with Spanish colonial absolutism from ideas about constitutional monarchy. An older historiography identified much of this activity as part of a provincial enlightenment, and while the metropolitan bias that was inherent in that idea was unwarranted, the critical distance it retained between the monarchy and the agents of enlightenment is occluded in the more capacious term. One of the contributors to the volume, John Robertson, has argued that one of the motivations for projects of reform was the frustrations experienced by provincial elites of 'kingdoms ruled as provinces', areas such as Ireland, Scotland or Sicily that were uncomfortably integrated into new unitary monarchies and empires. It is difficult to allow for those kinds of tensions in the version of enlightened reform offered here. The concept of enlightened reform understood in this way may contain too many unlike and even antipathetic elements to make a coherent set. Enlightened reform is a species of 18th-century patriotism, and it is still not clear if that is best understood as an actor's concept, generated by an identifiable political group, or an analytic concept that we can use to identify secular trends within the European monarchies. Finally, the concept of enlightened reform is calibrated to erase the distinction between core and periphery within the Atlantic empires. Enlightened reform, a multi-polar process promoted by governing elites, was independently pursued around the Atlantic rather than a royal project disseminated from capital to colony. This is potentially the most exciting element of the concept. It aligns the two pressing concerns of the volume, improvement and Atlantic history, in a creative way.

In a volume with 21 essays it would be impossible to indicate all of the diverse ways in which the contributors respond to the hypothesis of enlightened reform, but it is worthwhile to pick up on where the concept drives the analysis and where scholars use it in a more mediated or nuanced way. John Shovlin's account of reform in France restricts it to the familiar agents such as de Gournay and Forbonnais and to the coterie of agrarian patriots inspired by Fenelon. Florian Schui widens the scope of fiscal reform in the French state after 1763. He explains how Moreau de Beaumont, *intendant des finances*, compiled a survey of the fiscal systems of all the states of Europe to illuminate the possibilities open to Louis XV and how this document organised opinion and debate within the monarchy for the next 20 years. This example illustrates how reform projects transcended borders and were shared among comparable states. The modest but illuminating use of enlightened reform as an element of state strategy parallels John Robertson's deployment of the idea in the case of Naples, where as he puts it, 'Enlightenment thinkers who appealed to the existence of an informed public opinion may have expected more than historians can deliver' (p. 31). These analyses of the Italian and French projects of enlightened reform do not align the Enlightenment quite as closely with

the projects of the absolutist state as the programmatic outlines elsewhere in the volume might lead us to expect. Christopher Storrs account of the phenomenon in the lands of the House of Savoy similarly stresses the practical goals of reforming statesmen and devotes less attention to the context of public moral judgement. In all these cases inter-state competition and the exigencies of trade and warfare were at least as important to reforming dynamics as the existence of an informed public opinion.

The heart of the volume is the contributions on the Spanish and Luso-American experience. The central theme of these essays is the richness and complexity of reform movements and the capacity of creole and local elites to direct, control and in certain circumstances even initiate the process. Jordana Dym's account of the *Gazeta de Guatemala* exemplifies the strengths of the approach. The *Gazeta* was a late colonial newspaper through which creole elites and imperial officials fashioned a public identity. That in turn allowed the Captain Generalcy to acquire the kind of communicative capacity and social structure that enabled it to negotiate Bourbon efforts to improve agriculture and industry. This is a very clear example of the interpenetration of distinct but convergent central and local ideals. Readership of the journal constituted a community that would eventually find its own ends. Kenneth Andrien's account of the secularisation of Peruvian parishes illustrates a similar story of local agency shaping imperial initiatives. Charles Noel's article on the Bourbon court of 18th-century Spain lies at the opposite pole of Enlightened Reform. Noel advances a very strong claim; that the Madrid court exerted considerable reformist authority, more, in fact, than Windsor or Versailles (p. 147). This is difficult to judge, how would one assess the efforts of Bertin after 1763, for example, in comparison to those of Floridablanca? The core of the idea, however, is that the court played a relatively larger role in the project of reform, than in other European states. Courtly reform in Spain, as Noel explains, was highly marked by a serious, *dévot*, sensibility and the court was an extensive institution, including aristocratic salons and the Royal Academies as part of its world. This institutional and political complexity is mirrored in the accounts of intellectual history. Victor Peralta Ruiz outlines how ex-Jesuit historians, writing in Italian exile, developed a response to Robertson and Raynal in defence of the Spanish colonial empire. Importantly, the intellectual heart of these projects was counter-Enlightenment humanism, rather than the premises of the Catholic Enlightenment mobilised by Jaun Buatista Munoz. Luis Carlos Villalta uses a very unusual source, the records of the Inquisition, to reconstruct a reading history of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* among the graduates of Coimbra University, finding a nest of Enlightened culture in the heart of the old regime. The Lusophone Atlantic offers possibly the most diverse ecology of enlightened reform, ranging from Pombal's authoritarian reformism in the mid eighteenth century to the promotion of Brazilian independence as a conservative political measure by Silva Lisboa. All of these essays have significance beyond their own fields and the body of work will have to be engaged with by scholars in adjacent fields, particularly historians of the age of revolutions. The Southern Atlantic needs to be integrated into many different stories.

The complexity and variety of reform efforts in the Bourbon monarchies and their cultural dependencies in Southern Europe is well established by this volume. The continuing importance of practices of multiple monarchy, continuities of legal practice and novel kinds of collective action around the Mediterranean and Atlantic littorals is also clear. However aligning all this activity with the Enlightenment waters down the concept of Enlightenment to a very weak phenomenon. Enlightenment becomes any form of intensified intellectual sociability. Civil society is also used as a synonym for Enlightenment; a mechanism through which we can understand the co-ordination of non-state actors and the servants of the monarchies in one capacious project. The development of civil society is offered as the context within which an enlightened ideal of public reason was brought to bear on the state and replaced both religious ideals and reason of state as the rationality of the monarchy. This coinage aligns well with a narrative of British Enlightenment and with the thesis that the end of the Seven Years War provoked reform in response to a new appreciation of the dangers posed to the Bourbon monarchies by a newly-dominant Britain. The Scottish figures, such as Kames, Ferguson, Hume and Smith, who developed the language of civil society did so at this time in an effort to understand the nature of this new British polity. However this was a distinctly British phenomenon and the applicability of the concept to these very different polities cannot be taken for granted. Indeed the chronology of reform is contested within the volume. 1763 is a key date in the history of French relations with Britain but, argues Manuel Lucena-Giraldo, reform in the many kingdoms dependent on the Spanish

crown was Bourbon, that is continuous from the accession of Philip V. Christopher Peter Albi reiterates the same argument. In his account of the position of Francisco Xavier de Gamboa's seemingly inconsistent positions on changes in the laws governing exploitation of mineral rights, Albi remarks that reform was less inspired by the Enlightenment than 'represented the transfer to America of a project to apotheosize the king's written law, which began when Philip V imposed Castilian public law and institutions on the provinces of the old crown of Aragon' (p. 249). We might replace the chronology of reform and abandon the category of Enlightenment entirely without detracting from the really important perspectives advanced by this collection. Unshackling the currents of Enlightenment from the efforts to maximise power and improve governance on the part of the Bourbons in all their realms in the period from the Treaty of Utrecht to the French Revolution would create a whole new set of interesting questions to engage our interest.

Notes

1. Harry Kamen, *Spain's Road to Empire: The Making of a World 1492–1763*, (London, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, *A Nation upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire, 1492–1640*, (Oxford, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jack Greene, 'Hemispheric history and Atlantic history', in *Atlantic History: a Critical Appraisal*, ed. Jack Greene and Philip Morgan (Oxford, 2009), pp. 299–316.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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