

**Dolhnikoff, Miriam, *José Bonifácio. O patriarca vencido.*
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Companhia das Letras has been publishing a judicious selection of biographies of leading figures from the History of Brazil since 2006. Not surprisingly, José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva was one of those chosen for inclusion in this list of *Brazilian personalities*. The task of writing his biography was handed to Miriam Dolhnikoff.²

Strictly speaking, it could be said that, just like some of the other figures whose biographies are included in this collection, José Bonifácio is, in fact, a *Portuguese personality*. Born in the city of Santos, in the captaincy of São Paulo, in 1763, he left Brazil to go to Coimbra at the age of 20 and ended up spending three quarters of his adult life in Europe. He studied in Coimbra for five years and then embarked on an academic *grand tour* through several countries of the old continent for a further ten years, taking on a long list of academic and administrative positions and responsibilities in Portugal for yet another two decades. When he returned to the country of his birth, after almost forty years away, he did so while still a Portuguese subject. But, twenty years later, in 1838, he was buried as a Brazilian citizen in the new Empire. Naturally, it is not José Bonifácio's ambiguous nationality in itself that affords him any special distinction, but instead the fact that he took on the role of the "patriarch of independence" in the narrative of the Brazilian nation.

Miriam Dolhnikoff's book benefits from an already fairly consistent historiographical legacy about Brazilian independence, the key moment in José Bonifácio's life during which he metamorphosed from a retired scientist into the founding father of a new nation. One of the strong points of this biography lies precisely in the balanced way that the various phases of José Bonifácio's life are distributed throughout the book. The author not only resisted the temptation to allow the image of the patriarch to overshadow that of the educated and cultured man, but she also showed herself to be immune to the deterministic pitfalls that so frequently tend to contaminate the biographies of statesmen. In this regard, the case of José Bonifácio was a particularly risky one. However, without

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² Miriam Dolhnikoff's primary works on the dynamics of the different powers that lay behind the construction of the Brazilian Empire include: (2005), *Pacto Imperial: As origens do Federalismo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Globo (2006) and *Diogo António Feijó - Padre Regente*. São Paulo: Imprensa Oficial.

ceasing to see the life of her biographical subject as a sequence of cumulatively interconnected experiences, Dolhnikoff consistently manages throughout the book to focus our attention on the multiple personal and professional possibilities open to a man who was himself the embodiment of one among several possible political outcomes. This subtle game of mirrors between José Bonifácio's individual path and the peculiar nature of the political conjuncture surrounding the breakup of the Portuguese Empire and the building of the Brazilian one is, undoubtedly, the most interesting point of this biography, in which, from the first to the last page, events follow on from one another with a great deal of ambiguity.

In a reasonable and, I would say, fairly analytical fashion, Miriam Dolhnikoff extends this ambiguity to her own position in relation to certain historiographical debates that spread across the pages of her book. By stating, for example, that Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho was the heir of the Marquis of Pombal, but, simultaneously, that the group of cultured men that José Bonifácio came to join “maintained a relationship with the Pombaline legacy that was marked by a certain dose of ambiguity” (45-48), the author skips over one of the most central historiographical debates about the period, namely the discussion about the nature and genealogy of the Portuguese enlightened absolutism.³ Biographies are, in fact, normally fertile ground for dismantling binomials that have reached a dead end. The example of José Bonifácio clearly illustrates this situation. His progression from a devout and enthusiastic supporter of absolute reformism to the founder of an imperial constitutionalism is sufficiently expressive of the unpredictable transformations that are peculiar to the historical conjunctures of transitional periods. Even so, Miriam Dolhnikoff reveals some discomfort in dealing with this apparent *volte-face* (justifying it through a kind of calculated cynicism that had led José Bonifácio to keep quiet about his liberal political sympathies while he was professionally dependent on the Portuguese Crown), even to the point of stating that “José Bonifácio praised the absolutist monarchs out of convenience and not out of conviction” (113).

This apparent contradiction in José Bonifácio's political thinking, which Miriam Dolhnikoff only partially resolves, seems to me, however, to be a false problem. Although the hypothesis of six decades of resigned silence is not impossible, I do not think it is necessary to go so far. In fact, it is the very narrative of Bonifácio's life, as built up by Dolhnikoff, that makes such attempts at justification perfectly dispensable. There does not

³ For a brief look at the way in which this debate has been applied to the Portuguese-Brazilian Empire, see, for example, the quite distinct positions adopted by Cardoso (2011) and Monteiro (2014), as well as Paquette (2013), especially “The reform of empire in the late eighteenth century” (17-83).

seem to be any type of incoherence between the diligent scientist-bureaucrat who worked with such dedicated commitment alongside Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho in attempting to modernize the Portuguese-Brazilian Empire by strengthening the Crown's coordinating capacity and the ardent politician who, alongside Dom Pedro, fought tirelessly to establish a constitutional architecture that would not call into question that same empire. Throughout this process, representative government was much more of a formula than a principle. As Miriam Dolhnikoff does well to note, in 1821, when José Bonifácio drew up the program that was to serve as the basis for the elected representatives of São Paulo to present themselves at the Lisbon parliament, he showed himself to be a defender of the Portuguese-Brazilian Empire. Not necessarily the liberal, or even the constitutionalist Bonifácio, but rather the enlightened sexagenarian, simultaneously aware of the irreversibility of this particular circumstance, its imperatives and the opportunities it offered.

The political conjuncture of the period from 1807-1822, during which the tortuous process of the breakup of the Portuguese-Brazilian system took place, may now seem to us at a distance to be truly unintelligible unless we take into account the relentless force of a behavioral dynamics in which political agents tended to react, more than they actually acted. In that fifteen-year period which Valentim Alexandre described as representing “the empire under tension,” it is not difficult to find the image of the imperial space as a malleable body being pulled by opposing forces, which continued to distance themselves from one another in a reactive fashion until they ended up producing the fatal rupture (Alexandre, 1993). And yet, the biography of one of the protagonists of this process reminds us that historical inevitability is nothing more than a trap into which the more imprudent future observers may easily fall.

As the most recent historiography has shown, in the late eighteenth century, in reaping the rewards of the reforms introduced by the Marquis of Pombal and Dom Rodrigo de Sousa Coutinho, the Portuguese-Brazilian Empire had adapted to the idiosyncratic adjustments made to the model of a pluricontinental monarchy and seemed to enjoy the conditions that were needed for its long and healthy survival.⁴ Regardless of whether certain factors can—and should—be considered as pre-existing structural conditions or as precipitant elements, whose effects were felt in the medium term, there is no denying that the trigger for the breakup of the Portuguese-Brazilian system was the sudden alteration of the international system that led to the strategic solution of

⁴ Cf. Alexandre (1993) and Paquette (2009) and (2013).

transferring the Portuguese court to Brazil and to the consequent dismantling of the colonial pact. Regardless also of the correlative accumulation of a host of other factors, the process as a whole was marked by some central focal points of complete incompatibility, including the tension between mercantilist and free-trade principles and the shift of the imperial axis of interests from the metropolis to the colony, to the detriment of the former.

The famous statement of the Marquis of Fronteira, naturally quoted by Dolbnikoff – “everyone wanted the Court in Lisbon, because they hated the idea of being a colony of a colony” (103-4) – summarizes extremely well the key point in the ever more intense deterioration of the process that had been set in motion by the Porto revolution. If this was the feeling that lay at the root of the revolutionary dynamics of 1820, then a similar repudiation of the peripheral condition was what was also at stake in the debate between the Portuguese-Brazilian members of parliament and those from the metropolis at the *Cortes Constituintes* of 1821. Contemporary historiography has already done away with the idea that what was discussed there was the re-establishment of the colonial pact (Berbel, 1999 and Rocha, 2009.). Both parties knew about the impossibility of a return to the *statu quo ante*. After the royal family had left for Brazil, José Bonifácio himself strove hard for a further ten years to return there too, as he was now tired and distressed to find himself living on the margins of the empire.

Through the influence of his brother António Carlos, José Bonifácio went to the Lisbon *Cortes* to defend a system of governance that made it possible for both kingdoms to overcome this marginality. But it is worth remembering that the foundations of this concept of equity were above all pragmatic and rational in nature. Faced with the political crisis, José Bonifácio revealed that, after all, he had a keen sense of adaptability. He was an “opportunist” in the French sense of the term, or, in other words, in the sense that he was capable of acting according to circumstances and, simultaneously, of knowing how to take advantage of the opportunity of the moment. It is only in this way that we can understand how, without any paradoxes, the “patriarch of Brazilian independence” was one of the men who, between 1820 and 1822, had fought most determinedly for the continuity of the Portuguese-Brazilian Empire.

Both in the course of this struggle and, after independence, in his confrontation with the federalist forces, José Bonifácio always remained coherent in his belief in the modernizing potential of a strong central power. In the same way that he had accepted the idea of representative government since he considered that “to wish now to govern without it is to wish for disorder and to run terrible risks” (110), in 1822, despite the fact

that he was absolutely opposed to the holding of a Brazilian constituent assembly, he ended up giving in to this idea, alleging that he could no longer “withstand the tide of opinion” (144). After independence was consummated on 7 September 1822, the ferocity of the provincial forces and the adoption of ever more extreme positions again put his adaptability to the test. Having been defeated after several months of political combat, Bonifácio showed that he could not be “opportunistic” in the normal sense of the word, and that his capacities for adaptation were perfectly in keeping with his temperament and his vision of the world.

Perhaps the most fascinating of all the chapters in this biography is precisely the one in which Miriam Dolhnikoff presents us with a carefully organized and articulate synthesis of José Bonifácio’s thwarted attempts to apply his reformist thinking to a Brazilian national project. The abolition of slavery, the integration of the native population, the promotion of *mestiçagem*, and the civilization of the ordinary people and the elite according to European standards were the main points of what the author judiciously referred to as *Bonifacian alchemy* (199) and which had as its ultimate aim to create a nation that was homogenous in both social and civil terms. But, in this list of ingredients, the extinction of the slave trade and the gradual abolition of slavery were undoubtedly the two that José Bonifácio considered most important, since, from his point of view, at their very root, they endangered all the possibilities of constructing a civilized nation. Bonifácio’s attacks were directed precisely at the foundations of the economic structure, in which the demands of those clamoring for autonomy had found the strength that would provide them with political emancipation. He therefore knew that he could reckon with the overwhelming opposition of the dominant elites, and that only a very strong government would have the means to implement a national project of profound modernization.

In what was to be his final combat, however, Bonifácio ended up being defeated all along the line. His formula of “social alchemy” would have to wait a further half century before being recuperated by the abolitionists of the 1870s. His model of a representative institutional architecture founded on the predominance of royal power was to be tacitly and successively perverted until the way was paved for the establishment of the “imperial pact” between the Crown and the provincial elites that sustained the political order throughout the “Second Reign.”⁵ After so many years spent reinventing himself in his continuous response to the challenges of the times, José Bonifácio ended up allowing himself to be defeated by the apparently utopian intransigence of his own thought.

⁵ On this subject, besides Dolhnikoff, see also Mattos (1987).

The subtitle of this biography of José Bonifácio, *the defeated patriarch*, is particularly expressive in the way in which it captures this death rattle of a life of constant struggle. As is to be expected in a good biography, this book does not limit itself to presenting the battlefields, since it is also concerned with revealing the soldier's state of mind. In this case, we have a man whose tempestuous nature and existential unrest caused him, throughout his life, to swing abruptly between hope and tiredness. A man who, at the age of forty, was already displaying a fervent desire to retire from public life, and from whom public life was yet to demand the greatest tests of his dedication for a further three decades. Miriam Dolhnikoff makes frequent reference to the writing and correspondence of José Bonifácio, which allows her to arrive at a more profound understanding of the mind of her subject, thus resulting in the fact that one of the many merits of this work is precisely the balanced picture that she paints between factual narrative, theoretical reflection and a no less important psychological dimension.

João Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva never occupied a position of governance for more than a few months, never wrote a book about his political ideas, his academic activity never earned him any particular recognition, and his poetic work has remained forever obscure. He was an individual who had the good (or bad) fortune to live at a time when a great rupture was being made with the past, a time that was so complex that it can only be made truly understandable by shifting the level of observation to the micro-scale. Both the value and the opportune nature of this biography also lie in the way that it performs this function. By masterfully narrating the career of the enlightened Portuguese reformer who died as the patriarch of Brazilian independence, Miriam Dolhnikoff has made a remarkable contribution to our understanding of one of the most complex periods in the History of the Western World. The history of a life that was made up of unforeseen events, inconsistencies and disconnections. A book to remind us that we should read it, not to learn with History, but in order not to be surprised by it.

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