

Conclusions Part I

THE IBERIAN GROUNDS OF THE EARLY MODERN GLOBALIZATION OF EUROPE

In the classical view of globalization as ‘the Rise of the West’, Iberian empires are taken to have generated world economies in which these two countries—both of them economically backward, it is said—were unable to take advantage of the possibilities offered to them by the new markets of America and Asia (Wallerstein 1979; Frank 1978). Today this model is very much under review. This is not only because of doubts concerning the size of these markets, which appear to have been considerably smaller than was once thought (O’Brien 1980). It is also because what might be termed ‘Iberian globalization’ is now recognized as one of several such processes. Similar transformations had taken place in other areas of the world, from Anatolia to India, Russia, and even China (up to the fifteenth century) (Findlay and O’Rourke 2007; Darwin 2008).

The reasons for this burst of Iberian expansion are well known—commercial growth, the search for gold and new routes to Asia, the evangelizing impulse, and so on. Equally famous is the sophisticated maritime technology and weaponry of the Iberian peoples; this can be linked to the meeting of cultures and the transcultural processes and knowledge transfers that had taken place in Iberia during the Middle Ages. These societies therefore formed the embryo of European expansion, with the birth of naval superiority perhaps being the key to it—indeed, it was also the main limitation, to the extent that no such advance was made in the military control of territories (Headrick 2010; Findlay and O’Rourke 2007). And it is also clear that the analysis provided by E. Jones (1981), who underlined

the decisive role of competition among states for European political and economic development, was very applicable to Iberia. The competition between Castile and Portugal, and the need of both to assert their rights in areas like the Canaries and the African coast, where their subjects had been both collaborators and rivals from the very beginning, is a good example of this.

But, this having been said, this conflict was rather different from what is commonly imagined. Both the King of Portugal and his rival and counterpart in Castile were trying to channel, and thus control, internal tensions in their respective kingdoms. This struggle was in reality the fruit of the relations of solidarity and conflict that existed among the nobilities, aristocracies, the cities, and the Church, all of whom competed with each other and with the Crown for the control of resources. This was to a large extent due to the context of jurisdictional and political fragmentation of the societies of the time. In fact, if advanced capitalist economies are characterized by a state that regulates market competition, then early modern ones were shaped by political ‘competition’ among social agents for the control and expansion of their economic, political, military, and (even) religious resources. In this game, the king was not an impartial referee but rather an agent who had to defend his interests and present himself as a third party at one and the same time. And it is very important to emphasize—in contrast to Jones’s interpretation and the others most frequently advanced by scholars—that the background to this dynamic was formed by relations of tension and reciprocity existing within each of these social agents and, in particular, in the family, lineage, and kinship relations that characterized them and which they tried to solve by expanding the resources available to each one of them. Institutions such as *mayorazgo*, important in all societies of Southern Europe, were a means of preserving the lineage from dissolution and thus to maintain and keep together a series of resources that were vital in this confrontation. But this institution also further sparked and sought expansion, insofar as it required an increase in family resources to meet the needs of the secondary branches of the family and the extended lineage and, consequently, the collateral payments upon which these organizations depended. Yet these kinds of needs were not only found among the aristocracy but also in the nobility at large and even among the urban classes, who sometimes projected them into the expansive policies and politics of the cities themselves. The entrance of family members into the Church, a Malthusian practice for combating this situation at the level of the individual, could in turn redouble this expansive dynamic and deepen the conflict within elites on a more general scale. Although J. Schumpeter (1955) suggested something like this view of elites when he

spoke of the processes of social ascension of the former, the argument set out here goes a step further. In any case, the result was a process of ‘imperial’ construction that would have a unique and special stage in Iberia and that was manifested in the fight against Islam and, often, in the usurpation of the royal patrimony that had been at the eye of the storm during the fifteenth century. As a result of all this, by 1238 Aragon had completed its ‘re-conquest’ in Iberia and built an ephemeral—but impressive—‘empire’ in the Mediterranean that was the fruit of the Crown’s ability to coordinate and direct the internal dynamics of the nobility and mercantile groups (Gerbet 1994). In 1249 the Crown of Portugal had conquered the Algarve, and its nobility and monarchy—supported by the Portuguese and Genoese mercantile classes—threw themselves into the African and Atlantic expansion that the king tried, with relative success, to control. In Castile, these same energies threatened the king’s patrimony and created internal tensions that would lead to the conquest of Granada and the expansion into Africa and America.

All this would shape the imperial adventure. In terms of their organizational capacity, these were not archaic empires of medieval character: on the contrary, though the medieval component is obvious, the Iberian empires saw determined attempts at centralization made by their respective monarchies, a continuation of the medieval struggles. This was possible thanks to their institutional and military development and to the educational revolution that was taking place in Iberia (Chap. 4). Without these components, the empire would not have been possible—this was especially true for the one that would revolve around Castile—nor would it have taken the very complex form that it would eventually adopt. But without considering the forces behind the colonization programme, we cannot understand the dynamics of these empires. Originating in the needs of elites and their internal dynamics, with Crown finance often playing a limited role in their construction, the conquest instead tended to be characterized by the conferral of political capital and spheres of self-government upon the colonizers in exchange for their campaigns of conquest undertaken on behalf of the king and the resources that they won for him. For this reason, these two empires would soon be grounded on a vast number of micro-negotiations that counterbalanced attempts at control by the central apparatuses of these monarchies. Scholars often forget, even when they speak of the importance of religion in Iberian imperial enlargement, that the prodigious expansion of religious orders and institutions in the new territories implied an externalization of the costs and risks of colonization by the Crown. Costs of this sort were in fact met by a plethora of clerics who preached Christ with one hand and won subjects for the monarchs of Madrid and

Lisbon with the other. The agreements between the Habsburgs and the Pope, on the one hand, and the Avis and the Pope, on the other, to increase the monarchs' participation and control of the resources generated by the Church (patronage rights, the granting of tithes to the king, etc.) are a manifestation of the intention of these dynasties to intervene in this process and the resources it generated. But this entente implied that the Crown recognized the wide influence of the religious orders and even of the secular church in the New Worlds. The Jesuits would perhaps be the best example of the tension implicit in this relationship, and their expulsion from both empires in the eighteenth century was a manifestation of the risk of rupture that had always threatened this process.

The results of all this were varied: on the one hand, the Crown obtained enormous resources that it would try to control through a centralized bureaucracy based in the metropolis. On the other hand, another outcome was the emergence of a system in which the centralization and autonomy of the various social and institutional agents were mixed. Given the vast extent of empires and the wide variety of these conditions and situations in them, this balance between centralization and autonomy was very diverse indeed. These were not centralized empires; but neither were they simply a chain of decision-making centres of equal importance within the hierarchy and capable of imposing their agenda upon the centre. The urban or enclave character of some colonial areas facilitated attempts at central control based on the use of these nodes as centres of dominium and negotiation with the elites. But these were—obviously—immense territories, where the exercise of power was often difficult. The ethnic, social, and cultural diversity of these empires, immersed in one of the greatest globalizing explosions in history, would further complicate their monitoring and exercise of authority. An attempt was made to combine the difficult equilibrium that arose from this situation with a policy that, while it did not exclude violence, attempted to be inclusive and, in the long run, would maintain and even increase the levels of diversity. It is not surprising that J. H. Elliott has emphasized that this was one of the great differences with the English empire in America, where an exclusive, rather than inclusive, approach predominated (2006, Epilogue, pp. 594–595).

Empires such as these were able to wage war successfully on other empires that had begun similar processes. They did so in America and on the African coast, and despite a greater degree of parity, their efforts in Asia were relentless; here the Portuguese exercised some initial advantages in the techniques of naval combat, although rather fewer in terms of land warfare and the control of territory (Headrick 2010).

In America, the struggle for colonial resources, the difficulty in regulation, and the remarkable Iberian superiority in the exercise of violence over conquered peoples led to a capacity to destroy the original ecosystems that was unprecedented in history. The impact on the globalization process is hard to exaggerate. Looked at only from the demographic perspective, a global population of around 430 million inhabitants saw some 60–70 million disappear in just 60 years, that is, about 15% of humanity. And if we extrapolate the growth figures of the rest of the world between 1500 and 1600 (around 32%) and calculate the world population on this basis, the result would be that it would have stopped growing at around 80–90 million inhabitants. Even considering the major past pandemics such as the outbreak of the Black Death in Europe, it is difficult to imagine phenomena so devastating and of such great impact in the long term.¹ Furthermore, the transformation of American ecosystems should also be taken into consideration. An institutional perspective may offer important insights into this facet of the ‘Columbian encounters’, as ecological imperialism was clearly highly significant in them. Moreover, if by ecosystem we mean a set of relationships between social and natural agents that include the institutions of different societies, as in the preceding pages, it can well be said that what was being demonstrated was the inefficiency of the Iberian institutions when it came to preserving and replenishing many of the resources that were being systematically destroyed. The demographic crisis in America coincided with the enormous cultural distance that separated the existing American societies and those of Europe. In turn, this cultural gulf created great differences in its material culture and consumption patterns. All of these factors meant that it was thus very difficult for dynamic markets to emerge for European products in general, and for Iberian goods in particular, and it would take a long time to generate world economies that would lead to relations of centre-periphery domination in the two banks of the Atlantic world. Indeed, everything indicates that, following the logic of a pre-mercantilist ideology, this was not the fundamental aim or assumption of the metropolis in framing its policies.

In a world with many centres of economic globalization, areas were found—the Indian Ocean and Asian regions in general—that were capable of bombarding Castile and Portugal, and through them Europe as a whole, with highly expensive products with high added value. This favoured a neg-

¹ Obviously, these calculations are purely guidelines. The figures of Findlay and O’Rourke (2007, p. 161) come from Maddison (1995). See also Chap. 2.

ative trade balance between Europe and Asia. If centre-periphery economic relations existed—a very dubious proposition that we have refuted at the European level—these were the very opposite of the model presented in the literature of the 1970s. As a consequence, the effects on trade integration on a global scale were limited as the goods sent to Europe from the Asian areas constituted a very small part of its overall production; in turn, this perspective explains why some authors have found data that supports the absence of an early commercial globalization (O'Rourke and Williamson 2002, 2005).

Given that American markets had yet to be developed and imports from Asia were very much focused on luxury products that were still sold in small quantities in relation to the size of the European economy, it is understandable that the poly-nuclear character of fifteenth-century European growth was also maintained. As far as the Iberian kingdoms are concerned, they could take advantage of the new resources and the price differential with Asia, but also that relations on a global and imperial scale were not primarily responsible for improvements in their productive systems. This does not mean—despite a strong historiographic tradition to the contrary—that productive advancements did not occur in Iberia. On the contrary, these clearly did occur and were remarkable precisely because there was no hint of an international economic subordination and the economic growth at European level remained poly-nuclear in character.

Contrary to what has often been said about Iberian technological backwardness, important advances were clearly behind this growth, based upon the circulation of knowledge and expertise in the region. In spite of the fact that the composite monarchy implied the institutional diversity of the different states of the Habsburg dominions, the simple fact that many polities belonged to the same dynasty favoured the circulation of technology among them. Undoubtedly, the porous borders of the time were not an obstacle to the circulation of technological practices, but this network of polities accelerated it to the extent that it included areas such as Italy and the imperial territories of Central Europe, while both the king and elites were powerful agents of transmission of knowledge (Yun 2017). Likewise, there was a growing connection between the different regional ecosystems within the peninsula. These would not produce an integration of the internal markets similar to the one that would serve as the basis of industrialization in England after 1750. On the contrary, a series of economic regions were strengthened by their links with the sea; however, most decisive in this regard were ties in the interior lands, which increased

the domestic connections but failed to create an urban system or an integrated market on a peninsular scale. The limitations of the transport system and the composite character of the monarchy—and, therefore, the need to respect the borders between the various Iberian kingdoms—also limited market integration. But growing interregional connectivity was encouraged by the boom in the cities of the interior as political centres from the fifteenth century onwards, which in turn triggered the commercialization of domestic production and encouraged ties between neighbouring areas. In this context of a certain mercantile development, it is understandable that American silver, combined with the growth in population and the division of labour (parallel to urbanization), should have produced the most intense and genuine price revolution in Europe of this time. Had this occurred in an economy with hardly any mercantile development, the effects of the flow of silver would have been very different.

Moreover, growth was especially encouraged by the existence of property rights that were apparently inefficient—at least, according to the model of the new institutional economics—but which, thanks to the regional ecological systems in which they thrived, the abundance of resources and the complex factors that generated them turned out to be highly positive throughout most of the century. It might, indeed, be possible to talk of growth and development in a pre-industrial economy such as this one.

The internal confrontations among elites, and the limits placed upon their capacity to extract resources from society—and in the case of Portugal, the empire—were set down in the different political systems seen in the many Iberian kingdoms towards the end of the fifteenth century. Although all typology is a simplification, the models conformed to different patterns also present in other areas of Europe. Across the peninsula—if more slowly in Aragon—the strengthening of the power of the king, the market, and the cities had paralysed any development that would have led to a greater seigniorial control of the peasant labour force, and, of course, this had reduced the chances of developing a peasant servitude system. Portugal and Castile in fact gave rise to forms of absolutism characterized by a high degree of manoeuvrability of the central power (this was very close to the French model), which did not imply a reduction of the enormous power of the regional and local elites and their capacity to monopolize the economic, political, and military resources. The expansion of such elites had been based on increasing the size of the pie rather than on substantial changes on how it was distributed; this having been said, by the end of the fifteenth century, Portugal was already advancing towards a system in which the monarch

exercised a remarkable degree of power thanks to colonial revenues. The territories of the Crowns of Aragon and Navarre evolved towards forms of absolutism combined with more solid parliamentary systems that, although very different to it, are more reminiscent of the English model in terms of its effectiveness in containing the power of the king. In all cases it proved very difficult to expand the resources of the nobles, elites, and king at the same time; in Castile this was for geostrategic reasons and in Aragon because its expansive cycle had been consummated much earlier. In short, then, Castile and Portugal were creating powerful systems for pumping resources and opportunities for elites through state and fiscal apparatuses that were, by the standards of the time, remarkably efficient. In the Crown of Aragon, it was impossible for the nobility and elites to benefit from comparable mechanisms. This meant that seigniorial jurisdiction became an essential consideration and factor for them, particularly in the kingdom of Aragon itself, which also shied away from the English model.

Of course, the different characteristics of these polities varied in proportion to each case. But the most important thing is the diversity of the constitutions and political practices of these territories. This was all the greater if we take into account that within each of these political formations, there coexisted very different legal systems and a wide variety of customary norms. When comparing the Iberian Peninsula's political formations with those found in the Holy Roman Empire or the Italian Peninsula, we tend to emphasize the proto-national character of Iberian states. But internal diversity and jurisdictional fragmentation were also very prevalent in the peninsula. This would be decisive—even more so when the inheritance of Charles V is taken into account—for their government and, this is often forgotten, for their respective imperial ventures. These empires would become the solution to the problem of the elites' social consolidation and expansion. In other words, globalization—and the way in which European globalization was taking place—would have a decisive impact not only upon the models of economic development but also upon the state-building processes and the reproduction of asymmetries that would leave an indelible mark on the history of Europe. This does not mean that these elites and the social and economic systems on which they were based were going to remain immutable; if anything, the very opposite was the case. And this is the subject of the next chapters.