

EPILOGUE

Both the Spanish and Portuguese empires—as is almost a rule in the history of empires—have had bad press. From contemporary commentators to the current historiography, many authors have emphasized the most negative perspective or have made implicit comparisons with the present that have led to pessimistic assessments. When not seen as lost opportunities for the formation of national states, these empires are considered a drag on economic growth and even an obstacle to Spain’s and Portugal’s economic modernization.

From the political point of view, both empires—but above all the Spanish—have been considered as anomalous in the process of state formation. It has been generally accepted that the Spanish Empire was the key to an abortive process of constructing a Spanish nation state, which consequently could not evolve either on the English parliamentary model or according to the French Jacobin one (Bernal 2005). It can, however, be argued that other forms of state building were possible. Here it has been maintained that, at least until c. 1640, the Spanish empire was the key to the composite monarchy’s high capacity for reproduction. We do not know what would have happened without it, but all available evidence leads us to think that this political system could not have survived, at least in the form that it did or for as long as it did, without the empire. The truth is that, as far as Spain is concerned, rather than an unfinished project (an argument that hides a certain anachronism tinged with pessimism), the empire allowed a composite monarchy consisting of diverse polities—

crowns, kingdoms, principalities, seignorial and urban jurisdictions—with separate institutions and, above all, different parliaments, to reproduce itself. This political formula is not surprising for its time. Nor should it—viewed from the current perspective—be regarded as an aberration, in view of other, even longer, later and more complex processes of nation-building, such as those of Germany or Italy. As has been said many times, composite states are not the exception but the rule, in the history of early modern Europe.

In regards to its economy, the Portuguese empire has been considered the cause of its backwardness, which was based on the export of raw materials in exchange for industrial products. It has also been seen as the cause of the draining of human capital into the colonies, which, apart from other evils, aborted the formation of a solid bourgeoisie in the homeland.¹ In the Spanish case, the negative visions are curiously contradictory and bear the hallmark of monetarism. For many authors, the colonies were the cause of inflation, which rendered the goods produced in the homeland uncompetitive and, at the same time, led to an increase in wages, which reduced industrial profits. The result would be an unfavourable trade balance that would end up ruining Castile. On the other hand, it is still said—indeed, a number of contemporary theorists first noticed this trend—that the external payments of the monarchy in the European wars must have both encouraged the growth of other countries and limited the chances of domestic development.

As we have seen, recent studies on Portugal rather tend to strengthen the idea that the empire had a net positive effect on the economy. No similar estimates had been made for Spain. This having been said, in the above pages, it has been argued that the impact on the economies of both countries has to be studied from the viewpoint of institutions. In both cases, the empires contributed to—and were based on—the development of political economies that were efficient for a long period but, after 1600, were unable to feed domestic growth above a certain level of resource utilization and international competition. Furthermore, when this epoch's economic growth is studied, the impression is that it took place not because of the efficiency of the institutions—as the new institutional economic describes them—but in spite of them. This was largely because the empires contributed to accentuate the elites' capacities to acquire

¹ See a brief state of the art in Costa, Palma, and Reis (2015).

incomes rather than their interest in innovation, to use the binomial expressed by E. J. Jones. Moreover, the positive effect of Spanish silver on other economies—particularly the Dutch one (Chap. 6)—should be related to the fact that in these areas, with different institutional and social structures and with different ecosystems (particularly in the agricultural sector), the Habsburgs' expenditures increased their competitiveness. The result, in any case, was a series of readjustments in Iberia rather than an economic decline throughout the whole peninsula.

This being the case, it would be even more illusory to expect these empires to have produced a modernization of the Iberian economies or something similar to modern or intensive economic growth. Whatever the value of the concepts of the 'Great Divergence' and the industrial revolution, none of the current general interpretations of them have any heuristic significance from the perspective of Spain and Portugal in 1600. In Castile and Portugal, high salaries and emigration to America or Asia and Brazil did not lead to an investment in technology and the transition to a labour-saving and technologically intensive economy for obvious reasons that have to do with their political economy and institutional framework, the inexistence of an economically efficient state, and the still-limited nature of globalization.² It is important to stress how different the world of 1750 was from that of 1600: in regard to both foreign and interior markets, the state and globalization at the time of Philip III of Spain were far from those of England under Pitt the Elder. It is therefore clear that Iberian domestic growth of the sixteenth century had to be limited. Furthermore, to demand that industrial capitalism emerge from this growth and, though comparisons must be always welcomed, to judge the achievements of empires by their inability to sponsor and sustain intensive capitalist growth are simply an exercise in historical stupidity which few historians now posit.

Our view of Spanish and Portuguese imperial organization has also been dominated by an idea of exceptionalism. This is especially the case if the subject is approached from an anachronistic perspective based upon a simplistic understanding of the empires of the nineteenth century. But many of their supposed traits and failings are typical of almost all empires.

All empires have been based on a negotiation between centres and peripheries or on the plurality of decision-making centres, as is clear from

²For an interpretation along these lines for England, see Pomeranz (2001).

studies such as that of Burbank and Cooper (2010) and the relations they describe for empires such as those of the Ottomans, Chinese, Romans, and others. But this is also the case if we focus on post-Iberian empires. Darwin (2012) has seen the English empire as an unfinished one, partly because of the existence of very diverse decision-making centres and interests that did not always converge. Its experience in India and the transfer of sovereignty to the East India Company is very significant in this regard, as it is also the case of the Netherlands with the VOC and the existence of very diverse decision-making centres in its overseas domains (Adams 2005). Another weakness often highlighted for the Portuguese and Spanish empires, the high cost of war and the way in which the mobilization of military resources affected the chances of development, was set out long ago by P. Kennedy (1988) as a characteristic of all empires. By their extension all empires have experienced problems of communication and information, and they all must face the challenge of asymmetric information that affects the relations between their diverse centres, in particular in regard to those between the metropolis itself and its peripheries. Precisely because of the above, the negotiation between the centre and periphery—or between the different centres—led to transfers of not only political but also economic capital to the elites and resulted in rent-seeking practices among them, something that has often led to the use of the term corruption. And we could go on.

It is quite possible that the way to understand these empires better is by focusing on their specificities in their concrete historical context and in relation to their competitors of the day. Undoubtedly, their greatest rival until well into the seventeenth century would be the Ottoman Empire. This may be highly significant. Here Burbank and Cooper (2010) have offered very suggestive ideas. From the perspective of their respective political economies, there are many similarities. Like its Iberian competitors, the Ottoman Empire increasingly relied on taxation, especially after 1580, in part in response to the war efforts and in part because of its confrontation with the Habsburgs (Pamuk 2012). Like in the Portuguese and Spanish empires, this resulted in the local elites enjoying greater autonomy, which both increased their freedom of action and the decentralization of the tax state. But there was one fundamental difference: at no point before the eighteenth century did the Sultan try to implement a protectionist policy. Thus, there was never anything comparable to the *Carrera de Indias* in the Ottoman domains. On the contrary, the Sultan's principal concern was that commerce should flow through the various trade routes

and networks—often under the control of non-Muslims—with the intention of collecting taxes and facilitating domestic supply systems, especially in Istanbul. Hence, the Sultans were able to meet, and even benefit from, the challenges of globalization that corroded the income of the Kings of Spain and Portugal. And the Ottoman Empire would also remain a very decentralized polity until the nineteenth century.

More important, however, was that the composite character of the Spanish empire and the monarchy hindered the transfer of funds from one state to another within it and that this occurred not only for technical reasons but also, and more importantly, because it created ‘constitutional’ frictions between those territories; this is to say that it affected the pacts with the various elites, especially in the European territories but also in the relations between Portuguese and Castilians, vital between 1580 and 1640. As I have repeatedly stressed, the Habsburg system was not a proto-state, a nation with an empire, but, rather, a network of polities, one of which, Castile, had created an empire (Yun 1998, 2012, 2015). The problem was not only that the Habsburgs had many theatres to attend to and deal with but also that their entire system was based on the theoretical precept that no transfer of resources could be made between their states. This system—based on a principle which was not always respected by the Crown—was efficient for the reasons set out above but only until political formations arose that, despite not being modern state units, increasingly resembled the formula of homogeneous proto-national states from the point of view of their territorial integrity and that, at the same time, built colonial systems of an eminently commercial character and sought to save costs in the administration of these colonies. This was the case for Holland and England in the seventeenth century. These political formations best fit the most efficient model in the emerging mercantilist world.

In both cases, Britain and Holland, this meant a territorial continuum which, despite its political fragmentation, allowed for a more efficient customs system, based upon a narrow fiscal space in the metropolis whose customs duties, fuelled by foreign and colonial trade, accounted for most of its income. This does not mean that those empires, including the British, were free from corruption, nepotism, smuggling, patronage, and the negative effects of informal social networks. The recent literature in this respect is very significant (see, e.g. Rothschild 2011). But, above all, these empires—and in particular England—also witnessed genuine financial revolutions which, from the end of the seventeenth century, supported more efficient tax systems and issued debt at interest rates even lower than

those of Spain and with more payment guarantees. More importantly, from the late seventeenth century, the English empire would achieve all of this while a more efficient and competitive economy emerged and flourished. In this sense it is revealing that, although there was contraband in the English empire, it was often based on the fraudulent export of industrial products of high added value, which was positive for the country's economy as a whole.

There is another aspect to consider. The two Iberian empires belonged to an epoch in which family and extended kinships ties were crucial for the articulation of political, social, and economic life. They were in fact the DNA of those societies and therefore that of their empires. This is not new in history. On the contrary, family and kinship—in their very different variants—also had been crucial components of the social fabric and all primitive empires from the Romans to Tamerlane and even afterwards. As we have seen, imperial endeavours were in part a direct or indirect product of the dynamics of family and lineages and of the networks they supported, which were vital to the empires' constitution and functioning. This fact had many implications, and a very important one for our arguments is that one of the Iberian empires' key traits was the relative commercial efficiency of informal institutions that pivoted around kinship and went beyond it—and, in particular, of the mercantile networks that built trust upon mechanisms of enforcement that often operated on the margins of the state. Insofar as these networks had much to do with solidarities within the very extended family relationships and the political economy of the time, they not only corroded the monarchs' agenda for centralization but also contributed to the perversion (to our eyes) of the formal institutions and to the weakening of their states, making it more difficult to be competitive in the mercantilist world of the seventeenth century, particularly in America and even more in Asia. Above all, the Iberian empires could not maintain the primacy that they had enjoyed previously (in the sixteenth century), as states like England began to develop formal institutions more efficient in terms of protecting their markets. In short, the Iberian systems of the second half of the seventeenth century resulted in rich elites, weak states, and economies that found it inherently difficult to achieve expansion. The peninsula's tardiness in the implantation of a new regional model of growth based on the dynamics of the periphery is very meaningful.

Nevertheless, at the same time, attempts at reform and adaptation during the reign of Charles II (1665–1700) and the first Braganza kings—João (1640–1656) and Alfonso (1656–1683)—demonstrate that these

empires were not inert bodies, unable to confront the many challenges they were facing. Indeed, it is not surprising that Storrs has been able to present a much more positive image of this epoch (Storrs 2006). Thus, the Spanish and Portuguese empires cannot longer be seen as subject to a fatal decay. Moreover, their skeletons, in the form of arteries, strategic enclaves, and positions with specific negotiating agendas, provided them with an enviable flexibility. To the extent that these points also gained—or maintained—autonomy, their survival was possible and could even increase the wealth they were able to generate for the various elites of the most important nodal points, both in the overseas territories and in Europe. Furthermore, although they were not administered by stupid or inexperienced statesmen, history shows that no one is immune to making serious mistakes. Then, in the following century, the Bourbon and Braganza reforms were a way of rethinking the pacts with elites in Europe, America, Africa, and Asia that allowed Madrid and Lisbon to fulfil the essential agenda of governments: that they and their empires survive, in spite of the trickle down of possessions captured by their competitors, above all in Asia and the Caribbean region.³ Nevertheless, for well-known reasons, in the long run, these reforms would eventually break down the empires' internal equilibriums and pave the way for their fracture in the nineteenth century.

³ Only after completing this volume could I consult the illuminating book by Storrs (2016) on the first decades of the eighteenth century.

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