

Ana-María Rivera Medina, Amélia Polónia, eds.. *La gobernanza de los puertos atlánticos, siglos XIV-XX*. Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2015. 368 pp. EUR 29.00, paper, ISBN 978-84-9096-003-5.



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This volume, edited by Amélia Polónia and Ana María Rivera Medina, is the culmination of an ambitious project that brought together, in the city of Oporto Porto in 2012, a group of twenty-two international scholars from many different universities. The aim was to “develop a long-term crossed analysis of the historical dynamics of the Atlantic port areas, investigating structures, transferences, and consolidations of port models at both sides of the Atlantic.”[1] Focusing on different aspects of seaport governance in the Atlantic world, the articles in this volume are spread out over the *longue durée*, from the late Middle Ages to the twentieth century. This methodological approach, of extended timelines weaving several different conceptual threads of seaport governance, is shared by all contributors. Their analysis is primarily centered on regional and transatlantic networks of seaports in France, West and North Africa, Latin America, the Iberian Peninsula, and the wider Ibero-American world. The emphasis is on what the editors see as the creation and governance of seaport networks with the

emergence of Atlantic gateway cities in various economic spaces in the North and South Atlantic. Britain’s imperial Atlantic and the interlaced British-American international and transoceanic order, misleadingly referred to nowadays as the “North Atlantic,” is deliberately excluded. Although the reasons for this exclusion are not immediately clear—only mentioned briefly in the concluding remarks—it later becomes apparent that the volume’s intended contribution is not to the history of the Atlantic, but mainly to the historiographical and theoretical literature on the study of seaports.

One of the strengths of this edited volume is that it brings into fruitful dialogue an impressive diversity of scholars, languages, regions, and academic communities, a type of project one rarely encounters in those studies centered on the English-speaking “North Atlantic.” In that literature, scholars often present their findings with a universalizing ambition, invoking the entire history of the Atlantic world when in reality referring to the British Atlantic during a specific period. This

collection, in contrast, spans five centuries and is written in four different languages—English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese. In fact, all but one of the sixteen essays are written in a Romance language.[2] Contributors come from diverse academic backgrounds: from the Université de Poitiers in France, the Université Hassan II Mohammedia-Casablanca in Morocco, Universidad Católica Argentina, the Universidade Federal Fluminense in Brazil, and the Universidad Central de Venezuela, to name a few universities. All this is to say that the academic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the contributors, as well as the regional breadth and temporal depth of their work, is one of the most commendable aspects of this carefully edited volume. It reflects the kaleidoscopic nature of regional and transoceanic networks of seaports, articulating both regional and transoceanic networks, in a maritime world as vast and diverse as the Atlantic.

The Atlantic kaleidoscope carefully put together by contributors and editors of this volume, a kaleidoscope which is then projected onto the longue durée history of seaports, has the potential to provide a lens to revise some of the old assumptions and ideas of Atlantic history in Anglo-centric studies like Bernard Bailyn's. Yet this opportunity is missed. The conclusions of this book do not amount to any new "Idea of Atlantic History." This, though, was a deliberate omission. As the authors explicitly write, despite its title, the book was not primarily intended as a contribution to Atlantic historiography. Rather, the editors' main goal was to contribute to seaport studies, a much smaller and specialized field. Even though most contributors seek to establish a conversation with past collections of articles on Atlantic seaports like Patrick O'Flanagan's *Port Cities of Atlantic Iberia, c. 1500-1900* (2008), they nonetheless remind the reader that "la obra no pretende integrarse en un abordaje historiográfico de historia marítima, historia atlántica o historia global, aunque contribuya a cada una de ellas. Se espera recopilar la tradición de una sólida historia portu-

aria, en la que los puertos son los principales protagonistas, y se conciben como una 'entidad,' un sistema multidimensional que requiere normas, costumbres y agentes que contribuyan a su gobernanza" (p. 321). Their contribution to Atlantic and maritime history is more modest. By analyzing this multidimensional Atlantic system, in which seaports become the main actors in the story, the authors bring together regions and continents that have not been fully explored in connection. Franklin Knight and Peggy Liss's *Atlantic Port Cities: Economy, Culture, and Society in the Atlantic World, 1650-1850* (1991), for instance, does not even mention African ports in their study of the Atlantic world. With this volume, Polonia and Rivera correct this omission in the record of Atlantic seaport studies.

In sum, Atlanticists could find the empirical material on a large number of understudied Atlantic seaports very useful, but they could easily be disappointed if they seek a fresh historiographical perspective on Atlantic or maritime history. The volume is helpful, however, for scholars interested in finding new studies in the vast bibliographies in Spanish, Portuguese, and French that have produced cutting-edge research in the history of seaports in Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Moreover, researchers in the Anglophone world will appreciate the extensive bibliography extracted from a wide array of schools of thought in French and Ibero-American historiographies, which are placed in direct conversation with the Anglo-American literature on maritime history, port cities, institutional history, and the Atlantic.

What contributors are most interested in providing are new avenues of research in the study of different economic, urban, administrative, and political dynamics created by seaports. They follow a tradition in urban history of seeing harbors and their cities as important categories of historical research and analysis. This volume is then useful and relevant for a specialized audience of scholars studying seaports and their networks of

mobility, systems of exchange, urban structures, economic dynamics, as well as the evolution of their hinterlands and forelands.

The present volume explores all of these important issues. From a *longue durée* perspective, a number of ports are placed within wider networks of exchange that are then analyzed transversally. Using governance as an organizing concept, the volume is structured around four major themes related to governance, each traced over the *longue durée*. These four themes (and section headings) are: “Port Policies”; “Port Administration”; “Port Spaces: Infrastructure and Urbanism”; and “Economic Policies: Norm and Diversion.” Collectively, the studies focus on issues such as the legal status of Atlantic ports; port policies, including public works and urbanization; urban spaces of port cities; port management and administration; and economic policies and changing commercial systems. Through these studies, all authors seek to establish a direct conversation with past and present scholars who have written on the history, theory, and archaeology of ports.

The essays in all four thematic parts provide a wealth of information on a large number of primary and secondary ports in the Franco-Hispanic Bay of Biscay and in the constellation of ports that extends from Portugal and the Azores to West Africa and to the South Atlantic in Brazil and Argentina, including Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. They also display revealing information on the complex connections among regional and transoceanic networks of seaports. Some articles draw from larger research projects that have gathered an enormous wealth of information. Amélia Polónia, for instance, analyzes the data provided by the research project “Hisportos,” which gathers evidence on the Portuguese north-western seaports in the early modern age. Miguel Suárez Bosa, Daniel Castillo Hidalgo, Luis Cabrera Armas, and Leila Maziane collaborated in a co-authored study that analyzes a great wealth of bibliographical information and empirical evidence

on the transformation, infrastructural modernization, and consolidation of a hierarchical system of seaports, from 1880 to 1940. This maritime system, they argue, was based on the complementarity, centrality, and fierce competition among seaports like Dakar in Senegal, Casablanca in Morocco, and a series of ports in Gran Canaria. Guy Saupin and Thierry Sauzeau provide thought-provoking and complementary articles on the historical evolution of French seaports from Louis XIV to modern times. Saupin, in his comprehensive study on the emergence of a stable system of large commercial seaports in France, explores how stability and resilience to technological change contributed to a lack of innovation, a situation that was radically different to that of the deep transformations experienced by docks in Liverpool, the mainstay of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. All in all, while some conclusions reveal the dynamics of port governance and administration, explaining how seaports generally function, it is the wealth and diversity of information that is most impressive, particularly in the first two thematic sections.

There is, however, a downside. While all of these studies are empirically rich and methodologically rigorous, particularly those in the first two thematic sections on port policies and port administration, some unfortunately lack conceptual innovation. This leads to weak conclusions that result in potentially novel arguments on maritime and Atlantic history being left undeveloped. At times, lack of narrative imagination, arid writing, and administrative jargon make the reading cumbersome. Very few historical actors, vignettes, or colorful microhistories make an appearance in these pages. For the most part, impersonal structures and macrotemporal scales are favored over those vivid histories found in the social history of port cities, regional monographs, and microhistory. The authors in this book do not guard themselves against the main ills of *longue durée* history. There is, moreover, so much decontextualized detail that the book’s main organizing concepts,

the nuance and depth of some of its central themes, get lost in obscure and unexplained geographical references, statistical information, and administrative terms. Rarely do contributors in the first two sections explain to nonspecialized readers the broader significance of the ports and regions they are analyzing. Nor do they place their findings within a context that can speak to larger audiences whose interests may fall outside the deep history of the maritime regions in question. Why, for instance, is there a lopsided emphasis on the Bay of Biscay and its many seaports and maritime regions that form part of it? What is the broader significance of this maritime region in the Atlantic world and what led contributors to favor this region over all others? For this reader, such important questions concerning geographical choice were left largely unexplained.

There are exceptions to this lack of conceptual vigor, particularly when authors engage with the wealth of theories surrounding seaport dynamics. Some contributors, particularly in those parts of the book dealing with urban spaces and economic policy, place their findings within the context of innovative conceptual and theoretical work on seaports and their varying urban functions. Those readers familiar with the work of historians and social scientists like Joseph Konvitz, Gordon Jackson, Adrian Jarvis, David Hoyle Hilling, César Ducruet, and Fernando Monge will find some excellent studies that engage this tradition to illuminate specific case studies. Ana María Rivera Medina analyzes the interface of port and city in Bilbao and how its urban space was transformed during the late Middle Ages by a permanent struggle against bad weather, recurrent floods, and natural disasters. In an eye-opening article by Amândio Barros, the author uses network analysis and a close examination of the concept of governance to understand how a local elite transformed Porto in Portugal from a small European medieval port, with no weight or consequence, into a sprawling commercial hub in the Atlantic world. There are also engaging case stud-

ies on contraband in the Spanish colonial empire by Marta García Garralón; on legislation and commerce between Brazil and the Azores by Jose Damião Rodrigues; and on the impact of legislation on the juridical status of Afrodescendants, their process of emancipation, and the legal transformation of Buenos Aires by Nora Siegrist. Luis Sazatornil Ruiz provides an innovative exploration of the struggle to maintain the equilibrium of a “magical triangle”—that is, the oceanic foreland, the seaport’s hinterland, and the port and city interface, and adds yet another layer, the interlacing of the public and the private in this triangle. He imaginatively calls his article on seaports in Cantabria, Spain, “El muelle, la calle y la casa.” Imaginative and methodologically creative articles like these enliven the volume.

Finally, all authors and editors in this volume ought to be commended for the production of an original collection of articles that draw from a well-established tradition of seaport studies in history and the social sciences. It is also a project that is left open-ended, providing future lines of scholarly inquiry in seaport and maritime cultures and representation, multiculturalism, religious syncretism, and exchange of ideas. The variety and diversity in this carefully edited volume on seaports should be both celebrated and emulated by future joint scholarly projects in the field.

Notes

[1]. For the website created by the group of international scholars, see <http://www2.uned.es/gobernanza-puertos-atlanticos/indexEn.html>.

[2]. Indeed, there is one article in English, three in French, six in Spanish, and six in Portuguese.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

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