



**Fabricio Prado.** *Edge of Empire: Atlantic Networks and Revolution in Bourbon Río de la Plata.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. 264 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-28516-3.

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**Published on** H-LatAm (May, 2017)

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Fabricio Prado's *Edge of Empire: Atlantic Networks and Revolution in Bourbon Río de la Plata* focuses on social networks linking Portuguese and Spanish commercial interests across the Río de la Plata region between the mid-eighteenth century and the creation of the Republic of Uruguay in 1828. Prado argues that the transimperial mercantile networks operating within the Río de la Plata region and across the Atlantic Ocean, mostly tied to the slave trade, explain Montevideo's monarchist loyalty at a time when other Latin American centers were promoting a revolutionary agenda. Furthermore, the consolidation of Montevideo's colonial elites as privileged intermediaries of transimperial trade provided them with the legal and economic tools to expand their control over vast lands situated on the North Bank of the River Plate, despite Buenos Aires' jurisdictional claims to the same area. Prado then takes this argument a step further, showing how this history also conditioned the emergence of a distinctive regional identity in the Banda Oriental—the eastern strip of the estuary, known under Luso-Brazilian rule as Cisplatina Province—that eventually led to its secession from Brazil.

*Edge of Empire* joins a recent historiography that has been applying new frames of analysis to reconceptualize the history of the Río de la Plata region in the late colonial period and the begin-

ning of the nineteenth century. Similar to Jeremy Adelman's *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (2006) and Lyman Johnson's *Workshop of Revolution* (2011), Prado sheds light on a multifaceted process that interweaves the transformations of urban space, the political and economic interests of local and regional networks, and the different imperial agendas pursuing control over the South Atlantic. More than merely reconstructing mercantile networks, Prado uses them to visualize and understand "polycentric monarchies," a concept that historians Tamar Herzog and Pedro Cardim have posited elsewhere. That is, Prado shows the relevance of a peripheral area in shaping dynamics of power and the making of imperial relations among the Spanish, Portuguese, and British empires. At the regional level, *Edge of Empire* expands on the study of colonial Río de la Plata as a "port complex": a productive perspective formulated by historians like Fernando Jumar, that essentially challenges more traditional approaches anchored within a national context. Prado pursues this study by analyzing a rich set of documents including demographic sources, travelers' accounts, legal files of merchants, letters from officials of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, and even cartography. In this way, he effectively demonstrates the intricacies of regional and imperial experiences in the context of Río de la Plata's final decades under colonial rule.

The book is organized into seven chapters that are presented chronologically. The first chapter reviews the antecedents of the Portuguese presence in the estuary, beginning with the foundation of Colônia do Sacramento in 1680, a disputed port that would undergo a change of hands several times until the Spanish empire expelled its Portuguese residents and took definitive control of the city in 1777. Colônia engaged in illegal slave trading between Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro thanks to an "intertwined community" of merchants across the river and throughout the South Atlantic. Prado shows how these merchant communities enriched their mutual ties, and their connections to local

and imperial authorities, by sharing not only businesses but also symbolic spaces of sociability such as religious brotherhoods. The latter aspect, however, is not further explored in this book.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 convincingly reconstruct the emergence of Montevideo (founded as a Spanish military enclave in 1724) as the "main hub for transimperial trade" (p. 33) between the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century. Three principal factors led the rise of this Río de la Plata port. First, the Portuguese merchants that were expelled from Colônia do Sacramento in 1777 relocated to Montevideo, carrying with them wealth and advantageous networks across empire borders. Compared to Buenos Aires, whose elites remained more hostile to competitors, Montevideo proved more welcoming—"a safe haven for foreigners" (p. 53)—allowing wealthy newcomers to become notable citizens, or *beneméritos*. Tensions between these two port cities surfaced in a series of lawsuits involving their respective merchant communities. Disputes concerned not only the regulation of legal trade, but also the overseeing of inland areas that had become logistically significant for transimperial trade. These areas extended up to the northern border with the Portuguese empire and the territories of former Jesuit missions. Montevideo's elites would gradually expand their influence throughout these productive lands of cattle raising which were, at the same time, frequently used by smugglers.

According to Prado, a second factor that led to the rise of Montevideo's role in transimperial trade was the implementation of the Bourbon Reforms. Between the 1780s and 1810, Montevideo became the port of call for the authorized slave trade as well as the seat of the Resguardo, the Spanish institution in charge of repressing illegal commerce. Moreover, Spanish administration charged the Resguardo with supervising territory that had been under jurisdiction of the Royal Treasury of Buenos Aires until the 1780s, thus rein-

forcing the authority of Montevideo's elites' over an increasingly larger area of the Banda Oriental. Finally, a third element that fostered Montevideo's participation in transimperial trade was the ability of its merchants and authorities to take advantage of the military confrontations between Spain and other Atlantic empires, specifically the British, during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Although the historiography related to these wars points to the ruinous effects that mercantile activity within colonial Río de la Plata endured, Prado demonstrates how merchants wisely manipulated the letter of the law to secure the continuity of their businesses. Among these loophole practices, for instance, were the exploitation of trade with neutral nations; the use of Portuguese ships and routes to avoid British interception in the Atlantic; and the invocation of the right of "emergency landing" to (falsely) declare foreign vessels in danger, allowing them to dock, and eventually disembark goods for trade.

Chapter 5, titled "Changing Toponymy and the Emergence of the Banda Oriental," studies the representations of Río de la Plata through the lens of travelers' accounts. Here Prado shifts the focus of analysis from the mercantile activities of transimperial networks to the formation of regional identities, emphasizing how local, Spanish, Luso-Brazilian, and British subjects portrayed both sides of the estuary as distinct entities. The terms *Banda Oriental* and, particularly, *Oriental*—the latter as a demonym or identity marker,—begin to surface more frequently in travel literature in order to describe the toponymy of the region and its inhabitants. Since the study of these representations is essential to understanding nineteenth-century national projects in dispute, this chapter will be of interest to those who specialize in the intersections of literature, colonialism, and nation.

While chapter 6 explores a case study of a Portuguese-turned-Spanish merchant named Cipriano de Melo, chapter 7 returns to the larger international narrative as it deals with the aftermath of

Latin America's revolutions for independence. By 1810 the Napoleonic Wars had caused the Spanish monarchy to suffer a crisis of legitimacy, leading Buenos Aires and other Spanish American cities to eventually break their colonial ties to Spain. Prado links these political circumstances to the long-term history of transimperial networks discussed in previous chapters. In this way, the author demonstrates that it was more convenient for Montevideo's elites to maintain monarchic loyalty, first to the Spanish and later to the Luso-Brazilian empire, as they were prospering economically under imperial rule. Thanks to the political and mercantile fluidity that transimperial networks provided, local elites achieved high levels of autonomy within the colonial system, which equally justified Montevideo's conservatism. At the same time, new forces emerged in the territory of the Banda Oriental as a result of the development of its own regional identity—the *Orientales*—who challenged the predominance of commercial networks operating in Montevideo. Unlike the port elites who supported monarchism, the *Orientales* advocated republicanism as a means to build and maintain political participation. The author also explains how tensions evolving within the Luso-Brazilian empire between Portuguese loyalists and secessionists materialized as a militarized conflict in Montevideo, thus posing a threat to this port's ability to participate in transimperial trade. The independence of Brazil as well as the pressure from internal political forces of the Banda Oriental claiming sovereignty and autonomy, finally triumphed between 1825 and 1828, creating the Republic of Uruguay as a separate state.

In conclusion, *Edge of Empire* is a well-researched and organized narrative that ties local and regional histories back to the transimperial dynamics, especially in the context of Spanish and Portuguese empires. Prado's study shows that the rise of mercantile networks and the unfolding of a community deeply rooted on the territory of the Banda Oriental in eighteenth-century Río de la

Plata, molded regional and transimperial articulations of the Atlantic world. Save for chapter 5, in which Prado integrates primary sources and topics that could be further explored from the perspective of cultural and literary studies, this book will be of interest to scholars of the Atlantic revolutions, as well as a good source for Latin American history courses. Overall, this work contributes to a growing historiography of Río de la Plata that defies traditional frameworks by unveiling the multiple forces that shaped both regional identities and revolutionary processes on the verge of the nineteenth century.

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**Citation:** María Victoria Marquez. Review of Prado, Fabricio. *Edge of Empire: Atlantic Networks and Revolution in Bourbon Río de la Plata*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2017.

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