

João Pedro Marques, *The Sounds of Silence: Nineteenth-century Portugal and the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Translated by Richard Wall. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006. xxi plus 282 p. ISBN 1-57181-447-7

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The Sounds of Silence: Nineteenth-century Portugal and the Abolition of the Slave Trade by João Pedro Marques, the fourth volume of the interesting series *European Expansion & Global Interaction*, edited by Pieter C. Emmer and Seymour Drescher, is a significant contribution to the vast and rich international literature on abolitionism, its causes and consequences, main events and historical processes. Well-informed and up-to-date in relation to the most pressing debates on the abolition of slave trade, the study is based on comprehensive research work that has amassed a considerable bulk of the primary and secondary sources and data available at several archives—from the military and the colonial collections to the diplomatic records, which are mainly to be found in Lisbon. *The Sounds of Silence* provides a much-needed counterpoint (and counterbalance) to an *Anglocentric* leaning that overwhelmingly dominates this field of studies. A more polished version of his PhD (completed and published in 1999 by the Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, and manifestly serving as the source of other publications, such as *Portugal e a Escravatura dos Africanos* or *Sá da Bandeira e o Fim da Escravidão—Vitória da moral, desforra do interesse*, both also published by the Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, in 2004 and 2008), *The Sounds of Silence* also offers a detailed and insightful analysis of the troubled Portuguese political history in the nineteenth century (from the changes taking place in the Euro-African-Brazilian Empire to the Portuguese civil war and its end and aftermath), revealing the points of intersection and the mutual influences that its evolution had upon the abolitionist process.

Consisting of six chapters, this work successfully combines theoretical and analytical questions associated with the literature on abolitionism (especially in the preface and the first chapter) with an in-depth historical evaluation of the main actors, events and processes, enabling the reader to gain a meticulous understanding of the ever changing ways in which both the colonial issues and, more particularly, the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade were dealt with in Portugal at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Marques departs from and promotes a predominantly metropolitan reasoning (even considering the extensive importance given to the role played by the British authorities), seeking to deliver a political anatomy of the process that ended with the legal abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. He consequently proposes a “reconstruction of the ideological frameworks” (xiii) that accompanied its evolution, downplaying the economic reasoning and critically devaluing the contributions of scholars such as Eric Williams (and followers) and, in Portugal, the likes of José Capela and Valentim Alexandre (with whom he engaged in a heated debate over several issues of the Portuguese academic journal *Penélope* that, for various reasons, merit the special attention of those who are interested in the specific views of Portuguese historiography and its accompanying academic world). The exclusive emphasis on ideas as “explanatory factors in the abolitionist movement” (*idem*), the genealogy of which dates back to Thomas Clarkson and has David Brion Davis’ *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966) as a major landmark, is further enhanced by an overtly elitist, strictly political and markedly metropolitan (or *metrocentric*) approach to the Portuguese path to the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade.

As a consequence, in Marques’ analytical framework, international factors are reduced from the outset to the external pressures increasingly exerted by the British from the beginning of the

nineteenth century, an aspect that is convincingly and exhaustively explored throughout the book. The important role played by the restless forces within the Catholic and the Protestant worlds apropos of the slave trade and slavery—a role that was strongly determined by ideological dimensions—is, however, an aspect that is missing from the book, except when mentioned in order to highlight their relevance in influencing the nature of Anglo-American abolitionism. At the same time, the African and colonial causes and consequences of this crucial historical process are virtually absent (as is the Brazilian side of the issue), although an analysis is finally made in the last chapter of the *imagination* of Africa developed in Portugal after the formal disintegration of the Portuguese-Brazilian empire, which includes a critical assessment of the real significance and impact of the Portuguese imperial and colonial policy-making. The colonial situation and the colonial societies involved in the complex and contentious process of abolition are scarcely addressed and their importance is all too readily dismissed, although they are mentioned briefly in each chapter of this work. The focus and emphasis on the “the will of the masters”—a major concern of the author that has been pursued in recent writings—require the author to adopt this approach, but the colonial world was surely more than a mere recipient of recurrent and often contradictory and impractical political and economic instructions and legislative guidelines before, during and after the abolitionist process. For example, one wonders about the importance and impact of the strong ties that directly linked Angola to Brazil (chiefly based on the slave trade in the latter country). One also wonders about the extent to which organized interests in these latitudes worked in combination with the political and economic interests operating in Lisbon, powerfully, if not publicly, conditioning the ideological formulation of *tolerationism*. The amount of research that still needs to be carried out in order to satisfactorily answer questions such as these should warn against making clear-cut and bold assertions that locate the key explanatory factors within a single framework and geography of analysis. It also suggests that a more multidimensional form of investigation should be adopted.

At another level, the convenient and unquestioned focus on a political and diplomatic history (always conceived within a metropolitan framework) and the consequent importance that is attached to legal and legislative procedures (treaties, decrees, laws, etc.) as major indications of the variegated political positioning towards the abolitionist issue, and as major signs of its evolution, inevitably obscure crucial events and processes that are essential for making a more balanced appraisal. The resulting narrative of abolition fails to address the question of the great resilience of the slave trade and moreover overlooks the institution that upheld the associated market: slavery. To focus on *de jure* measures has analytical costs. The slave trade continued to characterize the Portuguese imperial and colonial world long after the closure of the Brazilian markets and the legal suppression of the odious commerce, and long after the abolition of slavery in Portugal in 1878. As the *serriçais* question and the “slave cacao” issue prove, the slave trade did not, by any extent, end when “national honor” implied the abandonment of *tolerationism*, and *gradualism* ceased to be just an expedient of a *de facto* calculated procrastination. Angola remained an active source of slave shipments to São Tomé and Príncipe, just to mention one maritime example of the ongoing slave trade, a market that accompanied the rise of *legitimate* commerce and persisted well into the twentieth century. The abolition of the slave trade must be critically examined, and its narrative, even if powerfully questioning longstanding mythologies and *identitarian* givens (many of which are still to be found in use today), must not be so clearly encapsulated and isolated from the study and understanding of the persistence of slavery, or analogous forms of forced labor, and related economies. As James Duffy’s *A Question of Slavery. Labour Policies in Portuguese Africa and the British Protest, 1850-1920*, published in 1967, undeniably established (although it remains curiously absent from the otherwise fairly comprehensive bibliographies of the thesis and of this excellent translation), slavery and the slave trade were fundamental cornerstones of the third Portuguese empire and continued to be so long after their putative legal abolition.

Perhaps the new book edited by Seymour Drescher and Pieter C. Emmer for the same collection—*Who Abolished Slavery? Slave Revolts and Abolitionism. A Debate with João Pedro Marques* (Berghahn Books, 2010), which is shortly to be published—will contribute towards enriching the ways in which the convoluted “Portuguese” abolitionist trajectories are assessed and revealed to an international historiography.

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