

respectivos sectores agrarios. Su herencia, no tan lejana en el tiempo, sigue marcando las realidades agrarias y rurales de estos países.

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ERNESTO BASSI: *An Aqueous Territory: Sailor Geographies and New Granada's Transimperial Greater Caribbean World*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.

As implied in this book's title, Ernesto Bassi explores how the sea functions as a nucleus around which identities are formed and histories take shape. Analyzing the role of the Caribbean Sea in the historical developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Bassi joins other historians that regard the sea together with the landed territories surrounding it, as a unique geographical zone worthy of detailed analysis. Bringing to mind, among others, Fernand Braudel's theories on the Mediterranean, and in a similar vein to the articles gathered in the recently published *Theorising the Ibero-American Atlantic* edited by Braun and Vollendorf (reviewed in EIAL 26/2), Bassi draws our attention to the fact that "a tradition of regarding the sea as signless or empty has hindered historians' ability to give serious consideration to the sea as a site where history unfolds, to the reality that . . . the sea is history" (p. 75).

This approach could easily be applied, for example, to Portugal's maritime empire in the early modern period. As Portugal lacked material means and had a small population, it built its empire, at least in the early stages, not as a territorial power but as political entity that strove to maintain its control over trade routes. Its ports and *feitorias* were nothing but the landed borders of an empire whose "territory" corresponded to the Eastern Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. Bassi suggests a similar move by looking at the unique identity that took shape in the Caribbean sea and on its shores, in a space that he defines as the "transimperial Greater Caribbean." This expression refers to the common traits of the various colonial realms which, by the time of the revolutions and wars of independence, were characterized by "crisscrossing political borders in Caribbean and Atlantic waters and gathering and spreading information obtained at ports and on the high seas." This configuration, Bassi claims, constructed a space of social interaction in which a specific role was played by ships, captains and sailors, as well as by many other less mobile subjects, who used this transimperial framework as the foundation on which they built their perception of present and future social, economic, and political identities in a changing world (p. 4). This shaping of identity occurred in a space under constant construction, an amorphous, "aque-

ous” –to use Bassi’s term– area, without clear-cut boundaries. As convincingly stated, “for all these transimperial greater Caribbean denizens, the sea could not be conceived as merely an interval between ports . . . to them it was a landed and aqueous space of social interactions, a distinguishable region of loose edges but clear markers. It was an aqueous territory” (p. 81). It was neither English nor Spanish, neither French nor Dutch. This aqueous territory was not the sum of the colonial powers or ethnic groups that surrounded it. Rather, it was a unique region that extended across political, geographic, legal, socio-economic, and ethnic boundaries (pp. 8-9). As Bassi demonstrates, this analytical framework is not only the product of his *a posteriori* analysis. The various players in the region shared an understanding that they belonged to a unique group attached to the sea and to the political and commercial activities around it. Captains, sailors, slaves, colonists, and natives “felt” that they belonged to this “transimperial Greater Caribbean” even if they did not name it thus.

Bassi provides the reader with a meticulous analysis of ship traffic, vessels, and seamen in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He shows the importance of the role of “hidden ports” (p. 25), non-official ports which were not authorized to maintain commerce with Spain or with other colonial powers in the region. However, looking at these ports’ activities, it becomes clear that the actual commerce and interactions held around the Caribbean were much more voluminous than previously thought, thus giving weight to the thesis positing the existence of a unique maritime region. As in many other cases, the hidden ports demonstrate that theoretical or official dichotomies, for instance that which pitted Spain against Great Britain, did not reflect day-to-day realities. Furthermore, it seems that identities around the Caribbean were to a great extent defined around common regional commercial and professional affiliations rather than around political, ethnic, or national ones.

One of Bassi’s more significant contributions is the connections that he makes between otherwise separated histories, using the salty waters of the Caribbean to amalgamate these histories into a single one, which zooms out and allows us to see the bigger picture of the historical developments that shaped the region’s character for generations to come in various regards.

After establishing a most convincing theoretical framework, Bassi proceeds, in the last chapters of his book, to analyze several cases through the prism of the theory of the “transimperial Greater Caribbean.” He shows how after the secession of the United States from the British Empire and especially after the victory against Napoleon at Waterloo, Jamaica became the center of British activity in the Caribbean. Interestingly, the disappearance of the United States among the British dominions in the New World did not lead the settlers in the remaining British colonies in the Caribbean to abandon these locales in favor

of the attractive new focus of British colonial activity in India. Identity, being more Caribbean than British, diverted colonists' efforts towards other colonies in the Caribbean region. Additionally, Bassi demonstrates how Haiti, the first colonial realm to gain independence in the whole of the New World (after the United States), became a focus of support –if not material, at least moral and inspirational– to other revolutionary and independence movements in northern South America, with Bolívar's effort to gain support from this former slaves' colony being indicative of this. Finally, Bassi shows how the capacity of the "transimperial Greater Caribbean" to perceive its distinctive character, in turn, influenced the way in which newly independent Colombia shaped its own national identity, not as a Caribbean nation but, rather, as an Atlantic one.

Aqueous Territory is an important contribution to the understanding of the development of the independent nations of the New World. It offers an alternative tool for research, which unveils previously neglected or insufficiently noticed social, economic, and historical phenomena. Moreover, Bassi suggests that his theoretical framework makes it possible to demonstrate that other outcomes were possible for the struggle for independence and for the shaping of the region's identity. These alternative futures were also concretely considered by the first generations of an independent New World.

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