Portuguese Rule in the Americas: Brazil, 1500-1822

Thales Zamberlan Pereira (São Paulo School of Economics – EESP/FGV)

Leonardo Weller (São Paulo School of Economics – EESP/FGV)

Draft of August 2025

Forthcoming, *The Routledge Handbook of the Economic History of Colonialism*

1. Introduction

Portugal was the pioneer in the maritime discoveries that marked the early Modern Era. Portuguese navigators were the first to circle Africa and reach India by sea, where Vasco da Gama landed in 1498. Two years later, Pedro Álvares Cabral reached the Americas, landing in what today is the Brazilian state of Bahia. By then Portugal had a global maritime empire, at least on paper: according to the Tordesillas Treaty, agreed with Spain and the Vatican in 1494, the Portuguese possessions included all "new" non-Cristian land ranging from the centre of South America to the edge of the Pacific Ocean, including all of Africa, India, China, Japan, and most of the Brazilian coast.

Competing European powers soon contested Portugal's enormous possessions in the Eastern Hemisphere. Yet the Crown in Lisbon successfully expanded and maintained its vast American colony, which soon emerged as the economic heart of the Empire. Brazil was the world's largest sugar producer until the late 17th century and accounted for 60% of the New World's gold production during the 18th century (TePaske 2010, 29). Additionally, it received at least half of the Africans forcibly transported across the Atlantic through the transatlantic slave trade.

This chapter is on the economic history of Portuguese colonisation in the Americas, whose basic periodisation and key facts appear in Figure 1. The first section describes the rise and stagnation of the sugar economy in the early colonisation era. The two following sections are on Brazil's gold cycle and enslavement of African labour. The rest of this chapter discusses, in this order, the "agricultural renascence" that followed the depletion of gold, the relations between the colony and its metropole, and the 1822 Independence that resulted in the breaking up of the Portuguese Empire.

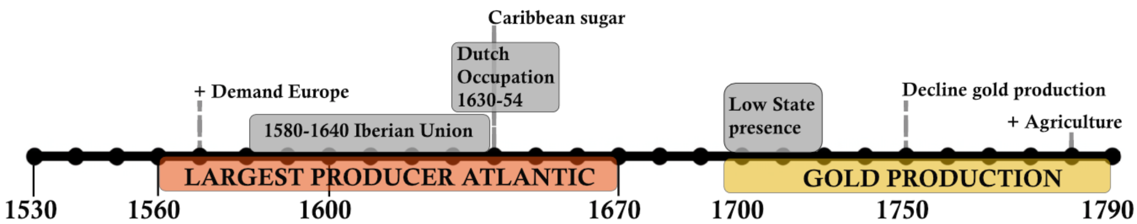


Figure 1: Main economic periods of colonial Brazil (1530-1790)

The pages below review evidence from the specialised historiography that are relevant to the global literature on the economic history of colonisation. In special, the chapter proposes a debate on whether the highly influential model by Engerman and

Sokoloff (2002) is applicable to Portuguese America. According to these authors, Latin America lagged behind because of its initial factor endowments. In wet tropical areas with low population density, such as the Caribbean and most of the Brazilian coast, a productive plantation system employed African enslaved labour to produce crops for exports, such as sugar. The plantations generated wealth that was highly concentrated in the hands of a small white elite. Similar results occurred in areas of Spanish America where a relatively large native population mined precious metals in a servitude system. The development of these plantation and mining economies delivered institutions that were not conducive to industrialisation. As a result, Brazil and the rest of Latin America remained unequal agricultural economies after Independence, while the United States grew rich thanks to a booming manufacturing sector. As discussed in this chapter, while Engerman and Sokoloff's model applies to some extent to Brazil's sugar sector, it fails to account for other key economic activities.

2. Colonization of Brazil and the sugar economy

Portugal started developing sugar cane plantations in Madeira Island on the late 15th century, eventually expanding that activity to São Tomé Island, using plants from the Mediterranean and forced labour from Africa. Based on that early experience, the Portuguese soon introduced sugar cane in their American colony. Output grew from the 1530s, beginning more than a century during which Brazil was the world's largest supplier of sugar (Costa, Lains, and Miranda 2016, 78).

Sugar shaped the Portuguese Empire as a whole and the colonisation process in the Americas in particular. Until the rise of Brazilian sugar, the Empire was composed of a network of dispersed ports, located in enclaves spanning across the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific oceans. This maritime colonial web collapsed under the military pressure of other European powers – mainly the Dutch – at the same time the sugar economy took off in the Americas. The priorities of the Portuguese Crown shifted. Portugal needed to secure its possessions in the New World, fighting European intruders – in the early years the French and then the Dutch – to secure the conditions needed for the expansion of large sugar cane plantations.

A colonisation model based on captaincies divided the Brazilian coast into 15 regions, handed over to grantees (*donatários*) who distributed land to settlers through the *sesmaria* charter.[1] However, conflicts with natives, diseases, and other quandaries forced most grantees to abandon their captaincies. The failure of that decentralised colonization model led King D. João III to increase royal control in the Americas, creating permanent administrative posts (Schwartz 1985a, 23). Salvador (Bay of All Saints) became the colonial capital in 1549. Until the capital was transferred to Rio de Janeiro, in 1763, Salvador was home to the governor-general (after 1720, the title "viceroy" became the

[1] *Sesmarias* were plots of land the grantees appointed by the king (the *donatários*) handed to people at their discretion.

official denomination), the *relação* (high court), and the *provedor-mor*, the highest authority of the colonial treasury administration.

Nevertheless, according to Schwartz, the creation of these "institutions of colonial government" did not immediately replace the *donatário* system across Portuguese America. In regions with greater sugar-based economic activity, such as Pernambuco, where the captaincy system had prospered, the Crown encountered difficulties in reclaiming the rights granted to the grantees (Schwartz 1985a, 20). Therefore, greater royal control over the colony began in regions like Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, which offered the potential for the growth of sugar production but were still less populated than Pernambuco (Abreu 2010). To stimulate sugar cane plantations in those areas, in 1551 the Crown authorized tax exemptions for all newly constructed sugar mills.

Since the beginning of colonization, the Brazilian Northeast dominated sugar production in the Atlantic, with approximately 50 of the 60 sugar mills in Portuguese America in 1570 (Schwartz 1985a, 165). By comparison, Santo Domingo had 34 mills, usually smaller than Brazil's (de la Fuente 2004; Morel 2004). Counting with various incentives and the presence of the metropolitan government, Salvador naturally became one of the main ports of the Empire. Even after the rise of the Caribbean as a global centre of production, at the turn of the 18th century, Bahia's output was still comparable to that of Jamaica and Barbados [see Figure 3].

Sugar production grew rapidly in Brazil between the mid-16th and mid-17th century. Growth was primarily extensive, driven by the expansion of plantations and mills. However, production also increased to some extent through the adoption of new technologies, such as the "three-roller" mills. Costs decreased, allowing the expansion of plantations even in less productive regions in the Southeast. Rio de Janeiro specialised in a sugar cane liquor called *cachaça*, which was sold in the domestic market and used for barter in the slave trade.

The Dutch invaded the Brazilian Northeast in the first half of the 17th century. They stormed Salvador several times and settled in Pernambuco from 1630 to 1654. A main military event in the history of the South Atlantic, the Dutch invasion happened during the Iberian Union (1580-1640), when Portugal was under the rule of the Spanish Habsburg. The Dutch invasion was deeply connected to the sugar sector. It was a direct consequence of Spain's decision to exclude the Dutch traders from Brazil, where they had gained prominence in the sugar trade. Battles destroyed fields and mills in Pernambuco. Output plummeted and many producers moved to Bahia (Mello 2012). Pernambuco's share of Brazilian sugar output had fallen to a mere 10% by the time Portuguese and local troops expelled the Dutch in 1654. Consequently, Bahia became the country's largest producer, a position it held until the late 18th century.

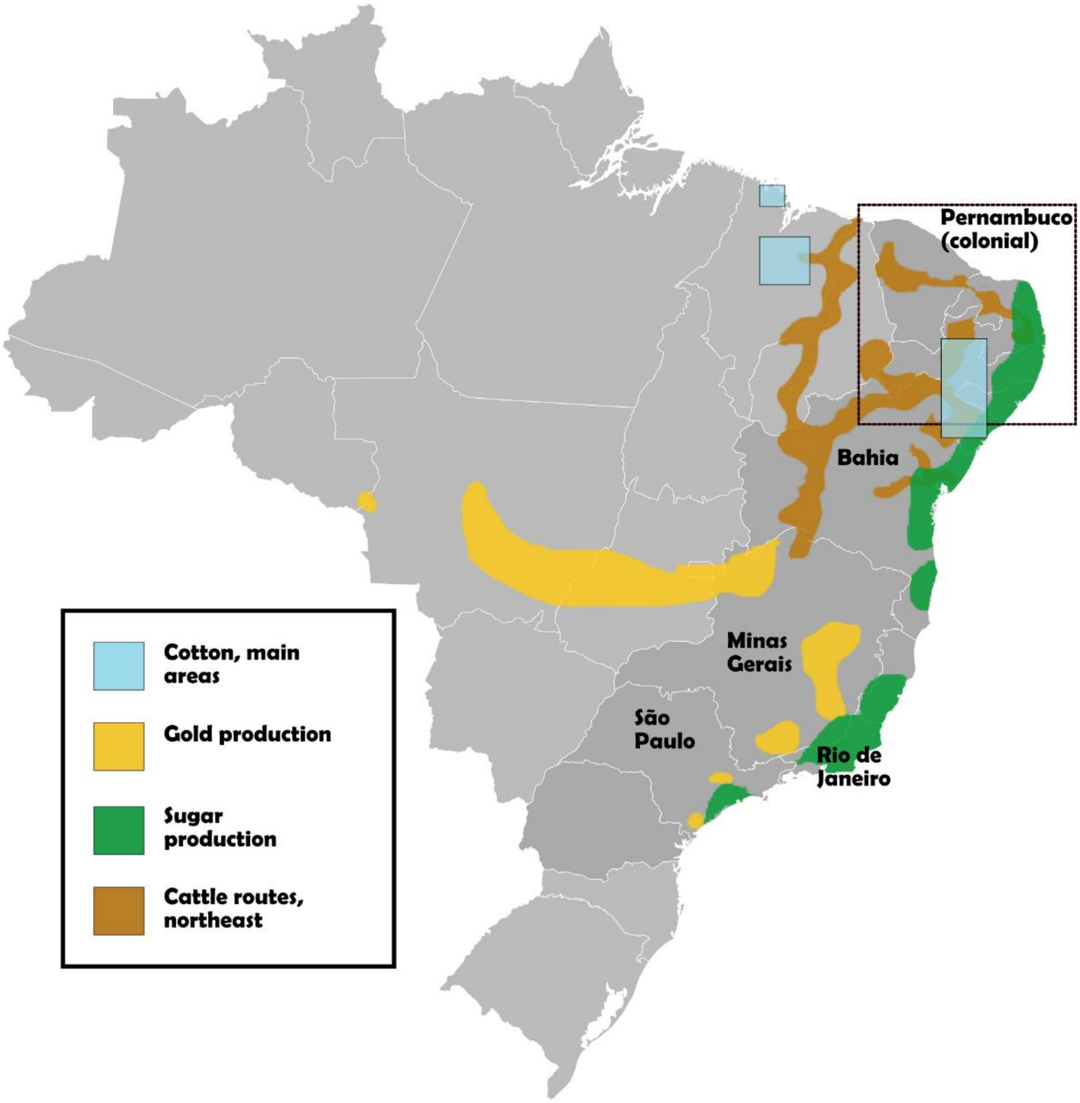


Figure 2: Colonial Brazil main economic regions
Sources: Gold (Guimarães and Fernandes de Morais 2018), Sugar and Cattle (Atlas FGV, https://atlas.fgv.br/marcos/caminhos-do-gado/mapas/o-nordeste-da-cana-e-do-gado-no-seculo-17)
Notes: The captaincy of Pernambuco included areas of the current states of Paraíba, Rio Grande do Norte, Ceará, Alagoas, and the northeast of Bahia.

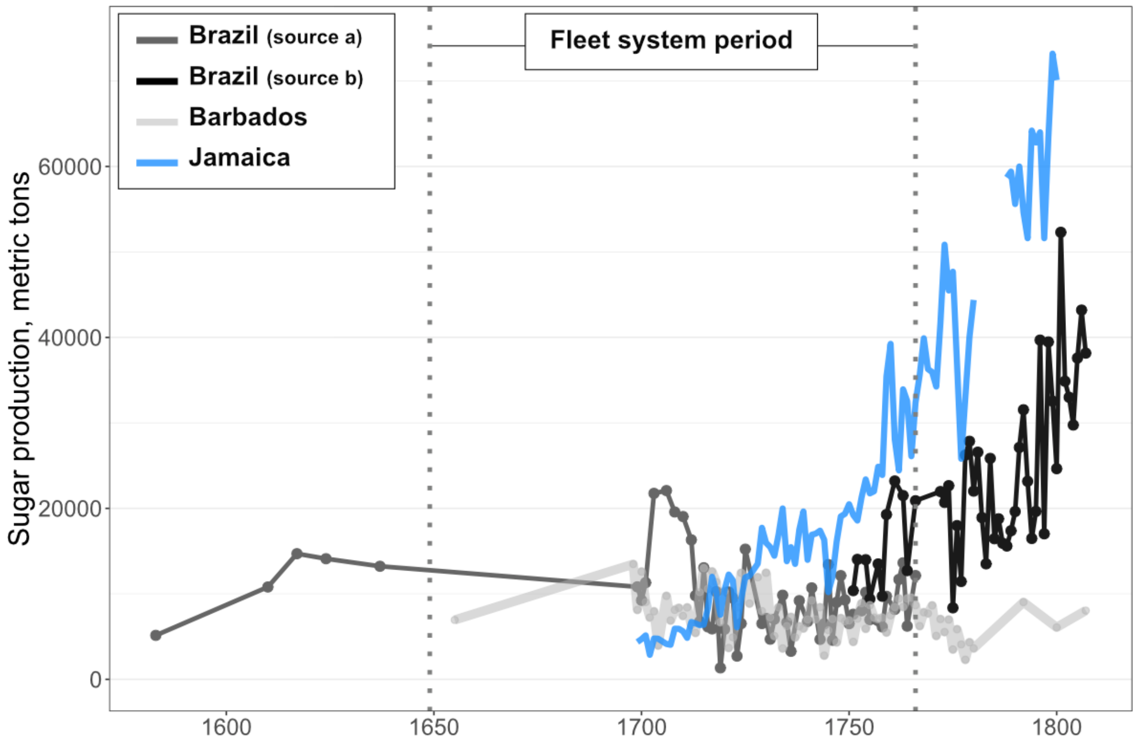
Besides fighting the Dutch, Portugal remained at war with Spain for almost three decades following the end of the Iberian Union. Lacking the capacity to face the Habsburgs militarily, the Portuguese Crown formed an alliance with England, symbolized by the marriage of Catherine of Braganza to Charles II and the transfer of the colonies of Bombay and Tangier to the English in 1661.[2] Portugal taxed its colonies to pay for the alliance with England and the indemnities for peace with Spain. These predatory fiscal policies squeezed profit margins in Brazil, particularly in the sugar sector. Letters from

[2] Resistance to the Habsburgs did not rely solely on English support. The conflicts in Catalonia (until 1652) and with France (1659) weakened Spain's military power during this period. Still, the English played a significant role in diplomatic negotiations with Holland (Mello 2011).

the officials of the Olinda (Pernambuco) city council to King D. Afonso VI in 1664 express dissatisfaction with the “state of misery in which the people were paying so much tribute.”[3] Discontent was generalised in the colony, with evidence of similar complaints coming from relatively more prosperous Bahia (Schwartz 1985a, 186).

Another legacy of the wars of the first half of the 17th century was the increase in transportation costs. Estimates suggest that war destroyed about 20% of the fleet to Brazil in 1626-27. The vulnerability of trade with Brazil was due to the use of caravels which, being light ships, were fast but lacked space for armaments. As the Atlantic became more violent, the Crown launched a fleet system during the 1640s, despite initial opposition from Brazilian producers, who paid for higher transportation costs and slower speed. The problem was that during times of war, when prices rose rapidly in Europe, prices fell in the Americas while “piles of sugar boxes accumulated in ports waiting for the arrival of ships”.[4] After decades of disputes, demands to increase trade led to the end of fleet system in the 1760s (Souza Melo 2023). Nevertheless, by then the Brazilian share of the global sugar market had shrunk, with output stagnating while the West Indies were booming, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Sugar production in Brazil, Barbados, and Jamaica (1580-1807)



Sources: Barbados and Jamaica, N. Deer, History of Sugar (1949, p.194; 198). Brazil (Economic History of Portugal, Table 2.7, Pinto (1979, p.196),

Notes: Source A consists of estimates based on travel accounts (before 1703) and fleet reports (between 1703 and 1766). Source B is a compilation of various sources by Carrara et al. (2022).

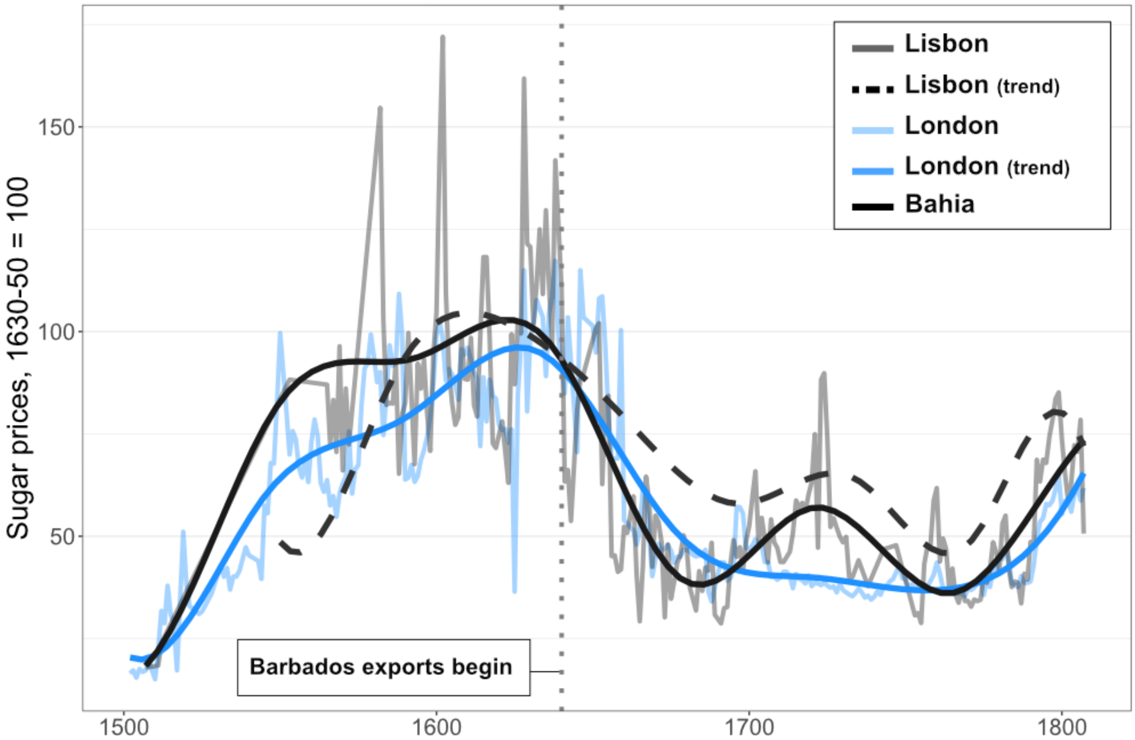
[3] Projeto Resgate. Pernambuco, 1º de agosto de 1664. AHU_ACL_CU_015, Cx. 8\Doc. 743

[4] Projeto Resgate. AHU – Rio de Janeiro, avulsos. CU_017, CX.3, Doc.420, 18 de maio de 1678.

Growing competition with the West Indies impacted the Brazilian sugar sector through multiple channels, with protectionist measures against Brazil playing a significant role. The English Navigation Acts (1651-73) and the French Colbert's policies (1661-83) restricted the importation of Brazilian goods (Higman 2000; Boucher 2008; Boxer 1951). Competition was also intense for African captives, who worked in sugar plantations. English, Dutch, and French occupied the African coast in search of enslaved people. The Dutch in fact conquered El Mina and Luanda in parallel to their invasions in the Brazilian Northeast. Although Portugal eventually regained control of some African ports, "Portuguese predominance on the African coast had been lost" (Schwartz 1985a, 340). Competition for factors of production also arose from within. Following the discovery of gold in Brazil's interior, the demand for enslaved labour surged, driving up labour costs. In nominal terms, the price of enslaved people in Bahia's plantation regions doubled between the 1690s and the 1720s (Flory 1978, 67).

Besides reducing the market for Brazilian sugar and increasing labour costs, the expansion of production in the West Indies reduced international prices. Figure 4 shows prices falling as the Caribbean entered the market in the 1660s. Prices only temporarily recovered while European powers waged large-scale conflicts, such as the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-13). The Brazilian sugar market remained depressed throughout most of that century. In Brazil, a squeeze in profit margins led to a process of underinvestment and economic stagnation in areas with sugar plantations, which is reflected in a slowdown in population growth. Conditions only improved after the global revolutions of the 1770s and the Haitian Revolution in 1793. However, by then the world market was already dominated by the West Indies and sugar was not the predominant economic activity in Brazil, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Figure 4: Sugar prices in Bahia, Lisbon, and London



Sources: Lisbon (PWR-Portugal), London (Gregory Clark, Global Price and Income History Group), Bahia (Schwartz, 1986, appendix B; Mattoso)

The rise and fall of the Brazilian sugar sector invite a comparison with the Caribbean. A notable peculiarity in Brazil was the predominant production of clayed sugar, a high-quality white sugar that did not need to be processed in refineries. Brazil also exported other types of sugar, such as muscovado, the main byproduct of the clayed process. Still, given its lower value in total exports, there were no incentives to refine it within the Portuguese Empire. In the Caribbean, on the other hand, the main export became that darker, lower-quality sugar, which was usually refined in Europe.

Data is quite scarce, but some estimates suggest that productivity in the West Indies was higher in mid-17th century (Schwartz 1985a, 114). Nevertheless, Schwartz documents that techniques were quite similar over time, with the sugar regions trying to copy each other. A hypothesis for this supposed difference in productivity was the larger scale of Caribbean production. According to Schwartz, Brazil could not keep up with the increasing competition because of "sugar's production decentralized structure", with several independent sugar cane plantations for every mill (Schwartz 1985a, 110). Data for Bahia suggest that there was an average of three to four cane growers for each engenho, with extreme cases like Engenho Sergipe, which depended on 25 cane growers. Brazil had inherited from the Madeira Island a "*lavrador* system of tenancy, sharecropping, and other forms of association between the mills and those who simply grew cane but did not convert it to sugar themselves"(Schwartz 1973, 180). Yet Ferlini stresses that the cane growers "were not independent and could not offer their product in a minimally competitive market." The mill owners had the upper hand because sugarcane, once harvested, has a limited timeframe during which it can be processed, thereby reducing the planters' options for selling their crops (Ferlini 1988, 233–34).

Given the long-reaching consequences of wars and trade policies, one should be cautious in explaining the crisis in Brazil's sugar sector based only on productivity differences. Combined with French and English protectionism, the costs of the fleet system would probably have conditioned Brazil's loss of market share for the West Indies even if productivity was the same everywhere. Portugal – and therefore the Brazilian sugar sector – was particularly susceptible to wars and adverse trade policies implemented by greater powers. Hence, the main driver behind the end of the sugar bonanza in Brazil was the imperial competition and geopolitical challenges of the 17th-century Atlantic world. In the end, Brazilian sugar became highly dependent on smaller markets, such as the Mediterranean region, which lacked refineries and colonial production structures to meet their demands.

3. Gold and the rise of the Brazilian "south".

Officially, the discovery of gold in Brazil dates back to 1693, although there are earlier reports of small and scattered findings. The timing of the official discovery was most likely not random. With import prices rising and the inflow of precious metals dropping after the end of the Iberian Union, Portugal was facing a severe lack of means of exchange in the late seventeenth century, leading the Crown to promote a series of recoinages (Pinto 1979, 6–10). Nevertheless, the scale and significance of the so-called gold cycle is out of question: Brazil became the world's leading producer for most of the eighteenth century, significantly impacting the entire Portuguese Empire.

Gold was abundant in areas of the captaincy of São Vicente (Minas Gerais and São Paulo in Figure 2). Minas Gerais alone accounted for approximately three-fourths of Brazil's total gold production during colonial times (Pinto 1979, 58). An intense demographic change occurred, with the population in the then sparsely inhabited Brazil's Southeast approaching that of the Northeast during the 18th century. Besides a significant migration from Portugal, gold conditioned a new and intense wave of slave trade from Africa, as will be detailed in the next section.

According to Laura de Mello e Souza, "perhaps never before in the colony had laws so intensely preceded the settlement of populations as they did in the Minas" (Souza 2015, 118). Although the Crown aimed to arrive "before society" in Minas Gerais, the first decades of the gold cycle were rather chaotic, with "instability prevail[ing]" (Iglesias 1970). The Crown granted powers to its few armed and organised subjects with the means to penetrate in the wilderness. Known as *Bandeirantes*, these explorers were descendants of Portuguese and natives who launched inland expeditions from São Paulo to enslave indigenous people and search for precious metals. The *Bandeirantes* and other Brazilians clashed with Portuguese migrants in the Emboabas' War (1707-09). It was only after that conflict that the Portuguese bureaucracy started to move towards its two main goals: to control gold production, reducing the presence of small-scale prospectors, and build state capacity to raise taxes.

To tax gold, the Crown needed to turn the metal into currency, which explains the establishment of a Mint in Bahia in 1694. The State transferred the mint to Rio de Janeiro four years later, a first move in a broad process that culminated in the transfer of the capital of the Viceroyalty of Brazil to that city in 1763 – Rio would remain the capital for the next two centuries. The growing presence of the state in Minas Gerais was part of that administrative shift towards the Southeast. In 1719 the Portuguese government announced the construction of a Mint in Vila Rica (today's Ouro Preto), a fast-growing urban centre that became the province's largest city. The creation of the captaincy of Minas Gerais in the following year marks the beginning of a long period in which the Crown's administrative machinery gradually imposed its authority (Bergad 1999).

While attempting to control gold production, the Crown also sought ways to regulate the metal's smuggling. According to Antonil's accounts, between 1700 and 1713 the confiscation of untaxed gold exceeded the revenue from the 20% tax applied to the metal, called the *quinto* (Pinto 1979, 60). To improve fiscal collection, in the late 1710s the Crown imposed a lump sum tax in Minas Gerais that summed up to 30 arrobas (441 kilos), which was the equivalent of about 7% of Brazil's annual production. The State increased that sum to 1,470 kilos in the following decade. The officials were then entitled to raise revenue forcefully if the cities failed to meet their targets. That was the beginning of the so-called and much feared *derrama* (literally "to pour").

At first, in the 1730s, that fiscal escalation did not distress miners, "who believed in endless wealth" (Pinto 1979, 62). Little did they know that gold production was reaching its peak. In the following decades, the "easy" gold ran out and the costs of mining, particularly labour, began to rise. After 1764, the last year the lump sum was met, the Crown repeatedly resorted to the *derrama*, causing widespread discontent. The growing presence of the Portuguese State in the colony, particularly through Pombaline policies, came in the form of governors who violently enforced tax collection. A popular revolt reached its climax with the *Inconfidência Mineira*, a pro-independence movement that the Portuguese repressed in 1789 (Maxwell 2004). By then, however, the gold rush euphoria had already faded.

In parallel to state formation, a new regional society evolved in Minas Gerais, with its own economic and social characteristics. Several of these features made the employment of labour somewhat peculiar. Most gold was manually extracted from riverbeds, an activity that involved lower fixed costs and barriers to entry when compared to sugar production. Enslaved people worked in relatively small groups, not rarely being able to accumulate enough gold to buy their freedom. Furthermore, the economy of Minas Gerais diversified during the 1700s. Various regions began producing food, and these productive activities persisted even after the decline of gold production (Carrara 2024) .

However, one should not exaggerate the social peculiarities of the gold cycle. Mining did involve freemen, but the arrival of enslaved people was massive, exceeding 7,000 per year (Russell-Wood 1977), making them the largest share of the population. Rising costs of mineral extraction, roaring food prices, and the Crown's multiple efforts to tighten taxation limited social mobility (Souza 2015). Since the purchase of enslaved people was made on credit (for 3 to 4 years), with exorbitant monthly interest rates (10%), "even successful miners lived in debt to [the slave traders from] Rio de Janeiro" (Russell-Wood 1977, 62). There is evidence that people with limited wealth owned enslaved workers, but State regulations and high costs did impose some barriers to entry. For this reason, a 1733 record reveals that "the poor" had to lease mines from wealthier individuals, retaining only one-third of the production (Souza 2015, 45). The outcome of this process appears in estimates showing that more than half of the mines in Minas Gerais were concentrated in the hands of less than one-fifth of the slaveholders.

As pointed out by several economic historians dating back to Caio Prado Jr. (1942) and Celso Furtado (1959), the gold economy was crucial in launching the process that eventually formed the Brazilian economy (Russel-Wood 1998). Migration from the Northeast to the Southeast reduced the enormous gap that had until then maintained the two regions nearly separated from each other. Within the centre-south, gold was fundamental in better integrating the vast hinterland with the ports along the coast. Economic integration also occurred between the underpopulated South and Minas Gerais through the trade of mules and foodstuff. Nevertheless, one should not exaggerate the role of the gold cycle vis-à-vis the sugar economy, which remained Brazil's most important export staple for most of the colonial period. Not only did sugar continue being produced in the Northeast; it also grew in the Rio de Janeiro state (Abreu 2010).

4. Labour, slavery, and slave trade

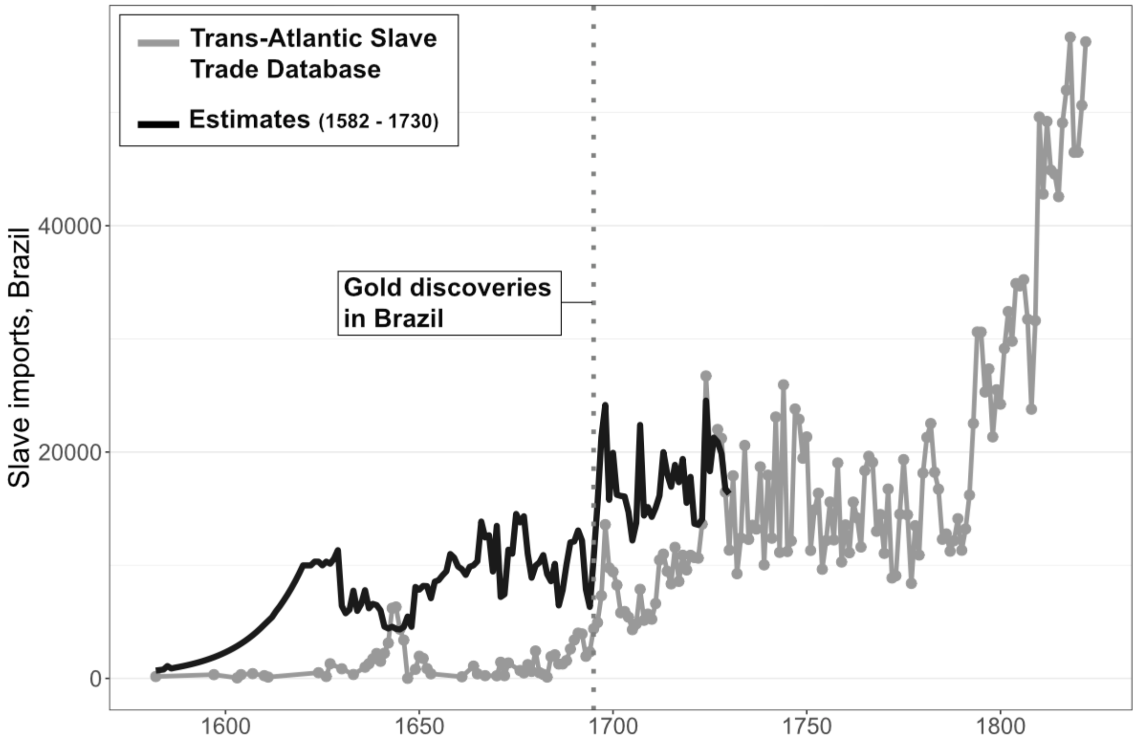
Besides sugar and gold, the main economic feature of colonial Brazil was the extensive employment of slave labour. From the second half of the 15th century, Portuguese expansion along the West African coast, primarily in search of gold, initiated the Atlantic slave trade. Forced migration from Africa was so intense that slaves made up 10% of Lisbon's population in 1551. However, the use of forced African labour in Brazil was different to the slavery that existed in Lisbon and other European cities: it was organized in the regime of plantation, along the lines of the early experience of sugar production created in the islands of Madeira and São Tomé (Alencastro 2000). This Portuguese plantation-based slavery was so important that Brazil eventually became the world's largest destination of African captives.

Nevertheless, the slave trade from Africa only gained momentum in Brazil in the 17th century. Until then, most labour was composed of indigenous enslaved people (J. M. Monteiro 1994). Estimates for Pernambuco suggest that two-thirds of the workforce were natives in 1583 (Schwartz 2001, 276). Schwartz's detailed analysis of Engenho Sergipe, a large sugar mill in Bahia, shows that only 7% of the workforce was African in 1572. This number increased to 37% in 1591 and reached the entirety of the workforce in the 1630s. This evidence suggests that the transition from Indigenous to African labour seems to have occurred gradually, maturing when the sugar sector was already experiencing its heyday.

Sugar producers did not consider the natives as a long-term reliable source of labour. Influenced by the Church, whose reaction to Protestantism included the conversion of American natives, the Portuguese Crown banned indigenous slavery in 1570. That law was poorly enforced, but it did disincentivise the purchase of indigenous enslaved people. Besides, price information suggests that natives were less productive – or represented higher risks/higher mortality – than Africans (Schwartz 1985a, 70). It seems that indigenous slavery was a second-best solution for plantation owners, who needed labour as European demand for sugar boomed, but were exposed to fluctuations and shortages in the Atlantic slave trade. However, the supply of native labour also became scarce as European diseases decimated the indigenous population. Even so, the slavery of natives did not completely disappear in some regions, especially in frontier areas such as the captaincy of São Vicente, where their records existed until the 18th century.

Figure 5 illustrates the three major changes in the trafficking of enslaved Africans to Brazil throughout the colonial period. The figure shows two series because the original database provided by the Slave Voyages Project only includes records of enslaved individuals with existing documentation, which was scarce before 1720. The first change occurred with the decline in indigenous labour, especially from the 1620s onward, when the sugar sector was booming in the Northeast. During that broad earlier period, the conflicts with the Dutch compromised slave trade in the 1630s and 1640s. The second significant increase relates to the discovery of gold in Brazil at the turn of the 18th century. The last change, which shifts the level of trafficking, derived from the agricultural revival from the 1780s onward, the topic of the next section. For Pernambuco, where the slave trade was particularly intense until the Dutch invasion, there are virtually no data between 1561 and 1720. The Project does provide some estimates for this period based on alternative sources (Eltis and Domingues 2008).

Figure 5: Slave imports in Brazil (1582-1822)



Source: Slave Voyages (www.slavevoyages.org)

Brazil's sugar and gold production did determine the levels and fluctuations in the slave trade shown in the figure above. However, slavery went beyond those key exporting sectors, with captives working virtually everywhere in the economy. This pervasive presence of slavery resulted in a rather peculiar structure of enslaved ownership. Typical masters owned only a few enslaved individuals. Large plantations with hundreds of captives were the exception rather than the rule (J. Monteiro 2005). The contrast with the Caribbean stands out, even though the literature often extrapolates the West Indies, assuming that large ownership was widespread across the Americas.

Evidence from Brazil is telling. In the first half of the 18th century, only 3% of masters had more than three enslaved individuals in the rural areas around Rio de Janeiro, where sugar cane was the main crop (Fragoso 2010, 262). In Minas Gerais, of the 2120 registered owners in the 1718 census, 60% owned up to five slaves (Klein and Luna 2010, 45). Similar results are found for other periods and other captaincies, such as the present-day regions of São Paulo and Paraná, where enslaved people typically represented a third of the population during the 18th century. Enslaved groups were larger in the Northeastern sugar sector, with plantations around Salvador having on average 60 captives (Schwartz 1985a, 428–46). Yet that was still a small figure in comparison to Jamaica, whose typical plantation relied on more than 100 enslaved workers (Higman 1984, 14). Such dominance of small and widespread slave holding persisted after Independence: according to Brazil's first national census, carried out in 1872, 16 years before emancipation, the average captives-masters ratio ranged from five to eight (Klein and Luna 2010, 155).

The question then is what caused such a decentralised structure of slave holding; why did Brazil form smaller and more widespread groups of enslaved people than the

West Indies? The main reason for this low concentration of slaves per owner was that, being much larger, Brazil had a more diversified economic structure than the islands of the Caribbean (Zahedieh 2010, 200). Enslaved labour was present in industries that required less labour concentration than sugar, such as indigo, tobacco, livestock farming, and cotton, besides the service sectors that grew in urban centres.

As highlighted earlier in this chapter, the production of sugar was decentralised in Brazil, with several suppliers for every mill. Cane growers often owned relatively smaller plots of land, and consequently fewer enslaved workers than a typical unit of production in the West Indies. This could have reduced the average of slavers per master in Brazil. Nevertheless, one should be cautious when considering this interpretation because what matters for production is the total number of enslaved workers involved, regardless of whether they worked for different masters. Estimates are simply not well-documented enough to enable a thorough assessment for the colonial period. If anything, the figures suggest that the scale in the sugar sector was closer to the Caribbean in Bahia in the early 19th century. On average, four cane growers supplied every mill in the Recôncavo region, around Salvador's Bay. The data is incomplete, but it suggests that growers owned about a third of the enslaved workforce. Therefore, adding up the different groups that formed the sugar complex in the Recôncavo, it turns out that 113 enslaved individuals existed per every mill, roughly the same figure registered for the Caribbean during that same period (Schwartz 1985b, 306; Higman 1984).

In other words, Brazil's low ratio between slaves and masters was a consequence of the pulverisation of slavery across an enormous territory; it most likely did not derive from the structure of ownership in the sugar complex. The model by Engerman and Sokoloff may be to some extent applicable to the sugar sector of Bahia, where scale was indeed larger than other sugar regions. However, one needs to consider a large intermediate class composed of slave masters who owned cane fields but not mills, a feature of Brazil's sugar sector that is absent in that model. Besides, and most importantly, Engerman and Sokoloff disregard the small but prevalent ownership of slaves elsewhere, away from the Northeastern sugar complex and so remarkably different from the Caribbean.

The dissemination of slavery in Colonial Brazil was a consequence of a large and well-established slave trade. As highlighted at the beginning of this section, the Slave Voyage Project reports that one in two Africans that were forced to cross the Atlantic landed in Portuguese America; the actual proportion was likely higher according to the more accurate estimates in Figure 5. The Portuguese were pioneers in the slave trade, but as the demand increased traders in Brazil became responsible for the bulk of that activity, crossing the Atlantic without heading north to Portugal (Alencastro 2000; Fraginals, Klein, and Engerman 1983). These Brazilian slave traders formed a powerful and conspicuous urban class that controlled both labour and capital. They offered credit to slave masters, including the owners of sugar mills, who are usually depicted as the wealthiest colonial groups in the traditional historiography. Besides, the large and prosperous slave trade sector also induced market integration between Brazil and Angola, where fluctuations in the price of slaves followed the pace of land occupation on the other side of the ocean (Miller 1986). For this reason, Alencastro (2000) characterises Colonial Brazil as a South Atlantic economy.

5. Trade liberalisation and the "agriculture renascence"

The growth in the Atlantic trade that began during the late 18th century had profound consequences for Latin American markets (J. H. Coatsworth 1990, 22). For Brazil, the increase in commodity exports during that period is called the "agricultural renaissance" (Godinho 1953, 87). One of the first descriptions of the resumption in international trade after the decline in the gold mines, which began in the 1750s, came from the historian Caio Prado Jr., who associated the agricultural growth mainly to greater demand for cotton in Europe (Prado Jr. 1972, chap. 10). Yet booming European markets demanded other commodities produced in Brazil, including sugar, which had been in crisis during the 18th century, as seen in the first section of this chapter. The economic expansion also intensified the reliance upon enslaved labour, raising the slave trade from Africa to unprecedented levels (Alden 1987, 284).

With the decline in gold production, pressures to reduce trade restrictions became somewhat inevitable in the colony. The most important liberalization preceding the trade boom came with the end of the fleet system in 1765. From then on licensed ships could sail between Portuguese ports without restrictions. Salvador and Rio de Janeiro were the first ports that benefited from the new rule, but Pernambuco and Maranhão soon followed (Alden 1987, 307). In fact, the annual number of vessels departing from Recife to Lisbon more than doubled in in the last three decades of the 18th century (Souza Melo 2023, 361). The growing number of ships sailing to Brazil also included foreign vessels, especially British, even though Portugal continued maintaining a commercial monopoly until 1808, at least on paper (Sousa 1970, 6).

According to Jacome Ratton, a French businessman who lived in Portugal during Pombal's rule (1757-1776), the end of the fleet system "greatly accelerated Luso-Brazilian commerce, (…) making it possible for ships to make two voyages to Brazil in less than a year, whereas in the past they could expect to complete only two round trips in three years" (Ratton 1920). João Rodrigues Brito, author of an important essay about economic conditions in Brazil, wrote in 1807 that the end of that system was among the main liberalizing measures that increased trade in the colony (Brito 1821, 68). As many other policies at the time, Portugal's decision to lower trade restrictions was not unique, also occurring in Spanish America. An example quite important for Brazilian merchants was the opening of the Rio de la Plata ports to non-Spanish ships in 1778 (Fisher 1981, 21).

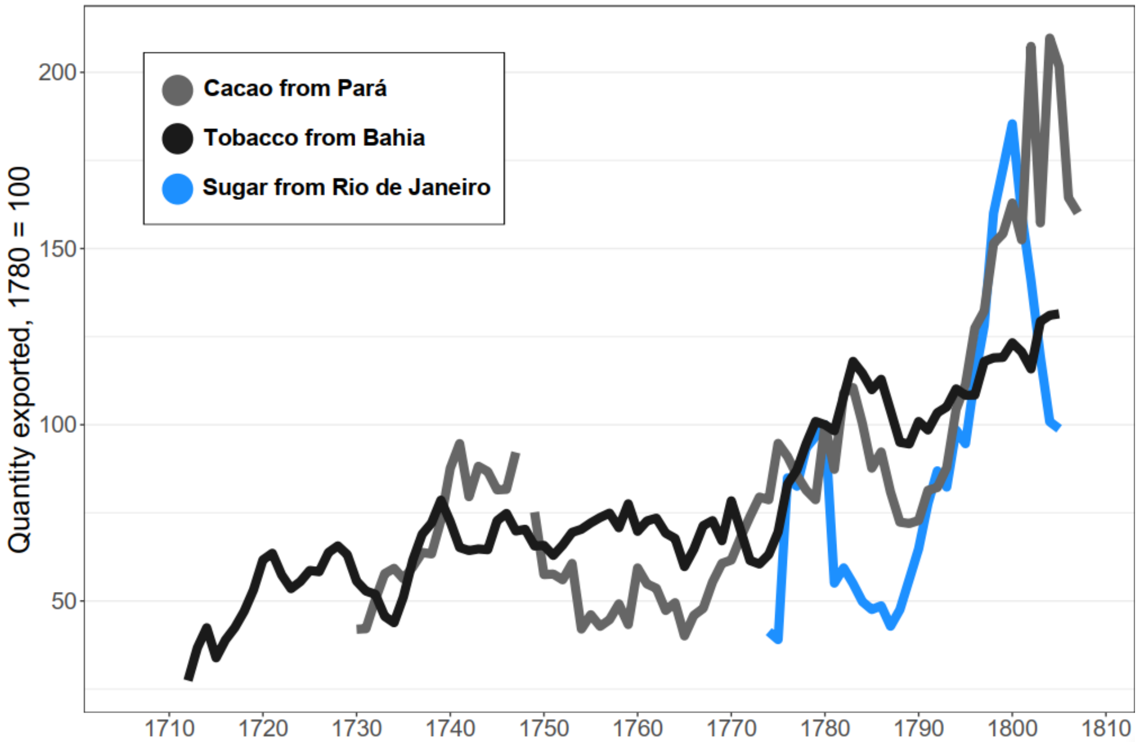
Therefore, the "agricultural renaissance" was associated with policies designed to liberalise and promote trade. A few years before the changes in the fleet system, two new monopoly trading companies – the Grão Pará and Maranhão (1755-1778), and the Pernambuco and Paraíba (1759-1787) – increased trade to the northern regions in Brazil, galvanising businesses and reducing risk in areas until then relatively disconnected to trade (Dias 1971; Rodrigues and Sangster 2012; Baskes 2013). Reviving sugar was the main goal of these new companies. Initial success was guaranteed by the fall in Caribbean supply during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), during which Bahian exports increased as much as 46 % (Pedreira 2000, 842). Yet cotton also boomed, following rising demand from the growing textile sector in Europe (Ribeiro Júnior 2004, 133; T. Z. Pereira 2018). By the 1770s both sugar and cotton had become Brazil's most important exporting commodities, reaching European markets through Portuguese ports. Together, they represented 85% of Portugal's reexports from Brazil in the final years of the 18th century (Pedreira 2000, 843).

To improve the competitiveness of sugar and tobacco exports, the Portuguese government granted more power to local boards of inspection (*mesas de inspeção*, established in 1751) in controlling the quality of products (Alden 1987, 305). Trade between Rio de Janeiro and the Rio de la Plata also increased during the Seven Years' War, as Lisbon exported British goods while Brazilian fleets transported back "large sums of silver" (Walker 1999, 23).[5] Since trade between the Portuguese and Spanish colonies was illegal, smuggling was accepted as a way to facilitate the presence of European products in South America. In fact, trafficking was "often encouraged by the [Portuguese] government and conducted from the Colony of Sacramento until its restoration to the Spanish Monarchy in 1777" (Pedreira 2000, 857). Trade with the silver-rich Spanish colonies enabled Portuguese merchants to play a more global role. That metal was intensively used in East India Trade, leading the British to regard "the Cadiz and Lisbon trades not as two wholly separate trades but rather as a single complex" (Christelow 1947, 4).

Figure 6 shows the new pattern of Brazilian commerce in the second half of the 18th century. Tobacco exports from Bahia grew 63 % between 1730 and 1779 (Nardi 1996, 335–43). Sugar exports experienced a similar increase in the following decades.[6] Growth was even higher for other commodities coming from the Northern provinces, like cacao from Pará (Alden 1976) and cotton from Maranhão (T. Z. Pereira 2018). Even regions that did not participate directly in foreign trade went through a phase of economic growth. An example is Rio Grande do Sul, which sold beef jerky to the rest of Brazil (Osório 2001, 126).

[5] (Great Britain Consulate - Lisbon 1766, 89) 4,000,000 cruzados in silver and 10,000,000 in gold arrived in Lisbon in 25 June, 1761.
[6] Sugar export from Bahia between 1710 and 1766 is from (Schwartz 1985a, 502; Alden 1987, 313)

Figure 6: commodity exports in Brazil, five-year moving averages (1710-1807)



Sources: Cacao (Alden 1976), tobacco (Nardi 1996), sugar (Alden 1987)

The Portuguese Crown not only permitted but also incentivised some trade liberalisation, as exports from its American colony were a major source of tax revenue. Yet the Crown also sought to preserve its colonial privileges in the form of monopolies: Lisbon made sure that profits were concentrated in the hands of Portuguese merchants (Maxwell 1995). This was indeed an Iberian story, with Spain also allowing for and benefiting from a trade boom in its American colonies.

6. What kind of colony? The debate on Portugal-Brazil relations

Given their discrepancies in size, Portugal and Brazil made an unusual case of colonial rule, with the colony growing to become the economic centre of the Empire as a whole. Not surprisingly, a specific historiography debates the relative power in the relationship between Portugal and Colonial Brazil. This literature is divided into two phases, composed of different generations of historians. The first group of scholars emphasize the power and ability of the Portuguese state to shape Brazil, with Raymundo Faoro's famous book from 1958 being a landmark. Building on examples that highlight the strength of the colonial administration, the author claims that Portugal managed to reproduce its state model in the Americas because colonization preceded the development of a colonial society.

However, the most influential interpretation of Portugal as a strong coloniser in the Americas comes from the model proposed by Fernando Novais [1979] to interpret what he calls the "Old Colonial System". The model is based on the triad of "metropolitan exclusivity," "superprofits," and their consequences on European industrialization.

Metropolitan exclusivity refers to the combination of Portugal's rights over the purchase of colonial products (oligopsony) and the sale of European products in the colonial market (oligopoly) (Villela 2011). Through this control of quantity and price, the Portuguese Crown managed to extract "superprofits" which - using a Marxist terminology - consisted of an important case of primitive accumulation, large enough to finance the investment in manufacturing activities in Europe, particularly in Britain. According to Novais, the relationship between the exploitation of Brazil and the Industrial Revolution stems from Portugal's military and economic subordination to England after the Methuen Treaty (1703). Brazil was a colony of Portugal, but its wealth ended up making Britain rich in a complex system of international domination.

A reaction to this Old Colonial System model emerged in the 1990s when a new generation of scholars highlighted the "periphery's" autonomy in relation to the "centre." Evidence of colonists challenging oppressive Portuguese policies and negotiating trading conditions reveals the limitations of Novais' model. For instance, João Fragoso shows that Rio de Janeiro's municipal council influenced the prices of sugar and its freights during the 17th century (Fragoso 2001, 47). Several other researchers revealed that Brazil traded directly with foreign ports, moving tobacco, *cachaça*, enslaved Africans, and silver between Brazil, West Africa, and the Rio de la Plata. Hence, the "metropole-colony" dichotomy was not as strong, since Lisbon failed to entirely dominate Brazilian trade (Flory 1978, 218)(Alencastro 2000; Nardi 1996).

Some historians extend and radicalise this revision, questioning not only Portugal's capacity to maintain the "metropolitan exclusivity", but also its own existence as an absolutist colonial state. For instance, António Hespanha highlights that members of local elites such as captaincy governors were entitled to grant *sesmarias* and validate the legality of land use (magistrates). According to that author, such examples illustrate how the Portuguese subjects living in the Americas were able to "colonize the administration" of the Crown (Hespanha 2001, 182). Yet Hespanha's interpretation of Brazilians having the upper hand may come as an overstatement. Laura de Mello Souza proposes a middle ground: the failure of the Novais' "colonial system" model in describing Colonial Brazil does not necessarily mean that Portugal was not absolutist (Souza 2006).

The Portuguese Crown always intended to maintain Brazil under its colonial dominance, preserving the integrity of its vast territory, from which a large and continuous stream of revenue was expected to flow in the long run. Given the distance and the size of its colony, however, the Crown often had to make its absolute power malleable to achieve those goals. That often included significant delegation of power and accommodation of local demands. Yet evidence does show that the Crown was powerful enough to assert its will when significant economic disputes arose. For instance, the Crown prohibited the production of ginger in Brazil when merchants in the Indian trade complained of the competition coming from Bahia. Although Bahian producers initially resisted the measure, showing that there was agency in the Americas, Portuguese officials eventually managed to halt production by progressively increasing taxes. In a different sector, Bahia maintained its prominence in tobacco production as the Crown banned its cultivation in Rio de Janeiro during the late 17th century. Later in that century, a ban on the trade of *cachaça* from Rio de Janeiro benefited Portuguese wine and brandy producers (Sampaio 2003, 145). Summing up, to quote Schwartz, "the state had assumed a direct role in the allocation of resources and thus in the ordering of society. […] the state itself was the level at which the struggle between groups and interests was finally resolved" (Schwartz 1985b, 256).

Overall, decades of historical research suggest that Portugal did not apply a single consistent set of policies for the Americas throughout the colonial period. Although the Crown was not an all-powerful Leviathan, the Portuguese monarchy became a progressively more powerful and centralizing state in the late modern period, capable of implementing laws designed to deal with challenges and crucial breakthroughs such as the sugar crisis and the gold cycle (Souza 2006, 68). In fact, Maria Bicalho highlights how the autonomy of the overseas councils declined during the 18th century, when "the taxes collected and the contracts managed by the councils were gradually transferred to the Crown's administration" (Bicalho 2001, 201). The hallmark of this shift was the Pombaline period (1750-1777), although the Portuguese government continued intervening in the economy of its empire in the following decades, while the western world was shaken by revolutions and the Napoleonic Wars.

7. The end of the colonial rule and Independence

The Napoleonic Wars forced the Portuguese royal family to move to Rio de Janeiro, where it landed in 1808 together with its Court and a multitude of clerks, merchants, and servants, an entourage that totalled about 10 thousand people. The prosperity of the "agricultural renascence" explains Prince D. João's decision to cross the Atlantic and settle in the Americas, where he was eventually crowned the king of Portugal. Such intercontinental imperial migration is unique in the history of European royal houses. Yet it enabled D. João to achieve several inconsolable goals: maintain the Portuguese empire without submitting to Napolean rule or antagonizing his English allies.

Despite Brazil's affluence, the costs of settling the court in Rio strained the Treasury. What is more, D. João meddled in military conflicts in the Rio de la Plata, draining even more resources from his American subjects. The Crown initially increased taxation on Brazil's main export products and created new duties with lower revenue-generating power. Since sugar and especially cotton production was concentrated in the Northeast, the new export taxes resulted in a considerable transfer of wealth from that region to Rio de Janeiro (T. Z. Pereira 2021). But that was not enough. To supplement revenue in the short run the government relied on loans from the Bank of Brazil, which was created in 1808 to financially assist the Crown in the tropics. From 1816 onwards expenses became unsustainable, and the government resorted to issuing paper money, leading to inflation, especially rising food prices.

Brazilians initially welcomed the arrival of the royal family as a promise of greater autonomy. In fact, the Crown did suspend restrictions on navigations in 1808, completely opening the Brazilian ports to foreign traders, a necessity given the rise in demand for imports that followed such a massive aristocratic migration (Pereira 2021). Nevertheless, as financial conditions deteriorated, various groups began to question the Crown's policies. Exporters criticized high taxes, while the urban population, including royal officials, protested the deterioration of living conditions (Cariello and Pereira 2024). By the end of the 1810s, resentments turned violent in a series of riots that occurred across the country, particularly in the Northeast.

Discontent with the king also grew on the other side of the Atlantic. The Crown's detachment from the administration of Portugal, which was under English military tutelage, hampered economic recovery after the Napoleonic Wars. The 1820 Porto Revolution and the election of a constitutional parliament mirrored events that occurred in other parts of Europe and the Americas, although with a colonial twist. The revolutionaries desired to limit the king's power through a constitutional monarchy. However, they also sought to resubmit Brazil into the old system of colonial monopolies. To pacify Portugal, D. João returned to Lisbon and agreed upon the formation of the new parliamentary regime, but not without leaving his son and heir D. Pedro in Rio de Janeiro.

The Brazilian representatives who joined the Parliament in Lisbon, outnumbered 2 to 1 by the Portuguese, progressively realized that their demands would not be met with the continuation of the empire. Some of them returned to Brazil in protest. With the political elite falling out with their Portuguese peers, popular revolts and riots shaking the country, and the economy deteriorating with rising taxation and inflation, the conditions were given for D. Pedro to declare independence from Portugal in 1822. Thus, the drivers of Brazilian Independence were like elsewhere in the Americas, including revolt against taxation under crumbling colonial rules. However, politically Brazil was unique. The newly-established Brazilian Empire became a sovereign state under the rule of a Portuguese-born nobleman – the emperor D. Pedro I – who happened to be the first in line to become the king of Portugal. It was not a secret that D. Pedro intended to reunite the old Portuguese Empire under his rule. For this reason, to some extent, Brazilians only gained full independence after deposing and expelling its first emperor in 1831. After a long, tumultuous, and quite peculiar independence process, Portugal finally lost for good its American colony, the immensely vast resource-rich territory that had become the very core of its empire.

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