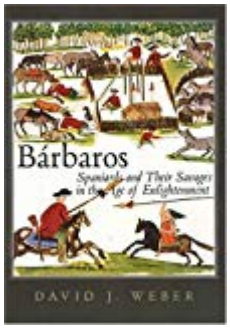
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David J. Weber. *BÃ¡rbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of the Enlightenment.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. xvii + 466 pp

David J. Weber. *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. xviii + 466 pp. $22.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-11991-6.



Reviewed by Eugene Berger

Published on H-Atlantic (July, 2007)

David J. Weber's *Bárbaros* represents a real step forward in the elusive quest to bring together scholars of Latin America, the Spanish borderlands, and the Atlantic world. Weber has long been recognized as the pre-eminent scholar of the Spanish borderlands, picking up where Herbert Bolton and others left off in dispelling the idea that the Spanish brought the pick and the English the plow to North America. In this book, however, Weber has added South America and Central America to his discussion of what happened when the ideas of eighteenth-century Spanish administrators, missionaries, soldiers, and simple colonists met very real and quite varied American frontier realities.

Weber's book respectfully challenges not only older scholarship, but the findings of many of his contemporaries. Weber mentions specific "oversimplifications," such as the idea that the Spanish were only interested in conquering territory on the frontier and had no interest in the "economic exploitation" of its indigenous residents (p. 8). Weber also challenges the notion held by some that Spanish frontier strategy saw little change from 1600 to 1800.

Weber is also cognizant of the limits of his own study, acknowledging that it encompasses a "variety of people and places" on frontiers which held the "greatest strategic or economic value for the empire," but that it "cannot be comprehensive" (p. 13). He chooses to focus on the eighteenth century as, in his view, the Bourbon crown made a conscious albeit incomplete effort to reconcile its "wish to protect Indians and its interest in exploiting Indian labor" (p. 5).

This book's introduction includes a valuable discussion of whether eighteenth-century changes in frontier strategy were the result of a power struggle among ministers of a new line of sovereigns, or whether they truly represented a wholesale philosophical shift toward the Enlightenment

in Spain and its colonies. Weber argues that the century saw a mixture of both. While new blood inevitably brought new ideas, the growing influence of the Enlightenment, combined with the exigencies of imperial competition, prompted Carlos III to send "a wave of trained scientists and explorers to gather intelligence about resources, geography, and peoples in the poorly understood spaces beyond the edges of empire" (pp. 5-6).

In chapter 1, we learn that the most significant of these traveling scientists was Alejandro Malaspina, who, in 1789, led an expedition of three corvettes with "distinctly secular names" to explore the Spanish Empire's Pacific coast. In what Weber calls "Spain's most ambitious scientific expedition in the Age of Reason" (p. 20), Malaspina led his crew from Chile to Alaska before arriving back in Cádiz five years later. Malaspina's team contacted dozens of frontier indigenous groups, developing something of a checklist from which to identify "savages" (p. 27)--faces painted, dressed in skins, etc. Malaspina also unexpectedly discovered that these frontier aborigines had provided Spanish Enlightenment thinkers with a mirror with which to develop their own sense of self. The answer, Malaspina thought, to "how and why elaborate societies developed ... would be found in personal observation rather than in ancient texts" (p. 31).

While Malaspina's observations may have helped shape the Spanish Enlightenment, we know that the arrival of European settlers deeply affected indigenous societies. The strength of this work is that it goes beyond the demographics of the sixteenth century and in chapter 2 begins to trace the changes that the Enlightenment brought to frontier indigenous groups. Weber's work categorizes indigenous groups not geographically, but instead divides them by the tactics they used to maintain their frontier autonomy. For example, the Araucanians of Chile and the Argentine *pampa* migrated, changed their leadership structure, and developed guerrilla tactics to fend off the Spanish. Other groups, such as the Charrúas in La Plata and the Caddos in Texas and Louisiana, found themselves to be located along strategic frontiers and were able to use disputes between colonizers to their benefit.

In chapter 3 we learn how the Bourbons sought to gain control over Catholic missionaries who operated next to and even among these independent frontier aborigines. The Bourbons believed that evangelization and subsequent acculturation had been moving too slowly, with excessive economic gain for religious orders. As a result, the Jesuit order, which the crown felt was the most wasteful and most autonomous, was expelled from Spain and its colonies in 1767. The Jesuits had also made enemies in other parts of Europe, but Spain's situation was unique because, on the eve of the expulsion, the Jesuits "had ministered to 300,000 Indians in 220 missions in Spanish America" (p. 110). While the expulsion of the Jesuits did give the crown greater control over frontier missions, the Bourbons predictably had limited success at getting mendicant orders like the Franciscans to adopt the very economically based Jesuit model of saving indigenous souls.

Chapters 4 and 5 detail the new frontier reforms developed by Bourbon administrators, and analyze whether conditions on the margins actually permitted their implementation. One of the most well-known Bourbon reforms was the emphasis on expanding commerce. Since centuries of war and evangelization produced only marginal success at pacifying the margins of Spain's American empire, the crown sought to build peace on the frontiers "on the foundations of commerce" (p. 192). This strategy was successful in the Viceroyalty of La Plata, where years of Pehuenche attacks on the Mendoza settlement dissipated when a Spanish counteroffensive in the 1780s allowed the establishment of the trading post of San Carlos. There Spanish wheat was exchanged for Pehuenche salt, ponchos, and blankets. Economic pacification generally failed on strategic frontiers

where economic competition from European enemies often meant that "the law of supply and demand outweighed gifts and diplomacy" (p. 201).

While much of the story of frontiers is one of conflict, the reader is reminded that conflict did not preclude relationships. This point is the focus of chapter 6, "Crossing Borders," which successfully challenges the long-held notion that, despite "ephemeral" connections between Spaniards and aborigines, the story of the frontier was one of "incompatibility." Weber details how Spanish observers during the Enlightenment were in fact finding more of a "symbiotic world" in which captives, traders, and missionaries formed quite permanent relationships with the seemingly "incompatible" other (p. 223). Increasing cultural and commercial contact was the norm. This contact could foster a lasting peace or, alternatively, could complicate matters and prompt a return to war.

The epilogue addresses the very interesting question of what happened to the Enlightenment frontier during and after the Spanish American wars for independence. New American constitutions were heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideas, as in the Cádiz Constitution of 1808, but did the ideas of the Enlightenment persist on the frontiers of new republics as well? Weber shows that, while the Pampa of Argentina offered to defend the patriots' Atlantic coast, alliances eventually evaporated. While some early republican leaders sought to treat Indians as equals, this trend soon gave way to the positivism of the mid-nineteenth century. Extermination campaigns across the Americas would target frontier indigenous groups that were deemed incompatible with modern states.

Weber concludes that, while Bourbon reformers made real attempts to shape the frontier, it was local conditions that ultimately proved determinate. "It was power, then, more than the power of ideas, that had determined how enlightened Spaniards would treat 'savages'--and it is in this sense that the Indian campaigns of the last half of the nineteenth century represented a continuation of Spanish policy rather than a repudiation of it" (p. 278). For this reason, we would benefit from a similar study on the Hapsburg period, one which would create a dialogue about whether or not there was a real break in frontier conditions upon the arrival of the Bourbons.

However, it would be difficult to expect such a study from anyone other than Weber. Only a scholar of Weber's stature could have compiled such a substantial work with such an extensive bibliography and endnotes. These notes include not only an impressive range of primary sources, but details of Weber's conversations with pre-eminent scholars from several fields that he has sustained over the years. Weber's experience, insight, and hard work have provided this generation of scholars with an essential tool for dialogue and further research.

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

Citation: Eugene Berger. Review of David J. Weber. *BÃ¡rbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of the Enlightenment.* ; Weber, David J. *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment.* H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13443