

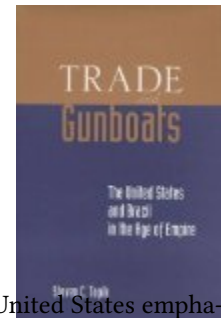
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Steven C. Topik. *Trade and Gunboats: the United States and Brazil in the Age of Empire*. Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996. x + 301 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2602-3.

Reviewed by Mark T. Berger (The University of New South Wales, Sydney)
Published on H-USA (April, 1998)



Taking the 1891-1894 Blaine-Mendocca trade reciprocity treaty between the United States and the Brazilian governments as his focus, Steven Topik's well researched monograph explores a number of important questions to do with U.S.-Brazilian relations, the shifting balance of military and politico-economic power in the Americas, Pan-Americanism, the role of the state in economic activity and the intersection between domestic and international political economies. Building on a framework that draws on the "imperialism of free trade" approach and "non-structural historicism," Topik has provided one of the first (if not the first) detailed study of trade negotiations between the United States and a Latin American government in the nineteenth century.

At the same time as he has meshed diplomatic history with political economy, he has sought to correct the tendency to examine U.S. diplomacy and U.S. politico-economic expansion in a way which focuses primarily on the United States (pp. 4-5, 17). His study attempts to put U.S.-Brazilian relations in the late nineteenth century in the context of the wider historical political economy of the period by focusing on developments in Brazil as much as on events in the United States. Topik steers a course between the conceptualization of the state as an unproblematic instrument of capital and the view of the state as a relatively autonomous and unified bureaucratic apparatus guided by its own institutional logic. He emphasizes both the overlapping, but not necessarily identical, interests of some business leaders and some politicians and bureaucrats, but also the divisions within and between the various groups, producing a complex picture of policy making and commercial activity in this period (p. 9).

Following the introduction, the first chapter on the

historical political economy of the United States emphasizes the "triumph of the city over the countryside and industry over agriculture" between the 1870s and the turn of the century (p. 11). Chapter Two examines the growing North American interest in Latin America in the context of the United States' rising politico-economic stature and its wariness of European influence in the region, particularly that of Britain. This chapter provides the background for the political and commercial negotiations leading up to the trade reciprocity treaty with Brazil in 1891. Chapter Three examines Brazilian politico-economic history in the second half of the nineteenth century as the country made the transition from monarchy to republic. Chapter Four looks at the debate in Brazil over the reciprocity treaty with the United States, while Chapter Five focuses on shifts in Brazilian politics with the ascension to the Presidency of Marshal Floriano Peixoto (November 1891-November 1894) and his government's efforts to reform the trade treaty entered into by his predecessor. This is followed by a chapter on the political changes in the United States following the 1890 election in which the Republican party lost its congressional majority.

Chapter Seven and Eight turn to a detailed examination of the revolt against Floriano led by the Brazilian navy and the role of the United States, particularly the initiative of the well-connected New York-based trader, shipping magnate and arms dealer Charles R. Flint, which led to the dispatch of a mercenary fleet to Brazil to aid the Floriano government. After carefully examining the U.S. role generally, and that of "Flint's Fleet" more specifically in the squashing, in early 1894, of the revolt, thus fending off what had been represented as an effort to restore the monarchy, Chapter Nine looks at the commercial results of the Blaine-Mendocca treaty arguing that, contrary

to expectations, it “did not ignite an explosion of commercial activity.” However, the “tremendous curiosity” in the United States about the Brazilian market was “whetted,” even though a lack of “commercial infrastructure” meant that very little of that curiosity “was translated into new commerce” by the time the treaty came to an end in mid-1894. Furthermore, the economic depression in the United States between 1893 and 1896 distracted attention from the prospects of the Brazilian market (p. 198).

Following a brief chapter on the aftermath of the trade treaty and the naval revolt, Topik concludes that the treaty did not lead to significant expansion of U.S. exports to Brazil in part because the country’s “internal conditions were unpredictable” at the same time as the treaty became “a pawn in Brazilian political struggles.” With regard to the role of U.S. capital in the making of the treaty he emphasizes that, although U.S. business generally was not “enamored of overseas markets or encouraging of state assistance,” a “clique of businessmen” which included Charles Flint was “deeply involved” in making commercial policy in this period. Flint and his colleagues sought government support for the commercial opening to Brazil because they anticipated that they could profit from the transport (railway and shipping) and financial opportunities which increased trade with Brazil would bring. Topik argues that Flint and his associates (who “extended the old politics of pork barrel to the international sphere”) succeeded because what they wanted meshed with “Republican ideology” but was perceived as being of no “great importance to most politicians or of great expense to the Treasury” (pp. 206-207). At the same time, U.S. politicians had their own reasons for supporting the treaty: “Blaine cared more about farmers’ votes than he did about “finding them markets” and virtually no attempt was made by the government “to find markets for companies suffering from agricultural or industrial glut.” The U.S. businesses that did carve out a market for their goods in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America in this period were large and dynamic companies that did not necessarily require government assistance, often succeeding by establishing their own infrastructure. Ultimately, Topik argues that the Blaine-Mendocca treaty and other reciprocity treaties in this era can be seen as being “intended more for political consumption within the United States” than as instruments of U.S. overseas economic expansion. Trade reciprocity treaties, he concludes, were “sops to the farmers and small industrialists who were being left behind by monopoly capitalism” (pp.

210-11).

Steven Topik’s book is interesting, well researched and based on an impressive use of archives in Brazil, Britain and the United States. What criticisms I have relate primarily to the way he frames the book as a whole. First, at the outset and at the end of his study, the author makes a brief attempt to relate the events of the early 1890s to current affairs, specifically to trade rivalries and trade alliances and debates about “free trade” versus protectionism. He argues that although the overall character of the international political economy at the end of the twentieth century is often represented as new, those who take that view may not have gone back far enough in the past. By contrast, he finds the “parallels” between the 1990s and the late nineteenth century “striking” as far as issues of international political economy are concerned (pp. 1, 209). However, the discussion of the parallels between the present circumstances and those of the 1890s is not actually pursued beyond the first paragraph of the introduction and a couple of paragraphs in the conclusion. Furthermore, I think it can be argued that the world has changed and, although at one level the issues may appear to be the same, the context in which they are being played out is very different. In fact, the detail of Topik’s book actually serves to undermine any attempt at drawing easy parallels with contemporary politico-economic issues. Contemporary trade rivalries and trade alliances, and the ongoing debate about the market versus the state, are taking place in a world far removed from the late nineteenth century.

A second and related criticism is that, although the author locates his approach within a wider theoretical debate, the wealth of detail and description which he provides is not well integrated with the overarching theoretical issues raised at the outset. That is, although Topik makes clear at the beginning that his book is attempting to make a contribution to historical political economy and theories of the state, subsequent chapters do not necessarily reflect the theoretical concerns raised at the outset. These criticisms aside, this is a book that will be of value to anyone interested in the history of U.S.-Brazilian relations, the historical political economy of inter-American relations and U.S. diplomatic history generally.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

Citation: Mark T. Berger. Review of Topik, Steven C., *Trade and Gunboats: the United States and Brazil in the Age of Empire*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. April, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1921>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.