

Caitlin A. Fitz. "A Stalwart Motor of Revolutions': An American Merchant in Pernambuco, 1817-1825." *The Americas* 65:1 (July 2008): 35-62. DOI: 10.1353/tam.0.0018.

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To what extent did U.S. citizens of the early nineteenth century seek to export their country's Revolution? In what ways did their general embrace of liberal trade and constitutional government upset or attract the people with whom they came in contact? As Caitlin Fitz notes, these questions are relatively new to scholars of American foreign relations and to diplomatic historians more generally. A preoccupation with high diplomacy and national policy leaves little room, in her terms, for "the more mundane world of commerce, ideological exchange, and public riots." (61) Fitz therefore directs our attention to the office of the consul—an unpaid but official representative of the United States in seaports around the world. Among these representatives was Joseph Ray, consul in the northeastern Brazilian port of Recife and thorn in the side of governments from Washington to Rio to Portugal during the 1810s and 1820s.

Although 4,000 miles apart, Philadelphia and Recife were linked by the trade and capital flows of the western Atlantic. Born into Philadelphia's business community, Ray had already traveled to Recife when he accepted the consular post there in early 1817. Surely he knew that the city and its province, Pernambuco, were centers of revolutionary agitation within Portugal's failing empire. That year, a revolt against the royal government broke out in Recife after the arrest of prominent military and religious leaders. Yet the rebels balked when poorer elements in Pernambuco tried to turn the unrest into a social revolution on the Haitian model. The uprising then fell apart in the face of concerted repression. Arriving in the fall of 1817, Ray found the decapitated bodies of rebel leaders decomposing in public view.

What was a consul to do? Although her subject left a relatively thin record of written thoughts and opinions, Fitz has meticulously pieced together a careful audit of Ray's actions. These show a clear pattern. Upon arriving in Recife, Ray made personal and

business connections with the surviving rebels, possibly with the help of Masonic cachet. More significantly, he repeatedly sheltered the most wanted leaders and helped them to escape Brazil. Nothing about his actions suggests a temporizing or timid disposition: he *personally* hid fugitives in his own residence and *repeatedly* found safe passages for them to Philadelphia or Boston. The authorities took notice, of course, knocking down his door to arrest his refugee-guests in early 1818 and eventually asking the American government to recall Ray. Sympathetic to the rebels but anxious to preserve commercial reciprocity with the Portuguese monarchy, President James Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams obliged in 1820.

Yet Ray remained in Recife to prosper as an importer of American furniture and flour and exporter of Brazilian molasses and sugar. More than his replacement in the consular office, he remained the key contact for those Recife merchants who wanted independence, republicanism, and commerce, not necessarily in that order. For Ray, “free trade and free men seemed like two sides of the same profitable coin.” (45) Both he and his Brazilian counterparts looked ahead to the mutual prosperity that open trade between their two nations might bring. Yet Fitz is surely right to avoid simple and cynical explanations for her subject’s career. His political views may well have followed his free-trade interests, but this only explains the coherence of Ray’s ideology, not his personal commitment to it. Anyway, making friends with defeated fugitives rarely makes for a safe business model. Ray was a genuine revolutionary, a trouble-maker of the first order. That he was also a well-heeled merchant looking for the main chance only makes his dedication to what Fitz calls “republican evangelizing” more interesting. (36)

The article blends first-rate scholarship and elegant, often witty writing. Fitz has drawn a wide range of sources, including court and census records from both American and Brazilian archives as well as newspapers, diaries, letters, and travelers’ accounts, into a very tight and sound essay. (Of course there are additional story lines she might have pursued or elaborated, including the pan-Atlantic influence of Masons and the apparent collusion of Catholic clergy with free-trade merchants). Its greatest contribution, apart from the light it shines on U.S.-Brazilian relations and the importance of the consul, is in posing a larger puzzle about Ray’s life—and the course of U.S foreign relations. For in 1824, after bravely supporting another revolt and helping at least one mixed-race man to escape to the United States, Ray found himself on the receiving end of revolutionary fury. Large crowds attacked his warehouse and made off with his property. They did so, not in spite or in ignorance of his American citizenship but because of it. For the rioters, the United States had come to represent business interests rather than revolutionary justice. Ray spent much of the rest of his life in Brazil, and even served a second time as consul, but he never regained either his property or his stature as an apostle of what his admirers simply called, “Free Ideas.” (49)

Ray’s sad ending points up a much larger question in the history of American foreign relations and diplomatic history: why and when did the United States (although not necessarily its citizens) stop supporting revolutions abroad? Clearly, he championed an

eighteenth-century radicalism that oriented itself against overbearing, monopolistic, and aristocratic government. That ideology had carried the American Revolution to a more or less successful conclusion, at least for those in position to pass judgment and edit history. As a result, many Americans, including Ray, remained wedded to a static, highly specific form of republicanism and liberalism. This one-size-fits-all ideology underlay the growing civil religion of American exceptionalism—and undermined Americans' efforts to export their version of liberty.

In northeastern Brazil during the summer of 1817, Ray was a political dissident, a human rights worker, and a successful businessman all at once. His "Free Ideas," drawn from the official memory of the American struggle for independence, moved and adapted well from Philadelphia to Recife. Yet Brazil was also riven by caste and labor conflicts that the American Revolution had (barely) managed to hold in check or pass by. Even as its racial hierarchies were fluid enough to allow some mulattoes or pardos into leadership roles, the profound divisions between the enslaved work force and the mostly white elite made the revolts of 1817 and 1824 unsustainable in the face of royal repression. Ray's simple call for free trade and constitutional government had little relevance or appeal to those who produced the molasses and sugar he wanted to ship.

Moreover, the American social order and the foreign policies it propelled had moved in a more conservative vein since the incubation period of Ray's ideology. As a product of Philadelphia, where attacks on the slave trade and on slavery itself had circulated for two generations, Ray was able to adapt to "Brazilian notions of race and class, in which he judged people on their wealth and social status as much as by their skin color." (54) But the Enlightenment ideas that had at least questioned slavery passed out of political favor in the United States during the 1810s and 1820s, leaving a firm commitment to the institution that powered America's export economy. "At home," Don E. Fehrenbacher has written, "the American nation was a house divided by the slavery question, but in the conduct of foreign affairs it appeared consistently as a slaveholding republic." How could a merchant and consul from such a republic command the affections of the Brazilian underclass? One wonders if, in his final years in Recife, Ray played the familiar American role of the innocent abroad, honestly confused as to why the locals did not love him better.¹

Exhaustively researched and finely crafted, Fitz's article is a solid contribution to the historiography of nineteenth-century American foreign relations—notably to the neglected era between the War of 1812 and Mexican-American war. It also adds to the growing literature on the Iberian Atlantic world, which helps to challenge and enrich the Anglo-American narrative.

¹ Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91.

H-Diplo Article Review

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