Over the last few decades we have witnessed a growing expansion of studies on the transatlantic slave trade from work that engages demographic analysis to those that explore specific social effects by looking at case studies. This booming literature, however, has been mainly in English, with some exceptions in French, and very few studies on the topic published in Portuguese. [1] Caldeira’s study fills this gap by providing an overview of the role of the transatlantic slave trade in the Portuguese Empire during the period of its formation, consolidation, and decline. He grounds his analysis in documents from Portuguese archives (mainly the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Torre do Tombo, and Biblioteca da Ajuda), as well as printed primary sources. Well written and full of case studies, this book is mainly destined for the general public, aiming to debunk some ideas regarding the role of Portugal in overseas expansion and in the transatlantic slave trade. Scholars of the transatlantic slave trade might also benefit from Caldeira’s emphasis on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which tend to be neglected in studies on the organization and operation of the commerce in humans.

The book is organized into two parts plus an introduction, and provides a useful appendix with a chronology of events related to the transatlantic slave trade and its abolition. However, the book lacks a conclusion, ending instead with a series of case studies of individuals who resisted bringing the transatlantic slave trade to an end. The last case presented provides a profile of Francisco António Flores, a Brazilian-born trader who arrived in Luanda in the 1830s-40s to profit from the sale of human captives despite the treaties to end the slave trade that Portugal and Great Britain had signed. Caldeira shows that, despite the international agreements and pressures, Flores, as well as other individuals, exported slaves from West Central Africa until the mid-1860s, with São Tomé, Brazil, and Cuba as the main destinations. A powerful introduction highlights the fact that slavery continues to exist in the contemporary world, although this contrasts with the abrupt ending that suggests that the slave trade collapsed in the mid-nineteenth century. Caldeira does not engage with scholars who have shown that slavery and the trafficking of human beings persisted within the Portuguese Empire well into the twentieth century.

In the introductory chapter, “Tráfico e Tráficos,” Caldeira discusses the role of Africans in the slave trades, the Indian Ocean slave trade (called “Oriental or Arab trade” in the volume), the transatlantic slave trade, and the debates in the
fifteenth century about the morality of the enslavement of Africans. Acknowledging the challenge of summarizing the historiography on the subject of the past forty years, Caldeira makes limited references to the classical studies on the transatlantic slave trade in the endnotes or in the text. Regarding the organization of the slave trade, Caldeira stresses the impact of the Atlantic demand on political instability and spread of warfare in the region. Yet the author insists that the Portuguese explorers did not have any role in the capture of free Africans. He states, “When they arrived in sub-Saharan Africa, the Portuguese made extensive use of raids to capture people, mostly women and children, later sold as slaves. However, since the mid-fifteenth century, such activities were replaced with peaceful commercial exchanges with traders and legal authorities” (p. 19). Several studies have been published in recent years showing that the Portuguese played an important role in the processes of enslavement. The documents available at the Arquivo Histórico de Angola in Luanda reveal the active role of Portuguese colonial agents in the enslavement of free Africans in the so-called guerras coloniais (colonial wars). Thus, the Portuguese did more than “just integrate themselves into the commercial networks that preexisted,” as Caldeira argues (p. 20).

Part 1, divided into three chapters, deals with the Portuguese slave trade from its infancy until the end of the eighteenth century. Chapter 1 explores the main areas of enslavement on the African continent. Caldeira stresses that the slave trade was an important motivation at the same time that the spread of Christianity was one of the core values of the Portuguese expansion. The author insists that the Portuguese did not invent the slave trade, yet the several cases he presents indicate how the Portuguese altered the direction and volume of the growing commerce in human beings. Caldeira shows how an administrative structure was put in place to organize and tax the slave trade beginning in the sixteenth century, helping to consolidate Luanda as one of the main slaving ports on the African coast. Unfortunately, he does not relate the “governamentalização do tráfico,” or the “governability of the slave trade,” into a wider discussion on the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on West Central African societies. One of the strengths of this book, and particularly this chapter, is Caldeira’s reconstruction of the early slave trade between Mpinda, the main slaving port in the Kongo state region, and São Tomé in the sixteenth century. The author made extensive use of the primary sources published in the Monumenta Missionaria Africana,[2] reconstructing those earlier commercial contacts and the beginning of the slave trade from West Central Africa.

Chapter 2 focuses on the long journeys enslaved people faced. Despite the limitations of the primary sources, Caldeira recreates the horrors of the barracoons along the coast of Africa. In the case of West Central Africa, the author stresses the role of the Catholic Church and its agents in the slave trade on the ground, showing how priests baptized enslaved people before they boarded slave ships, morally justifying their enslavement as a route to saving their souls. Caldeira claims that the slave ships in the seventeenth century were small, implying that fewer people could be put on board, although shipping data suggest that hundreds of people were put on board of slave ships. The ships may have been small in size, as Caldeira argues, but they were filled with large numbers of human beings.

Chapter 3, “Lucros e Perdas,” addresses the ongoing debate on the profits and losses of the slave trade, engaging with the classic study of Eric Williams (Capitalism and Slavery [1944]), which stressed the role of transatlantic slave trade profits in the rise of capitalism, and with the work of Joseph C. Miller (Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830 [1988]). Although Caldeira argues that the slave trade did not generate much profit, he pinpoints
the process through which the Portuguese Crown imposed its monopoly. The slave trade was so central to the economic life of the Portuguese possessions in Africa that Caldeira stresses, “In Cape Verde, São Tomé and Angola, all free men, regardless of social status or skin color, who had a minimum of capital, were linked, directly or indirectly, to the slave trade” (p. 164). Many of the residents of Luanda acted as intermediaries, and some of them employed itinerant traders to carry on business on their behalf in the internal markets. Looking at the short biographies of some of the earlier merchants in the Portuguese Empire, Caldeira suggests, without delving into the subject much deeper, that most were New Christians in search of new economic opportunities and alliances.

Relying on archival and published sources, Caldeira reconstructs the lives of six slave traders in the seventeenth century, stressing their Atlantic connections. Moreover, the author also shows the intimate link between the early slave trade and the Jesuits in Angola, as well as the involvement of colonial officials, including governors, in the commerce of human beings. The chapter ends with two cases of slave traders from the eighteenth century: the case of a former slave in Brazil, João de Oliveira, originally identified by Pierre Verger, who acted as a slave trader in Porto Novo and Onim; and the case of a business partner of the Portuguese prime minister, Marquês de Pombal, who took advantage of a series of monopolistic actions, such as the creation of charter companies, to profit from the slave trade. Both cases are interesting and deserve more attention from historians. The case of Oliveira, for example, suggests that the formation of the Brazilian community in Porto Novo might have taken place before the nineteenth century. Further investigation on the connections of the Marquês de Pombal with slave traders might reveal the intimate link between the Portuguese Crown, public interests, and private profit in the slave trade.

Part 2, which encompasses two chapters, focuses on the last century of the slave trade in Portugal and Brazil. The first demolishes António de Oliveira Salazar’s myth that Portugal was the pioneer abolitionist state. In a book intended for the general public, Caldeira’s efforts to summarize the academic debate is welcome and appreciated. He demonstrates how Portugal was the last, not the first, western European country to abolish, reluctantly, the transatlantic slave trade. And, as the cases discussed in the first chapter of part 1 indicate, the Portuguese Crown turned a blind eye to illegal shipping and contraband. However, for a book that intends to include the nineteenth century, it has little to say about the shipments of contratados, i.e., contract laborers from Angola to São Tomé, a slave trade disguised under new terms.

The second chapter of part 2, “O tráfico que resiste,” recovers the long list of treaties signed between the Portuguese Crown and Great Britain to bring the slave exports to an end. Relying on the estimates of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Caldeira shows that more people were transported to Brazil in Portuguese and Brazilian ships in the nineteenth century than in previous times. The ending of the slave trade created a demand for more enslaved people, increasing the cycle of violence on the African continent. The chapter also includes short biographies of the last slave traders, including the infamous Francisco Félix de Souza, D. Ana Joaquina, Arsénio de Carpo, and Barão de Água-Izé—among others who were less notorious—who already benefited from scholarly attention. Although the short biographies describe the human side of the slave traders, they end up memorializing the slave trade from the point of the view of the traders, not the enslaved persons. By emphasizing the agency of the slave traders, the enslaved remain invisible.

Caldeira’s book is an important contribution that deserves the attention of the Portuguese public, which lacks accessible books about the role of
the transatlantic slave trade in history. As Caldeira indicates, the transatlantic slave trade had a central role in shaping the Portuguese Empire and in the history that connects the Lusophone countries. Hopefully, more scholars in Portugal, Angola, Mozambique, Guiné Bissau, Cabo Verde, São Tomé, and Brazil will follow Caldeira's steps and produce more studies, in Portuguese, on the importance of the transatlantic slave trade for the rise and consolidation of the Portuguese Empire.

Notes


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