The book under review is the result of a rich, well-studied, and long journey through one of the most important periods of Ibero-American history. Historian Brian Hamnett has written a book of great importance for the general understanding of the decades between 1770 and 1830 on both sides of the Atlantic. Hamnett illuminates phenomena often set aside by the historiography, particularly the relationship between the metropolises—Spain and Portugal—and their ultramarine territories. Indeed, unlike most of the works that have appeared in the last ten years, this book puts the Iberian metropolises on the same level of analysis as their colonies, aware that the revolution that led to the independence of the Spanish American states cannot be understood without considering what was happening in Europe at the same time.

The End of Iberian Rule on the American Continent, 1770-1830 contains several interesting theses, apart from a solid critical apparatus and an abundant bibliography. Hamnett’s central argument is that the demise of the Spanish and Portuguese Empires was not inevitable and that, consequently, the crisis of legitimacy and the power vacuum caused by the Napoleonic invasion of the Iberian Peninsula opened the door to numerous and sometimes contradictory political options. Not surprisingly, Hamnett argues that, prior to 1808, Spanish American elites were actively involved in decision-making and that, therefore, independence should not be seen as a national response to foreign empires. Unlike historians like John Lynch, Hamnett highlights the negotiation mechanisms that the Spanish and Portuguese crowns had to implement with their subjects in order to secure the survival of the empire. This contradicts the much-cited argument that in the second half of the eighteenth century Madrid and, to a lesser extent, Lisbon carried out a second “re-conquest” of Ibero-America through absolutist reforms. Hamnett sets this aside entirely. Rather, he argues, neither Spain nor Portugal had enough resources to implement an absolutist regime; hence the need to negotiate again and again with the Ibero-American elites.

Undoubtedly, political negotiations explain why both empires managed to overcome the revolutionary winds of the late eighteenth century. Hamnett, in fact, wonders how and why both empires managed to last so long. He finds the answer precisely in these processes of political negotiation. Rebellions such as that of the Comuneros or Tupac Amaru in the early 1780s certainly affected the relations between the Spanish metropolis and its vassals. However, they were also shocking enough to Spanish American elites that, when the time came in 1808, the latter hesitated before severing ties with the motherland. This explains why independence took so long to consolidate in Spanish America, as well as why in many regions the monarchical regime continued to have high levels of legitimacy well into the 1810s. In the case of Portugal, the imperial disintegration followed a different path and, to some extent, a very original one. Instead of abdicating to Napoleon, the royal family moved to Brazil, hoping that the situation in Europe would allow them to someday resume control of the empire. As is known, this did not happen, and by the beginning of the 1820s Brazil had become a sovereign and independent state.

Hamnett’s analysis does not begin in 1808, as usual, but in 1770, when nothing could foreshadow the col-
lapse of both empires. This is in itself very original. An-
other novelty relates to the author’s historiographic ap-
proaches: we find ourselves facing a book that, in a single
chapter, and sometimes in single same paragraph, com-
bines economic, social, and political history with intellec-
tual history. In fact, The End of Iberian Rule devotes the
same space to interpreting the effects of the Cadiz Con-
stitution in Ibero-America (rather tenuous and indirect,
according to Hamnett) as to studying more material is-
ues, such as the formation of armies and the troubles of
a revolutionary civil war that, in the Spanish American
case, lasted until the mid-1820s. An example: in the final
part of the book the author inserts the narrative of the
last armed confrontations between royalists and revolu-
tionaries with the first attempts to establish republican
governments. Behind these pages there is an attempt to
resume and round off the main thesis, namely that the
empires were not inevitably on the road to collapse, nor
were the republican regimes and the creation of new na-
tions bound to succeed. In Hamnett’s words: “there is lit-
tle evidence that leaders of Independence movements or
insurgencies, regardless of the historical location of the
epoch, held clear ideas of the type of political construc-
tion appropriate for the post-imperial age. Most were
aware, however, that a national consciousness and iden-
tity did not exist in the countries they wished to emanci-
pate from imperial rule” (p. 305). Independence, in other
words (and following François-Xavier Guerra), was not
the end result of nationalism, but rather its point of de-
parture.

In short, Brian Hamnett’s book is an extraordinary
contribution to our knowledge of a generation of politi-
cians, men of letters, military officers, and popular lead-
ers who, for better or for worse, changed the Ibero-
American spectrum. Anyone interested in both the ideas
and the material culture that enabled and gave legitimacy
to these events should consult this work of rare compre-
hensiveness and consequence.

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

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