Merchant groups in the 17th-century Brazilian sugar trade: Reappraising old topics with new research insights

Leonor Freire Costa
ISEG-Technical University of Lisbon
leonorc@iseg.utl.pt

Abstract

This paper examines the role of the New Christians within Portuguese mercantile organizations during the early modern period. It stems from the case of the General Brazil Company, because the foundation of this enterprise provides an example of how the 17th-century Portuguese authorities dealt with New Christian issues, allowing for a survey of Portuguese historiography on the subject.

Keywords

General Brazil Company, merchant organization, interest group activity, sugar trade, Brazil, 17th century

In 1654, the Portuguese empire in Brazil was restored to its former size, once the North-eastern region had been reconquered from the Dutch West India Company. It is worth noting that the final stages of the struggle gave the Portuguese General Brazil Company a political reward, with the Dutch West India Company surrendering to its naval forces. Founded to defend the Portuguese sugar fleets, and because of its receiving the monopoly of four fundamental commodities by royal charter, the Brazil Company met with fierce opposition in political circles, which condemned its inefficiency in not organizing escorts with the necessary regularity. However, despite this hostile climate, or simply because of it, after the glorious victory over the Dutch, was able to write in an official paper from the Overseas Council: “This company that one says is harmful has conquered Pernambuco for this crown without spending a penny from the royal treasury” (Costa 2000: p. 58).

The military effort to recover Pernambuco is one of the main subjects of Portuguese and Brazilian historiography. The work of Evaldo Cabral de Mello and José Antonio Gonsalves de Mello, together with Charles Boxer’s ever-visible research into Portuguese colonial issues, deserves particular mention (Boxer 1952, 1957; Mello 1987, 2000; Mello 1998). However, the episode described above introduces other recurrent issues of Portuguese history, perhaps most notably Portuguese backwardness. Firstly, it stresses the formal position of, who presumably should not have been involved in the Pernambuco revolt, whilst declaring his support for a stockholding firm founded by royal charter to protect colonial flows, including those from Pernambuco ports. Secondly, the Inquisition and its negative effect on merchant welfare has turned the Brazil Company into a paradigmatic case study. The company, thought of as an organization created by and for New Christian interests, was a reminder of João IV’s so-called tolerance toward the New Christians, thanks to Father António Vieira’s ascendancy at the royal court. Because it was short-term, such a policy prevented the Portuguese bourgeoisie from prospering and achieving a political role (Torgal 1981). This is one of the most widely publicized ideas of Portuguese historiography, from which Charles Boxer himself did not escape, one of his articles being quoted in every study on the Company, although the author was merely enlarging upon João Lúcio de Azevedo’s work on both New Christians and António Vieira (Boxer 1949).

This paper deals with merchant groups and commercial organizations in the Brazilian sugar trade in the seventeenth century and cannot avoid these Portuguese historiographical topics. Rather