

van Groesen, Michiel: *Amsterdam's Atlantic. Print Culture and the Making of Dutch Brazil*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4866-1; 265 S.

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From 1624 to 1654 the Dutch Republic had a large colonial empire in Brazil. In „Amsterdam's Atlantic“, Michiel van Groesen, Professor of Maritime History at Leiden University, shows how the rise and fall of this colony were affected by the peculiar media landscape of Amsterdam. The strategic use of printed media at first generated national joy over the victories won in Brazil by the West India Company (WIC). But gradually the authorities lost their control over the circulation of news, and a different, grim picture of the colony emerged. Dutch Brazil became 'Amsterdamnified'; the media war over the colony eventually caused its doom.

Van Groesen puts Dutch Brazil 'back on the front pages'. Nowadays, it is little known that the Dutch Republic once was in power in Brazil. The author convincingly shows that in the seventeenth century Dutch Brazil was, in fact, front page news. Due to the failure of the colony, Dutch Brazil never played a significant role in national history, unlike for example the activities of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which ultimately resulted in the colonial empire of the Dutch East Indies. Lately, however, historians have turned their attention to the presence of the Dutch Republic in the Americas.¹ Even more recently, their attention has shifted away from the socio-economic context of the WIC. With his focus on news and media, Van Groesen provides a useful starting point for further research.

Moreover, Van Groesen treats Dutch Brazil as a case study for historical research on print culture. He uses 'the rise and fall of Dutch Brazil to demonstrate the interplay between Atlantic news, information management and public opinion' (p. 189). By stating that Amsterdam, because of its high degree of press freedom, was Europe's main Atlantic news centre in the seventeenth century, Van Groesen broadens the book's relevance. Abroad,

too, eyes were set on Dutch Brazil, for it was the first Protestant colony in the world. Also, its geopolitical dimension was significant, because of the war between the Dutch Republic and the Habsburg Empire. Van Groesen sees the Dutch reporting of Atlantic news as a key moment in the development of public opinion in Europe. In the discussion on Dutch Brazil, several groups that were previously absent from public debate now also raised their voices.

Exploring a wide variety of sources, Van Groesen reconstructs the media representation of Dutch Brazil. He draws on newsprints, papers, and pamphlets, but also shows how the official news channels were undermined by letters and personal stories of soldiers. The author begins by tracing the knowledge in the Dutch Republic about Brazil before WIC rule. He then dedicates two chapters to the most successful period of Dutch Brazil. This started with a spectacular media hype after the conquest of San Salvador de Bahia in 1624. The Dutch were so interested in this news because it was the first major defeat of the Habsburg monarchy since the continuation of the Habsburg-Dutch war in 1621. The inconvenient fact that the Spaniards took control again of the colony only a year later was not covered. Also, there was significantly less public attention for the Dutch victories in the years after 1640.

Despite these victories, the positive media image that had predominated in the first decades now disappeared. Apart from the official reports issued by the WIC and the States General, other accounts of Brazilian experiences began to take over the public sphere. More and more reports of miserable living conditions in the colony and disappointing financial results appeared in print. Criticism of the WIC for its leadership, the slave trade, which was deemed immoral, and the outrageous tolerance of Catholicism in the colony became prominent. The most hotly debated issue, however, was the monopoly position of the WIC. This issue pitted the different

¹ Recent studies on the Dutch Atlantic include for example: Gert Oostindie / Jessica V. Roitman, *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680–1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders*, Leiden 2014; Wim Klooster, *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World*, Ithaca 2016.

WIC chambers against each other; while the Amsterdam regents and merchants preferred free trade, the province of Zeeland wanted to maintain the monopoly.

The revolt in 1645 of the *moradores*, the Portuguese (and Catholic) plantation owners in the colony, heralded the beginning of the end for Dutch Brazil. As the public turned more and more against the WIC leadership, the latter lost its control of the news flow altogether. Soldiers were not paid in time (if at all), shares dropped, and the WIC troops suffered significant losses. In Amsterdam, not only the public but also the authorities lost their belief in the WIC. Only the province of Zeeland continued to plea for supporting the colony. In the strife between the two provinces, powerful Amsterdam eventually got the upper hand, and the colony was renounced. In January 1654, the governor of Dutch Brazil symbolically handed over the keys of Recife to the Portuguese commander. Dutch Brazil, it was said, was lost because of 'pure negligence'. The defeat resulted in painful media silence, which after a few years transformed into a mythological and exotic recollection of Dutch Brazil.

In „Amsterdam's Atlantic“, Van Groesen convincingly demonstrates the importance of the interplay between the authorities, the public and the media. He successfully connects a wide range of opinions and their influence on the decision-making process, while still taking their particularity into account. This is indeed one of the strongest points of this book; it shows that the opportunities the Amsterdam media offered were the reason why the debate on Dutch Brazil got out of control. For some marginalized groups, such as the Sephardic Jews, this was actually the first time they took part in public debate. Every interest group had their respective motivations and opinions. For example, the Amsterdam regent who regarded the colony as a waste of money suddenly found himself on the same side as the strict Calvinist who despised the toleration of Catholics and the presupposed lack of moral standards in the colony. The enormous variety of views and sources that Van Groesen takes into account is admirable.

Even though the thrust and execution of the

study is convincing, there are also some minor weaknesses to point out. To some extent, Van Groesen seems to overstate the importance of news on Dutch Brazil for readers in the Republic: 'the impact of its capricious storyline on the formation of opinions at home is unrivaled in the early modern period' (p. 10). Sometimes it seems as though the Amsterdam media covered mostly or only Atlantic news. However, the newspapers reported on many other issues as well, such as the Thirty Years' War. This remains unmentioned in the book. Van Groesen might have strengthened his point by offering a general explanation of how often Dutch Brazil was covered in the news in comparison to other important issues.

Nonetheless, Van Groesen succeeds in showing that the Atlantic was important for Amsterdam. His claim that the Dutch Republic was just as significant for the Atlantic is less convincing. Van Groesen wants to turn away from 'the discourse of empire that has traditionally favored Spain and Britain' (p. 9), and show that the Dutch presence in the Atlantic was substantial as well. However, the book is not really about the Dutch in Brazil, but rather about Brazil in the Dutch Republic. The reader does not learn much about the activities in the colony itself, only those aspects that were presented in the contemporary media that constitute Van Groesen's sources. In order to gauge the influence of the Dutch presence in the Atlantic compared to other European powers, different empirical work would have been necessary.

Lastly, the distinction between Brazil and the rest of the colonial empire in the Dutch Atlantic seems rather vague. Why exactly is the book only about Brazil? Sometimes the other Atlantic territories are touched upon indirectly, or they are considered as complementary to Dutch Brazil, but nowhere is the difference stated explicitly. Van Groesen argues that 'other Dutch ventures in the Atlantic [...] did not have the same political substance or public appeal' (p. 10). Unfortunately, he does not explain why. To me, this observation seems to raise more questions than answers. After all, in West Africa the Habsburgs had important colonies as well, so that conquering these was just as essential for the success of the Dutch Empire. This notwithstanding,

Dutch victories in Africa never generated as much media attention as Brazil. It might be an interesting point of departure for further research to compare Dutch Brazil with other colonies.

These criticisms, however, mostly show that Van Groesen rightly puts this neglected part of Dutch history back on the front page. The book offers a major contribution to Dutch historiography, for it studies the Dutch Atlantic from a different angle than the usual frame of imperialism and the WIC. With his emphasis on media, and an impressive use of diverse sources, Van Groesen not only casts new light on the history of Dutch Brazil, but also makes clear how the interaction between the public and the authorities was massively influenced by the print media.

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