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# Atlantic History and Other Approaches to Early Modern Empires : a Conversation with Jack P. Greene

*História do atlântico e outras abordagens aos impérios modernos : uma conversa com Jack P. Greene*

*Histoire atlantique et autres approches des empires modernes : conversation avec Jack P. Greene*

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## Resumos

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In this interview with historian Jack P. Greene we discussed historiographical trends in the study of early modern empires and the role he played in the development of an Atlantic perspective that has been broadly adopted in the academia. We went through his ideas of negotiation and colonial autonomy, marks of early modern empires, as well as his ideas about what should be a fruitful comparative history, focused in differences and interconnections. The interview was also an opportunity to reflect upon issues such as the toxic role of traditional national narratives, the formation of national identities in the New World, the pervasive Marxian approaches and his experimentation with postcolonial studies.

Nesta entrevista com o historiador americano Jack P. Greene discutiram-se as tendências atuais da historiografia para o estudo dos impérios modernos, desde a história atlântica à história global. Discutiu-se também o papel que ele desempenhou na definição de uma história imperial centrada nas ideias de negociação e de autonomia colonial, que acabaram por ser adotadas de forma generalizada e muito para além da academia norte-americana. Revisitámos, de permeio, as suas propostas para o que deveria ser uma história comparativa frutífera, focada em diferenças e interconexões. A entrevista foi também uma oportunidade para refletir sobre questões como as problemáticas narrativas nacionais tradicionais, a formação de identidades nacionais no Novo Mundo, as abordagens marxistas da história e a sua curta experiência com estudos pós-coloniais.

Dans cet entretien avec l'historien américain Jack P. Greene, sont abordées les tendances actuelles de l'historiographie sur l'étude des empires modernes, de l'histoire de l'Atlantique à l'histoire mondiale. Est aussi évoqué le rôle qu'a joué Jack P. Greene dans la formation d'une histoire impériale centrée sur les idées de négociation et d'autonomie coloniale qui ont finalement été largement adoptées, bien au-delà de l'académie américaine. Nous abordons ses propositions pour ce qui devrait être une histoire comparative fructueuse, axée sur les différences et les interconnexions. L'entrevue a également été l'occasion de réfléchir sur des questions telles que les problématiques narratives nationales traditionnelles, la formation des identités nationales dans le Nouveau Monde, les approches marxistes de l'histoire et sa courte expérience des études postcoloniales.

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**Mots-clés:** histoire atlantique, empires modernes, Nouveau Monde, impérialisme, colonialisme, identités nationales

**Keywords:** Atlantic history, early modern empires, New World, imperialism, colonialism, national identities

**Palavras chaves:** história atlântica, impérios modernos, Novo Mundo, imperialismo, colonialismo, identidades nacionais

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## *Texto integral*



Jack P. Greene (1931) is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities, Emeritus, Johns Hopkins University, where he taught for forty years and presided over the creation of the influential Program in Atlantic History and Culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The program was a milestone for the study of the Atlantic World, it was an early center of debate for specialists in the British, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Dutch Empires in the New World. Professor Greene paved the way for a renovated understanding of empire, which emphasized negotiation and the autonomy of overseas polities.

He has taught at several American universities like the University of Michigan and the University of California, Irvine. He has also been a visiting professor at European universities, including Oxford University, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and the Freie Universität of Berlin. Since 2000, he has also been an Adjunct Professor of History at Brown University. Over the past seven decades, Greene has published widely on the political, constitutional, social, and intellectual history of colonial British America and the early modern British Empire. His most recent books are *Atlantic History : A Critical Appraisal* (2008, with Philip D. Morgan) ; *Exclusionary Empire : English Liberty Overseas, 1600-1900* (2010) ; *Constitutional Origins of the American Revolution* (2010) ; *Evaluating Empire and Confronting Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2013) ; *Creating the British Atlantic : Essays on Transplantation, Adaptation, and Continuity* (2013) ; *Settler Jamaica : A Social Portrait of the 1750s* (2016) ; and *Exploring the Bounds of Liberty : Political Writings of Colonial British America from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution* (2019, with Craig B. Yirush).

I first met Professor Greene in Providence, Rhode Island, in September of 2015. We both were attending a conference at John Carter Brown Library. Since then I have been wanting to ask him a few questions about his role in the development of the historiographical landscape, about Atlantic History, and about what the future might entail. The opportunity finally came in February of 2019, in Lisbon, during a conference devoted to the use of petitions in the age of Atlantic revolutions.

In the interview we discussed the historiography of early modern empires and the role Professor Greene played in the development of an Atlantic perspective that has been broadly adopted in the academia. We went through his ideas of negotiation and colonial autonomy, marks of early modern empires, as well as his ideas about what should be a fruitful comparative history, focused in differences and interconnections. The interview also provided the opportunity to reflect upon issues such as the toxic role of traditional national narratives, the formation of national identities in the New World, the pervasive Marxian approaches, the role postcolonial studies could have had in the study of early modern Atlantic empires, and the transformative nature of the American Revolution, which continues to be completely overblown by certain sectors of American politics and culture.

**Miguel Dantas da Cruz (MDC)** : Dear Professor Jack Greene, thank you so much for agreeing to this long overdue interview. I am sure you already know how influential your writings have become in the Portuguese-speaking academia, primarily in Brazil, but also in Portugal. Your emphasis on the negotiated nature of early modern empires went deeply against the grain of the traditional Portuguese historiography, which overstressed the centralized nature of the Portuguese imperial effort. An empire essentially based on the whims and initiatives of the settlers would not do enough justice to the “heroism” of the Portuguese global enterprise. I would like to start by asking you how harmful do you think the efforts to create national narratives were to our knowledge of the past, in particular the imperial past ?

**Jack P. Greene (JPG)** : Enormous. Careful contextualization is essential to historical study and historiographies organized around the rise of the nation state or the emergence of new nations in formerly colonial and imperial spaces routinely and systematically distort the many pasts of the peoples who inhabited the territories over which those nations claimed jurisdiction by reducing them to nothing more than a prelude to the rise of the nation. The United States, for an example, was an unintended consequence of colonial resistance to British imperial efforts to assert closer supervision over Britain’s American empire. There was no such entity before 1776, and the thirteen colonies that came together to create the United States were neither independent states nor united. Rather, they had long histories as semi-autonomous polities in a larger polity known as the British Empire, an entity that included, in addition to extensive territories in West Africa and India, eighteen other settlement colonies in the Americas that did not revolt, but that, like those that did, had rich and often long histories as distinctive and well-developed polities. They also were integrally embedded in the culturally unified and strategically and economically connected, but loosely administered, extended imperial polity to which they were voluntarily and proudly attached. To shoehorn the rich history of the revolting colonies into a narrative focused upon the rise of the United States is to de-contextualize and deeply distort their history in three ways : first, by passing lightly over their imperial past ; second, by downplaying the unique histories and important distinctions that distinguished each colony from the other ones, and, third, by focusing on or inventing unifying events that supposedly predestined their descendants to come together as a nation.

**MDC** : Even after independence, life in North America remained marked by the local, regional, or state’s experience ; you have made this point several times. Federal institutions played almost no part in the lives of American citizens. An encompassing American identity was a later development. Having that in mind, can I venture to say that you disagree with Benedict Anderson, the author of the famous *Imagined Communities*...<sup>1</sup> when he stated that the 13 British colonies were much more connected and had more in common than the Spanish territories in what is modern-day Latin America ? He emphasized the close-knit ties of the north Americans in the relatively small territory of the 13 colonies. He also emphasized the links between the ports of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston and the general awareness of the population, who were much more familiar with their neighbors. To some degree, he asserted, that is why they came together, while their South American cousins splintered.

**JPG** : Anderson was correct in pointing to the relatively brisk economic exchange and even mercantile ties among some of the continental colonies, as for instance, among New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. But such contact was less frequent between New England and the Hudson and Delaware River ports, and economic exchanges between the northern colonies and those south of the Delaware were fairly sparse. Even in the case of the main northern ports, the relationship was principally a competitive one. For the southern continental colonies, as for the West Indies, economic ties to Britain were always far stronger than those with any other colony. Politically, of course, colonies had little contact with one another. Each colony was a distinctive political entity, and except perhaps for the two charter colonies of Connecticut and Rhode Island and the colony of Delaware, tied to the proprietors of Pennsylvania, their external political ties were transatlantic rather than continental.

When these separate polities did come together in the Seven Years’ War, their central concern was to protect their own citizens and only secondarily to protect the loosely connected parts of British North America as a whole. To be sure, during that war, a few people like Benjamin Franklin at the Albany Conference in 1754 had a larger vision of a community of interests. But when the Albany Congress proposed a plan of union to the colonies, not one of them endorsed it. Ever provincial in their political concerns, each colony was suspicious of and sometimes at odds over boundary issues with even its closest neighbor and its inhabitants identified themselves primarily as members of the polity and culture in which they resided. Insofar as they shared a larger identity, it was not as Americans but, like their counterparts in Nova Scotia and Britain’s island colonies in the Atlantic and the West Indies, as Britons overseas.

This is scarcely surprising, because the first broadly shared political experience among Britain’s American colonies was their opposition to legislation from the British Parliament after 1764. Whatever the fissiparous nature of the British Empire, however, Anderson is certainly correct to emphasize the importance of the extensive geographical reach of the Spanish empire as a deterrent to political integration following independence. What bothers me more about Anderson’s work is his misleading suggestion that corporate identities are imaginary. In my view they are so deeply rooted in the economic practices, social customs, and legal cultures that people develop to enable themselves to live and function in a specific political space that we ought to think of shared corporate identities as socially constituted and reinforced—lived and learned : experienced and by no means only imagined.

**MDC** : Is it possible to argue that state frontiers and institutions themselves were reference points mainly for the elites, while the majority of the population, whether settlers or citizens, remained essentially identified with local boundaries and institutions ?

**JPG** : Yes, certainly. Even the smallest state, Rhode Island, was divided by the Narragansett Bay, with settlements on both sides and others on islands, all of them enjoying considerable local autonomy and local identification. Perhaps because of its geography and small size, Rhode Island was the place where the first political parties developed, with a Newport faction led by the Ward family and a Providence faction led by the Hopkins family vying for political control over a highly de-centralized set of rival towns. In virtually every colony, however, day-to-day governance took place in localities that constituted the primary political arena for all but the most cosmopolitan members of elites.

**MDC** : I would like to stay in this topic for one more question. Is it possible that the alternative to the broader national approach also has some drawbacks ? There is the risk of fragmentation or super-specialization. A specialist in colonial Virginia knows nothing about colonial New England or colonial Jamaica. I know that “the sum of the parts is far greater and infinitively richer than the whole”, as you wrote,<sup>2</sup> but do you think we could lose the perspective of the broader picture ? I only ask this because I fear such a development might be happening in the studies of colonial Brazil.

**JPG** : Deconstruction of imperial and national histories into the subsidiary units that compose them is, in my view, a highly profitable undertaking because, if carried far enough, it can reveal the rich panoply of variations within the larger context. But these subsidiary units need to be related to the larger entities of which they are parts. The way that colonial historians in the United States tried to resolve this problem in the 1980s when local studies seemed to be leading to fragmentation and narrow specialization was through synthetic analyses designed to pull all the new information together into a larger characterization that would illustrate both the commonalities and the distinctive features among societies within national imperial polities. The historical geographer D. W. Meinig and I both took a stab at this in the late 1980s focusing on the entire British American empire, and Bernard Bailyn and David H. Fischer each produced an alternative synthesis focused on just British North America. All of us were trying to enrich a general narrative by building on the findings of local and regional studies.

**MDC** : But is that problem of geographical super-specialization resolved in the USA, at least to some degree ?

**JPG** : People have moved on from doing these local studies, and now they are doing studies that are much “wider” in some respects, often framing their studies in an Atlantic or global perspective.

**MDC** : The local in the global and global in the local ?

**JPG** : Yes, although the new modes of inquiry sometimes seem to be less based in archival research, with many scholars cherry-picking sources, such as petitions, to speak about general questions concerning race, gender, or class.

**MDC** : And sometimes they overstress their argument ?

**JPG** : Well... They do not put it in a context that is understandable, one that makes sense within that particular imperial world, British or Portuguese, for example. It is not desirable to miss or to downplay such a crucial element in people’s lives as the imperial. Explanatory fashions change from one generation to the next, but often at the expense of something quite essential to the production of a thoroughly contextualized result.

**MDC** : I will pick up on that point. Certain methodologies might also help us rise above the limitations of a narrow local perspective. At the same time, they claim to provide a richer analysis of the past than Atlantic History. I am mainly thinking about connected histories, *histoires croisées*, global history or hemispheric history, of which you are one of the leading proponents.<sup>3</sup> Do you think Atlantic history, as we know it, has its days numbered ?

**JPG** : I doubt it. Atlantic history is very deeply entrenched and when something is entrenched it is hard to get rid of it. The simple fact that there are academic positions filled by practitioners of Atlantic History will insure that it will perpetuate itself far into the future. Of course, Atlantic history may well get subsumed into a broader global rubric that might prove more useful in the sense of offering a still larger view of how the world has worked and organized itself. On the other hand, by ignoring the texture and the detail produced by the study of how peoples in specific communities organized, functioned, and created histories among themselves, global history can miss an incredible amount.

**MDC** : Your program at Johns Hopkins is still strong ? They recently lost Gabriel Paquette.

**JPG** : Well, I am told that it is, but no longer with the cooperation of the Anthropology Department, which we had for several decades with Richard Price and Sidney Mintz. Now, Atlantic history seems to be mainly a subject for early modern historians of the British and Iberian empires. In its original format, the Atlantic History and Culture Program at Johns Hopkins was interdisciplinary and ran for about twenty years beginning in the late 1960s until the anthropologists took it over and changed its name to the Center for Global Studies of Power and Culture. But my successor at Johns Hopkins, Philip Morgan, is still a profound believer in Atlantic History, and although I think that a hemispheric approach is superior for producing a comparative understanding of the early modern transformation of the Americas, I also regard the Atlantic approach as extremely useful for uncovering transnational relationships and interconnections.

**MDC** : I will reemphasize that point in my next question to you about what Bernard Bailyn, also a leading proponent of Atlantic History, asserted a few years ago when confronted with these historiographical conundrums. When asked about the narrow geographical scope of the Atlantic perspective and about other more global and inclusive approaches, he pointed to the level of cohesiveness and integration of the Atlantic basin and its dynamics. Truly global events or dynamics were fewer and had a lesser impact in the everyday lives of the majority of the population in the early modern world.<sup>4</sup> Do you agree with him ?

**JPG** : Yes. I agree that the Atlantic did have an internal dynamic that justifies an Atlantic basin approach and constitutes an integrated and manageable unit of study. As we quickly discovered in initiating the Atlantic Program at Johns Hopkins, however, many of the historical processes characteristic of the Atlantic extended far beyond its waters. Although Bailyn and I are roughly from the same intellectual generation, we do have different historical preoccupations. A look at his short book on Atlantic History reveals an emphasis on similarities and general processes, the identification of which is quite useful. But what I thought Atlantic History could do, and what I have emphasized when I have been on panels with him, was to focus on differences. What is really interesting about doing Atlantic History is the possibility it offers for understanding difference, which I also regard as the principal objective of all

comparative history. My hope in establishing the Atlantic Program at Hopkins was that it would facilitate the construction of a comparative history of the Americas, a subject that has interested me since I was in graduate school. As I said earlier in this interview, I now think that a hemispheric approach to this project would be superior to an Atlantic one.

**MDC** : I may have a trick question for you. I am sure you have heard about this theoretical approach, that has now become a research group in Brazil, the *Antigo Regime nos Trópicos*. I know you have expressed doubts about it. However, at its core you will find the ideas of negotiation and of autonomy of the overseas polities that you have been defending. Power was so dispersed and the negotiation was so pervasive that the more cynical ones amongst us might say we are almost whitewashing empire, freeing it from its hierarchical wickedness. That is never the intention, of course, but do you think, by emphasizing the negotiation between the center and colonial elites, and it is almost always the elites, never the dispossessed, we are painting a misleading picture ?

**JPG** : I have heard about *Antigo Regime nos Trópicos*, but I do not know much about it. Regarding your broader question, absolutely. There is the risk of buying into the settler mythology. They thought of themselves as being the spearheads of a civilizing world. In their minds they were transforming an untamed wilderness into a civil space. Of course, as a result of the last fifty years of scholarship, historians have examined in detail the many ways in which the traditional influence upon elites and other possessing classes ignored the adverse effects of their successes on other peoples affected by Europe's expansion into the Americas, from indigenous peoples who lost their lands, lives, and, in many cases, their status as free people, the millions of imported Africans on whose labor and enslavement so much of the new settler world depended, and the unsuccessful would-be settlers who, for myriad reasons, failed to establish themselves securely in the new societies. Over all, as many metropolitan critiques of the colonial process began to point out during the closing decades of the eighteenth century, successful settlers regularly behaved in the most uncivil manner in their relations with and exploitation of such peoples. *Evaluating Empire*, my last large monograph, is a study of the growing critique of empire within Britain, as domestic Britons sought to distance themselves from the excesses committed in the process of colonizing the Americas. Historians must take particular care not to minimize or downplay the incredible costs to others of the colonizing process.

**MDC** : You have talked about wilderness and that will make me change the order of the questions. I would really like to hear your opinion about what I believe is a personal historiographical concern that I rarely share. When we read for example Michael Zuckerman,<sup>5</sup> the idea of "wilderness" seems to have been an "English thing". It seems to reflect what can be called the English "mental disorder" when dealing with the challenges of the New World. Probably more than the fear of the Indians, it reflects a very religion-guided fear of the forests and woods and of nature, where the devil lived. But, at the same time, it was incorporated in the legitimizing discourse of improvement. It was something to be feared, both physically and spiritually, but also to be tamed. Do you agree with this impression ? And, if so, what can it tell us about the mentality of European expansion and colonial encounters, bearing in mind that the Portuguese had a previous experience in Asia ?

**JPG** : At least for the New England puritans, Zuckerman was right. For them, the concept of the wilderness with all its religious connotations was a powerful and frequently invoked cultural image, and a prolific population of New Englanders moved right across the northern half of what became the United States, to western New York, to Ohio, to Michigan, to Indiana, carrying this mind set with them. I think this idea is deeply ingrained in the people who grew up in New England cultures. But this particular concept of the wilderness was not so pervasive outside of New England. Where Zuckerman was at fault was in not subjecting that term to some sort of critical assessment.

The point you make is exactly the sort of reflection I hoped would come out of Atlantic History ; that these terms that are nationally specific would get tested and confronted by what other people thought was going on. If you look at Virginia, where an underlying Protestantism did not reach the intensity of New England's zealous religiosity, the wilderness was conceived in completely different terms, as a dangerous but potentially economically and socially promising place that could be the site where families, merely by each one industriously pursuing its own happiness, could construct a new and satisfying life for themselves and in the process build improved and civil communities. Increasingly pervasive in New England as well as elsewhere in the colonies, this view of the wilderness as a place of economic opportunity was a far more important force in driving colonial expansion into indigenous lands than the puritan concept of the wilderness.

**MDC** : I hope you understand why I found this question of wilderness so interesting. The Portuguese empire had nothing with the same symbolic charge. The concept of *sertão* may look similar but did not have the same underlying meaning. *Sertão* was unquestionably a dangerous space, but a space to be explored without spiritual qualms. *Sertão* can probably translated as backwoods.

**JPG** : Backwoods is a place where debtors and criminals go to escape the law, an unruly and dangerous place, but also one that invites occupation and organization, and it is the occupying and organizing process that accompanied settlement and transformed back countries into civil habitations that has been so valorized by English and United States historiography.

**MDC** : When I consider Portuguese America and British America, and try to compare some of their features in the framework of the concepts of "center" and "peripheries", I found significant similarities, particularly in the beginning. In both cases we can find the existence of proprietary colonies, the private nature of the initial colonization, the initial absence of a significant standing army, the leading role of local polities in the maintenance of that army and the possibility that local elites had to appoint someone for the governorship office. There was, however, almost right from the beginning, a striking difference : the nomination of a governor-general for Brazil, in 1549, which was contentious and which created another intermediate center of power and influence. Can you reflect upon this difference and consider if it might reflect in some way the trajectories of both empires ?

**JPG :** The English did not try to pull these societies together until the end of the 17th century, with the Dominion of New England, which included New York and all the colonies to the north of it, and with the appointment of a governor in the West Indies with authority over all the English colonies in that region. But these efforts were aborted by the Glorious Revolution, and metropolitan authorities never tried it again. Rather, they consistently respected the territorial and political integrity of the separate colonies as they had developed over time.

**MDC :** So, from what we can understand, the nomination of a viceroy would have been impossible ?

**JPG :** Probably. From the map, it would have appeared possible for the relatively small colonies to be brought under a single jurisdiction roughly similar in size to the large colonies of Virginia and the Carolinas. But even in New England, distance, as well as already well-entrenched traditions of self rule, would have made it a project that would have encountered major provincial resistance which the metropolitan English government did not have the resources to negotiate with, much less put down. Distance and fear of resistance thus discouraged any metropolitan effort to bring all the colonies in British North America under a single government or even into regional groups. Of course, extended distance was also a feature of Mexico and Peru where the Spanish did create Viceroyalties. But there the amalgamation process started much earlier and was mitigated by the existence of considerable local scope for jurisdictional variation in *audiencias* and towns.

**MDC :** Several years ago, the Brazilian historian Luiz Felipe de Alencastro proposed a very simple but very interesting conceptualization for the history of the Portuguese empire. He argued that the empire generated two kinds of man : the “overseas man” and the “colonial man”.<sup>6</sup> The first tended to depart from the mother country never to return, the second left the mother country to come back, “to enjoy in the metropolis their social [and economic] gains”. This concept has remained rather unexplored, but I would suggest this might have some value to explain the directions of empire and how important were the rates of return to the mother country. How do you see the evolution in numbers of these types of man in the English empire ?

**JPG :** I do not know that work but it sounds very useful. We are discussing two categories of people. There are lots of overseas men in the British Empire, mostly functioning as merchants and mariners. Only a few of them stayed in the New World for very long. Rather, they established connections with local factors in a particular port such as Kingston or New York and returned to Britain to live while keeping up the relationships they had made in America. Sometimes they become spokesmen and lobbyists for the interests of the places with which they maintained a commercial attachment. But the phenomenon of people who established agricultural estates or even professional careers in American colonies ever achieving the economic wherewithal to support themselves in the metropolis is mostly limited to colonists in places that generated exceptional wealth, such as Jamaica and the Leeward Islands. From the continental colonies, there was no coherent overseas population living in London until the 1760s. And where are they from ? Not from Virginia, not from New England, and not from New York or Pennsylvania, but from South Carolina, which is a very wealthy place from the 1740s on and by the 1760s had generated enough wealth to allow the richest people to live in England. For example, between 1765 and 1775, continental Americans living in England frequently signed petitions objecting to Parliament’s treatment of the colonies, but almost all of them were South Carolinians. Of course, officials (who were often metropolitans) usually returned to Britain when they finished their terms of office. But the colonial man, the permanent settler, not the overseas man, was by far the more typical sort of colonist throughout colonial British America.

**MDC :** Is it possible this had an impact in the relation between each colony and the mother country ?

**JPG :** It could have had, but it did not start early enough nor go on long enough in South Carolina to have a permanent impact before American independence. In Jamaica, on the other hand, it had a profound impact, especially when we consider the role of the West Indian lobby, which in the 18th century was overwhelmingly Jamaican. The people who constituted that lobby were merchants who had strong Jamaica ties or wealthy absentees who still had estates in Jamaica and maintained close ties with resident Island leaders. In fact, sometimes they had brothers or sons or other relatives who are running things back in Jamaica, while they are living in England. A full and comparative investigation of the relative rates of return among colonists in the several empires in America would indeed tell us a lot about the nature of each of those empires and throw considerable light on the pull of metropolitan cultures as an ideal for the elites in the colonies.

**MDC :** I always have thought about this Alencastro’s interpretation and about the way it has been overlooked. It has never been explored to its full potential.

**JPG :** Some people have tried to use the concept of sojourner, which was normally applied to merchants. A sojourner was a person who went to a colony for a decade or so for the specific purpose of making a fortune and returning to Britain as soon as he or she had done so. This happened relatively frequently in Jamaica, where it led to the internal development of a special category of people who supported themselves by serving as attorneys, a term usually associated with the law but in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands referring to people who managed one or more plantations for an absentee living in Britain

**MDC :** That Jamaican example made me remember what we were discussing a few minutes ago about differences. One thing that strikes me as a very important difference between the British Atlantic and the Iberian Atlantic is the weight carried by the royal justice in each empire. I am sure you know Stuart Schwartz, who has devoted part of his research to a royal court in America and its judges and argues that there was a gradual integration of these officials into the colonial society, normally through marriage.<sup>7</sup> Some of them even became landowners in Brazil.

**JPG :** Yes, I know the work of Stuart Schwartz, and I have long been familiar with the idea of the co-option or domestication or creolization of imperial officials in the Spanish colonies through the first book of my wife, Amy Turner Bushnell, on the officials of the royal treasury in St. Augustine. As far as the legal establishment is concerned, nothing on the scale that Stuart describes for Brazil occurred in British America. Most royal colonies had no more than one or two metropolitan-appointed judges and sometimes an Attorney General who in some cases may have had the authority to appoint inferior judges or magistrates for the surrounding counties or towns but themselves resided in the provincial centers where the superior courts sat. In most cases, however, the power of appointing magistrates was in the hands of the governor, who relied on the advice of local magnates for nominations to those positions. As a result, the people actually exercising judicial authority in the localities were not overseen by anybody. At the most and mainly only in the oldest and best developed colonies such as Virginia, local courts were required to have provincially trained county or town clerks responsible for keeping local public records in a standardized form. Such people were overwhelmingly local.

**MDC :** A few years ago, you defended the idea that the postcolonial theory can be applied to early modern settler colonies.<sup>8</sup> As a large part of our readers know, postcolonial theory is normally used to explain modern colonialism and the effects of modern colonialism in Africa and in Asia. Do you think your assertion still applies ? Did the scholarship vindicated you ?

**JPG :** Whether I have been or need to be vindicated I am not sure. But I do not think that my attempt to promote this point was very successful. Other impulses lay behind advances in the histories of indigenous peoples, women, the impoverished, and the enslaved, particularly the insistence of the French Annalists upon creating an inclusive history. But the point I was trying to make in that article was that all the things that postcolonial researchers say about extractive societies are also true of settler societies. I was really talking to the postcolonial researchers, inviting them to look at settlement colonies. By the time I wrote most historians had come to appreciate the importance of studying socially and politically marginalized people. I was also trying to point out that from the beginning, settler colonialism exhibited most of the characteristics that postcolonial scholars associated with the nineteenth-century extractive empires. The extractive impulse was fully exemplified in late eighteenth-century India and was not something new in the nineteenth century.

**MDC :** I believe you were criticized for that approach by Michael Zuckerman.<sup>9</sup>

**JPG :** Only by Zuckerman, who does not understand postcolonial studies. He alleged that I did not understand the theory, but I think he is the one. You may have noticed that I did not bother to respond.

**MDC :** Yes, I have noticed that. Another question regarding imperial languages : in *Evaluating Empire* you tried to see what the imperial endeavor meant during the 18th century. One idea appeared repeatedly : humanity, the language of humanity.<sup>10</sup> Can you tell our readers the ways in which this idea was constantly being evoked in conversations about empire in America and at the same time in England ? Were there differences ?

**JPG :** Well, there was less of it in America, where the “inhumane” practices were so central to colonial territorial and economic expansion that few found any need to criticize them. For instance, an enlightened person like Ezra Stiles (1727-1795), president of Yale College, showed no regret in the 1780s, pointing out that the fact that Indians were gradually dying off meant easier and more rapid American expansion across the continent. At the same time in England spokespeople like Josiah Tucker (1713-1799) condemned colonists for disregarding Indian land rights and provoking wars to drive them away, with Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) suggesting that the Indians should drive the colonists out. A few North Americans participated in the rise of antislavery, but in my view that movement was almost totally an English phenomenon, stimulated mainly by the investigations of Granville Sharp (1735-1813) and others after 1765. Other metropolitans, like Adam Smith, depicted North American and West Indian slave owners in a very unfavorable light while at the same time acknowledging the importance of the colonial slave labor system to the empire’s increasing wealth.

East India Company depredations in India during the late 1750s and early 1760s also provoked a lot of negative comment, as well as, on a smaller scale, did the previously taboo subject of Protestant discrimination against Irish Catholics in Ireland. Using all these examples, a few metropolitan analysts endeavored to pull all of these behaviors together, either to make a case for the inhumanity of empire, condemning colonialism in general as a stain on the British national character, or to sharpen the distinction between metropolitan and colonial Britons, attempting to distance the metropolis from the misbehavior of its sons and daughters overseas.

**MDC :** Let’s move now to a different topic. Recent historiography has emphasized the growing pains of the Brazilian national identity in the immediate aftermath of the separation from Portugal. White elites wanted to distance themselves from the mother country, yet maintain the European identity that had been an important part of their social status during the colonial period. In order to create a national identity that they could aspire to and share, they had to leave out the other groups, Black Africans, Indians and mixed blood population, under the penalty of diluting the feature that gave them their status and that reminded them they were descended from Europeans. They faced a contradiction : an encompassing national identity would have forced them to see themselves as part of a multiracial population. You have dealt with this before, in your research about American identity, but would you like to revisit the transition of identities in the new USA, from a European identity to an American identity ?

**JPG :** There has been a perpetual tension in the culture of the USA since it was established between the impulse to imitate the culture of the Old World and the desire to create a specifically American identity. During the colonial era emerging elites consistently looked across the Atlantic for British models of society and culture, and during the conflict that led to American independence, people celebrated the American states as the representatives of the pure British culture as opposed to the corruption of that culture in Britain itself. During the nineteenth century, elites, particularly along the East Coast, continued to identify with England and endeavor to render American society more English. The

idea of whiteness, though, which was at the core of American identity, was not explicitly salient because American practice took it for granted that whiteness was the American norm, elites never stopping to consider that people of Indigenous or African descent had any notable role in shaping national identity and history. Unlike their counterparts in Brazil, American elites saw no need to take deliberate action to exclude them. Only when subaltern groups became potential rights-claimers did state legislatures feel the need, through legislation, to exclude them formally from civic privileges common to white Americans, as, for example in New England in the 1830s and 1840s, when state legislatures denied free black people the right to vote.

**MDC** : Can you elaborate on the differences between the North and the South, between New England and Jamaica, for example ?

**JPG** : The critical difference, aside from climate, was the labor system. Even in the most heavily black and slave areas of the southern colonies and states, white people remained a demographic majority and in control of the legal regime. In West Indian colonies, like Jamaica, however, whites rarely composed more than ten to fifteen percent of the population, and, with the abolition of slavery in the 1830s it became increasingly clear that they could not long retain control of the civil system. By the late 1850s and early 1860s in Jamaica, for instance, whites were so frightened by the possibility of a political takeover by the formerly slave population that they gave up the legislative government the colony had enjoyed for two centuries in favor of Crown colony government, a move that effectively invited the metropole to decide who would rule within the colony. With this new system of governance, whites and privileged Brown and Mulatto groups ran the colony for the next fifty years, the majority Black population not managing to acquire a voice commensurate with its size until the early decades of the twentieth century. In the USA, of course, despite passionate pleas from Black people, until the 1960s there was only limited movement in this direction.

**MDC** : On a related topic, we know there are historiographical reasons for thinking about the American Revolution and the French Revolution as two processes of the same transformation. One can for example remember the classic Age of the Democratic Revolution.<sup>11</sup> We know that this is not your view. But can you tell us a little bit more about the transformation of a conservative movement into a radical revolution ? Was it a conscious endeavor ?

**JPG** : Of course, I do not think the American Revolution was in itself a radical event. As my good friend Gordon Wood has emphasized in making a case for its radical character, the Revolution did open the way for the emergence over the next fifty years of new ways of talking about the polity and particularly the role of ordinary people in the polity, that were quite different from the older ways of conceiving of them. But this change in civic language took about 50 years before it fully supplanted the old language. In my view, this was a change facilitated by the American Revolution, but one that might also have happened without any change in political attachments.

**MDC** : That development was not part of conscious effort ?

**JPG** : No, it was not. The most radical development produced by the American Revolution was the separation of Church and State, but even that was already more or less happening. The French Revolution, unlike the American one, does seem to me enormously radical, although not in the conventional ways historians have studied. What was most radical about the French Revolution, in my view, was the creation of a powerful centralized state which involved the obliteration of all the old semi-autonomous political jurisdictions and the subjection of the entire French nation to a national code of laws. Bowing to the reality of state power over domestic affairs within their boundaries, the principal objective in breaking with Britain, the American Revolutionaries never tried to introduce a national law code and were scrupulous in preserving the territorial integrity and political authority of the individual states. Given the long-standing composite character of European states, the highly centralized nature of the French revolutionary state was indeed an incredibly radical development, while the USA for more than its first century remained a federal state that looked and functioned much more like the composite states of the early modern era than the all-powerful state that emerged in France and in the twentieth century became the principal form of the national state. What makes the French Revolution much more radical than the American, in my view, was thus its centralizing, not its democratizing, tendencies.

**MDC** : But, we can find that same kind of process also in the American Revolution, in the clash between Hamilton and Jefferson, right ?

**JPG** : Certainly Hamilton wanted a stronger centralized government that could exercise financial control while Jefferson thought that the states were far more competent to manage their domestic affairs. But these opposing views did not represent a tension between radical ideas and conservative ideas but rather one between centralized and dispersed governance. Whether this tension was radical or conservative is not a question I find very compelling. Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800, however, represented a strong endorsement of the idea that authority should be distributed more or less evenly between the states and the national government. This has been a pervasive political tension in the United States, nowadays Republicans want to keep power in the states because that is their best hope of suppressing the political voice of people they deeply fear. In the early American republic it was also a movement to keep power in the hands of local elites, who, for the most part, were supported by the wider empowered white male population who enjoyed the franchise. People who like to call themselves radical historians, and who try to use a Marxian framework, for instance, overstress the antagonism between the general population of free men and elites as a kind of political constant. But I do not really see that.

**MDC** : The problem of class was not that relevant back then ?

**JPG** : Exactly. There is one point I make over and over again to people who are Marxists, and that is that the only class of people to exhibit any class consciousness in British America was the aspiring elite, who endeavored to separate



themselves from the rest of the society, even from other lesser elites, and pursued all sorts of opportunity for doing so, including forming institutions with limited memberships, marrying within elites, and, like those Brazilians you were talking about, trying to emulate European society.

**MDC** : One question regarding modern-day USA. Any foreigner who visits the USA is stunned by the pervasiveness of the founding fathers in modern-day American culture. They are always remembered, and by any pretext, in the newspapers and television, as if people needed some kind of superior guidance to square things out. As far as I know, nothing like this exists in any other democracy. Can you give us your opinion about this, do I dare to say, obsession and tell us about its roots ? Does it have anything do to with the highly juridical (if we can say it like that) understanding of political life in the country or it's simply a convenient re-appropriation and reinvention of the past ?

**JPG** : I call it the sacralization of the founding fathers, and it arises out of the conservative insistence upon emphasizing what they call heritage history, which is an endorsement of a national narrative that leaves out all these other people who were not of European extraction and were often exploited or oppressed by whites. One of the best commentaries on this subject is the movie *Lone Star*,<sup>12</sup> which revolves around a conflict over whether the role of Mexicans in Texas history should be taught in public schools.

**MDC** : So, this sacralization is not that old ?

**JPG** : No, it is relatively new, dating back only to conservative elements in the Reagan era who were bent on subverting the movement toward a more inclusive history by stressing the large role of whites in creating and running the national government. And it has also been popularized by scholars and semi-scholars who write appreciative books about and biographies of the founders. But I regard the founders as what I called the F word, if you understand that, of American historiography. I enjoy saying this to conservative groups that I talk to occasionally. I do not think sacralization does anything good for historical understanding.

**MDC** : Nor even for modern-day governance.

**JPG** : Absolutely not. And that is one reason why I refer to the group who framed the national constitution of 1787-88, merely as the framers. The true founders of the formerly British polities that united to form the United States were those individuals of all classes, genders, and races who constructed new polities and new societies in the Americas, starting almost 200 years before the creation of the USA. The framers were a remarkable group and deserve enormous respect for putting together a constitution that lasted for 80 years. But, of course, that constitution could only be held together by force and a costly civil war, and the present-day US constitution differs enormously from the original, and why not ? Constitutions need to change with the times to remain relevant.

**MDC** : It certainly has changed a lot. Well, Professor, I believe we have to end. Thank you again for this hour-long interview. Hope you liked it.

**JPG** : Thank you for arranging it. I enjoyed it very much.

## Notas

- 1 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London : Verso Editions, 1983.
- 2 Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History : Reflections on a Continuing Problem". *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 64 (2), 2007, p. 249.
- 3 Jack P. Greene, "Hemispheric History and Atlantic History", in J. P. Greene, P. D. Morgan (eds), *Atlantic History. A critical appraisal*. New York : Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 299-315.
- 4 Neil Safier, "Atlantic Soundings : A Conversation with Bernard Bailyn". *Atlantic Studies : Global Currents*, 7 (4), 2010, pp. 365-71.
- 5 Michael Zuckerman, "Identity in British America : Unease in Eden", in N. Canny and A. Pagden, *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World, 1500-1800*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1987, pp. 115-158.
- 6 Luiz Felipe de Alencastro, *O Trato dos Viventes. Formação do Brasil no Atlântico Sul*. São Paulo : Companhia das Letras, 2000, pp. 103-04.
- 7 Stuart Schwartz, *Sovereignty and Society in Colonial Brazil : The High Court of Bahia and its Judges, 1609-1751*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1973.
- 8 Jack P. Greene, "Colonial History and National History...", op. cit, pp. 235-50.
- 9 Michael Zuckerman, "Exceptionalism after All ; Or, The Perils of Postcolonialism". *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, 64 (2), 2007, pp. 259-62.
- 10 Jack P. Greene, *Evaluating Empire and Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- 11 R. R. Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution, 1760-1800*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1959.
- 12 Directed by John Sayles. It premiered in 1996 and it was nominated for an Oscar.

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