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First View

Recensões

Miguel Dantas da Cruz (ed), *Revolutions and Social Movements*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 271 pp. ISBN 9783030985332

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Full text

- 1 In many ways, petitioning – including its numerous subgenres and related practices – is experiencing a sort of renaissance, at least in terms of scholarly attention.¹ While often recognised in one form or another, petitions have traditionally been left to the margins; mentioned, and sometimes discussed, but rarely elaborated thoroughly and systematically. The reasons are diverse, and often vary from country to country. In Britain, for instance, systematic studies on petitioning have long been restrained by the Great Fire of 1834, consuming the original copies submitted to the House of Commons – the principal receiver of petitions. Other sort of petitions, including those to individual members of parliament (often referred to as instructions), on the other hand, have not necessarily been archived systematically due to their informal character. In addition to source-related challenges, petitions and petitioning have also remained understudied due to the traditional emphasis on high politics. Even if debated in deliberative and legislative assemblies, and often concerning issues of national scale, petitions have usually been seen as of secondary importance to affairs of the state.

- 2 Within this framework, *Petitioning in the Atlantic World, c. 1500-1840: Empires, Revolutions and Social Movements* (Palgrave Macmillan) is continuing the recent trend of not only placing petitions to the forefront but also contemplating them in a more systematic fashion. Edited by Miguel Dantas da Cruz, assistant researcher at *Instituto de Ciências Sociais of Universidade de Lisboa*, the book provides an important contribution to the scholarly debate on petitions – not the least due to its non-



Anglophone emphasis.² More specifically, the book links petitioning to the issue of connections across and within the cultural and geographical area referred to as the Atlantic world, pointing out that "[p]etitions are often missing from attempts to identify the inner workings of the Atlantic World, including in encyclopaedic efforts to systematise the historiographical field" (p. 2). The editor goes as far as to suggest that "petitions were as indispensable for imperial administrations as they were for early modern European countries" and "integral to the fabric of every expanding monarchy with imperial politics, and therefore they are crucial and privileged sources from which to reconstitute the history of the Atlantic world and its dynamics" (pp. 2-3). These aspects are, indeed, thoroughly elaborated in the book, mainly through numerous case studies.

3 While common parlance to describe edited volumes as diverse in terms of discussed perspectives and geographical reach, the scope of *Petitioning in the Atlantic World* is diverse also in practice. In addition to the introduction, it consists of eleven chapters with different perspectives, addressing petitioning in North and South America, Africa, and Europe. Interested in the communicative and negotiative functions of petitioning, most of them discuss the subject from a pointedly colonial aspect: including chapters on Dutch West Indies, Portuguese America, indigenous communities in British and Spanish America, French Senegal, and so on. Despite addressing manifold perspectives and geographical entities, rather than providing a comprehensive presentation of petitioning in a single country, the book succeeds in maintaining consistence – a clear indication of both a shared vision and good editing.

4 The book is divided into three thematic sections, focusing on (1) petitionary practices, (2) petitioning and colonialism, and (3) the rise of mass-petitioning. In the first, Jack P. Greene, a heavyweight in the field of Atlantic studies, discusses "the role of consent as it functioned in the construction and operation of long-distance empires and their successor states in America" (22). While Greene uses different angles to address the issue, including reflecting on Albert O. Hirschman and Sir William Temple, he also elaborates the issue through late-medieval English petitioning, concluding that the tradition – also adopted in the American colonies – provided subjects important means to interact with the authorities. Whereas the first chapter elaborates the subject in rather abstract terms, the following three chapters approach petitioning from a concrete perspective, often by providing examples from both sides of the Atlantic. Joris van den Tol, for instance, discusses petitioning in both Dutch Brazil and the Dutch Republic, arguing that "[p]etitions from the colonies to the metropole as well as petitions in the colonies highlight the active participation of colonial inhabitants on the rules that governed much of their lives" (48). Rather than "passive bystanders merely responding to European or colonial regulations", the colonists "actively tried to shape and influence these rules" – by petitioning, for instance.

5 Andréa Slemian's and Álvaro Caso Bello's chapters also provide illuminating insights into colonial petitioning from a local perspective. Slemian discusses petitions to the court of appeals in the Portuguese America. More specifically, Slemian focuses on those addressed to the *Mesa Grande*, "a specific chamber of writs/orders, where extrajudicial matters were handed" (70). These petitions were often pleading for "recognition of rights that could not be granted by a lower-level authority" (75). Caso Bello, on the other hand, focuses on petitions submitted from Santafé Bogotá, employed to deny rumours of revolutionary sentiments in the city in the 1790s. By focusing on both the petitions and practices concerning petitioning, Caso Bello demonstrates how individual petitions – and, indeed, even individual actors – could play a central role in defining the relations between peripheries and central government on different sides of the Atlantic.

6 While much of the first section addresses petitioning in colonies from the perspective of the colonists, the second elaborates the issue from a different angle. Adrian Masters and Bradley Dixon, for instance, discusses indigenous petitioning in early-modern British and Spanish colonies, demonstrating that "[m]any hundreds of thousands of non-European communities also turned strategically to petitioning", making use of "Western" instances and institutions (105). Amy Turner Bushnell, on the other hand,

explores a more informal sort of petitioning in and around Spanish Florida, involving indigenous communities and escaped slaves. Lastly, Larissa Kopytoff discusses the use of petitions by black and mixed-race men and women in coastal Senegal between the 1760s and 1840s. By submitting petitions to both French officials in Senegal and in France, the petitioners – including both Christians and Muslims – took part in both decision-making processes and identity-construction. "For the African inhabitants of Senegal", Kopytoff notes, "collective petitions were integral to their interactions with the French state and reflected their active role in claiming space within the French body politic" (158).

7 By exploring revolutionary ruptures and the rise of mass-petitions, the third section returns to more widely recognised forms of petitioning. James F. Hrdlicka explores petitioning as constitution-making in revolutionary Massachusetts. While addressing a relatively canonical period and subject, Hrdlicka focuses on "the voices and perspectives of non-elites", being actors "who did not write famous treatises or leave behind volumes of personal correspondence" (177). Adrian O'Connor, on the other hand, addresses the issue of petitioning from the perspective of representation in revolutionary France. He explores petitioning as a form of implementing the sixth article of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, declaring that "Law is the expression of the General Will" and that "every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its formation" (199). O'Connor also deals with the National Assembly's later endeavours to restrict petitioning to maintain its ability to deliberate and legislate. Diego Palacios Cerezales focuses on the riotous forms of petitioning – usually seen as highly illegitimate. He concludes that in "early modern and modern Spain, and across many other settings, collective disobedience, open resistance, aggressive imposition by the crowd – in short, rioting – was practised and justified as a form of petitioning" (235). Lastly, Miguel Dantas da Cruz elaborates on the changing patterns of petitioning during the First Portuguese Liberal Revolution (1820-1823). Contemplating the sudden parliamentarisation of Portuguese politics – and how it influenced petitioning and *vice versa* – da Cruz raises questions that should be of interest also to those studying petitioning in other political cultures.

8 In general, *Petitioning in the Atlantic World* succeeds in addressing both petitioning and the inner workings of the Atlantic world. On one hand, the chapters thoroughly demonstrate that petitions, indeed, played a role in the complicated web of connections across the ocean. By focusing on them, the book shows how these connections were, actively and passively, constructed, maintained, influenced, and altered – both within and between the colonies and their metropolises. On the other, the chapters also make it evident that petitions form a source basis with great and often neglected potential. Mainly focusing on non-Anglophone petitioning, the book provides an important contribution also in this field. While meritorious in general, most of the book focuses on petitioning as concrete activity. Due to the focus on practices and functions related to the process of using petitions, less emphasis is put on petitions as texts, especially from a discursive aspect. Although often restricted by the scarcity of systematic records and corpora, approaching petitions from a pointedly discursive perspective can provide important insights both into petitioning itself and the changing patterns of society in a more general fashion. Perhaps it is something at least some of the authors may be interested in the future, sources allowing.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Henry J. Miller, *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Philip Loft, "Petitioning and Petitioners to the Westminster Parliament, 1660-1788", *Parliamentary History*, 38.3 (2019): 342-361; Zachris Haaparinne, *Voice of the People or Raving of the Rabble? Petitions and Disputes on Political Representation in Britain, 1721-1776* (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Press, 2021).

2 See also Martin Almbjär, *The Voice of the People? Supplications Submitted to the Swedish Diet in the Age of Liberty, 1719-1772* (Umeå: Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, 2016); Joris Oddens, "The Greatest Right of Them All: The Debate on the Right to Petition in the Netherlands from the Dutch Republic to the kingdom (c. 1750-1830)", *European History Quarterly*, 47.4 (2017): 634-656.

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